



### Question:

A religious female high school student is debating her future, and is unclear on how she should relate to the option of military service. Is there any place to distinguish between different positions and frameworks of military service?

### Answer:

There is no one clear answer to your question. What we are dealing with is a complex issue with different points of view, whose resolution would be affected by broader religious views.

An inspection of the sources of Jewish law will show that this is not a black and white issue. Biblical sources never speak of women participating in wars even in what is known as Milchemet Mitzvah. Furthermore, when the Torah commands to count those who are of military age it directs the census of men and not women.

In Rabbinic sources we find several sources that challenge the idea of women serving in the army. The Gemara in Kidushin (2b) states, "It is not the manner of women to wage war". Similarly, in Yevamot (65b) we read, "the manner of a man is to conquer, it is not the manner of women to conquer". The Gemara Nazir (59a) poses a different challenge "from where do we know a woman should not go with weapons to war? The verse states: "A woman shall not wear that which pertains to a man..." The carrying of weapons by a woman, states the gemara, is a transgression of the prohibition for women to wear men's clothing.

In contrast there is an explicit Mishna in Sotah (44b) that states, "in wars whose mandate is a mitzva, everyone goes, even a groom from his room and a bride from her wedding canopy", a bride – a woman. This Mishna is quoted as halacha by the Rambam in Hilchot Melachim (7/4).



When we read the halachic rulings and articles written on this topic, those who oppose military service for women, base themselves on the sources that reflect that position. In reference to the Mishna in Sotah they suggest one of several understandings, found in the Radbaz and other authorities. One direction is to reject any option of women's military service, suggesting the Mishna says that since the groom leaves, the bride is forced to leave the wedding canopy. Another approach suggests that the woman truly partakes in the war effort but do not do so as a warrior.

In contrast those who are of the opinion women can serve in the army see the Mishna in Sotah as the corner stone of the issue reading other sources accordingly. The Gemarah in Kidushin could be understood as relating to Milchemet Reshut. Alternately, there are those who point out the statement found in Kidushin is not said in a halachic context, therefore it should not be understood as such. The gemarah in Yevamot is found in a halachic context. However, it too can be understood as referring to a Milchemet Reshut. Alternately, one can note that the statement speaks of conquering, it does not necessarily disqualify women from filling other military positions.

As for the prohibition to wear garments identified for the opposite sex, one may suggest that applies in a Milchemet Reshut. In a Milchemet Mitzva the requirement to fulfill the mitzva overrides the prohibition. Other arguments may be that the prohibition applies to garments, a weapon, on the other hand, is not a garment. To say so we would need to understand the term, "keli zayin", used in the gemara, as armor not weapons. Alternately we may suggest that the definition of men's or women's garments is a socially defined term. Since today many women carry weapons it is no longer to be defined as a man's garment.

A separate issue that pertains to women's army service is issue of tzniut, modesty – morality. One demention of this issue is for the women. The environment in the army is fertile ground for harassment or overall



pressure for inappropriate behavior. Those who support women's enlistment will counter that rules and regulations, instituted in recent years prevent such harassment or pressure, today, in the army. [In the opinion of the writer of this section, this is a somewhat optimistic and naïve view of the reality.]

There is also the broader issue of the sanctity of the Jewish camp. The presence of woman in the intimacy and intensity of military life challenges attempts to maintain such sanctity. Others will argue that serious religious girls will have impact in creating a more responsible atmosphere needed to maintain proper sanctity.

In conclusion, it seems somewhat of a stretch to claim there is a clear prohibition for women to serve in the army. On the other hand, there certainly is no justification (As the Chief Rabbinate ruled) for a broad requirement for all women to serve in the army. Many girls would serve the nation better through the National Service program. For those who choose to serve in the army, it appears that service in combat units, and all the more so mixed units of men and women, is rather problematic for an observant Jew.

#### Sources:

Bamidbar chapter 1, special attention to verse 2-3.

Kidushin 2b

Yevamot 65b

Nazir 59a

Sotah 44b

Rambam Hilchot Melachim chapter 7 halacha 4

Radbaz on the ruling of the Rambam Melachim 7/4.



For further reading (in Hebrew):

Peninei Halacha, Haam ve'Haaretz – Rav Eliezer Melamed, chapter 4 sections 10-11

Lishelat Giyus Banot le'Tzahal – Rav Yoezer Ariel. Appears in the internet.

Shierut Mashmanti le'Nashim be'sheirut leumi uve'Tzahal – Chavat Daat Rabbanei Beit Hillel. Appears on the internet.

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