‘Are Your Brothers To Go to War While You Stay Here?’: On Haredim Drafting to the IDF



Editor’s Note: Amitai Tzvi, the son of Rabbi Dr. Tamir Granot, rosh yeshiva of Tel Aviv’s Yeshivat Orot Shaul, was killed by a Hezbollah missile on Oct. 15, 2023. On Saturday night of March 9, 2024, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, in a weekly Torah class, opposed the forced conscription of yeshiva students, stating that many would leave Israel before serving in its military. Rav Tamir responded on March 12, 2024, and his remarks were posted to YouTube. They are translated from Hebrew by Elli Fischer. All links are at the translator’s discretion to provide greater clarity and context for readers.

Since the statements made by the chief rabbi, Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef, on Saturday night [of March 9], concerning the enlistment of Yeshiva students, I have been very torn about whether to speak—whether due to the honor of the Torah or to increase peace. I decided to speak out because of the honor of the Torah and because of my wife’s tears, honored Rabbi [Yosef]. Your words concerning the enlistment of yeshiva students made my wife cry for 24 hours.

I wish to begin with the tears of my wife—the mother of Amitai, Lt. Amitai Granot, who fell in battle against Hezbollah on October 15, the 30th of Tishrei, five months ago.

Amitai was a *yeshiva bachur*, 24 years old. He learned in yeshiva for three years and then enlisted. He became an officer. He very much wanted to go back to learn in yeshiva. He really, really wanted to. He loved the Torah with his whole being.

No one—honored Rabbi [Yosef]—no one forced Amitai to enlist. No "decree" was pronounced on him. He went to the army to fulfill the mitzvah of aiding Israel against enemies—of fighting an obligatory war (*milchemet mitzvah*)—and to fulfill [the mitzvah of] "You shall not stand idly by your neighbor's blood" (Vayikra 19:10) and to engage in the mitzvah of saving lives—*piku'ach nefesh*—and to share in the burden of his compatriot.

It was for those very same reasons that the 18 students from the yeshiva [Bnei David] in Eli, who have been killed in sanctification of God's name, enlisted in the army. And the nine students from the *hesder* yeshiva in Yerucham, and the students of many other yeshivot, *hesder*, *gavo'ah*, and others, throughout Israel, and pre-army preparatory seminaries—all to fulfill these *mitzvot*, to take responsibility. Some have been killed sanctifying God's name, and some have, with God's help, remained alive. May they be designated for long lives.

They went to the army because they want to uphold the Torah truly, because they want a Torah that leads to action, because they want a Torah that includes responsibility, not a Torah that entails lawlessness or cowardice.

Now, to the tears of my wife, Avivit, the mother of Amitai. I ask you, honored Rabbi, in the name of her tears: Was Amitai wrong? Is it for naught that he now lies under clumps of earth beneath Mount Herzl, he and all his comrades who lie there with him, and in other cemeteries around Israel? Should they have stayed in yeshiva and left the army and self-sacrifice for secularists only? Or perhaps to travel abroad to learn Torah and not enlist?

Honored Rabbi, you must ask forgiveness from my wife, from my wife's tears, and ascend Mount Herzl to ask forgiveness from Amitai, a yeshiva student and soldier, and from all the righteous, holy, and pure students of Torah who chose to fight—and also from those who do not study Torah who gave their lives.

To leave and go abroad in order to not fight in a *milchemet mitzvah*? When the nation's life is at stake? Honored Rabbi, are we in Russia? Is this army the army of the tsar? Are our soldiers Cantonists?

You are the Rishon LeTziyon! Of Tziyon, honored rabbi, not the Rishon LeBrooklyn or Baghdad! You have responsibility toward the entire Jewish People!

And another thing: You, honored Rabbi, spoke out against forced conscription. I want to promise you and all my brothers, students of yeshivot. Don't worry. There will be no conscription by force. Perhaps it concerns you that there will be no forced conscription, because it leaves you responsible for the Jewish People and for the Torah. The easiest way to evade real responsibility toward the Torah and toward the Jewish people is to turn the draft into a decree of persecution. One can fight against decrees of persecution. One can protest, one can scream. So no. No, no, no. There's no such decree, and there never will be. This is Eretz Yisrael! The army is ours, it is all of ours, and we love one another!

The problem, the challenge, is not that there's a decree of persecution, but just to extend a hand. Our army, our secularist brothers, must extend a hand and ask for help, ask for cooperation. The Jewish People need you, yeshiva students, need your cooperation. It needs soldiers, fighters, literally. You know why? Because there are 580 dead [soldiers, including those killed on October 7,] and thousands upon thousands injured. It must refill its ranks to defend our home, to defend us, to defend you, to defend all of us, with no distinctions.

Do you, honored Rabbi, suggest that students flee abroad or stay in their yeshivot, under their *shtenders*? Is this your answer to an outstretched hand, to a call for assistance in saving lives?

I want to say something about the claim that [Yair] Lapid and [Avigdor] Lieberman are engaged in another round of politics concerning the enlistment of yeshiva students. We went through this 10 years ago.

Dear friends, the truth, even when uttered by Lapid and Lieberman, remains the truth. Torah, even when spoken by Lapid and Lieberman, is still Torah. If Lapid and Lieberman would tell you to keep Shabbat, would you desecrate it just to go against what Lapid and Lieberman say? If Lapid and Lieberman tell you to give tzedakah, would you stop giving tzedakah because Lapid and Lieberman said so?

They're not the ones saying it. The Holy One, blessed is He, says it. The holy Torah says it. It's your brothers, the people of Israel, saying, "Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here" (Bamidbar 32:6)? Can it be?

I want to say a few words to the yeshiva students. They are always telling you, "The tribe of Levi! The tribe of Levi!" If you have not yet opened a Rambam [*Mishneh Torah*] to the Laws of Shemittah and Yovel, you should do so, and you will see that Rambam never exempted the tribe of Levi from *milchemet mitzvah*, and it is not clear that he exempted them from discretionary wars (*milchemet reshut*). Moreover, you are not the tribe of Levi. Rather, you are those people about whom Rambam speaks in the last *halakhah* [of the Laws of Shemittah and Yovel], one whose heart moves him to devote himself to Torah, to sanctity, to serve God. This is certainly correct.

But an exemption from waging war? In the Laws of Wars, where Rambam lists exemptions from fighting in wars, does he exempt students of Torah, in any halacha!? "Even a groom from his nuptial chamber and a bride from her wedding canopy!" Where is the exemption for students of Torah? In the army of King David, were students of Torah exempted?

So you'll say, "It's *hashkafah* [an ideological matter].' We are Haredim. It's risky to encounter the outside world." It's true. There is such a risk. And we have a responsibility to be God-fearing and toward *Yiddishkeit*.

So go to your rabbis and tell them: “Let’s not behave like frightened little children, as if the army can’t accommodate us. We want to fulfill the commandment of the Torah. We want to be partners among the Jewish People. We want to join the army. Let’s join the army, and we will see how we can make it work, how we can find the right and proper arrangements – like the *hesder* yeshivot have, and even better than that.” Because they will be better if you come.

God-fearing students with *Yiddishkeit* will be able to serve in the army and come out even better. Their Torah will be more whole; it won’t be a Torah that is closed up in its four *amot*, but a Torah that makes the desert bloom, that makes the land and people of Israel, our hearts, bloom. Oh, how the Torah connects to the people of Israel.

It’s possible.

You must tell the army what you need, and the army will tell you, with professionalism, what is possible.

Don’t say, like children, “The army doesn’t want to.” It wants to, very much. It is ready and willing. Take responsibility.

Friends, this is everyone’s responsibility.

I want to conclude by saying something to our secularist brothers: It is impossible to approach this issue of Torah study and yeshiva students without speaking the truth. I want to address two issues. Some of you, certainly not all of you, but some of you, those who have called for an end to volunteering and enlistment, must improve their ways and explicitly say, “We were mistaken.” Only then can we speak about enlistment. Because if someone can avoid enlistment or refuse to volunteer for any number of ideological reasons associated with the left, then it is also possible to refuse enlistment or refuse to volunteer for ideological reasons associated with the right. The Haredim are right when they say, “You can’t preach morals to us when you do the same.”

It’s true that it’s not everyone, but those who did this must say openly that there is no excuse for exempting anyone in Israel from enlistment and military service. Under no circumstance can one threaten [to refuse service in] the army.

That’s the first issue.

The second issue: To speak appropriately and lovingly, and so that there is successful enlistment of yeshiva students and Haredim—and not only Haredim, but also secularists who need to enlist but don't, so we're talking about everyone enlisting—but first and foremost with respect to Haredi enlistment, it is necessary to understand what Torah study is. It is necessary to appreciate Torah study. It is necessary to speak about it respectfully and admiringly. It is necessary to understand that, without Torah study, we would not be here today. Without the Torah study of the past 2,000 years, we would not have reached the land of Israel. Without Torah study, the Jewish People would have been inconsequential intellectually and morally. There is no Jewish People without Torah study. There is no Jewish People without yeshivot. And you, our secularist brothers, must tell the yeshiva students—students of Haredi yeshivot and all the others—we want these yeshivot. We will not harm them. We, too, want to study Torah—everyone in their own way, of course, and freely. We will protect the yeshivot and even support the yeshivot if you become partners.

This is what you must tell them, explicitly. "We'll help you. We will sustain the yeshivot. We will care about your Torah and your fear of God; just become partners. Stand with us."

In this way, with words like these—by extending a hand with appreciation and understanding of the glory and value of Torah—it is truly possible to create change.

It is possible to make change. The situation is difficult. It's a crisis. But this crisis can produce a major change in the relationship between the Torah and the Jewish people. The entire Jewish people can come closer to the Torah, and students of Torah can become much closer to the Jewish people.

I hope and pray that these words are received with love.