

## DRAFTING IDENTITY

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A 17-year-old kid with a buzz cut stands with his backpack next to his parents and little sister while his cousin takes a picture. They all smile, but not wholeheartedly; there's a tension beneath their smiles, a nervousness. His dad embraces him and puts a hand on his shoulder with a sense of pride. Across from them, on the other side of the wide, open plaza, a beautiful blonde girl is on the verge of tears as she hugs her boyfriend who sports a similar buzz cut. He kisses her and whispers in her ear before taking a group picture with his friends. They are all pumped. The other recent high-school graduates glance at a big monitor that hangs like a billboard on the building's outside wall, waiting for their names to appear. Once their names pop up, they say their goodbyes and head to the bus, their small frames dwarfed by their huge backpacks. Parents, sisters, brothers, and friends wave to their loved ones—some cry, some laugh uneasily, some cheer a little too loudly. The accompanying younger siblings know that in a few years or months it will be their turn to get on this bus; their parents realize this too. One by one, as the graduates step on the bus, they turn back with a confident smirk for their last picture as civilians—and their first as soldiers. Almost all Israelis have this photo of themselves boarding the bus the day they enlist in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

There comes a time in every Israeli citizen's life when he or she gets to fulfill the social contract by enlisting in the IDF. Israel, surrounded by enemies, is under constant existential threat. Because this has been Israel's reality since its establishment, enlistment is mandatory for all civilians; the IDF plays a vital role in Israeli culture and society. There is a sense of camaraderie and brotherhood between those who wear uniforms, and even between civilians and soldiers. Soldiers ride public transportation for free, have special comedy shows and concerts organized for them, and often get "soldier discounts" at movie theaters, restaurants, and shops. Strong friendships are often formed within military units, and the military serves as a bond that threads Israeli society together.

In her essay "Families in Arms: Kinship and the Military in Israeli Society," Erella Grassiani explores the connection between kinship and military service within Israeli society. Grassiani claims that, in Israel, "the army is present in society in a naturalized form; it is self-evident and in general not questioned by the public" (116). No matter where civilians stand on the political spectrum, the consensus is that, if not for the IDF, there would not be a country to protect. There's a saying in Israel: "The people build the army, the army builds the people." Grassiani also points out the reciprocal relationship between Israeli society and the army: "the army defines the way Israeli society looks and functions and how the nation is being built and rebuilt" (116).

If military service plays a pivotal role in Israeli society and is a vital common denominator of the community, then it is not surprising that there's a stigma against citizens who choose not to enlist or do other kinds of national service in place of enlisting. In her book *Conscientious Objectors in Israel: Citizenship, Sacrifice, Trials of Fealty*, Erica Weiss examines how refusal to serve in the IDF affects social status and pushes conscientious objectors to the margins of Israeli society: "[r]efusing military service, the basis of civic participation and a foundational moral good, puts [conscientious objectors] outside the accepted range of opinions and behaviors in Israeli society" (132). As part of her examination, Weiss attended several peace movement events, where she encountered conscientious objectors who felt that their environment turned its back on them after they announced their refusal to serve. During his reserve duty, Avi came out to his friends in the unit with his decision to refuse to further serve in the reserves. "I was dead to them. They wouldn't see me, wouldn't talk to me, I didn't exist," Avi tells Weiss, "[t]hey said I betrayed them" (135). Eyal experienced the same reaction, not from his friends, but from his own father. "He was choosing the ideology, the state, over me, his son!" says Eyal, who felt that his father "was sacrificing [him] to something he saw as bigger" (142). He felt like "the nation (*ba'am*) came before [their] relationship" (142). Like Avi and Eyal, many military refusers experience the Israeli public's harsh criticism of their actions and denunciation from society.

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It's February 2007 at the Berlin International Film Festival. Israeli director Joseph Cedar is about to win the Silver Berlin Bear award for Best Director for his film *Beaufort*. The film tells the story of the IDF's withdrawal from the Israeli Security Zone in southern Lebanon in 2000. Itay Tiran, Oshri Cohen, and Itay Turgeman portray the three soldiers who were the last to occupy the Beaufort outpost. Together with Cedar, the actors have the privilege of walking the red carpet in Berlin and representing Israel to the world. But these actors neither served in the IDF nor performed any other kind of national service. Though they didn't fulfill their part of that social contract, they were not thrown aside to the margins of Israeli society, but rather celebrated in Israel as successful actors. Ironically, they show the world what it means to be Israeli while having evaded the "backbone of what it means to be Israeli"—military service (Weiss 139).

Both scenarios—Avi and Eyal's rejection from their community and the public's admiration of Cohen, Turgeman and Tiran—exist simultaneously. How do we explain the two contradictory reactions to the same choice? In her essay, Grassiani says: "[f]rom the first days of the IDF, the army was called a 'people's army' that was to provide a place for all kinds of people to meet and form one nation, one family" (117). This one nation consists of different communities that sometimes have different values. In this case, two contrasting communities emerge: refusers within the arts and entertainment industry, and refusers who don't live in the public eye.

After being praised for his role in *Beaufort* and having had the honor of representing Israel in several international film festivals, Tiran was cast again as a soldier in Samuel Maoz's 2009 film *Lebanon*. Despite his success, critical acclaim, and role-model status, Tiran's evasion of military service isn't completely overlooked. Whether it's journalists who bring up the issue in interviews or citizens who take offense, Tiran is often pressed to provide satisfying reasons for evading the army. Tiran was asked in one of his 2010 interviews if, given the chance then, at age 30, if he would go through three symbolic months in the IDF to appease his critics. He answered: "I didn't commit any crime. Why should I go through a light version of the military to compensate for something that I don't think I did wrong?" (Tiran). Tiran speaks openly about his decision not to enlist and is unashamed. But that doesn't prevent

directors such as Cedar and Maoz, who were both combat soldiers in the IDF, from casting him as a soldier in their films. Tiran's charisma and dedication on stage and in front of the camera are captivating; they have made him one of the most successful and respected actors in Israel, landing him role after role both in films and the theater. Perhaps this is the reason why people, including Cedar and Maoz, overlook the fact that he didn't serve. Maybe Tiran is forgiven for not fulfilling his part of the social contract because of his contribution to Israeli culture. Or is it that the artistic community has different values than the Israeli community at large? After all, the artistic world, both in Israel and abroad, is known for leaning left. But while not enlisting has social costs, another consequence of evading the draft should be considered.

In a Hebrew news article, Or Heler presents Israeli enlistment statistics as of December 2014. The article shows that 27.3 percent of men—a rise of two percent from 2012 and a new record—and 42.3 percent of women—a one percent rise from 2012—don't enlist. While the Orthodox community is usually thought to be a significant part of this statistic, Heler shows a dramatic increase in the religious community's enlistment rate; almost 2,000 ultra-orthodox Jews enlisted in 2013, as opposed to almost 1,300 in 2011. The statistics are concerning because they show that draft evasion isn't specific to certain communities but rather is a growing phenomenon. Artists are a small, even peripheral, part of this statistic. Society's attitude towards draft refusers has changed across the board. It only seems like society takes it especially easy on actors—who have the platform to openly talk about and defend their decision. But Eyal and Avi, who were denied by their family or unit for refusing to serve, will probably still be able to go on with their lives, get jobs, get into college, and even be part of most social circles. Something has shifted in Israeli society; there's far less stigma surrounding the refusal to serve. The perception of what it means to be a contributing citizen in Israel has changed significantly.

Weiss also presents John Rawls's "positing of an 'unencumbered self,' an idea of political neutrality in which the individual can be theoretically separated from her sense of moral good and attachment" (136). "In [this] model, the individual has certain inalienable rights that precede any political and moral views the person may choose to take up," she explains (136). Weiss

claims that “[it] is this idea of citizenship that informs conscientious objectors’ expectations that their moral and political attachments will affect neither their citizenship nor their personal binds to the collective” (136). This expectation—whether it comes from Rawls’s model or from thinking that society won’t care about people’s personal choices—may not have been common in the past, but it is today. Draft refusers are right in thinking that their choices will have no devastating social consequences. Yet as a patriotic Israeli, I find the acceptance of refusal very concerning. What has changed?

Although the IDF is an organization subject to political motives, civilians’ opinions and agendas do sometimes factor into the military’s course of action. After all, the people build the army. *Beaufort* depicts the last few days of the last group of soldiers that occupied the outpost in southern Lebanon on Mount Beaufort before Israel’s withdrawal. After 18 years of occupying the post in enemy territory, criticism and pressure from the Israeli public eventually led the government to withdraw. The presence of the public is evident and felt in the film, even though it is never overtly depicted. The soldiers on the mountain don’t engage with the Israeli people, but they certainly feel their influence. This unseen force is represented by the anti-war movement Four Mothers—Leaving Lebanon in Peace.

Four Mothers was a social movement founded by the mothers of soldiers who served as combatants in Lebanon. This group worked to turn Israeli public opinion against the futile war Israel had been fighting in Lebanon since 1982 and played a major role in the government’s decision to withdraw. *Beaufort* presents the harsh opinions and feelings the soldiers have towards the Four Mothers movement: “[f]our old whores who don’t know shit about the army are brainwashing the whole country with their bullshit,” says Zitloui, one of the soldiers (0:48:56). When Liraz, the commander, doesn’t get permission to lead his men into the Lebanese village to find terrorists, he tells his commander they should just “shut down the army. The four old ladies defeated us. They’re right” (1:08:13). It is as if the real battle is against Four Mothers rather than Hezbollah. *Beaufort* gives a clear sense of what was going on in Israel around that time, showing the Israeli public’s lack of support for its military actions and strategy.

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Buildings are shaped like bulky rectangles with small window-like rows of squares. Circles on top of the buildings with vertical lines underneath them look like antennas. In front of the buildings, on the bottom of the painting, there's a thick grey stripe with four cars on it. The cars are drawn simply, like caricatures. The sky is painted in one color and there are three big white stars drawn as if the artist has never seen a real star. Two of the buildings stand out. These two rectangles are filled with vertical and horizontal lines that create small, pressed-together windows from the bottom to the top of the buildings. One of the two buildings is taller than all the others. All these details give away the fact that this is not just any city, but Tel Aviv, and that these buildings are the Azrieli Towers.

Two squares in the middle of the painting are filled with vertical colorful stripes and look like posters on the side road. The colors of the squares resemble the gay pride symbol and might refer to Tel Aviv's reputation as being tolerant and gay-friendly. This painting could easily be mistaken for one made by a six-year-old in art class, but it's hard to believe that a six-year-old would write "Israel wants war" in big Hebrew letters on top of one of the Azrieli Towers. This is actually the name of the piece, made in 2001, by the Israeli artist David Reeb, one of the most political artists in Israel. Reeb's work questions Israeli society and its political policies, particularly those that focus on the Israeli 'occupation.' Reeb's bold statement "Israel wants war" contrasts with the Israeli public's state of mind that "Israel always strives for peace." Reeb's statement, displayed against the Tel Aviv background, both literally and figuratively far from the demonstrations in the West Bank, casts a clear judgment on the Israeli public. This statement is aggravating and thought-provoking, and could be interpreted as a catalyst for much of the highly-charged politics in Israel.

"Israel wants war." Some would agree with that statement. Whether or not you agree, it is reasonable to posit that such a statement could only emerge after 1982, which I would argue was the first time Israel went to a war by choice. The First Lebanon War kept Israel in Lebanon for 18 years, holding on to its position at the Beaufort outpost in the Israeli security zone in southern Lebanon. Something about the way Israeli society perceived the necessity of military service changed in that moment, and the Four Mothers

movement embodied that change. After that war, the IDF went from an army that fought other armies to an army that fights terror organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Israel went from fighting wars in which losing could cost the country its existence to fighting wars that kept up the status quo. Israel's image changed from David to Goliath, and the nature of the criticism of Israel's actions in the world media and within parts of Israeli society reflect that shift.

I will suggest that a part of Israel's change in image comes from other nations' acknowledgment that Israel's strong national identity derives from having a solid national core in the IDF. It is the IDF that brings the different communities of Israel together. In his article "The Myth of Benign Group Identity: A Critique of Liberal Nationalism," Jamie Mayerfeld examines the problematic nature of strong nationalism as an inevitable cause of conflict and violence. "[A]ny nationalism," says Mayerfeld, "will exert pressure on people to undertake, in the name of the nation, acts of violent aggression or violent resistance that are unjust" (557). Therefore, some would claim that identifying strongly with one's nation is negative. Mayerfeld also claims, "[w]hen people identify themselves closely with their nation, they are more susceptible to the perception that their nation has been treated unjustly by other groups or nations, and they feel a stronger need to correct the perceived injustice, by force of arms if necessary" (557). If we were to look at nationalism not from the perspective of an individual, but from the perspective of a nation, when several states have a strong national identity, it becomes a source of conflict. As Mayerfeld states, "[n]ationalism thus gives us the uninviting spectacle of nations acting unjustly in the name of justice" (557).

Thinking back to Heler's statistics, I find that there is another factor to consider when examining the reasons for draft dodging being more acceptable in today's society. Over the years, Israel has become more and more cosmopolitan through its innovation, liberalism, and tolerance. From adopting international fast-food chains and building malls, to technological developments and becoming more independent, Israel has set herself up for growth and prosperity. It seems that Israel's quest for progress and change has brought her to embrace and open up towards minorities, and Israeli society has become more accepting. When it comes to the LGBT community, whose symbol is proudly displayed in Reeb's painting, and to the Druze community,

whose integration in society is improving, a move towards acceptance is positive and welcomed. But at the same time, we should see that when society becomes too liberal and accepting of military service refusers, it reshapes what the Israeli identity is made of for the worse and weakens the sense of strong nationalism Israel is known for.

In Israel there are unique words for describing civilians who decide to leave Israel and for Jews who decide to come and live in Israel. *Aliyah*, which literally translates to ascending, is used to describe Jews who move to Israel. *Yerida*, meaning descending, describes Israelis who leave Israel to live abroad. These words' literal meanings indicate a clear criticism of civilians who choose to leave their country, and the contrast positions Israel as a supreme place one should ascend to. No one questions whether Eyal is a real Israeli or not, despite his refusal to serve. Of course not—he still lives on the land he refused to fight for. But Oren Moverman, an Academy Award-nominated filmmaker who served as a combat soldier in the IDF before moving to the U.S., is referred to as an ex-Israeli in Israeli news articles. And why? Because he no longer lives on the land he was willing to die for? Society calls someone who served in the military but left Israel to live abroad an ex-Israeli, but still calls someone who lives in Israel and did not serve an Israeli. This is another indication of how the backbone and the core of Israeli society and identity has been shattered. Mayerfeld might see this crack in national identity as positive progress towards a future with less conflict and violence. As he explains, “strong national identity leads warring nationalities to disagree on what justice requires and to harbor intense grievances against the injustices they believe have been dealt to them by their national enemies” (575). He believes that “[p]eople who are swept up in these conflicts need to lessen and perhaps relinquish their attachment to the nation if they want to avoid further bloodshed and lay the basis for lasting peace and democracy” (575). But as an Israeli and a former military officer who grew up in constant conflict, I can say that if we lose our strong sense of nationalism, our unique national identity, and our core bond—all the things that brought us to claiming our own land and building our country—we will become extinct. We Israelis live in a different reality—a reality that requires people willing to fight for their nation.



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