

On Yiddishkeit and IDF enlistment

Matthew Wagner , THE JERUSALEM POST

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In the face of increasing draft dodging, one of the nation's largest secular high school systems is teaching traditional Jewish texts and Judaism to foster patriotism and a willingness to serve and, if need be, die for one's country.

"We are not preaching religion but the Jewish sources and tradition are the basis of our existence here," said ORT Israel Director-General Zvi Peleg. "If you don't have a strong Jewish identity, if you do not know what you are doing in a country surrounded by enemies, and if you do not feel part of the Jewish people, why would you want to join the army?"

Peleg said that 92 percent of ORT graduates enlist in the IDF. This is slightly higher than the national average among secular high schools of 90%, according to IDF data.

ORT and other high schools are grappling with Israel's most basic existential conundrum: How does an open, democratic society educate a generation of young people to fight radical Islamic terrorism on a day-to-day basis?

Their answer is to teach Judaism and Jewish identity. In all secular schools it is mandatory to learn Bible and Jewish tradition. But ORT concluded five years ago that there was a real need to make Jewish texts the focus of soul-searching discussions on the meaning of Jewish and Israeli identity for high school students. These discussions were geared toward preparing students for their future army duty.

Every year a core of about 600 students with leadership qualities in 30 high schools around the country volunteer to participate after school in active discussion groups.

Each discussion is based on a text from "the Jewish bookshelf": Bible, Midrash, Talmud and also modern Hebrew literature by authors such as Meir Shalev and Amos Oz.

In addition, all 10,000 12th graders are exposed to less intensive discussion groups, as part of a mandatory program.

In the next five years both the mandatory and the voluntary programs, which are known as Shorshei Israel and which are funded by ORT and the New York Jewish Federation in equal parts at an annual cost of several million shekels, will be expanded to include all 65 ORT schools.

ORT, which stands for the Russian Obshestvo Remeslenofo zemledelcheskofo Truda, meaning The Society for Trades and Agricultural Labour, was first established in 1880 in St. Petersburg, to train Jews living in the Pale of Settlement occupations that had been restricted solely to non-Jews.

"We try to encourage our students to position themselves on the spectrum between "Israeli" and "Jew," said Shoshi Pinsky a teacher at an ORT school in Givat Ram, Jerusalem. "We believe it is essential for a future soldier to figure out what it means that he or she belongs to the Jewish people and how that is different from being an Israeli citizen."

Pinsky said that the use of Jewish sources is not aimed at encouraging religious observance.

"We are not missionaries. We make that clear to students who are initially turned off by the prospect of being taught Judaism. We are just trying to encourage in-depth discussion among students who have become increasingly more individualistic and less attached to collective ideals."

One of the texts used by ORT's Shorshei Israel program is the Midrash that tells how God chose the Jewish people from among the nations to be the recipients of the Torah. In the Midrash, God approaches other peoples and offers them the Torah. One nation declines because the Torah demands "Thou shall not kill," another because of the commandment "Thou shall not steal."

"A lot of students felt uncomfortable with the depiction of other nations as killers and thieves who could not stand up under the rigorous ethical demands of the Torah," said Pinsky. "But the text gave us a chance to deal with the 'chosenness' of the Jewish people."

In recent years there has been a gradual rise in draft dodging in a country where every Israeli male high school graduate is expected to serve three years of army service and every female is expected to serve two years.

"The decrease in the number of soldiers enlisting in the IDF is a symptom of a general deterioration of commonly held values and goals in Israeli society," said Lt.-Col. Shlomi Avraham, deputy head of the IDF's Manpower and Research Department. "We have become a very individualistic society with citizens more interested in realizing their personal goals than giving up three years of their lives to serve their country."

High-ranking IDF officials are concerned about the trend of falling enlistment rates for several reasons. First, it comes at a time when the IDF, in the wake of lessons learned during the Second Lebanon War, is abandoning a misconception that a small, highly trained cadre of combat soldiers backed by super-advanced technology can do the job.

Second, a higher juvenile delinquency rate has disqualified more potential soldiers than in previous years.

Also, a fall in birth rates 18 years ago has resulted in fewer available soldiers today. According to Avraham, this trend will continue through 2012.

In an attempt to stigmatize draft dodging, Defense Minister Ehud Barak and the IDF have launched a scare campaign. Young entertainers known to be draft dodgers have been ostracized and the IDF hopes to pass legislation that would enable it to punish draft dodgers.

But Avraham admitted that education was the best way of motivating soldiers to enlist in the army. He said that the IDF has met with high school principals to discuss possible educational programs that encourage a stronger Jewish, Zionist identity.

Alina Levchenko, 18, an ORT graduate, said that a few years ago she seriously considered dodging the draft.

"I am basically a pacifist and a humanist," said Levchenko. "I am against the occupation. I think it is wrong for us to be forcibly ruling over another people."

But through her participation in the after-school Shorshei Israel discussions, Levchenko, who immigrated nine years ago from Moscow, gave more thought to her relationship with the state.

"I would not say that I have developed a strong Jewish identity," said Levchenko. "But I've reached the conclusion that the state helped my mother, who is a single parent, to bring up myself and my brother. So I feel obligated to pay back my debt."•



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