



opinions

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A Tal Order

★ Jewish Light Editorial

The Tal Law is dead. This is not only a good thing, but indeed essential to the future viability of an indivisible Israel.

In a 6-3 decision last week, the Israeli Supreme Court struck down the 2002 law that allowed full-time yeshiva students to defer military service. Striking down the law has created a gray area on an issue that has caused significant social discord and has tremendous implications for the nation.

The controversy has its underpinnings in a promise David Ben-Gurion made over 60 years ago to exempt 400 *Haredi* Jews from military service. The limitation on the number was lifted during the tenure of Prime Minister Menachem Begin, and the exemption grew to cover tens of thousands of yeshiva students who, along with their rabbis, claimed that military service would disrupt their religious education and observance.

The Tal Law was an effort by the government of Prime Minister Ehud Barak in 2002 to address the issue of vastly multiplied exemptions. The law, named after a retired justice, would defer army service until 23, at which point a student would continue full-time study, serve 16 months in the army, or devote a year to national service.

But it didn't really work as planned. By the time students hit age 23, many already were married with children and thus exempt by virtue of a different life station. As Linda Gradstein pointed out in a recent JTA article on the subject, quoting Yehuda Ben Meir of Tel Aviv University: "The Tal Law has failed. It has not been able to wean the community off the idea of not serving and not working. There is now a third generation that believes this is the way they should live."

The problem is disturbing in and of itself, but the overall implications for the State of Israel are causing immense social unrest. First, there is an accurate perception that different rules apply to one segment of the Jewish population, and that distinction is an unfair one. Second, the population that is exempt from service is the subset of Jewish Israel with the highest birth rate, largest families and with high poverty levels by virtue of the number of men whose full-time occupation is Torah study. Moreover, that study historically has failed to consistently provide the type of math, science and other subjects that are necessary to the cultivation of secular job skills. This dynamic has caused significant economic stress to be imposed upon the whole of Israeli society.

Third, the exemption issue is now painted against a backdrop of gender politics, with a large swath

of the Israeli population extremely unhappy with segregation practices on streets, busses and other venues practiced by *Haredi*. Moreover, a number of violent and abusive episodes that have resulted from a small and out-of-control, albeit unrepresentative, portion of the *Haredi* population have exacerbated the simmering social frustration.

Overall, the unrest that has evolved is the pitting of a fairly progressive Jewish majority, that honors egalitarian principles and is conscripted into service at a young age in the name of sovereign defense, versus a culture that chooses to live according to different social mores, eschews many aspects of contemporary society, and to a great extent denies the need for the shared sacrifice of public service.

Even the more conservative elements of the parliamentary leadership know that the time has come for something more progressive to replace the practice of yeshiva exemptions. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has acknowledged the Tal Law cannot be extended, despite the objections and political threats made by several of the religious parties within the Knesset ruling coalition.

The solutions are not readily apparent, though. Though the Tal Law is now deemed unconstitutional, determining the next steps may be challenging. The cost of truly bringing all age-appropriate yeshiva students into the army, or into some form of alternate public service, is quite high, especially at a time when the governmental coffers are not overflowing. So while there is little chance that the long-term solution will resemble the Tal Law or what preceded it, there may be a time of stress as leaders cope with how to balance an egalitarian and constitutionally accepted solution with a pragmatic, financially viable one.

Our view is, the sooner that a real solution is adopted that shows a common purpose amongst all Israelis of military age, the sooner the country will advance toward a culture of mutual support and understanding. We are broken-hearted from afar that the defense and security of the State of Israel require the commitment of its youngsters to serve, but we believe that exempting a growing swath by virtue of their particular religious beliefs is detrimental to the sustenance of a Jewish state. We oppose any extension of the Tal Law, and we support the Knesset finding a realistic and financially sustainable model of national service for all at the earliest possible date.

Submit letters to the editor to Managing Editor Mike Sherwin at msherwin@thejewishlight.com. Letters may be edited for grammar, length and clarity. Letters should be no more than 250 words. Please include your name, municipality and a daytime telephone number. The *Light* will publish only one letter from an individual writer during a 60-day period. Anonymous letters will generally not be considered for publication.

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Cardow, The Ottawa Citizen

Iran rhetoric

Once again, we see Neoconservatism raise its ugly head. Gene Carton's Feb. 15 letter sounds too familiar in its cry for Israel to attack Iran "NOW." Most people know the horrible human and financial repercussions of, "Weapons of mass destruction, we must act NOW." How many times will Neocons try to facilitate war?

Mr. Carton argues that Iran will have nuclear weapons "in all probability within the year," but it is not apparent that he has any atomic energy agency expertise on which to make this judgment. It is inflammatory rhetoric aimed at scaring people.

Mr. Carton alludes to Ahmadinejad's cry to "Wipe Israel off the map." Does Mr. Carton remember Premier Khrushchev slamming his shoe on a U.N. podium, saying the U.S.S.R. will "Bury the United States" (Remember, the U.S.S.R. had hundreds of intercontinental ballistic missiles, loaded with atomic warheads)? Does Mr. Carton remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, when atomic weapons were 90 miles from our shores? Lastly, Mr. Carton should know that Israel does not have "unbridled airpower." Knowledgeable people understand that the IDF has a massive arsenal of fighter planes but not heavy bombers, the kind of aircraft needed to thoroughly destroy all of Iran's underground nuclear facilities. What are the unintended consequences of a "less than successful" preemptive airstrike? The answers would be an all-out Arab assault on Israel and worldwide condemnation of Israel.

Neoconservatives have no memory relative to statesmanship, resolving international conflict through diplomacy, and utilizing economic and political sanctions. Their world view of "preemptive wars" is dangerous to mankind and must not be given any credibility.

Mort House
Fort Worth, Texas

Selection of Sinquefeld for award

We recently learned that the St. Louis Regional Office of the

American Jewish Committee is honoring Rex Sinquefeld with its "prestigious John D. Levy Human Relations Award." How ironic—and inappropriate—that a man who has devoted the past few years to using his wealth to sponsor various efforts to reduce state and local tax revenues should receive such an honor.

The result of Mr. Sinquefeld's statewide ballot issue last year is that the Cities of St. Louis and Kansas City now are required to vote every five years to continue their earnings taxes, without which substantial portions of their revenue would be eliminated. Not having a permanent tax also makes it more difficult to issue long-term bonds, backed by revenue that is not guaranteed beyond five years. More recently, Mr. Sinquefeld is trying to eliminate Missouri's income tax, replacing it with a large sales tax. Such a tax would disproportionately affect lower-income taxpayers.

Mr. Sinquefeld's goal is to reduce the size of state and local government, by reducing their revenue. The result would be to cripple the ability of the State of Missouri and of St. Louis to fund vital governmental services and to provide important programs for their less advantaged residents.

These substantial and destructive initiatives of Mr. Sinquefeld more than offset any private "civic and philanthropic causes" he may have supported. The decision by the American Jewish Committee to honor him with a "human relations" award is incomprehensible.

David and Dale Steinberg
Chesterfield

Play raises questions

The *Jewish Light* has reported on the recent outrages to women by the *Haredi* community in Israel. At one extreme, an eight-year-old girl has been cursed and spit upon in Beit Shemesh so she cannot walk to school. There have been others, including forced segregation on public transportation and even sidewalks.

The recent condemnation of harassment in Beit Shemesh by

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