



OLIM THINKING ALOUD

REBBETZIN ROOKIE AND RABBI HESHIE BILLET

National Service: Why Sherut Leumi?

Rookie: Sherut Leumi in Israel, which translates as National Service, was established as an alternative to mandatory military service. It serves several valuable purposes.

Giving fosters love. The Hebrew root *Hav*, which is connected to *ahava*, love, means to give. When we give to someone or something, we show our love, and our love grows in turn. Consider the giving of care to a newborn baby that solidifies parental love and concern.

Giving is an integral part of gratitude. Psychologists tell us that gratitude is an essential element of living a more appreciative, emotionally rich life. National service demonstrates appreciation of the land we live in.

Giving back and paying forward help the human psyche to understand that we are not simply entitled, but need to see ourselves as partners in the social contract. Society gives to us, and we must also give to society.

Doing Sherut Leumi exposes the volunteer to segments of Israeli society he/she may never have encountered before. Working side by side promotes understanding, sensitivity and acceptance.

No one should see him/herself as *yotzai min haklal*, out of the ordinary. In the Passover Haggadah, about the wicked son, we say “and since he took himself out of the community,

he denied the fundamental principle.” Fundamental principle can mean either the axioms of society, or the ultimate Fundamental Principle—the Almighty.

Heshie: Most of the people who do national service instead of Army service in Israel are women from the religious Zionist community. It is much easier to maintain standards of “*tzniut*”, including modest dress, while doing National Service, than while serving in the IDF. Interestingly, there is an increasing number of men doing national service as well.

Today there are growing numbers of Haredi men serving in IDF combat units. But on a relative scale, the numbers are small. National service is a viable alternative to military service. It seems reasonable that every citizen should feel responsibility to the society that enables them to live freely and practice their religious beliefs.

Moshe Rabeinu told the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe who wanted to remain on the east side of the Jordan River that it was unseemly that their brothers will fight for the land west of the Jordan while they relax (or make money) at home on the east side. At minimum, no one should be exempt from making some physical contribution of self to their country

What kind of work can be part of Sherut Leumi?

Rookie: Someone who opts for national service can choose from many options that suit their interests and temperament. Many lines of work are appropriate: work in schools, youth movements, hospitals, emergency services, nursing homes, kids at risk, special education and special needs, vulnerable elderly, development towns, internal security, immigrant assistance, museums, holocaust remembrance and many other options. In year two of service, which many opt for, young people may choose to serve in Jewish communities abroad, like the US, the UK, Australia, Russia, and others.

Who should do Sherut Leumi?

Rookie and Heshie: We are of similar minds on this question. We feel strongly that EVERYONE who lives in Israel and benefits from having a Jewish state and a Jewish army to defend that state should give back in the form of service. Certainly, military service is National Service in the fullest sense of the word. The men and women who serve in the army, whether in combat, intelligence, desk jobs or support positions, are contributing to the defense of Israel against a broad spectrum of enemies.

But even those who will not, cannot, or choose not to do army service, can and should find an alternate form of service to the nation for at least a year or two. We are not minimizing the importance of dedication to Torah study. But just as the Yeshivot Hesder manage to produce young men who excel at Torah and also serve the country alongside their secular counterparts, we believe that there has to be a way for EVERYONE to give back to this country that ensures and safeguards

the existence of the Jewish people.

Similarly, we feel strongly that the United States of America should also require mandatory national service. This might deflect the horrible trend of disrespecting the US flag, taking a knee when the US national anthem is sung at sports events, desecrating monuments, accusing the US of being founded on principles of racism and other demonstrations of disdain and ingratitude for all the untold opportunities and the good that the US has bestowed upon its citizens, resident aliens, and the world at large.

Heshie: National service is an important statement of appreciation and loyalty to a country which gives us opportunity. I strongly regret not being compelled to give something back to America after I completed college. Much personal benefit would have come had I been more altruistic about giving to my country at that stage of life ■

A recent oleh, **Heshie Billet** is Rabbi emeritus of the Young Israel of Woodmere and a past President of the Rabbinical Council of America. A recent olah, **Rookie Billet** retired from a long career as a Jewish educator, principal, synagogue rebbetzin, and yo'etzet halacha in the US.



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