



# **Outsiders in Uniform: From the Margins to the Army and Back**



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## **Outsiders in Uniform**

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## Preface

*The minute you take off your uniform, people look at you differently! An Ethiopian paratrooper looks different after he's taken off his uniform. Without the uniform, you go back to being an Ethiopian, not a combat soldier! You have to start proving yourself again all the time.... Unfortunately, I think that someone who's done meaningful military service, not necessarily in a combat unit, can still get looked down on as "the ugly Israeli," but this shouldn't hold him back in life. (An Ethiopian Jew who served in the IDF)*

*Even if I didn't pick up a specific trade in the army, I got the best tools for working. I got the ability to work. At the end of the day, the army is a business in every sense of the word, which helps you in the future. (An ultra-Orthodox Jew who served in the IDF)*

*Not everyone succeeds, even those who were in a combat unit. One in a million manages to get ahead. Some people have a good head and they aim to do well.... Is it easier for someone in a combat unit to be successful? I don't know. It's not a sure thing. There are also guys who were combat soldiers who aren't really making it. It doesn't matter... In the end, if you don't have a college degree, you won't move forward, no matter where you served.... If you have education, you have everything! (An Ethiopian Jewish veteran)*

*I got to know new people.... If I hadn't been in the army, I would have been closed off in my own comfort zone in my own neighborhood and community, but I got to know the country and places that I never in my life would have gotten to, and also new people. I met kibbutznikim and Druze. It opens up your mind.... I have hopes that I can go far. I don't think that because I'm Ethiopian, because of my color, that I have no chance, or something like that.... Don't let color hold you back. You can't walk around feeling inferior, although I can understand where that [feeling] comes from. (An Ethiopian Jewish veteran)*

*I got to know Israeli society. I realized how foolish I'd been to think that people who serve in the army are suckers. In fact, it's just the opposite. I realized that the ones who serve in the army are doing the right thing. But not out of Zionism.... You owe it to every person in the state, and that's why you serve.... If you don't do it, you're being ungrateful to everyone around you.... Today I can walk with my head held high and say: I served in the army. (An ultra-Orthodox veteran)*

The above observations encapsulate the entire life stories of young post-army men who belong to two unique and distinctive marginalized groups in Israel: young Ethiopian Jews, and ultra-Orthodox men. These statements crystallize their feelings and opinions concerning the benefits they gained from their army service. Alongside disappointments, feelings of discrimination, and class and social stagnation that characterize some of the Ethiopian veterans, it appears that, thanks to their army service, many of them expanded their circle of friends and their ability to trust others outside their group. Military service made it possible for the members of both groups studied to become better acquainted with

Israeli society in all its diversity; and for some of them, in particular the Haredim, their service notably strengthened their social and national solidarity, sense of shared destiny, and desire to play a significant role in the civic-social “common good.” It goes without saying that the above statements and opinions are not typical of most of the ultra-Orthodox communities, who relate to the state and its institutions with an attitude of estrangement, hesitancy, and utilitarianism. Army service is also an important and unique springboard to the labor market for most ultra-Orthodox men, whose education and culture have placed good job prospects out of their reach. By contrast, a majority of the Ethiopian veterans, even after their service, felt a sense of alienation and lack of integration into Israeli society, and experienced discrimination and racism—ugly phenomena that occurred despite their sacrifices in the army and their expectations, at least in some cases, of equal treatment following their discharge.

These statements raise questions regarding the prior expectations of army service among inductees from special populations: Why enlist in the army at all, in the case of the ultra-Orthodox? What benefit do the young men expect to gain from their service when they enlist? What are the social factors and civilian processes that shape their expectations of army service? How do different forms of social capital and perceptions of civic responsibility affect the expectations from military service among these special populations? How do the social networks within their group influence their motivation to serve? Questions also arise about the value and the impact of their army service in their own eyes: What did these young people gain from serving, and to what extent did the benefits they derived live up to their prior expectations? In both groups, did changes take place in their perception of civic responsibility and their social ties as a result of their military service?

This book deals with the extent to which army service affects the mobility and socioeconomic integration of groups from Israel's social periphery, whose demographic presence and social/economic importance within the Israeli public and the army is on the rise. It is based on my doctoral dissertation, written between 2013 and 2018 in the Department of Public Policy and Management at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, under the supervision of Prof. Guy Ben-Porat. The study draws a connection, on both the abstract and practical levels, between various theoretical concepts of social capital and perceptions of civic responsibility, on the one hand, and the ability to reap symbolic and material benefits from army service, on the other. The theoretical model that I developed in this study ascribes considerable influence to the inductees' individual (and community) social capital in shaping their expectations of army service and their ability to secure these advantages. The scholarly literature dealing with the effects of army service on special populations has not devoted a great deal of attention to the role of social capital in the ability of young people from marginalized populations to achieve social and economic mobility following their army service. The accounts by the study participants of the contacts and social networks they formed in the army attest to the singular importance of social capital in generating social/economic mobility during, and primarily after, military service in Israel.

Both populations were studied at two points in time: prior to, and following, their army service. The aspect of time was helpful in tracking perceptions of civic responsibility and social capital following army service, and, primarily, the fulfillment of prior expectations. The expectations of new inductees are affected by the social networks of their community, and they in turn influence the expectations of future recruits from this same group. The conclusions from the study on which this book is based make it possible to formulate a set of general

recommendations that can aid in obtaining the best results from the military service of special populations in Israel, both for the individuals and their communities, and for the army, which integrates them in various roles.

Since 2010, and over the course of the writing of this book, there has been intense public and political debate surrounding the conscription of Haredim. It would appear that this issue is not nearing resolution in the political or legal realms, engendering deep frustration and a social rift between the (largely secular/traditional) public that serves in the army and the ultra-Orthodox community as a whole. Despite this profound social-political rupture, it is hard to ignore the fact that more and more young Haredim see army service as an acceptable way of quasi-civil, social, and economic integration into society and the work force. Since most of them enlist on a voluntary basis in the face of severe social and community sanctions (and at times, even blatant condemnation), I thought it appropriate to examine the motivations of these conscripts, and their expectations of army service as compared with their feelings upon completing it. Likewise, in recent years young men from the Ethiopian community have been at the forefront of a determined struggle for social equality and an end to discrimination and racism, which reached its height in the turbulent demonstrations of the summers of 2015 and 2019. Their claims were striking, given the emphasis on the contribution and sacrifice of Ethiopian soldiers, which are unappreciated by the Israeli establishment and society at large. Consequently, a comparison of the attitudes toward military service in these two populations offers fascinating insights concerning the role of military service in Israel's current reality as a public/state institution that is essential for social mobility while at the same time perpetuating social stratification.



The study was based on in-depth personal interviews and on observations of the preparation process for army service and for the return to civilian life. A total of 56 interviews were conducted with ultra-Orthodox and Ethiopian recruits and veterans (27 inductees and 29 discharged soldiers).<sup>1</sup> In addition, I interviewed 22 professionals, army personnel, social activists, rabbis, and field workers involved in recruiting soldiers from these groups and supporting them following their enlistment. The material gathered was analyzed using the “grounded theory” method of qualitative research in which common themes are identified by coding concepts and terms found in the texts.

In qualitative research, great importance is attached to the role of the field researcher vis-à-vis the subjects of his research. Among the challenging problems in such research is the relationship between the researcher and the subject. Participation in the study must be the result of genuine consent on the part of the subjects, and not coercion. As a secular-traditional researcher specializing in ultra-Orthodox integration in the work force, academia, and the military, I came to the present study with many years of research and professional knowledge in the field. Alongside the many advantages, this also carries a price in the form of possible biases regarding the ultra-Orthodox subjects. At the outset, I believed that expectations from military service in the ultra-Orthodox community were primarily material in nature, and that the benefits from such service were also focused on this aspect. As the research and interpretation process evolved and deepened, my earlier biases lessened, especially after the complexity of their motivations for enlisting, and the

1 Since the objective of the study was to focus on issues related to membership in special and distinct groups, women before or after army service were not included. As of this writing, only ultra-Orthodox males are enlisting in the IDF; consequently, they were compared only with Ethiopian Jewish males.

personal and social changes that they experienced as a result of their service, became clear.

Regarding the sessions and interviews with the Ethiopian soldiers, in some cases the cooperation was only partial, due to a covert fear of the researcher as a representative of the academic establishment, and of officialdom in general. In these interviews, there was a noticeable hesitancy and cautiousness in the way the interviewees expressed themselves and their careful choice of responses. In some cases, I was asked whether anyone other than myself would be reading my notes or listening to the tapes from the personal interviews—comments that indicated only partial trust in the researcher and that almost never occurred with the ultra-Orthodox interviewees.

The book consists of nine chapters. The first chapter is theoretical, introducing concepts related to the three areas on which the study is based—civic responsibility, social capital, and the compensation model of military service—and presenting the “republican equation,” which describes the reciprocal relationship between the citizen-soldier and the state. I connect these concepts with the major theories associated with them and posit an entire conceptual framework that serves to explain different opinions and processes within the special populations that compose Israel’s human mosaic, which are addressed in the second chapter. This chapter relates to changes in Israel that have led to a weakening of the link between military service and civic responsibility. I argue that shifts in the type and extent of motivation to engage in military service are a direct outcome of the Israeli public’s diminished sense of external threat, and, in particular, of libertarian, neoliberal, materialist, and achievement-oriented trends that have shunted aside the figure of “the fighter” in favor of individual and sectorial needs and interests.

The third, fourth, and fifth chapters focus on the **Ethiopian Jewish community** and its complex and ambivalent attitude toward compulsory military service. The third chapter considers traits of this population, its complicated relationship with the establishment, discrimination and racism toward Ethiopians, and the manner in which young people from this community deal with the obligation to serve in the army. The following chapter examines motivations for enlistment among young Ethiopians, their expectations from army service, and the impact of their family and community, circles of friends, and social networks on these expectations. The fifth chapter discusses whether and how these expectations were realized by Ethiopian soldiers, only some of whom completed their service, by way of a description of the benefits and rewards of veterans from this community. Space is devoted here to the army experience of these young men in relation to the concepts on which the study is based: civic responsibility, social capital, and the military compensation model. At this stage, it appears that the hopes and aspirations of many of these veterans are not being met in full; in fact, the changes they have undergone at times run counter to their original motivations for serving.

The subsequent chapters deal with **Haredi society** and the opposition of its spiritual leaders to military service. The sixth chapter illustrates the historical and social evolution of Haredi society in Israel and aspects of the segregation of this unique and diverse group. This chapter relates to changes that have taken place in the Haredi community in recent years, including a guarded process of give-and-take with the state, its institutions, and its symbols, of which the army is a key example. I demonstrate that the marginality of the Haredi population is different from that of the Ethiopian Jewish community: Whereas the Haredim choose to segregate themselves intentionally from the non-Haredi majority, the Ethiopian community is discriminated against and

excluded from Israeli society against its will. In the seventh chapter, I describe the Haredi volunteers and veterans, their attitude toward the state, and their complicated ties with their parents, family members, and community in light of their controversial decision to serve in the army. It appears that most of the Haredi enlistees come from the growing, heterogeneous fringes of the Israeli Haredi population, and some can barely be considered as belonging to the Haredi community. This chapter reveals the hopes and dreams regarding military service, as well as the fears surrounding it, for young Haredim who enlist as single or married men. The sixth and seventh chapters include an analysis of the social ties of the Haredi recruits and of characteristics of their social capital prior to their service. In the eighth chapter, I discuss the unique benefits and changes experienced by Haredi veterans of army service following this formative period, which sparks fundamental shifts in attitude toward the state and non-Haredi groups.

The ninth chapter consists of a summary and discussion. It includes new perspectives on existing concepts, and presents an improved theoretical model of military compensation that focuses on the importance of individual and community social capital prior to military service in shaping the army experience, and especially the ability to benefit from it.

Military service is a significant milestone and a formative experience in the lives of young people in Israel. Even before beginning their service, many develop expectations and hopes for service in specific units and positions with the belief that service in these positions will bring with them various benefits in civilian life.

This is especially the case among marginalized population groups. These young people grapple with questions and concerns about military service such as "why enlist in the army at all" or "what can I get out of service in general, and from service in specific positions".

Issues addressed in this study include the impact of the individual's social environment on the motivation to serve and on expectations from military service among various marginalized groups; the relationship between different perceptions of citizenship and attitudes towards the state, and expectations from military service; and the possibility of making the most of it in adulthood. The book responds to these questions by focusing on two marginalized populations in Israel - young people from Ethiopia and ultra-Orthodox men. The role of military service in promoting the social and economic mobility of those in these

communities was examined in a series of meetings and personal interviews with young people, before and after military service. Presenting the cases in a wide-ranging theoretical context, which concerned different conceptions of ethno-republican citizenship that miraculously elevated the values of sacrifice for the state and society, alongside liberal and neo-liberal attitudes, materialism and achievement, and their attachment to theories of social capital, is the book's innovative and unique contribution to the professional literature on the subject of military-social relations in Israel.

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