

## From aliyah to the IDF: Shlav Bet gives olim a chance to serve

Since the start of the Israel-Hamas War, Shlav Bet has expanded and gained new momentum, with many Israelis and olim stepping forward to fill manpower gaps and support the IDF.

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*IDF soldiers conducting counterterrorism operations in the Gaza Strip, September 14, 2025. (photo credit: IDF SPOKESPERSON'S UNIT)*

For many who make aliyah, the decision to move to Israel is driven by a deep sense of Zionism, a connection to the land, and a desire to contribute to the country and to the nation in a meaningful way. For some, this means joining the IDF.

Yet many *olim* (immigrants), myself included, arrive in Israel past the age of conscription and never have the opportunity to serve in the IDF.

[Shlav Bet](#) (Track B) is an IDF enlistment track that allows men and women who did not serve at the usual age - often older immigrants or previously exempt Israelis - to voluntarily join the army or reserves after completing a shortened basic training program. It was originally created to encourage more ultra-Orthodox to enlist. The program provides an opportunity for civilians to actively contribute to Israel's defense and national effort, even later on in life.

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Below, several men share their experiences in Shlav Bet - what motivated them to join, what they've learned, and how the program has shaped their perspectives on life and service in Israel.



*Jon with his Dad. (credit: Miscellaneous family and friends)*

### **Jon: shouldering the stretcher**

Jon Kelsen and his wife, Hannah, made aliyah in August 2022 with their three young children, driven by their shared conviction to join and contribute to “the most significant

current project of the Jewish people - the State of Israel.”Aliyah was in part “about putting our shoulders under the stretcher,” Jon explained, using the Hebrew metaphor lasim katef mitachat la’alonka to describe taking part in the collective responsibility of building and defending the country.

Signing up for Shlav Bet, especially during the war, was a natural extension of that impulse, he added, as he felt even more compelled to contribute. Yet the process was far from straightforward. Jon spent over a year pushing to find a way in and was eventually accepted into a combat logistics unit (Avtacha).

Part of his motivation came from knowing that thousands of reservists had been serving for hundreds of days with few breaks. Many were exhausted, and manpower was stretched thin. If Jon’s contribution meant that some of these reservists could get a break, it was worth doing the program.

Emphasizing his point further, Jon recalled Moses’ words in the Bible when two and a half tribes of Israel chose to stay in Trans-Jordan: “Your brothers are going out to war, and you’re going to remain here?”

For years, he said, that phrase had haunted him. From a young age, he had wanted to serve, but he made aliyah past the age of conscription. “If I could go back, I would have served at 18 or 20,” he said. Still, he is grateful to be contributing now in his 40s. “I certainly would recommend this experience.”

Serving in Shlav Bet has offered him a rare window into the IDF, providing him with the opportunity to interact with parts of Israeli society that he otherwise wouldn’t have been able to. It has given him a “taste of the military, which is so formative to so many citizens of Israel.”



*Jon and his family. (credit: Miscellaneous family and friends)*

Throughout his experience, Jon has learned many things about Israel and about the IDF. In particular, he has seen firsthand what it means to navigate life between two worlds: the soldier mindset on base and the responsibilities of home, work, and family. That transition is challenging, requiring constant adjustment between military and civilian life.

For him, service isn't just about putting on a uniform; it's about participating in a "people's army" whose success depends on every individual.

Something that really struck him was how much the IDF is a people's army. Regular citizens put on their uniforms and step into a completely different world.

Ultimately, Jon sees the army as a project of the people, sustained by the people. Its success - and the success of programs like Shlav Bet - depends entirely on the dedication of those who serve; no one else can carry it forward.

### **Nathan: contributing to the nation**

Nathan's path into service has been shaped by both commitment to his country and responsibility to his family. He is currently serving on base in a security role (Avtacha), which involves standing guard, responding to traffic accidents, and securing breaches on the base. While perhaps not glamorous, he emphasizes that his work is essential.



“It’s not the most glamorous thing in the world, but every base needs this, and if I wasn’t here, it would be somebody else who’s already done over 100 days of this.”

The decision to join Shlav Bet came with personal challenges. Nathan has four young sons under the age of 12, and being away from family is difficult. Still, he wanted to relieve some of the pressure on long-serving reservists and to contribute to the country - not just to his family, but to the nation.

One day his sons will all serve in the IDF. Nathan wanted to lead by example, showing them that if they will be expected to serve, so should he. “My kids are going to go through this. It’s hard for me to tell them that I expect you to join the army if I’m not willing to do it as well.”



*Nathan with his family. (credit: Miscellaneous family and friends)*

Nathan first made aliyah at 25 but received a medical exemption from the army at the time. He and his family then spent 14 years outside Israel before returning. Now over 40, he voluntarily joined Shlav Bet, undergoing a medical panel to lift his exemption and fully commit to serving in the IDF.

Finding the right unit was another challenge. The application process is not straightforward, and many roles require prior training. “It’s like applying for your first job out of high school. Like a kid with no high school diploma who has no skills. Miluim is hard to get into if you have no training. That’s where I was,” he related, describing the difficult process.

Nathan initially trained through Pikud Haoref, where he was offered the role of identifying bodies, a role he felt was very important but ultimately not for him. He then transferred to Alog 99, a logistics unit between Be'eri and the Gaza border, finding a role where he could meaningfully contribute.

Nathan has now completed 75 days of miluim (reserve duty) and is not sure how much longer he will be serving. Even when home, he remains connected to his duties, carrying the awareness and responsibility of his role.

Through this experience, he has gained a deeper understanding of Israeli society. "Until I joined the army, there's a lot I didn't realize I didn't understand," he said. Being part of the IDF has given him a new perspective and has provided a window into a central part of Israeli life, revealing its values and the sacrifices involved.

"It's like watching a movie but then reading the book. Now I understand a deeper side. It gave me a real window into life in Israel that I didn't even realize I was missing."

Nathan also emphasized the importance of every role in the army, not just combat positions. "Not every job in the army is glamorous but in order for the army to do its job, it needs all sorts of people. It needs people to clean, to cook, and to fix things."

For Nathan, Shlav Bet has been more than service; it has been a way to connect, contribute, and integrate into the country in a real and tangible way.

Ultimately, he describes Shlav Bet as an amazing program that allows people who didn't or couldn't serve at an earlier stage to still be able to join and contribute. It's an opportunity he otherwise would not have gotten, and he's glad that he did it.

Jon and Nathan's experiences demonstrate how programs like Shlav Bet provide more than military manpower and highlight what it truly means to serve. They offer pathways for olim and those previously exempt to contribute, integrate, and find purpose inside a system that shapes a nation. During this challenging period, when so many are struggling and suffering, Shlav Bet is one way to step forward and make a difference.