

RAV SHLOMO GOREN: ESTABLISHING THE JEWISH ARMY

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Shlomo HaMelech wrote the popular aphorism “*Ein chodosh tachat hashomesh* — there is nothing new under the sun” (Kohelet 1:9). Generations later, as the Jewish people returned to the same land, we had another Shlomo to show us the truth in that statement. As the Israel Defense Forces developed, there seemed to be no guidance for those committed to Torah and halacha. What do training exercises look like on Shabbat? How do traditional army tactics interact with Torah ethics? Rav Shlomo Goren, with his tremendous intellect, was known as an innovator,¹ but from his perspective, he merely applied the values and principles of our Torah to navigate this new section of Jewish life.

Originally Shlomo Goronczik from Zambrów, Poland, his family immigrated to British Palestine in 1925 and were among those who started Kfar Chassidim, a religious village outside of Haifa. At only 12 years old, Shlomo Goren was the youngest student to enter the Chevron Yeshiva, where his genius was clear for all to see. After receiving semicha at age 17, he published his first of many books, initially on the obscure Temple sacrifices. Rav Goren’s works include halachic discussions on *Orach Chaim* and *Yoreh De’ah*, divrei Torah on the holidays, weekly parsha, philosophy, and perhaps most notably, laws and responsa on military procedure and service and more.

Rav Goren insisted that Israel’s military be founded on Torah values. Due in part to his efforts, the IDF

does not discriminate between soldiers, whether religious or secular, traditional or progressive, political or indifferent. All military divisions are open for all, and are not separated based on personal affiliations, but on commitment and ability.

In his responsa *Meishiv Milchama* Vol. 1 (p. 5), Rav Goren outlines the foundations for halachic decisions in the army. In the Talmud Yerushalmi, *Nedarim* 9:5 (and *Torat Kohanim* 2:4) Rabbi Akiva and Ben Azzai disagree on the *klal gadol ba’Torah* — the overarching rule of the Torah. According to Rabbi Akiva, it is “Love your fellow as yourself” (*Vayikra* 19:18), and according to Ben Azzai, it is “This is the narrative of the generations of mankind” (*Bereishit* 5:1). Rav Goren explains that their statements are not in opposition as much as pinpointing the differing levels of our world perspective. Do we concern ourselves with only those like us, the *rei’acha* (fellows) of Rabbi Akiva, or do we look at all of mankind with care and concern, like Ben Azzai’s emphasis on *adam*? With this in mind, Rav Goren insists that a Jewish army must take all people into account, and place the utmost value on any single life, regardless if that life is Jewish, non-Jewish, Israeli or not. Perhaps this emphasis was most clearly seen in his stance that even non-Jewish IDF soldiers deserved a military burial.

Just as Rabbi Goren emphasized this value of an individual in the IDF, he also lived the axiom. In 1953, there were no paratroopers who felt strongly about keeping kosher. When Rav



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Goren visited a base and found that the kitchen was not in accordance with halacha, and thereby not in accordance with army code, he demanded an explanation. The base commander, Ariel Sharon, explained that not a single paratrooper kept kosher, so why go through the effort of maintaining a kosher kitchen? If even one soldier kept kosher, of course the kitchen would comply. So Rav Goren at age 36, twice the age of most soldiers, signed up to train as a paratrooper, jumping out of planes and all.



Endnotes

¹ Arye Edrei, “Divine Spirit and Physical Power: Rabbi Shlomo Goren and the Military Ethic of the IDF,” *Theoretical Inquiries in Law* (2006).