

# Draft-Dodgers or Deserters?

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In this week's editorial in the popular English charedi weekly magazine *Mishpachah*, editor Rabbi Moshe Grylak defends the charedi community's insistence upon exclusively learning in yeshivah and kollel rather than dividing this time with serving in the Israeli army. Rabbi Grylak argues that they are not draft-dodgers, claiming that learning Torah protects the nation. Because of this, Rabbi Grylak insists that "decreasing the scope of Torah learning in Eretz Yisrael would be disastrous." It provides metaphysical protection that would supposedly be fatally compromised if they were to take off several months to train and serve in a military capacity.

But is this really true? On a theoretical level, it has a very shaky foundation. On a practical level, charedim themselves don't believe it; and if they do; they certainly don't act in accordance with this belief.

Let's start with the theoretical level. To be sure, there are a small number of statements in the Talmud and Midrash which, at first glance, would seem to indicate that *kollel* students are as effective as soldiers. However, as with all statements of the Sages, these are tersely stated, open to a number of interpretations, and contingent on various factors, many of which may even be unknown, and the real-life practical application of such a concept is far from clear. (And there are certainly many more statements in the Talmud about the importance of working for a living, which are apparently not considered binding!)

The Talmud (*Sotah* 21a and *Makkos* 10a) says that the study of Torah protects a person from certain types of harm. Elsewhere, the Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 108a and *Bava Basra* 7b) rules that Torah scholars are exempt from the expense of building protective walls for the city, since they are protected by virtue of the Torah they learn. The *Ba'al HaTurim* (Deuteronomy 1:3) says that a Torah scholar can protect forty thousand people around him.

But to which kind of Torah scholars does this apply? Does everyone learning Torah have the power to protect others? Maybe, for example, it only applies to those who are teaching others and are thus connected to them? Perhaps those Torah students and scholars whose studies are part of a framework in which they put their lives on the line for the nation, produce Torah which provides the most protection?

And what is the extent of the protection? Is there a linear increase with each additional person who is learning? Nobody is proposing that yeshivos be shut down, *chas v'shalom*; just that most (but not all) yeshivah students divide their time between Torah study and army service. Would this risk danger, when the number of students in yeshivah and kollel is constantly rising?

And to which kinds of circumstances is it referring? Who says that it applies to the situation of today, with regard to an existential threat from our enemies? Note that the important authority Radvaz greatly restricts the extent of the Talmud's ruling about Torah scholars being exempt from contributing towards security, including stating that it does not apply in cases where the rabbis consider themselves in need of protection. As Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin, in a classic article on the drafting of yeshiva students (translated in *Tradition*, Fall 1985), wrote: "If you understand that the scholars don't need protection in relatively peaceful times and are exempt from building the protective walls, what consequence has this when compared to a life-and-death struggle, a war which is a mitzvah and in which all are obligated?"

Second, and most significantly: Regardless of the sources that someone might dig up/reinterpret to claim that yeshivah and kollel students are protecting Israel, let us ask the following: Do charedim themselves actually believe that they are soldiers providing metaphysical protection? If so, then from their perspective, they are not draft-dodgers. But instead, they are deserters.

An important aspect of the belief that Torah provides protection is that while this protection may be of global benefit, it is most concentrated in the places where the Torah study actually takes place, and where its students and scholars are. The numerous stories mentioned by Rabbi Moshe Grylak in his *Mishpachah* editorial are about Torah providing specifically *localized* protection. In this vein, when the 300-strong Grodno yeshivah relocated from Ashdod to Bet Shemesh due to last year's war in the South, a prominent Torah scholar in Bet Shemesh was quoted as stating that "We have no doubt that the efforts of the residents of Bet Shemesh, such that the sound of Torah should not cease from one yeshivah, is the 'iron dome' of the city; it is the true protection, and the cause that our residents have not been part of the bloodshed."

But if so, why didn't they stay in Ashdod? If charedim really believe that Torah study provides protection that is greatest in its immediate locale, then why did the Grodno yeshivah relocate from Ashdod, which needed protection, to Bet Shemesh, which did not? And why did other yeshivos move from Ashdod and Netivot to Bnei Brak? If the haredi community's excuse for not serving the military is that they provide metaphysical protection, then why can't they provide it where it's actually needed? The yeshivos should have relocated from Bnei Brak and Jerusalem to the South, not the other way around!

In the previous Gulf War, Rav Elyashiv was quoted as saying that Tifrach yeshivah should stay put and rely on the protection that its Torah provides, but Grodno, which is in the much more dangerous town of Ashdod, should relocate, since one cannot pray for a miracle. Okay, so it's more dangerous in Ashdod; but isn't that even *more* of a reason for them to stay, and help protect the residents? Soldiers don't go where it's safe; they go where they are needed to protect the population! Where are the elite battalions of haredi Torah students, travelling to provide metaphysical protection where it is desperately needed? The IDF was certainly effective at

defending Ashdod; if the yeshivah students couldn't defend it with their Torah, shouldn't they enlist in the IDF, which is apparently more effective?

It seems to me that charedim don't really believe that their Torah study provides localized protection. In Kiryat Sefer and Betar, bastions of the charedi community which are full of yeshivos and kollelim, they have the same security fences and armed guards as every other town in Israel that is over the Green Line. Most charedim, given the choice of living in a settlement with a kollel but no guards, or a settlement with guards but no kollel, would choose the latter.

And just look at the charedi approach to the notion of Divine assistance as it applies to other areas. One of Rabbi Grylak's stories, from the Talmud itself, is about how one group of Sages' Torah brought economic security. But do charedim rely on Torah for that? When it comes to receiving government money, *bitachon* goes out of the window. They exert a maximum of *hishtadlus* to recruit votes, and they demand to receive financial stipends from the State of Israel. If they trust in their Torah and mitzvos and *bitachon* to provide physical security, why don't they trust in it to provide financial security? And the story that Rabbi Grylak quoted regarding Rav Moshe Feinstein was about protection from medical calamities – do charedim claim that their cities have less of a need for hospitals?

And there's more. What was the charedi world's reaction to the planned draft? Hysteria over the disruption to their way of life, declarations of war, some calling for cancelling the yeshivah vacation (unlike during the Lebanon war!) while others took time off learning for demonstrations. But where is their *bitachon*? Learning Torah protects you from Syria and Hezbollah and Iran, but not from the Israeli government?!

When it comes to issues of genuine concern, charedim don't rely on *bitachon*. The reason why charedim don't serve in the army has nothing to do with the highly questionable notion that having sixty thousand people in *kollel* provides essential security for the country that would be compromised if they were to share the burden of military service. The real reason why charedim don't serve in the army is because they want to maintain a certain way of life. Not that one cannot be sympathetic to that, and to their reasons for it. But it should not come at the expense of others disproportionately shouldering the burden of national security.

The religious-Zionist *hesder* yeshivot of Sderot and Netivot practiced what they preach and stayed in Sderot and Netivot during the war, boosting morale and providing spiritual support to the residents. They were joined by the *hesder* yeshivah of Kiryat Gat, which temporarily relocated to Sderot to provide support during the war. Perhaps putting their lives on the line to serve in the IDF helps these young men appreciate what it means to put oneself out on behalf of the nation, and to demonstrate such care with their Torah learning. That is the kind of Torah student that the nation needs.