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THE IDEOLOGY OF HESDER

Half a dozen years ago, advocacy of the cause of *yeshivot Hesder* before the American Jewish public would have seemed largely superfluous. The impact of the Yom Kippur War was then still strong, the memory of Hesdernikim's role within it still vivid, the halo of the heroic student-soldier yet fresh. The religious community, in particular, took great pride in a clearly perceived *kiddush ha-Shem*. Almost everyone had seen some striking picture or heard some moving story: of boys (they really were not much more) who had gone into battle wearing *tefillin*; of a group which had stunned its brigadier by inquiring, during a nocturnal lull in the Sinai campaign, whether and when they would be provided with a *lulav* and an *etrog*; of another which, after a disheartening day on the battlefield, improvised *Simhat Torah* dancing and *hakafot* by the banks of the Suez Canal. Almost everyone had read comments of leading I.D.F. commanders praising the courage and commitment of *b'nei yeshivot*, noting both the inspirational qualities which had done so much to boost collective morale and their vital role in the forefront of the actual fighting. And there was, of course, the litany of suffering, the grim statistics of the *yeshivot's* highly disproportionate casualties, to attest to that role. Within the context of pervasive sadness and pride, the ideological presentation of Hesder seemed largely unnecessary. The reality spoke for itself.

Today, thank God, such a presentation is in order. Time has healed many wounds and dimmed many memories. Above all, it has opened fresh vistas and posed new challenges, these hopefully unrelated to the battlefield. We have seen the first glimmers of peace; and, for the moment at least, the country appears relatively secure. And as our sense of danger is dulled, as our roseate hopes lull us into a sense of imagined security, as the perception of just how

close Syrian armored columns had come to swooping down upon the Galil and beyond becomes blurred—Hesder and its cause evidently needs, if not an advocate, at least an expositor. This brief essay is therefore presented as a modest exposition of the essence of Hesder and its significance—at least as viewed from the perspective of Yeshivat Har Etzion.

The typical graduate of an Israeli yeshivah high school is confronted by one of three options. He can, like most of his peers, enter the army for a three year stint. Alternatively, he can excuse himself from military service on the grounds that *torato umnuto*, “Torah is his vocation,” while he attends a yeshivah whose students receive the Israeli equivalent of an American 4-D exemption. Finally, he can enroll in a yeshivat Hesder, in which case, over roughly the next five years, he will pursue a combined program of traditional Torah study with service in the Israeli army. While at the yeshivah he will learn full time (Hesder is *not* an Israeli R.O.T.C.), but there will be two protracted absences from it, one of nine months and the other of six months, for training and duty.

Of these three courses, Hesder is, in one sense, perhaps the easiest. Properly speaking, however, it is also the most arduous. The advantages, judged from a student’s perspective, are fairly clear. Most obviously, the tour of actual army service is shorter. While a student is tied down by Hesder for almost five years, he only spends, unless he becomes an officer, about sixteen months in uniform. Most important, however, Hesder provides a convenient framework for discharging two different—and, to some extent, conflicting—obligations. It enables the student, morally and psychologically, to salve both his religious and his national conscience by sharing in the collective defense burden without cutting himself off from the matrix of Torah. Socially—and this of course has religious implications as well—Hesder offers him a desirable context as, even while in the army, he will often be stationed with fellow Hesdernikim. And Hesder enables him, pragmatically, to keep his future academic and vocational options open. Unlike his peers at non-Hesder yeshivot, he can, upon completing the Hesder program, legally pursue any course of study or employment or both within the mainstream of Israeli society.

These are legitimate and even important considerations. But they are not what Hesder, ideally considered, is all about. Properly understood, Hesder poses more of a challenge than an opportunity; and in order to perceive it at its best we need to focus upon difficulty and even tension rather than upon convenience. Optimally, Hesder does not merely provide a religious cocoon for young men fearful of

being contaminated by the potentially secularizing influences of general army life—although it incidentally serves this need as well. Hesder at its finest seeks to attract and develop *b'nei torah* who are profoundly motivated by the desire to become serious *talmidei hakhamim* but who concurrently feel morally and religiously bound to help defend their people and their country; who, given the historical exigencies of their time and place, regard this dual commitment as both a privilege and a duty; who, in comparison with their non-Hesder confrères love not (to paraphrase Byron's Childe Harold) Torah less but Israel more. It provides a context within which students can focus upon enhancing their personal spiritual and intellectual growth while yet heeding the call to public service, and it thus enables them to maintain an integrated Jewish existence.

To be sure, the two aspects of Hesder, the spiritual and the military, are hardly on a par. The disparity is reflected, in part, in the unequal division of time. Primarily, however, it concerns the realm of value, within which two elements, each indispensable, may yet be variously regarded. When the Mishnah states, "If there is no flour, there is no Torah; if there is no Torah, there is no flour,"¹ it hardly means that both are equally important. What it does mean is that both are, in fact, equally necessary, although, axiologically and teleologically, flour exists for the sake of Torah and not vice versa. *Il faut manger pour vivre, il ne faut pas vivre pour manger.* ("One should eat in order to live, not live in order to eat"), declaims one of Molière's characters; and so it is with Hesder. The yeshivah prescribes military service as a means to an end. That end is the enrichment of personal and communal spiritual life, the realization of that great moral and religious vision whose fulfillment is our national destiny; and everything else is wholly subservient. No one responsibly connected with any yeshivat Hesder advocates military service *per se*. We avoid even the slightest tinge of militarism and we are poles removed from Plato's notion that the discipline of army life is a necessary ingredient of an ideal education. No less than every Jew, the typical Hesdernik yearns for peace, longs for the day on which he can divest himself of uniform and *uzzi* and devote his energies to Torah. In the interim, however, he harbors no illusions and he keeps his powder dry and his musket ready.

In one sense, therefore, insofar as army service is alien to the ideal Jewish vision, Hesder is grounded in necessity rather than choice. It is, if you will, *b'diavad*, a *post facto* response to a political reality imposed upon us by our enemies. In another sense, however, it is very much *l'hathillah*, a freely willed option grounded in moral

and halakhic decision. We—at Yeshivat Har Etzion, at any rate—do not advocate Hesder as a second-best alternative for those unable or unwilling to accept the rigors of single-minded Torah study. We advocate it because we are convinced that, given our circumstances—would that they were better—military service is a *mitsvah*, and a most important one at that. Without impugning the patriotism or ethical posture of those who think otherwise, we feel that for the overwhelming majority of *b'nei torah* defense is a moral imperative.

Hence, to the extent that the term Hesder, “arrangement,” connotes an accommodation arrived at between conflicting sides, it is somewhat of a misnomer. Hesder is not the result of a compromise between the respective positions of *roshei yeshivah*, and the Ministry of Defense. It is rather a compromise with reality. We do occasionally argue with the generals over details and they do not always sufficiently appreciate the preeminence of the spiritual factor. The basic concern with security, however, is ours no less than theirs.

Of course, that concern must be balanced against others. *Knesset Yisrael* needs not only security but spirituality—and ultimately, the former for the sake of the latter. Those who, by dint of knowledge and inspiration, are able to preserve and enrich our moral vision and spiritual heritage, contribute incalculably to the quality of our national life; and this must be considered in determining personal and collective priorities. Hence, while we of yeshivot Hesder, feel that training and subsequent reserve status for men should be virtually universal—spiritual specialization being reserved, at most, for a truly elite cadre²—the length of post-training service should be justifiably briefer than that of those unable or unwilling to make a comparable spiritual contribution. The military establishment, I might add, generally understands this. Junior officers, currently concerned with keeping good soldiers in their units, sometimes complain about what they regard as this inequity. However, higher level commanders, more keenly aware of the total picture and the longer term, recognize the value of the spiritual aspect of Hesder as inspirationally significant, for *b'nei yeshivah* as well as their comrades, in the event of war. It should be emphasized, however, that, from a Torah perspective, the justification for abbreviated service does not rest solely or even primarily upon the yeshivah's stimulus to bravery. It is grounded, rather, in the intrinsic and immeasurable value of Torah *per se*—indeed, in the faith and hope that it moves us toward the realization of the prophetic vision, “Neither by force nor by might but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.”³

The case for Hesder rests, then, upon several simple assumptions. First, during the formative post-secondary years, a *ben Torah*

should be firmly rooted in a preeminently Torah climate, this being crucially important both for his personal spiritual development and for the future of a nation in critical need of broadly based spiritual commitment and moral leadership. Second, the defense of Israel is an ethical and halakhic imperative—be it because, as we believe, the birth of the state was a momentous historical event and its preservation of great spiritual significance, or because, even failing that, the physical survival of its three million plus Jewish inhabitants is at stake. Third, in light of the country's current military needs—and these should admittedly be reassessed periodically—yeshivah students should participate in its defense, both by undergoing basic and specialized training, thus becoming part of the reserves against the possibility, God forbid, of war, and by performing some actual service even during some period of uneasy peace. The need for such participation is based upon several factors. By far the most important, although it relates more to training than to peacetime service, is the fact that in the event of war the Israeli army may very well need every qualified soldier it can muster. And lest one think that the number is militarily insignificant, let it be noted that, while indeed they may not seem all that many, nevertheless, the boys currently enrolled in Hesder, not to mention those who have moved on to the reserves, can man over four hundred tanks—surely no piddling figure. This factor relates to training more than to peacetime service; but with respect to the latter as well, both common fairness and self-respect dictate that the Torah community make some contribution even if it be justifiably smaller than others'.

The notion, held by many at one major yeshivah, that *b'nei Torah* should prepare for a possible war but need do nothing to prevent it, fails to recognize the importance of deterrence. It should be emphasized that, with respect to aiding others, prevention is at least the equivalent of relief, halakhically and not just proverbially. The *mitsvah* of *hashavat aveidah* includes deterring loss as well as restoring it.⁴ The highest level of *tsedakah*, the Rambam tells us, takes the form of preventive sustenance—even if it does not cost the “donor” one single penny.⁵ The rationale behind the position in question—in practice, it entails six months of training but no service thereafter—presumably rests upon the assumption that prevention can be supplied by others; or, as some put it, that so long as anyone is walking the streets or working on a civilian job, there is no excuse for pulling boys out of a *bet hamidrash*. This view is not without foundation.

In determining whether and when the study of Torah should be set aside in favor of a *mitsvah*, *efshar la'asota al yedei aheirim*, the extent to which it can be realized by others, is a crucial factor.⁶

However, that possibility should evidently be real and not merely theoretical; and in assessing it, their readiness to take up the slack should presumably be considered. It is by no means certain that I may compel others, directly or indirectly, to assume my share of a common task so that I may learn more.⁷ Further, the problem acquires a wholly different dimension when what is at issue is not just the distribution of time and effort but the possibility of danger; and this element is unfortunately present even in time of presumed peace. Consequently, in determining the duration of peacetime service, we are driven back to balancing conflicting communal needs – and this is the basis of its abbreviation within Hesder. It should be clear, however, that the concept of *efshar la'asota* provides no mandate for categorical dispensation. Those who strike this balance and conclude that they owe no peacetime service whatsoever are of course entitled to their position. But I must confess that I, for one, do not find the notion of a state on the house morally engaging.

The ethical moment aside, a measure of service is, for many, a matter of self-interest as well – and not only because it is, after all, our own home that we are defending. Service enables the individual soldier to avert the moral and psychological onus of the drone and it enables the religious community as a whole to avoid both the reality and the stigma of parasitism. It helps build personal character, on the one hand, and opens channels of public impact, on the other, by producing potential leaders attuned to the pulse and the experience of their countrymen. To be sure, the prospect of secular criticism should not routinely be the decisive factor in determining religious policy. Nevertheless, it cannot be totally ignored. Hazal, at any rate, did not regard *hillul ha-Shem* and *kiddush ha-Shem* lightly.

If the rationale underlying Hesder is relatively simple, its implementation is anything but. I described it at the outset as the most difficult of the options open to a yeshivah high school graduate, and, seriously taken, it is precisely that. The difficulty is not incidental. It is, rather, grounded in the very nature and structure of Hesder; and it is threefold. First, there is the problem of dual commitment *per se*, the possible loss of motivation and momentum and the division of time, energies, and attention inherent in the fusion of the study of Torah with any other enterprise, academic, vocational, or what have you. From this perspective, the question of Hesder meshes with the much broader problem of the relation of the active and the contemplative life, of Torah and *derekh erets*, of the sacred and the secular. As such it admits of no easy solution. “If I had been present at Mount Sinai,” said Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, “I would have asked of the Merciful One that two mouths should be created for every per-

son, one with which to study Torah and one with which to attend to all his (other) needs.”⁸ His wish is deeply shared by Hesdernikim and their masters; but it remains a wish.

With reference to Hesder, specifically, there is, however, an additional problem: the conflict of values, lifestyle, and sensibility between *bet midrash* and boot camp, especially in a predominantly secular army. The danger is not so much that students will lose their faith and become non-observant. On this score, yeshivot Hesder have a track record at least as good as their immediate Eastern European predecessors.⁹ It is, rather, a problem of possible attrition—the loss of refinement and the dulling of moral and religious sensitivity which may result from exposure to the rougher aspects of a possibly dehumanizing and despiritualizing existence. As the Ramban noted, the qualities of aggressiveness and machismo which are so central to military life naturally run counter to the Torah’s spiritual discipline. Commenting upon the *pasuk*, “When thou goest forth in camp against thine enemies, then thou shalt keep thee from every evil thing,” he observes:

And what seems correct to me with respect to this *mitsvah* is that the verse enjoins with regard to a period during which sin is rife. It is known of the behavior of warring camps that they eat every abomination, rob and plunder, and are not even ashamed of fornication and any villainy. The most decent of men by nature may become invested with cruelty and wrath as the camp goes out to engage the enemy. Hence, the verse has enjoined, “And thou shalt keep thee from every evil thing.”¹⁰

Situations less drastic than actual war are less threatening, but these, too, can have an impact. As the Ramban’s interpretation clearly implies, the difficulty can be overcome, but a genuine and conscious effort is needed in order to avoid moral corruption and spiritual corrosion.

Probably the greatest difficulty, however, concerns neither the practical ramifications of the diffusion of effort nor the grappling with potentially inimical influences. It concerns the very essence of Hesder: the maintenance of a tenuous moral and ideological balance between its two components. At issue is a conflict of loves, not just of labors. At one level, this is simply the problem of religious Zionism writ large. On the one hand, a yeshivat Hesder seeks to instill profound loyalty to the State of Israel. On the other hand, it inculcates spiritual perspectives and values which are to serve as the basis for a radical critique of a secularly oriented state and society. The problem acquires another dimension, however, when that loyalty includes the readiness to fight and die. Moreover, it involves, at a

second level, issues which are specifically related to a student-soldier *per se*. Like all yeshivot, a yeshivat Hesder seeks to instill a love for Torah so profound and so pervasive as to render protracted detachment from it painful – and yet it demands precisely such an absence. It advocates patriotic national service even at some cost to personal development – and yet prescribes that students serve considerably less than their non-yeshivah peers.

These apparent antinomies are the result of the basic attempt to reconcile conflicting claims and duties by striking a particular balance: one which should produce an aspiring *talmid ḥakham* who also serves rather than a soldier who also learns; one which perceives military service as a spiritual sacrifice – we do *not* want students to be indifferent to their loss – but which proceeds to demand that sacrifice; one which encourages a Hesdernik to excel as a soldier while in the army but prescribes his return to the *bet hamidrash* before that excellence is fully applied or perhaps even fully attained. From the yeshivah's perspectives, these antitheses are fully justified. Indeed, they constitute the very essence of Hesder as a complex and sensitive balance. However, preserving that balance, with its multiple subtle nuances, entails traversing a narrow ridge – and here lies the primary difficulty, existential and not just practical, of Hesder. Small wonder that many only achieve the balance imperfectly. It is, however, in those who do succeed in attaining the balance and who, despite the difficulty, are genuinely at peace with themselves, that Hesder at its finest can be seen. And it is inspiring to behold.

These problems are very real. They pose a formidable educational challenge; and while they are by no means insuperable – the history of yeshivot Hesder can attest to that – we ignore them at our peril. Moreover, it is precisely the adherents of Hesder, those of us who grapple with its sophisticated demands on a regular basis, who are most keenly aware of the problems. Nevertheless – although stateless centuries have tended to obscure this fact – Hesder has been the traditional Jewish way. What were the milieux of Moshe Rabenu, of Yehoshua, of David, of Rabbi Akiva, as hazal conceived and described them, but yeshivot Hesder? The mode of integrating military service with the study of Torah may very well have differed from our own. Hazal described Yehoshua as being reproached for having omitted a single evening of communal *talmud Torah* in his camp;¹¹ and as an army, we are unfortunately quite far from this standard. Nevertheless, the principle is very much the same.

Indeed, in the Ramban's view, the institution can be traced back to our very fountainhead. In explaining why Avimelech was so anx-

ious to conclude a treaty with Yitshak, he conjectures that it may have been due to the fact

that Avraham was very great and mighty, as he had in his house three hundred sword-wielding men and many allies. And he himself was a lion-hearted soldier and he pursued and vanquished four very powerful kings. And when his success became evident as being divinely ordained, the Philistine king feared him, lest he conquer his kingdom . . . And the sons emulated the fathers, as Yitshak was great like his father and the king feared lest he fight him should he banish him from his land.¹²

This account of lion-hearted *avot* and their sword-wielding disciples may fall strangely upon some ears. Although we don't like to admit it, our Torah world, too, has its vogues, and, in some circles, much of the Ramban on *Bereshit*—the real Ramban, honestly read and unflinchingly understood—is currently passé.¹³ The fact, however, remains: the primary tradition is Hesder.

The reason is not hard to find. The halakhic rationale for Hesder does not, as some mistakenly assume, rest solely upon the *mitsvah* of waging defensive war. If that were the case, one might conceivably argue that, halakhically, sixteen months of army service was too high a price to pay for the performance of this single commandment. The rationale rather rests upon a) the simple need for physical survival and b) the fact that military service is often the fullest manifestation of a far broader value: *gemilut ḥasadim*, the empathetic concern for others and action on their behalf. This element, defined by Shimon Hatsaddik as one of the three cardinal foundations of the world,¹⁴ is the basis of Jewish social ethics, and its realization, even at some cost to single-minded development of Torah scholarship, virtually imperative. The Gemara in *Avodah Zarah* is pungently clear on this point:

Our Rabbis taught: When Rabbi Elazar ben Prata and Rabbi Ḥanina ben Tradion were arrested [that is, by the Romans], Rabbi Elazar ben Prata said to Rabbi Ḥanina ben Tradion, “Fortunate are you that you have been arrested over one matter, woe is to me who have been arrested over five matters.” Rabbi Ḥanina responded, “Fortunate are you that you have been arrested over five matters but are to be saved, woe is to me who have been arrested over one matter but will not be saved. For you concerned yourself with both Torah and *gemilut ḥasadim* whereas I concerned myself solely with Torah.” As Rav Huna stated; for Rav Huna said, “Whoever concerns himself solely with Torah is as one who has no God. As it is written, ‘And many days [passed] for Israel without a true God.’” What is [the meaning of] “without a true God?” That one who concerns himself solely with Torah is as one who has no God.¹⁵

The midrash equates the renunciation of *gemilut hasadim* with blasphemy;¹⁶ and the Gemara in *Rosh Hashanah* states that while both Rabbah and Abbaye, being descended from Eli, overcame the curse cast upon his house, “Rabbah, who engaged in the study of Torah, lived forty years; Abbaye, who engaged in Torah and *gemilut hasadim*, lived sixty years.”¹⁷ When, as in contemporary Israel, the greatest single *hesed* one can perform is helping to defend his fellows’ very lives, the implications for yeshivah education should be obvious.

What is equally obvious is the fact that not everyone draws them — and this for one of several reasons. Some (not many, I hope) simply have little if any concern for the State of Israel, even entertain the naive notion that, as one *rosh yeshivah* put it, their business could continue as usual with Palestinian flags fluttering from the rooftops. Others feel that the spiritual price, personal and communal, is simply too high and that first-rate Torah leadership in particular can only be developed within the monochromatic contexts of “pure” yeshivot. Still others contend that, from the perspective of genuine faith and trust in God, it is the yeshivot which are the true guardians of the polity so that any compromise of their integrity is a blow at national security. These contentions clearly raise a number of basic moral, halakhic, and theological issues with respect to which I obviously entertain certain views. However, I do not wish, at this juncture, to polemicize. These are matters on which honest men of Torah can differ seriously out of mutual respect, and I certainly have no desire to denigrate those who do not subscribe to my own positions. What I do wish to stress minimally, however, is the point that, for the aspiring *talmid hakham*, Hesder is at least as legitimate a path as any other. It is, to my mind, a good deal more, but surely not less.

The point can be underscored by a brief glance at the relevant prooftexts most frequently cited by rigorist critics of Hesder. Of course, those who oppose it because they have little use for the state, on the one hand, and presume, on the other, that its dismemberment would not seriously endanger its inhabitants need not look far for support. Given their assumptions, they can draw upon a plethora of sources which stress the overriding importance of *talmud Torah* and castigate the expenditure of time upon relatively insignificant purposes. I very much hope, however, that, among our critics, this is a decidedly minority view; and I prefer to address myself to the position of those who do assign a measure of value to the state — and hence, of necessity, to its army — and whom the question of military service therefore confronts as an instance of the difficult, perhaps even agonizing, choice between conflicting values. In large measure — and I, for one, regard this as perfectly legitimate — the assignment

