The fifty percent Haredi discount

written by David M. Weinberg | 25.01.2025

Defense Minister Israel Katz says that if his new haredi (ultra-Orthodox) IDF draft bill were adopted, the number of haredim serving in the IDF per year would jump to 4,800 in 2025, 5,700 in 2026, and steadily reach 50% eligibility by 2032, the seventh year of the bill's implementation.

This, out of a pool of more than 60,000 young haredi men who currently exempt themselves from military or national service.

Deputy Attorney-General Gil Limon immediately retorted that the scope of Katz's proposed draft does not meet constitutional standards of equality, as insisted upon by the Israeli Supreme Court (and as expected by most Israelis).

More relevant and poignant was the response delivered at a Wednesday meeting of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee by Noa Mevorach of the Religious Zionist "Shutafot LaSheirut" movement (Partners in Service).

In a passionate address, Mevorach held up her husband's conscription notice for reserve duty, what would be his fifth tour of reserve duty in the IDF since the Simchat Torah (October 7, 2023) invasion of Israel and the massacres led by Hamas. This next tour of duty would take him away from home and from his four kids for the upcoming holidays of Purim and Pesach, just as he was absent from home for Rosh Hashana and Succot.

"The blood of great (Torah) scholars from my community who went to battle for Israel over the past year, the husbands of my friends who were killed in battle and whose kids are orphans – cries out from the ground," exclaimed Mrs. Mevorach.

"I hear the discussion here in this committee where it is said over and over that haredi men cannot be drafted except by consensus, that they cannot be drafted against their will, that force won't work. And that the great goal of the proposed new draft legislation is to softly and slowly reach a 50% draft of haredi men."

"So take another look at my husband's fifth draft notice! I ask every member of Knesset to consider this: Why am I not eligible for a 50% discount too, for a 50% reduction in the army burden placed on my husband and on the shoulders of my

family? Give me a 50% reduction! I'll take either the holidays of Tishrei (Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Succot) or the holidays of Nissan (Pesach) in this cutback, so that my husband can be home for 50% of the holidays and we won't have to sit at the holiday table alone or go to my parents."

"Why am I not eligible for 50% savings? Who decided and with what authority was it decided that one particular population in the State of Israel, the haredi public, is entitled to a 50% discount? I also want the option to choose such a bargain!"

Of course, Noa Mevorach's demand for relief and true sharing of the military burden is justified on religious, ideological, social, legal, and political grounds. And Defense Minister Katz's draft/non-draft legislation is a weak, sad sop to the power that haredi factions hold in Israeli politics.

The enforcement mechanisms in the proposed bill – supposed financial sanctions against any yeshiva that does not meet its quota and against men who are issued draft orders but do not show up – are a joke too.

Moreover, the extent of haredi draft that Katz aims for does not meet the IDF's immediate needs, which is about 10,000 new soldiers, including 6,000 to 7,000 combat soldiers.

Alas, I see no solution for this painful issue, no matter what draft/draft exemption law is passed in this Knesset or the next; no matter what sanctions are imposed on haredi families and institutions.

Haredi leaders are mostly 90+ year old scholars locked into an ideological framework that mistakenly posits spiritual primacy of their Torah study above all else. They are incapable of adjusting to the realities and necessities of Jewish statehood, and unwilling to risk the vast changes in haredi society that would surely follow any significant draft of haredim, even in frameworks that are super-finely tuned to haredi sensibilities.

It would be nice to believe that the trauma and suffering of the past 15 months in the general Israeli public and in the "Torani" (ardent Religious Zionist) community as represented by Mrs. Mevorah, would shock the haredi community out of its crushingly insular shell and nudge it forward towards national service – but nada. It has not happened to any significant degree nor will it.

This is an historic grand tragedy that has the potential to crash the modern State of Israel, no less, in the Heavens and on earth.

I don't dismiss the slew of impressive efforts to integrate older haredi men and women in soft military and civilian-security frameworks such as the military industries and regional rapid-response Homefront defense squads – such as those being bravely advanced by Eli Paley of the Haredi Institute for Public Affairs. In fact, I salute him.

Nor should one dismiss the gargantuan effort now being made by the IDF, for the first time, to provide a truly haredi-friendly military environment for haredi inductees.

The IDF just drafted a first cohort into its new "Hasmonean" haredi brigade, complete with its own sequestered training base where haredi religious standards on everything from kashrut and tefilot to gender separation and ideological indoctrination are to be scrupulously observed. This impressive effort is headed-up by a smart and sensitive military commander, Col. Avinoam Emunah. (He was chased and hounded by haredi hooligans in Bnei Brak several weeks ago.)

Alas, these fine initiatives only nibble at the edges of the military, societal, and ideological need, which is significant draft to the fighting army of 18 to 26 years old haredi men.

And thus, the arrangements now proposed by the defense minister are both an outrage and a fiction.

Outrage, because they perpetuate mass draft desertion by the haredi community. They fail to nudge haredi leaders towards reluctant recognition of the post-October 7 changed situation and towards even grudging validation of military/national service for mainstream (not just marginal) haredim, yeshiva boys and kollel men.

Fiction, because the target numbers are a boondoggle. Like the previous frameworks for haredi draft over the past decades (the Tal, Plesner, Shaked, and other plans), the numbers will never be met, or they will be massaged to included lots of inductees who are not really haredi at their core, and thus "satisfy" the target goals.

I want to add my voice to Noa Mevorach’s cry. Two of my sons – serious religious men, Torah scholars even, with young families – just received their fourth call-up notices, covering another ten weeks of reserve duty on the Gaza and Judea and Samaria fronts, for the Purim-Pesach holiday period. I too demand a 50% discount for them.

Published in The Jerusalem Post 24.01.2025.

The opinions expressed in Misgav publications are the authors’ alone.