

Lowering Army Exemption Age: A Sowellian Move



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Lowering the exemption age manifests the age-old adage, "Don't be right, be smart." It will not deepen the conflict between groups in Israel; on the contrary, it will lower the flames. Non-Charedi society will continue to feel frustration over Charedi non-participation, but at least it won't have to subsidize it.

And here we are again. Once more, the issue of Charedi recruitment to the IDF, among the thorniest and most complex issues that continually arise in Israel's public sphere, is up for discussion. All sides occupy their familiar corners. The general public does not doubt the righteousness of its position, while Charedim remain firmly

entrenched in theirs. Not many issues have the potency to bring Charedi society, en masse, to the streets of Israel in demonstration. The draft issue might be the only one.

From the Charedi perspective – to generalize, of course – the IDF is Ben Gurion’s melting pot for creating the “new Jew” – a Jew divorced from his father’s tradition and his mother’s Torah. Participating in the IDF involves a clear and present danger of leaving halachic tradition and, at the very least, abandoning the Charedi value of maintaining a significant distance from the State of Israel and its secular culture.

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On the other side of the equation is the non-Charedi perspective, which sees Charedim as immoral and unscrupulous draft dodgers. How can they enjoy the defense provided by Israel’s military while refusing to share its burden? How can they claim the mantle of moral superiority even as they evade the most basic moral responsibility that life in Israel demands? From this perspective, the refusal of Charedi society to serve is both baffling and infuriating.

It seems that with every passing year, as the numbers of Charedi society continue to burgeon, the tension only intensifies. Clearly, something has to happen; something needs to give. But equally

clearly, nothing can happen. It is a social battle in which no side can capitulate.

The current Israeli administration, comprised of parties generally sympathetic to the Charedi cause, has proposed several articles of legislation in connection with the draft issue. Among a range of suggestions, the most significant and realistic item seems to be lowering the exemption age for Yeshiva students – from 26 down to 23 or even to 21. This will mean that a Charedi individual, whose annual deferral of army service currently depends on being enrolled in a Yeshiva institution, will be released of this burden at the age of 21. He will be free to work, study in academia, or do as he pleases without the menace of enforced conscription hanging over his head.

Some, including Eliyahu Levy in [a recent Tzarich Iyun \[Hebrew\] article](#), have sharply criticized this proposal. Levy claims that the move will only deepen the inequality of Israeli society, accentuate the moral conundrum, and further incite non-Charedi Israel. According to Levi, combining the freedom to integrate into Israel's economy and begin a professional life with Charedi refusal to serve in the IDF will only make things worse. I disagree with this position and wish to argue that lowering the exemption age – as recommended years ago by Israel's finance ministry – is a good idea.

Before I get to the body of the argument, I will briefly expand on the economic challenge facing the State of Israel. One of the direct derivatives of the recruitment problem is the non-integration of Charedim into the general labor market. The issue is becoming

increasingly burdensome as Charedi society proliferates, and we would be deeply mistaken to ignore it.

Army Service and the Economic Challenge

One of the primary obstacles facing a Charedi man who wants to earn a living is enforced conscription. The arrangement initiated by Ben Gurion ties the two together: deferrals from army service are granted to Yeshiva students alone; as soon as he leaves the study hall, a (former) Yeshiva student must make his way directly to the army base. Thus, a Charedi individual who does not wish to enlist – for better or worse, this includes almost all Charedi young men – cannot work (legally) even if he wants to.

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Back in the day, there was reason to believe this policy would incentivize Charedi recruitment. Any Charedi person who wishes to go out to work – and indeed, there ought to be many – is automatically forced to enlist. In practice, however, decades of experience show that the result is the very opposite. After a few years of growth, the rate of Charedi enlistment over the last five years continually declines, while the rate of participation in the job market has remained stagnant.

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problem” was caused, albeit unintentionally, by binding together the issues of work and conscription: not only do Charedim not serve, they also don’t work. Secular society must carry both burdens alone. The sociological habits created by this situation weigh even heavier on Israel’s labor market, and no solution seems to be in sight.

This reality has been troubling economists from all sides of the political spectrum for years. Indeed, more and more voices are calling for breaking the dependence between the two issues: army and labor. The current government’s new recruitment outline seeks to finally address the problem, at least partially, by lowering the exemption age.

Enter the naysayers – Levy and his colleagues – with a significant claim: lowering the exemption age will only amplify the inequality between Charedi and non-Charedi Jews in Israel. The move will essentially create two classes, the “serving class” and the “evading class,” while the “evaders” won’t pay any price for it. Is this the good and the just that we want? Is this what the Torah expects from us?

Don’t be Right, Be Smart

The ethical claim noted above is, indeed, a justified one. There is much truth in its simple morality. However, in a complex reality, justice may be the enemy of wisdom. Pragmatism, I readily concede, is not everything. But it remains a significant something.

In his book “A Conflict of Vision,” economist Thomas Sowell formulated the dichotomous division of public thinking. On the right

side of the map stand those who espouse the “constrained” vision of observing reality, respecting it, and understanding that despite all its shortcomings, it is probably the best option. Indeed, it is the only one possible. In contrast, on the other side of the political fence are those espousing the “unconstrained” vision, who seek to change the existing order and impose justice open the world – hence, “justice warriors” – without bowing to political or sociological restrictions.

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To borrow Soel’s semantic field, the claim against lowering the age of exemption draws from an unconstrained view of our reality. It is a claim that begs for justice and aspires to a magical solution that will finally bring the Charedi issue to a fair conclusion. Yet, the enemy of justice is often simple reality, and a consideration of reality, as experienced over the last 70 years, teaches us some basic lessons:

- The great majority of Charedi society does not enlist in the IDF and will not enlist irrespective of sanctions and their severity.
- Fear of conscription prevents the Charedi public from working and creates economic woes for Israel.
- The secular public hardly gains a sense of equality from the situation in which Charedim cannot work; on the contrary, the sense of equality is further compromised.

Expecting non-Charedi society, those who make real sacrifices to serve in the IDF, to understand the Charedi refusal to enlist is

unrealistic and perhaps unfair. Indeed, today's tumultuous social climate is not disposed toward listening and understanding. However, setting aside the emotional backdrop, lowering the exemption age only serve to *reduce* inequality. Significant entry into the workforce will do much to alleviate the feeling that Charedim are piggybacking on secular society. It is enough for a few thousand members of the Charedi sector to go to work, and not only will the secular public not be disadvantaged, but they will feel that at least they are not bearing the entire burden of the tax.

As part of the wave of protests against the current government (and its judicial reforms), many among the secular public have argued that they are “funding the evasion” – paying the living costs of Charedi society, from Yeshiva and Kollel budgets to balance grants for Charedi cities and social security allowances. If Charedim enter the workforce en masse, at least this claim will drop from the agenda. There will be greater justification for funding Yeshiva and Kollel institutions since the Charedi public is interested in such funding and bears the tax burden like any other group in the country.

Some have made the argument that Charedi entry into the workforce will create greater identification with Israel, and this, in turn, will lead to greater participation in the IDF. I cannot pass judgment on this assessment; certainly, such trends will be vehemently opposed within Charedi communities. But even absent this, the move is both required and justified. It is an imperfect solution to a thorny issue. But if we consider the alternatives on the table – the Basic Law: Torah Study (which essentially equates Torah study to military service)

accompanied by the notorious override clause – it seems to be the best of them. This is most true from the non-Charedi perspective.

How to lower the flames

Some, including Levy (in the aforementioned article), fear that lowering the exemption age will intensify polarization in the Jewish nation. In my opinion, this prognosis is mistaken.

A good move toward minimizing the outrage, even if only a little, is for Charedi politicians to lower their voices – as they have recently started doing. Above all, we need a good dose of humility. We need humility, as Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer has noted [in a previous piece](#), to recognize the moral issue latent in the Charedi refusal to serve in the IDF. And we need the humility to recognize that those serving in the IDF deserve unique benefits.

Certainly, we need to silence the ludicrous argument made by some in the Charedi camp, who oppose lowering the exemption age for fear that this will spark a mass exodus of Yeshiva students from the Yeshiva system. Such claims are reminiscent of Ephraim Kishon's feuilletons: In the name of an elusive "equality," we demand that the IDF acts as an enforcer of Torah study by forbidding young men from leaving Yeshiva and running the risk of enforced conscription.

In conclusion, I do not see any good news in the current proposal for those who want to see more Charedim serving in the IDF – though stranger things have happened. Yet, not only does the proposal not

set back the relations between Charedim and the state, it even promotes equality in the economic field. In life, as the cliché says, we would do better to be smart than to be right.

