

## Who Should Defend the Country?

### *Shabbat Ki Teitzei 5784*

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Rabbi Barry H. Block

At the height of the Vietnam War, most young American men did not want to serve overseas in a conflict they viewed, rightly or wrongly, as immoral. A lottery was established to determine who would be drafted into service. “366 blue plastic capsules containing birth dates [were] placed in a large glass container and drawn by hand to assign order-of-call numbers to all men within the 18-26 age range specified in Selective Service law.” If a man’s birthday came out as number 1, he would be drafted first; if his birthday was lucky number 366, he would not be drafted. June 27, my birthday, was unlucky the first three years, coming out at numbers 64, 55, and 7, while I would’ve escaped any concern of being drafted in 1972, when my birthday’s randomly assigned number was 330.<sup>i</sup>

There are several reasons that I was not in drafted, not least being that I only turned nine in the last year of the draft. However, many men like me but a dozen years older wouldn’t have gone to Vietnam, even if their birthday came up as number 1. Full time students with decent grades were not drafted until 1971. Wealthy and well-connected parents often sought and successfully secured exemptions for their sons for a variety of other reasons—real, exaggerated, and fabricated. Presidents Biden and Trump were far from alone in having been excused from service for health reasons—asthma, in Biden’s case; or bone spurs, in Trump’s. Men from less advantaged backgrounds could avoid the draft by becoming fathers—which many did, and American birth rates rose during the draft years.<sup>ii</sup> Others fled to Canada or engaged in civil disobedience—burning their draft cards, for example. Some even committed felonies to make themselves ineligible.<sup>iii</sup>

The overrepresentation of poor and working-class Americans in the Vietnam War was not new to American history. The critique was articulated by Benjamin Franklin during the Revolution.<sup>iv</sup> During the Civil War, conscription could often be avoided legally by literally buying an exemption, prompting critics to call the conflict a “rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.”<sup>v</sup>

After the Vietnam War, though, the United States shifted to an all-volunteer force. Researchers found that, at the outset, those with limited opportunities outside military service—that is, lower income Americans and members of racial and ethnic minority groups—were most likely to serve. Later, though, they found: “The move toward a smaller and more technologically advanced military has...made military recruitment more selective and created a tendency in the opposite direction.” Today’s “recruits score higher than the civilian population on

cognitive skill tests and come from households with above average median parental income and wealth... The over-representation of minorities in the military has declined in recent decades.” Even military casualties, disproportionately suffered by Black men in Vietnam, were experienced differently in Iraq and Afghanistan, where non-Hispanic white armed service personnel were killed at slightly higher rates than their percentage of the population.<sup>vi</sup>

The Torah, too, is concerned about who constitutes the nation’s fighting force—in this case, the Israelite army to conquer the Land of Israel. The Book of Numbers gets its name from the census that God commands, instructing Moses and Aaron to list “every male... from the age of twenty years up, all those in Israel who are able to bear arms.”<sup>vii</sup> Still, though, not all Israelite males over age twenty were to be counted. The Levites were exempt. God commands: “Do not on any account enroll the tribe of Levi or take a census of them with the Israelites.”<sup>viii</sup>

In the twentieth century, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz explained that, since the Levites would not be landholders when the Israelites conquered their territory, they would not be required to fight.<sup>ix</sup> That theory suggests that people who didn’t own land, meaning they were poor and reliant on charity, should not have to fight to defend the nation, the opposite of what has often been the case in the United States.

Rashi, though, writing centuries earlier, suggests another reason for the Levites’ exemption, insisting that they shouldn’t be expected to provide ordinary military service because they functioned as God’s own army, protecting the Tabernacle.<sup>x</sup> This claim calls to mind the hotly contested exemption of ultra-Orthodox men from military service in Israel today. “Israel’s Sephardi chief rabbi, Yitzhak Yosef, [has] said: “‘The state exists on Torah study, and without the Torah, there would have been no success for the army.’”<sup>xi</sup> Israel Policy Forum, by contrast, reports that the exemption “has fostered significant resentment among [other Israeli] Jews. It has also exacerbated the [ultra-Orthodox] community’s socioeconomic marginalization and high unemployment rates.”<sup>xii</sup>

Biblical discussions about who should serve are not only about religious functionaries. Near the end of Numbers, two tribes, Reuben and Gad, want to settle east of the Jordan River, outside the Promised Land. Moses is enraged, thinking that they are seeking to dodge the draft, as it were, to get out of fighting alongside the other ten tribes to conquer the territory God has promised. The Reubenites and Gadites, though, reveal another motive: They are wealthy! They own a lot of cattle, and there’s good grazing land east of the Jordan. Still, they don’t see their wealth or their choice of residence as cause for military exemption, offering instead to serve on the front lines, returning to their homes, their families, and their cattle only after their people are victorious.<sup>xiii</sup>

The hand of God must have been at work a month ago when I chose my sermon title for tonight, **before** Melanie Nodelman contacted me to ask if I would bless Spencer—excused me, Senior Airman Nodelman—this evening as he prepares for overseas deployment. I chose the topic when thinking about a biblical passage at the outset of this week’s Torah portion that I ultimately did not cite. I was also mindful of the ultra-Orthodox exemption in Israel, which has caused tremendous unrest and upheaval.

I also assumed that I would be addressing an inequity in today’s American all-volunteer force, which I knew had been a particular problem in the Civil War and Vietnam. The only Americans I know who are serving today are several chaplains, a handful of folks in the National Guard, a young man from San Antonio now at the Naval Academy, and Spencer. I imagined them to be outliers. I guessed that an all-volunteer force would primarily attract people whose opportunities are limited. I do always research before I ascend the *bimah* and spout off, though. This week, I learned a lot about our all-volunteer force.

I imagined that my conclusion tonight would be that the United States’ military should be more like Israel’s, where universal compulsory military or other national service offers unity of purpose to virtually all Jews who aren’t ultra-Orthodox, alongside Druze men and an increasing number of Bedouin men. Across the socioeconomic spectrum, they serve side-by-side, binding the country together.

Instead, my research led me to believe that the burden to defend the United States is being shared more equitably than it was in the Vietnam era or Civil War, bringing both risk and benefit to young Americans who choose to serve. I continue to believe that universal national service, in the military or a civilian service corps, would enhance American unity and patriotism.

All Americans rely on the service of our men and women in uniform. Military service isn’t for everyone, though. Just as Dylan Nodelman also serves—albeit as a civilian, in a different uniform, as a first responder—just about every young American adult could offer two or three years of service to our country, and both they and our country would be enriched. We must do **something**, after all, to heal our nation’s toxic divisions. Let us do so with strength, and then, may we strengthen one another and build a better America, together.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.sss.gov/history-and-records/vietnam-lotteries/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Martha Bailey and Eric Chyn, “The Demographic Effects of Dodging the Vietnam Draft,” National Institutes of Health, May 4, 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8095165/>.

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- <sup>iii</sup> David Roos, “7 Ways Americans Avoided the Draft During the Vietnam War,” *The History Channel*, May 28, 2024, <https://www.history.com/news/vietnam-war-draft-avoiding>.
- <sup>iv</sup> Andrea Asoni and Tino Sanandaji, “Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight? Socioeconomic Representativeness in the Modern Military, Research Institute of Industrial Economics, IFN Working Paper No. 965, 2013, <https://www.ifn.se/wfiles/wp/wp965.pdf>.
- <sup>v</sup> Camillo Mac Bica, “Rich Man’s War and a Poor Man’s Fight,” *thuthout*, February 13, 2011, <https://truthout.org/articles/rich-mans-war-and-a-poor-mans-fight/#:~:text=As%20a%20consequence%2C%20those%20who,to%20the%20streets%20in%20protest>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Asoni and Sanandaji.
- <sup>vii</sup> Numbers 1:2-3.
- <sup>viii</sup> Numbers 1:49.
- <sup>ix</sup> Steinsaltz on Numbers 1:49.
- <sup>x</sup> Rashi on Numbers 1:49.
- <sup>xi</sup> Lorenzo Tondo and Quique Kierszenbaum, “Plan to end ultra-Orthodox students’ military exemption sparks row in Israel,” *The Guardian*, March 26, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/mar/26/plan-end-ultra-orthodox-students-military-exemption-row-israel>.
- <sup>xii</sup> “The Hareidi Exemption,” *Israel Policy Forum*, June 25, 2024, <https://israelpolicyforum.org/2024/06/25/the-hareidi-exemption/>.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Numbers 32.