**“The Chain of Hebrew Soldiers”: Reconsidering ‘Religionization’ within an IDF Bible Seminar**

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**Abstract**

This article offers an ethnographic analysis of the educational, and religious tensions that emerged through one five-day Biblical seminar hosted by the Israel Defense Force’s ‘Identity and Jewish Consciousness Unit’. We argue that despite the official focus on professionalization as a pedagogical parameter, the seminar participants themselves imagine biblical narratives in ways that point to a distinct kind of personal and individualized discourse. By looking at how seminar participants interpret biblical narratives, scholars are able to paint a more nuanced image of how religion and ‘religionization’ function within the Israel Defense Forces.

Key Words

Bible, IDF, Identity, Jewish Consciousness, Religionization

**Introduction: A Bureaucratic Reshuffle**

In January of 2016 the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) transferred their “Jewish Consciousness Unit” from the authority of the Military Rabbinate/Chaplaincy Corp, to the auspices of its Manpower Division (Krasner. 2016). The newly titled “Identity and Jewish Consciousness Unit” (IJCU) was to be a partnership composed of officers who had previously served in the IDF’s educational corps and those who had served within the Rabbinate. They were tasked with providing lessons and pedagogical material to commanders and soldiers that are distinctly related to Jewish history, tradition, and lore. The military command sees the IJCU as adding a necessary motivating force to IDF recruits and officers alike.

This transfer of authority from one unit to another signaled more than just a simple bureaucratic reshuffle. Veiled just behind the IDF’s reorganization of the IJCU’s bureaucratic placement was the politically electric issue of ‘religionization’ within Israeli society. The shift followed the claim that the military rabbinate which is generally seen as being dominated by the national-religious sector of Israeli society, was becoming overly involved in shaping the broader educational and identity framework of the IDF. At stake here was the assertion that the IDF – and specifically its command and officer cadre – was becoming too religious, politically right wing, and beholden to certain rabbinic elements and political movements beyond the military.

Over the past decade or so social scientists have noted the increasing influence that religion plays within Israeli public life (Fischer. 2012, Cohen and Susser. 2012). This observed phenomenon becomes most controversial in the Israel Defense Forces, whose system of mandatory enlistment transforms military service into a reflection of much broader tensions within Israeli society itself (Stern and Ben-Shalom. 2020: 257, Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari. 1999). Academic and lay observers have noted the tensions that this increased participation has generated when the military seeks to balance between the specific ritual and religious demands of these soldiers with wider operational as well as societal objectives (Levy. 2011: 69; Levy. 2014; Harel 2011; Drory 2009; Elbshen 2013; Lubell. 2016).

The social sciences have tended to view these tensions through the prism of power relationships. Yagil Levy for example, sees religious forces both within and beyond the IDF as seeking to “theocratize” various aspects of military culture (Levy. 2014: 273). Likewise, Lebel (2016) as well as Agbaria and Shmueli (2019) see in the increased participation of national religious soldiers in command and combat positions a push to assert communal influence over Israeli society. This perspective rooted in the political economy of religionization highlights the various ways in which classically ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ institutions compete with one another for forms of power in the public forum. More specifically it sees the IDF as either passively allowing religious over-influence within its ranks, or even actively encouraging such influence. This scholarly vector however tends to elide the competing and often contradictory modes through which Jewish cultural and religious traditions are interpreted and mobilized within the IDF itself.

In a classic and early essay of interpretive anthropology, Sherry Ortner defined what she termed to be ‘elaborating symbols’ which “provide vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and translatable into orderly action” (Ortner. 1973: 1340). For Ortner, certain cultural items and activities can function for members of a group as a medium through which various elements of social experience can be made to “hang together” into a working whole (Ibid. 1341). In this field, certain social symbols can effectively function as means through which individuals can think through and sort out some of the daily conflicts and contradictions that pervade social experience.

Following Ortner’s insight, this article moves away from the classical study of the political economy of Israeli ‘religionization’ within the IDF, to a more interpretive and ethnographic accounting of the educational, and religious tensions that emerged through one five-day Biblical seminar hosted by the IDFs own ‘Identity and Jewish Consciousness Unit’. We contend that, far from passively or actively encouraging the influence of “religious” perspectives within its ranks, the IDF looks quite skeptically at incorporating “Jewish heritage”, and Biblical seminars within its pedagogical program. That is to say, the IDF tends to view these phenomena as a kind of ‘loose cannon’, that can all too easily impart contradictory and unpredictable messages to servicemen and women and which can violate the normative political and ideological messages that are meant to unify military units (Hacker 1993, 1). As a result, we demonstrate how the IDF attempts to officially frame it’s use of Jewish traditions in ways that speak to their professional relevance to soldiers but stop just short of promoting specific religious beliefs. We assert however, that this framing does little to mitigate the classically religious and personal interpretations that individual soldiers give to Biblical texts and Jewish traditions. Ultimately, we argue, the IDF is not supporting (either actively or passively) religious pedagogy within its ranks. Rather, they are trying (and perhaps ultimately failing) to mitigate those influences by turning to professional discourse.

Despite the power play by differing forces both within the military unit producing the seminar and beyond regarding the pedagogical parameters of the program, the individual participants themselves bring their own independent interests, wants, and spiritual desires to the biblical seminar. By highlighting how the IDFs own use of biblical imagery and narrative is in actuality “detached” from the ways in which individual soldiers actively imagine the boundaries of religious discourse, this article also demonstrates the limits of larger institutional entities (be they governmental or civilian) to either promote or discourage certain kinds of religious experiences within the Israeli public arena.

**Religious Influences within the IDF**

The IDF is widely seen as reflecting many of the prevalent currents and substantive tensions within Israeli society itself (Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari. 1999: 3-4). In this way, social, political and religious shifts within the IDFs enlisted or officer corps become a point of contention for both scholars and lay observers alike. One such tension has been the increased number of national religious soldiers serving in command and combat positions. Between 1990 and 2008 for example the number of combat infantrymen who had attended religious state high schools affiliated with religious nationalism rose by 23.5 percent (Maarchot, anonymous author.2010: 53).[[1]](#endnote-1) Many of these religious Zionists often attend premilitary rabbinic academies which are designed to spiritually fortify an individual for meaningful and long term military service (Lebel. 2015, Rosman Stollman. 2014).

This interest in the increasing religious character of the IDF have focused primarily on the ways in which religious ideas and practices have been received by both the military command and regular soldiers. Levy (2010: 203, 2014), Libel and Gal (2015: 216) and Yefet (2016) for example have observed how the increased presence of the national religious in the military have placed an undo amount of pressure on the military structure to accommodate their personal, ritual, and at times even political needs (Bick. 2007, Cohen. 2004, Levy. 2016). Others have noted concerns that religious nationalist soldiers may express an undo amount of loyalty to civilian (mostly politically right-wing) rabbinic authorities and thus possibly endanger the ability of the military to execute West Bank settlement evacuations (Rosman-Stollman. 2014: 141; Levy 2016: 310). Taken together these trends and their political and social implications are known in Hebrew as *Hadata* (religionization). Specifically, it sees the Israeli military as actively encouraging the phenomena, or passively accepting it. To be sure, there are academic voices that do not see in the increasing religious observance of IDF soldiers a broader trend that works to limit the choices and freedoms of others (Statman. 2019, Rosner and Fuchs. 2018, Ben Porat. 2016). At the same time, very little of this debate is based in ethnographic and qualitative evidence.

At stake in this phenomena rests the role that religious discourse, thought, and practice ought to play within the military, and how that may shape the overall social and legal structure of Israeli society. An ethnographic and qualitative analysis of one Bible seminar can better illuminate how IDF officers on the ground grapple with competing religious and political loyalties. Such an analysis can complicate the unilinear focus of the ‘religionization’ argument within military contexts, by looking beyond the unilinear production and reception of religious content, towards the conflicts and tensions within and between military units themselves regarding the interpretations of religious messages, practices, and ideas.

**Jewish Consciousness: Between the Rabbinate and the Educational Corps.**

A concern over the place of Judaism within the Israeli military served as the social and political context for the bureaucratic shift that occurred in January 2016 transferring the Jewish Consciousness Unit from the IDF Rabbinate to the Manpower Division. This organizational restructuring however was also the result of years of political controversy regarding the role that Jewish tradition and lore ought to play in military units.

In 2001 Yisrael Weiss, then the Chief Rabbi of the Israel Defense Forces, established what he termed the “Jewish Consciousness Unit”. The unit was created to instill “combat values” through what it viewed as the generational arc of the Jewish tradition (Hare. 2008, IDF Rabbinate Website). This move deviated starkly from the military rabbinate’s traditional role of simply supporting “the standards of religious observance maintained by troops from religious backgrounds” (Cohen, Kampinki, and Stollman. 2016: 4, Kampinski. 2009: 147).

The subsequent Chief Rabbi, Brigadier General Avi Rontzki went further in demarcating a philosophical foundation for the rabbinate’s new interest in combat motivation and individual empowerment. For Rontzki the primary purpose of the Military Rabbinate was to “aid the commander in strengthening the combat spirit from the sources of Torah and the rabbinic sages” (Rontzki. 2017). In this way the military rabbinate participates in cultivating a sense of historical meaning and moral purpose within the commanding levels of the IDFs combat units. As Rabbi Rontzki wrote in the Rabbinate’s monthly newsletter L’Halakha-Ul’Maase;

A soldier who sees in himself a link in a long chain of Jewish military fighters with a national history behind him that is thousands of years old, and that placed before him a distinct Jewish mission and vision – that kind of soldier can call forth immense inner strength before going out to combat in defense of his nation and land (Rontzki. 2009:1).

In the second decade of the 21st century, Rabbi Rontzki and his rabbinic officers could be found on the front lines as Israel repeatedly faced off with Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in the North. “We explain to the regiment and brigade rabbis”, Rontzki wrote in the Rabbinate’s monthly newsletter published after Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip, “that they have to be located with the field units wherever they may be – in training, exercises, operational activities, and even in combat” (Rontzki. 2009: 1). This expansive notion of the rabbinate followed Rontzki into civilian life. He could often be found visiting forward combat units, giving lectures and raising the morale of soldiers. For example, in August of 2014 the first author recalls Rabbi Rontzki visiting his reserve unit which called up during Operation Protective Edge.

 Apart from its motivational activities in times of war, the Rabbinate’s Jewish Consciousness Unit also took an active part in more routine educational activities which bore their own religious connotations. For example, in an Information Request the IDF Spokesperson’s office disclosed on their website, that in the two years directly prior to the JCU falling under the authority of the Manpower Division, 15,090 soldiers took part in 200 educational seminars (IDF Spokesperson’s Report. 2018). In addition, in 2017 alone 26,700 soldiers took part in 442 ‘penitential tours’ which were situated mostly in the environs in and around Jerusalem[[2]](#endnote-2). 124 of these tours were held in the City of David, a well-known archaeological site that doubles as a Jewish neighborhood bordering the contested East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhood of Silwan.

In light of this prolific activity, individuals both within the military as well as some civilian commentators offered heavily critical observations of the Jewish Consciousness Unit’s new and more expansive role in cultivating combat motivation through their appeal to distinct Jewish pedagogical resources (Ben Simhon. 2014). Opposition to the unit’s activities came from a variety of overlapping sources. The rabbinate was not the only unit tasked with offering pedagogical material on Jewish life and culture to IDF soldiers. The Israeli military has a well-funded and extensive ‘Education and Youth Unit’ which in many ways competed both ideologically and bureaucratically with the Rabbinate’s Jewish Consciousness Unit. The Education unit is bureaucratically situated under the IDF Manpower Division. Like the military’s Chief Rabbi, The Chief Education Officer also holds the rank of Brigadier General and is directly answerable to the Chief of the General Staff. The unit “focuses on educational and command activities”, and is tasked with “strengthening the connection between the army and society, as well fostering an understanding and appreciation” of the IDFs own ethical code, known as the Spirit of the IDF (IDF Website). Like the Rabbinate’s Jewish Consciousness Unit, the Education and Youth Unit also places a distinct focus on the command levels of the military seeing them “as educators who accept the nation’s children into their hands for a significant period of time” (IDF Website).

Observers both within and outside of the military claimed that in presenting pedagogical materiel to soldiers and commanders on issues related to Jewish life and culture, the Jewish Consciousness Unit was not only subverting the traditional role of the Education Unit, but they were doing so to further a right wing political and ideological agenda (Asman. 2015, Cohen. 2015, Amiran. 2016). Likewise, the State of Israel’s governmental Ombudsman report of 2012 criticized the relationship between the two units stating that, “there were flaws in regulating a reciprocal relationship between the Education Corps and the Military Rabbinate, and this affected the overall educational activity of the IDF itself” (Ombudsman Report. 2011: 1603).

When in January of 2016 the then IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot decided to transfer the Jewish Consciousness Unit from the Rabbinate to the Manpower Division, he was placing them on equal bureaucratic as well ideological footing with the Education Corps. The renamed Identity and Jewish Consciousness unit was staffed with both Religious Zionist Rabbinic officers as well as representatives from the education Corps. Instead of competing with one another they were to work together under the watchful oversight of the Manpower Division a supposedly politically disinterested arm of the Israeli Military. As Lt. Gen. Eizenkot wrote in a letter to his senior officers,

It [the tense situation] demanded a change in the current policies, where at its focus would be [the idea] of preserving the IDF as a Statist military, in a democratic country, that takes care to unite and unify all soldiers and that promotes enlistment for all (Cohen. 2016).

For the Chief of Staff Eizenkot the IDF was and ought to remain a neutral and unifying meeting ground where Israelis of all stripes would feel comfortable serving. The reassignment and renaming of the Jewish Consciousness Unit was meant to ensure that neutrality and unity.

What this reassignment also meant however was that two opposing, and in many ways contradictory, perspectives on the role of Judaism within the military were to coexist organizationally under one command. Yisrael Weiss the former Chief Rabbi of the IDF under whose authority the Jewish Consciousness Unit expanded its educational role, exemplified this problem in his sharply worded criticism of the IDF Rabbinate for allowing this shift to take place.

The military Rabbinate today announced its own death. Her heart has been uprooted. There is no other Jewish army in this world, and it has no divine spirit. Its soul has run out (Ezra. 2016).

At stake for Weiss and others in the activities of the Jewish Consciousness Unit was something far removed from the stated official goal of promoting motivation and unit cohesion through cultural lessons. The unit’s ultimate and perhaps unspoken purpose was to cultivate a ‘divine spirit’ within the ranks of the military. Both Weiss’ and Eizenkot’s vision of Jewish consciousness were in tension with one another within the pedagogical setting of the Manpower Divisions new Identity and Jewish Consciousness Biblical seminar. Interestingly enough however the junior and midlevel officers who participated in the seminar did not meaningfully relate to either of vision. By contrast for these participants, biblical narratives and tales resonated on a very different personal plane. For some it was a nice break form their normal duties and an opportunity to raise their military salaries. For others, the seminar was seen as providing a personal and spiritual connection to Judaism. Yet in all cases the militaries goals, as well as the fears of religionization on the part of some in the general public were “detached” from the lived experiences of these participants.

**The Seminar: Background**

*Method*

As a new and controversial unit within the military the IJCU itself is interested in both developing their pedagogical apparatus as well as better positioning themselves within the wider politics of the IDF General Staff. In their attempt to achieve both goals the IJCU engaged the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Ariel University in a research project to determine if commissioned and non-commissioned officers who had participated in their seminars intend to use the pedagogical material with their own subordinates. The department was engaged following a previous research project conducted by the authors on the original Jewish Consciousness Unit while it was under the command of the Israeli Rabbinate.

That project analyzed the organizational development of command training within the Rabbinate’s biblical seminar (Ben-Hador, Lebel, and Ben-Shalom. 2020). From a theoretical perspective that was grounded in business administration, it argued, that while in the short term, participants used biblical narratives in shaping their command and leadership styles, in the long term, a focus on biblical material only cultivated a “clash of values”, between the individual soldier and the military structure (Ibid. 2020, 19). This current article complements that previous research in several ways. Firstly, while it focuses on a similar pedagogical material, the specific Biblical seminar analyzed in this article is situated in an entirely different military context. Secondly, that change in setting, allows the article to focus not on command organizational structure, but rather more directly, on the wider social and philosophical issue of religionization within the Israeli military that are empirically grounded in ethnographic experience. Finally, this article offers a thicker analysis of the seminar and its socio-political context by engaging with both the current and classical theoretical literature in anthropology and religious studies.

According to general staff regulations, IDF commanders are required to present educational material related to Jewish life and tradition to their subordinates several times a month. Authorities within the IJCU are very aware that few commanders enact this regulation. They were curious as to the social or cultural issues preventing commanders from doing so. The research was designed as a small scale – though penetrative – ethnographic project. To that end, the first author was inducted into the reserves by the IJCU and contracted by the unit to participate in one of their week-long seminars titled ‘*Leadership in the Pathways of the Bible*’. All authors were given interview access to participants in previous seminars. In most instances however, this access was fairly superficial, consisting of mainly phone calls, that did not really generate the kinds of in depth responses that we had hoped for. At the same time we were able to meet with, on their various military bases, a select group of officers who had participated in previous seminars. Upon completion of the contracted project the authors applied for – and received – permission to publish the results of the research in academic presses from the IDF’s Behavioral Sciences Division.[[3]](#endnote-3)

The data and insights for this article were gathered while the authors were engaging in ethnographic research on behalf of the IJCU and under the supervision of the Behavioral Sciences Division. Despite this working collaboration with the military, the results of the project were produced entirely independently from military oversight. The first author was given the same access to the seminar, under the same conditions as every other participating officer. At no point during the course of the project did officers from the Identity and Jewish Consciousness Unit, nor the Behavioral Sciences Division interfere with the ethnographic research design, nor in the interpretation of the data. Indeed, the results were ultimately fairly critical if the military’s design, planning and execution of ‘Jewish Consciousness’ pedagogical material. Moreover, the approval to publish granted by the Behavioral Sciences Division, was not conditioned upon any requirement on our part to censor portions of our data or analysis. This ‘hands-off’ approach was certainly welcomed by the first author, who capitalized on it in his many informal conversations with seminar participants. It should be noted, while the IJCU did not interfere with the research design, they did, during various preliminary meetings imply that they would have preferred a ‘quantitative’ rather than a ‘qualitative research design. It is possible that the unit’s openness to ethnographic research was the result of them perceiving such research as less convincing than “objective” quantifiable data.

This research was designed as a qualitative ethnographic project meant to explore the subjective inner experiences of seminar participants as they related to the objectives and goals of formal military procedure and pedagogy. This kind of limited, yet in depth ‘case study’ follows in the anthropological tradition of seeking to “extract the general from the unique” (Burawoy. 1998, 5). Here, the actions, thoughts, experiences of individuals in specific cultural contexts, “reflects the [full] complexity of social structure” (Kempny 2006, 193). That is to say, through data that is grounded in local experiences, anthropologists ‘extend’ out to offer tentative comments on wider social phenomena. While this data might be thought of as ‘anecdotal’ to more quantitative eyes, it is no less grounded in the empirical experience of both the ethnographer and his/her ethnographic informants.

*Seminar*

The seminar was geared towards all commissioned and non-commissioned officers regardless of sex or religious persuasion. Seminar classes were held on the military base of Tsrifin (Sarafand) not far from the central Israeli city of Rishon LeZion.[[4]](#endnote-4) 61 individuals were enrolled in the course with ranks ranging from staff sergeant to Lieutenant Colonel. Although we did not conduct a specific survey, most of the participants seemed to identify as either secular or traditional. Present were also several religious nationalist (identified by their knitted skullcaps) and two ultraorthodox officers. Due to the analytic complexity in classifying between secular and traditional identities, this paper only specifically notes when a soldier openly identified as ‘religious’ (Yadgar. 2010). Bible is a required course in all Israeli high schools (both secular and religious), and most participants would be expected to have some familiarity with the biblical narratives. Yet, this past experience was never touched upon during the seminar, either by the educational staff, nor the participating officers. Indeed, in light the experiential focus of the seminar, it seemed as if the pedagogy was meant to supplant the dry material students were forced to study in high school.

The weeklong seminar included both day long classroom and fieldtrip components. Classes ranged from a general overview of Biblical literature, and a history of the IDF’s use of Biblical literature, to lessons analyzing specific Biblical battles from the vantage point of current IDF tactics.

Fieldtrips included an excursion to the City of David in Jerusalem, a Hasmonean battlefield in the Ayalon Valley, a tour of some of Samson’s battle sites, along with tours of Nebi Samuel traditionally believed to be the prophet Samuel’s burial location. The commander of the course was a reservist with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Throughout, he acted as something of a father figure for the participants, organizing light snacks and drinks during classes and field trips, and even baking a cake at home with a picture of all the participants at the conclusion of the five-day course.

The seminar itself is an optional course that participants can enroll in for various personal and professional reasons. The IJCU frames its Bible seminar as a professional development opportunity for the IDF’s officer cadre. Similar to many of the other career development courses the IDF offers to their professional officer corps, officers are given salary raises as an incentive for enrolling in and completing the seminar. That is, the Bible seminar was framed for potential participants in the same way the IDF ‘sells’ many of its other professional development courses, such as public speaking, or stress management.

One materialistic contrast however that differentiates the Bible seminar from other professional development courses concerned funding. A participant’s home unit would generally have to transfer funds to the unit conducting the professional development course in exchange for that soldier’s participation. Such a payment however is not necessary for the IJCU’s Bible seminar. As a result, there is less disincentive for a unit to release an officer who is ordinarily very busy in their home unit to a seminar. As one religious captain in an air force programming unit noted, “Listen, it doesn’t cost anything to send me here, it helps me make more money, which we need since my wife is pregnant, and it’s also kind of interesting”.

What really differentiated this seminar from other IDF professional development courses however was its unique content that straddled the worlds of religious expectations, professional development, and the personal desires of participants. Each stakeholder within the seminar however viewed its pedagogical goals somewhat differently. In this way the goals of the IDF as a state institution in promoting biblical seminars and Jewish heritage pedagogical material become detached from the thoughts and desires of the participating officers.

Officially the IDF uses Biblical motif’s and materials in ways that are quite dissociated from their overt religious contexts. In this setting, discussing Biblical stories at the scene where they supposedly took place helps to cultivate unit formation and group cohesion (Shneur. 2018: 65). Biblical tales becomes more a tool of military sociology and tactics than of individual piety or religious zealotry.

## For example. in one class on the first three verses in the fourth chapter of the Book of Judges, the lecturer – a former combat officer and rabbi – began discussing the military background to the Israelite war against Sisera and the Canaanites.

## for he [Sisera] had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel (Judges 4:3).

## The lecturer was quick to note the ‘intelligence’ and political failure that must have occurred leading up to the story itself. Sisera’s collection of 900 chariots was similar to, “Lebanon where we missed or ignored the collection of thousands of missiles”.

## While highlighting the professional lessons one might infer from the Biblical narrative, the lecturer made sure to ignore the repeating spiritual cycles of sin and redemption that form the primary contextual theme of the Book of Judges itself (Stern. 2018). In practice however the two paradigms are so easily intertwined in the hearts and minds of individual soldiers, that it is often difficult to separate the professional from the spiritual contexts of Biblical tales (Daprin, Azulay and Hamo. 2012: 46). In other words, there remains a distinct personal and pietistic ‘subtext’ to the Biblical narratives that cannot be so easily elided by State or military dicta. The ways in which the official and subtextual interpretations of Biblical narratives become detached from one another occur along a variety of vectors, and not all of them are overtly spiritual.

**The Social and Political Detachment**

*The Bible and Religionization*

## One way in which the IDFs use of Biblical themes becomes ‘detached’ from the everyday experience of its soldiers quite simply revolves around the political position of religion within the IDF itself. In this sense, one mid-level officer in a combat infantry unit noted how a commander needs to be careful with his soldiers, especially when he first begins his position, in that not all the soldiers share similar religious thoughts, ideas, and practices. In this way, the officer remarked how a smart commander needs to know how to “*walk between the raindrops*”, and sometimes the Bible or Jewish heritage is too sensitive of an issue to discuss within a military unit. Here the discourse of ‘religionization’ itself – or the notion that the military is becoming beholden to external religious forces – influences the ways in which soldiers themselves interpret the use of Biblical pedagogy in military settings. As another non-commissioned officer noted, “I have so much to focus on, why fall into that trap? I don’t want it too look like I’m talking about religion, it will just make my job harder” These statements further underscore how while the IDF command might see the cultural use of Biblical texts as just another professional tool (within a larger toolbox) to build unit morale and cohesion, soldiers themselves almost instinctively relate this kind of Biblical pedagogy to religious themes as deeply personal matters, and that ought to remain so.

This almost instinctive categorization of Biblical stories as religious categories - as opposed to cultural tales with professional uses - runs counter to the ways in which the IDF has traditionally incorporated Biblical themes to further both military and State goals. This traditional approach was highlighted during the seminar itself on several occasions, by individuals with seemingly very different political stakes involved. In one instance for example an officer who originally came from the IDFs Educational Corp presented a lecture that evocatively described the first swearing in ceremony for IDF General Staff officers in 1948. To mark the occasion, David Ben Gurion who also held the defense portfolio, offered the following words:

In the oath you have just sworn you join the chain of Hebrew soldiers from the time of Joshua Bin Nun, Judges-Warriors, and Freedom Fighters… This chain that was cut off from the days of Simon bar Kochba and Akiva ben Yosef has been forged anew in our days, and the Army of Israel in its own land is once again marching to battle to fight for the freedom of the nation…

The officer giving the lecture noted how Ben Gurion was asking his staff officers to see themselves as the historical reincarnation of characters within Israel’s book of “national consensus”, that being the Bible.

A similar message was also echoed during a fieldtrip the seminar took to the Judean foothills, an area traditionally seen the site of Samson’s Biblical adventures. The seminar’s tour guide was an individual affiliated with Israel’s National Religious Camp and who worked for a right of center educational tour agency promoting the millennia old history of the Jewish people in a way that “strengthen[s’ the Jewish legacy, the love for the Jewish country and the connection to Israel and its roots” (Eshkolot Website). In a manner similar to the educational officer, the guide noted how Israel’s early operations in its war of Independence, as well as its military units were named after Biblical figures. He then played for the group a popular song originally written during Israel’s War of Independence about the light mechanized unit called ‘Samson’s Foxes’.

Samson’s Foxes / They are once again raiding / And carrying the flames at night / From Gaza to Gat / once again the battle is joined /…..yes the machine gun that spits its fire is new / But the fire itself is very old

With these lyrics – “yes the machine gun that spits its fire is new / But the fire itself is very old” - the guide emphasized how Israel’s army, at the direction of David Ben-Gurion, has always viewed itself as the continuation of an ancient Biblical tradition.

Scholars have long commented on the ways in which Israel’s first Prime Minister marshaled Biblical motif’s to serve national and political ends (Shapira. 1997; Kedar. 2013: 162). At the same time, while the Bible for Ben Gurion held national and even redemptive importance (Shapira. 1997: 664), it’s centrality to the act of state building was far removed from any theological or deistic motif (Shapira. 2004: 12). In practice though this discursive and nationalizing act of separation comes across as somewhat artificial to many of the soldiers participating in the IDF’s Bible seminars. It is simply too difficult to divorce the Biblical narratives from a religious or otherwise spiritual context.

This complexity bears its own social weight within military units. As one noncommissioned intelligence officer claimed, “i*n my unit everyone jokes around with each other. It would just be weird to start talking about the Bible*”. This sentiment was repeated by several individuals who expressed how the Biblical narratives, legends, and traditions were too heavy a topic to talk about in the very informal contexts that can often characterize IDF units. A young religious captain in an IAF programming unit put the matter succinctly at the summation of a lesson on the prophetess Deborah when he commented to the first author, “I think if you would to start talking about this [Biblical themes of Jewish heritage] in my unit you would come across as either disconnected [from one’s social setting] or patronizing”. Resting behind the captain’s words was an understanding that Biblical narratives are personal spiritual matters and ought to remain so, at least within the context of the military unit.

**The Personal – Professional Detachment**

*The Bible as Spiritual Development*

Another related tension surrounding the seminar rested in the ways in which the goal of professional development advocated by the IDF became detached from a notion of personal development expressed by the participants themselves. This manifested itself in various ways. For one, the ‘religious’ context of the course became a source of confusion and tension. This disconnect first became apparent upon entering Tsrifin when the first author asked directions from a secular or traditional officer who seemed like he might be participating in the program. “*Do you know where the seminar is*?” He responded simply, “*you mean the Rabbanut* [Rabbinate]?” Although an apparently insignificant response to a request for directions, it does reveal how in the popular mindset of participating soldiers the seminar itself was still related to the rabbanut thus making it distinctly ‘religious’ (as opposed to ‘professional’) in character.

The Biblical subject matter of the seminar further highlighted the tension between the goals of the military which seeks to develop the professional skills of its officer corps and the more personal desires of participants who might be interested in a salary raise or simple distraction. Several of the religious participants for example almost intuitively noted a distinct incongruity between the various pedagogical elements of the seminar which consisted of representatives of both the rabbinic and educational side of the IJCU as well as by representatives of both religious Zionist and secular civilian educational institutions. On the first day of the seminar for example a class on the history of Biblical literature given by a representative of the City of David – a religious Zionist neighborhood in East Jerusalem and archaeological site - was followed by a class on citizenship given by an officer formerly assigned to the Education Corps. The officer presenting the latter class for example began her presentation with the question, “why is the army giving a seminar on the Bible” Her answer was one of unit solidarity, since the founding of the State, she argued the Bible has been seeing as one common denominator, unifying the different elements of Israel (Jewish) society. Citing such secular Israeli luminaries as Amoz Oz and Moshe Dayan, her answer was certainly given in the context of framing Biblical literature as national culture, yet it fell short of the more ‘religious’ connotations that some of the national religious soldiers may have been expecting.

Some of these soldiers were expressly disappointed when these expectations were not fulfilled. As another junior officer, a religious programmer in an air force unit, noted, “*At first I was excited to attend the course, I thought it was religious, isn’t this the Rabbanut? Now I’m not so sure*”. Religious participants in previous courses were also sensitive to similar tensions. As one noncommissioned officer in the Navy recalled in an interview concerning a previous seminar he attended,

we came to the course under the assumption that the lecturers would be rabbis, a course that would be appropriate for a religious solider, the kinds of courses that are given by the Rabbanut. We got to the course and we realized that wasn’t the situation….there were a few lectures that we really got up and left because some of the lectures really bothered us.

The social tension surrounding this conflict between religious expectation and the secular reality of the seminar was viscerally felt within the interviews. The noncommissioned navy officer for example was only willing to interview alongside his navy bases military rabbi (who did not participate in the seminar). The rabbi himself was a junior officer, just starting out in his military career. As a result, he refused to be recorded and was very circumspect in his criticisms of the seminar. Yet nonetheless, he noted how the seminar was not entirely appropriate for every soldier, some of whom come form traditional and religious backgrounds. All this goes to demonstrate how, in the popular mindset of some of the participants, the five-day seminar on the Bible was inherently infused with a ‘religious’ or spiritual undertone, that is quite separate and distinct from the unifying message of cultural heritage that is advocated by the IDF itself.

## This disconnect is highlighted by an article authored by David Schneur (2016) - a former commander of the Bible seminar - and published in the IDFs own official academic journal *Ma’archot*. Schneur describes the IDF’s use of Biblical pedagogy in terms of cultural heritage that does not require one to be a “Kippa Wearer” or to express a specific “religious” Jewish outlook (Schneur. 2016: 64). The author goes on to quote from Orde Wingate, a British army officer and passionate devotee of the Hebrew Bible who was instrumental in creating and training the pre-state elite guerrilla force known as the Palmah. “I’ve taken a great interest in the Bible, the Book of Books of generations. The supernal creation of the Nation of Israel. The eternal testament to your life in this land, by which right you exist today” (Ibid).

## Schneur was emphasizing how Wingate used the Bible in a way that attested to the connection of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel. While Wingate was certainly not an Orthodox Jew, Schneur perhaps misses the very real religious connotations of the passage itself. Wingate of course was a very religious Protestant Christian Zionist (Royle. 2014: 18, Tulloch. 1972: 44-45, Lehenbauer. 2014: 56). Here cultural heritage and indigenous claims to the Land of Israel cannot be easily separated from a religious context. The Bible seminar presents with a similar paradigm. Some participating soldiers could not help but expect to receive personal and spiritual values from a Biblical seminar built around a professional learning ethos.

*The Bible as Personal Development*

In contrast to the above examples, where the pedagogical material fell somewhat short of the normative spiritual expectations of the religious participants, this ‘religious undertone’ could also manifest itself in pluralistic ways as well. That is, the seminar itself might be used as a venue through which participants might explore and better clarify their own spiritual leanings and personal beliefs.

The first author met Major Eitan[[5]](#endnote-5) – an intelligence officer in the Central Command – on the first day of the Bible seminar. Eitan at times came to class wearing a small knit kippa identifying himself with the national religious sector of Israeli society, while at other times he chose not to wear a head covering at all. The sartorial choices regarding head coverings for Jewish religious nationalists in Israel can often denote distinct religious, social, and political fidelities (Harel. 2019). Eitan claimed he did not want to come to the course while publicly identifying with one specific stream of religious thought and practice.

Eitan tended to challenge seminar speakers with controversial questions. During the first class for example, the lecturer, a representative from the national religious ‘City of David’ archaeological site, asked participants what Biblical figure they most identified with. Eitan stated that he identified with Moses, since he married a gentile woman. The “Judaism expressed in the Bible” he noted, “seems to be more open and diverse than what is practiced today”, and he wished the State of Israel could return to that more ancient Biblical formula. This somewhat politicized statement in a military context elicited some raised eyebrows from the participants, yet the speaker simply responded by commenting how the Bible has strong contemporary relevance for Israeli society. A statement that certainly paralleled the pedagogical goals of the course.

At the same time, during one of the breaks between classes, Eitan was overheard asking one of the lecturers about moving to the City of David. Although widely frequented as a popular Jerusalem tourist attraction, the City of David is not known as one of the more pluralistic Jewish communities in Israel. When the first author asked him about this discrepancy, Eitan confirmed that he was interested in moving to the City of David and tried to explain how he could square his seemingly maverick and pluralistic persona with his desire to move to a right wing religious Zionist enclave. Eitan responded with a personal comment,

I have a dream to not be religious. To be secular, and to come to religion voluntarily and not through obligation. I said [to myself] I’m going to come to this course [identity and Jewish consciousness] without a kippa…I want to talk about the Bible in a language that’s not religious. I wanted to look at things differently. … True there is a conflict [between his pluralism and his interest in living in the City of David], but all our lives we live in this conflict around Judaism and religion. I was born religious, but now I want to build myself.

For Eitan, the IDF’s Bible seminar provided a medium through which he could “build” his own personal spiritual identity that included both a pluralistic adherence to open questioning alongside a fidelity to zealous religious nationalism. This venue for personal exploration stood in stark contrast to the IDF’s broader goals of mobilizing themes of Jewish heritage to produce organizational cohesion and professional development. While Eitan may not have disagreed with viewing the Bible as a kind of cultural ‘heritage’ that may be used to improve organizational performance, he saw within the IDF’s Biblical seminar something uniquely capable of molding one’s personal character, rather than a vehicle for mere professional development.

Eitan’s emphasis on personal and spiritual development was echoed by other participants as well. In one informal conversation with a Captain who was then serving in the IDF Rabbinate, she noted for example, “I’m enjoying every moment of the workshop, but it’s not a professional course. I see it as something to help build myself, as personal development.” For her the course offered historical lessons, interesting outings, and a chance to meet officers from the military beyond her own unit, but it fell short of the kind of practical and pragmatic instructions that she could use with her subordinates.

*The Bible as Personal Experience*

The experiential nature of the workshop itself, as seen through its heavy emphasis on fieldtrips, helped to solidify the personalized ways in which participating officers interpreted the pedagogical messages of the course. These fieldtrips are viewed as being integral elements of the seminar and are seen to impart both professional and operational lessons to participants. These include giving soldiers a familiarity with local terrain and building a personal connection the individual soldier and the land he or she is sworn to protect (Shneur. 2016: 65).

The first field trip for example was held on the second day of the seminar and brought participants to the City of David, directly south of the Old City of Jerusalem. The importance that the IDF itself placed on this specific component of the course was underscored by an offhand remark made by the commander of the seminar. The commander (a Lt. Colonel in reserves) mentioned to a participating officer how the head of the IDFs manpower division – a full General – had called that evening to inquire as to how the field trip went. The inquiry itself was unusual in that the Head of the Manpower Division jumped down several command levels to speak with this Lieutenant Colonel. IDF generals serving on the General Staff rarely – if ever – personally call Lieutenant Colonels serving in the reserves. To be sure, the General’s call came on the heels of the death of an IDF private from dehydration on a similar trip to Jerusalem a few years earlier, it also highlighted how sensitive the course was to the manpower division itself.

The excursion took the participants to portions of the archaeological site that usually go unvisited by general visitors. The fieldtrip included a somewhat arduous climb down a ladder dozens of meters beneath the ground to the bottommost portion of the iron age wall that once surrounded the City of David. The physically demanding portion of the seminar echoedhow Zionists have classically ‘consecrated’ their connection to the Land of Israel through experiential and arduous fieldtrips (Katriel. 1988, Stein. 2009, Rabineau. 2014). There, highlighted by the shadows of artificial lighting, the participants sat at the foot of the wall and took turns reading verses from Second Samuel chapter 6 that describes the Ark of the Covenant’s return to Jerusalem from its Philistine captivity. In this Biblical scene David is observed by his wife Michal dancing raucously with the people as he accompanies the Ark of the Covenant back into Jerusalem. Michal is disgusted by behavior that she views is beneath the decorum of a king (II Samuel 6:2). The City of David’s guide for the group began using this chapter to discuss the ways in which leaders ought to relate to the common people. That is, participants were asked to debate the extent to which a commander ought to cultivate or transcend the professional distance that exists between officers and their subordinates.

## At the same time however, participants viewed this trip not so much as a means to develop professional command skills, but rather as an enjoyable outing meant to develop one’s own appreciation for Jewish and Biblical history. As one participant noted, “it was a fun trip, it gave me a new perspective on the Bible, and maybe even on Judaism, but it’s not really something I can *use* with my soldiers”. The IDF’s attempt to concretize an experiential field trip to the City of David, into a lesson centered on professional development did not match the ways in which the participants themselves assimilated the fieldtrip into their own personal lives.

**Conclusion**

In 1928 the famed linguist and cultural theorist, Edward Sapir, published an article titled, The Meaning of Religion. There he argued that certain religious sentiments,

persist even among the most sophisticated individuals, long after they have ceased to believe in the rationalized justification of these sentiments or feelings… (Sapir. 1928: 137).

In contrast to most academic and lay perspectives of religious experience in the early to mid-twentieth century that were predicting the victory of rationalism and science over what was seen as the more primitive and primal experiences of religious passion (Pepper. 1989: 452, Hadden. 1987), Sapir understood that religious pathos transcended the kinds of bureaucratic rationalism that modernity so often demands. Sapir, with his inimitable focus on the importance of appreciating individual experience in social analysis (Sapir. 1938), implied that religious pathos was something that was quite inescapable by individual practitioners themselves and could not be easily subsumed under the reified rubrics of organized religion. While one can certainly critique the theoretical accuracy of Sapir’s concept of ‘religious survivals’, his point – at least in its ethnographic sense, was quite apt. Religious experience – and contemporary Judaism - cannot be easily subsumed under the categorical rubrics of professionalization, consciousness or heritage.

Sapir’s conclusion is drawn out by the tension between how Judaism is experienced by individual officers in the IDF, and how it is mobilized by the institutional framework of the Israeli military itself. Here Biblical narratives fall between the cracks created by these two opposing views of how Jewish traditions ought to function within a military organization and civil society in general. On the one hand the military would like to use Biblical texts to both motivate its forces as well as to offer a mode of professional conduct grounded in ancient sources. On the other hand, soldiers themselves who participate in the IDF’s Bible seminar, see Biblical narratives, legends and lore as fitting into distinctly personal and religious categories that do not easily overlap with the professional goals of the military. For these soldiers, biblical narratives function in ways that allow them to “sort out” -as Ortner implied (1973: 1341) - a different kind of social experience. One that is deeply vested in a discourse of personal growth and individual spirituality.

Scholars of ‘religionization’ (*Hadata* – Hebrew) have linked the increased presence of religiously observant soldiers within the command and combat ranks of the IDF to an increase in the role that Judaism itself plays within the IDF itself. Yet these analyses have fallen short of engaging with the ways in which soldiers themselves mobilize religious discourse within their own military units. In this way the discourse on ‘religionization’ has elided two important factors. For one, members of the IDF’s officer corps are themselves tasked with utilizing Biblical narratives to cultivate a Jewish ‘consciousness’ within their subordinates. At the same time the IDF itself realizes that they rarely choose to do so willingly. For the participants of the seminar, Biblical narratives cannot really be mobilized for professional ends. Rather they see them as falling under ‘religious’ categories, meaning they must remain personal, and deeply individualistic. Secondly, the social composition of IDF units themselves tend to dampen – at least the overt – modes through which Biblical pedagogy and religious messaging can influence the professional character and operations of these units.

Considering the tense social context of these courses, one wonders why the IDF continues to insist on including Jewish Consciousness or religiously inflected pedagogical material into their military classrooms and field units. One could argue that in choosing to continue these courses the IDF is pursuing a path of known least resistance. That is to say, canceling them would likewise precipitate a chaotic controversy within the ranks of the military as well as within Israeli society more broadly, which the military would likewise like to avoid.

 While academics, the popular media, and the military itself argue over the ‘religious’ or ‘professional’ souls of Israel’s soldiers, servicemen and women themselves have their own personal and vernacular modes through which they sort out the dilemmas inherent in modern Israeli Judaism (Stern and Ben-Shalom. 2020). In the context of the IDFs own Biblical seminars, one finds these soldiers, both critiquing the divergent messages within the Identity and Jewish Consciousness unit as well as questioning the ways in which the Jewish tradition can bear professional relevance. By looking at how soldiers relate to contemporary Judaism scholars are able to paint a thicker and more complex image of how religion and ‘religionization’ functions within the Israel Defense Forces.

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1. Due to military regulations, the IDF’s quasi-academic Journal, Maarchot, often refrains from publishing the names of authors who are actively serving in sensitive roles. While the IDF refrains from recording the religious fidelities of its conscripts, the article argues that such beliefs can be inferred from their graduating high schools. As a result the statistics cited are far from exact, many graduates come from traditional homes, and many cease identifying as religious during the course of their service. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. It is customary for observant Jews to recite certain penitential prayers in the month leading up to the Jewish High holidays. In Israel many combine these prayers with pilgrimages to Jerusalem, specifically to the Western Wall in the Old City. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Behavioral Sciences Division (or, Machleket Mada’ei Hahitnahagut – MaMda”H) is ultimately responsible for all social scientific research projects conducted on military personnel and within military frameworks. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. While we were told the pedagogical material presented was also appropriate for Druze Christian or Muslim soldiers, all participants in this seminar were Jewish [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Name altered to protect privacy [↑](#endnote-ref-5)