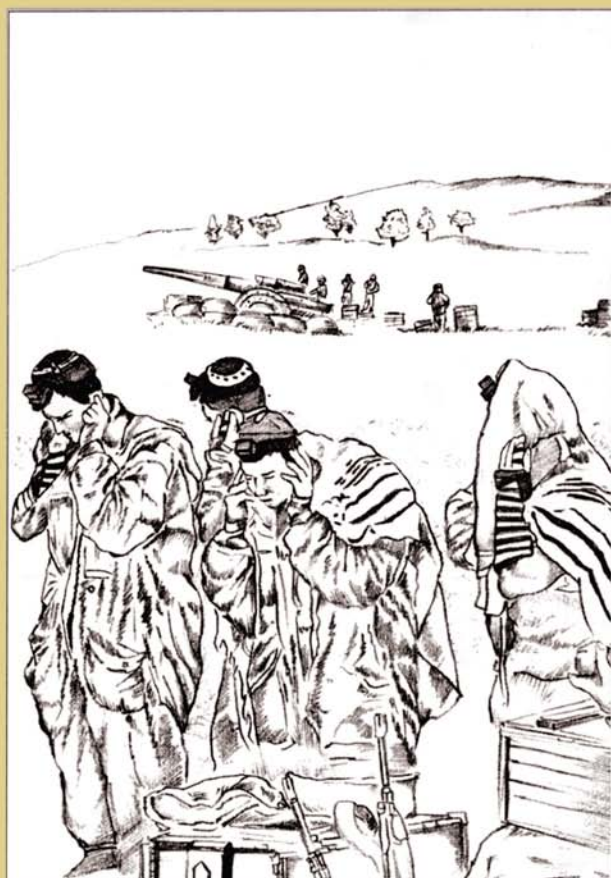


The Scroll or the Sword?

Stuart A.
Cohen



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The Sherman Lecture Series

The Sherman Lecture Series is an annual series supported by the Sherman Trust on behalf of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, UK.

Edited by Dr Tudor Parfitt and Professor John Hinnels, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, UK.

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The Scroll or the Sword? Dilemmas of Religion and Military Service in Israel

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Amsterdam B.V. Published in The Netherlands by Harwood
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First published in 1997 by Harwood Academic Publishers.

This edition published 2013 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Cohen, Stuart A.

The scroll or the sword?: dilemmas of religion and military
service in Israel. – (The Sherman Lecture series; v. 3)

1. Draft – Israel – Religious aspects 2. Military art and science
– Israel – Religious aspects

I. Title

355'.033'05694

ISBN 90-5702-083-1

Front Cover Soldiers at prayer on the battlefield

For Tova and our children

Psalms 128:5–6

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Acknowledgements

Many people have helped me to write this book. First among them are Professor John Hinnels and my good friend Dr. Tudor Parfitt, both of the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University, whose invitation to deliver the 1996 Sherman Lectures originally prompted me to set down on paper the notes out of which the manuscript eventually emerged. Quite apart from extending warm hospitality, they also brought me into contact with an audience whose comments, and criticisms, provided the necessary stimulus for further research.

My other debts are of somewhat longer standing. For some years now I have been fortunate enough to conduct an annual post-graduate seminar on 'Israel and her Army' within the Department of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University. It is a privilege to be able to express gratitude to all the participants, whose vigorous (sometimes heated) contributions have transformed a duty into a pleasure. Sincere thanks are likewise due to my colleagues at the BESA Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan, who provide so congenial an atmosphere for the study of Israeli security affairs in all their aspects. I am especially grateful to BESA's founder, Dr. Thomas Hecht, and Director, Professor Efraim Inbar, whose energetic leadership has propelled the institution to the very forefront of this particular field.

At a critical stage of research, funding was generously provided by the Ihel Foundation and Research Authority of Bar-Ilan University and by the Memorial Council for Jewish Culture in New York. Their support enabled me to benefit from the invaluable assistance of Ilan Suleiman and Kobie Green.

My greatest debt, and one impossible to specify, is to my wife Tova and our four sons. Always a source of encouragement, they have in this particular case also been a fount of knowledge and first-hand information. Flaws in the book are entirely my responsibility; whatever virtues it may possess are very much theirs.

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Preface

The title of this book is derived from an ancient Jewish teaching, attributed to a certain Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'in, who lived in the land of Israel during the third century of the common era. As far as we know, Rabbi Eleazar was the first sage to take homiletic advantage of the alliteration of *saḥra* and *saifa*, Aramaic terms which literally translate (respectively) as 'a scroll' and 'a sword'. These two objects, he taught:

"came down from heaven tied together. God said to Israel: 'If you observe the *Torah* [i.e. the Divine word of the Bible] which is written in the one, you will be saved from the other; if not, you will be smitten by it.'"¹

A plain reading of this text leaves no doubt that its author intended to project a figurative contrast between two distinct spheres of human endeavour. Representing all canonical Jewish texts, the 'scroll' symbolizes the irenic pursuit of scholarship; by contrast, the 'sword' signifies martial action. The purpose of Rabbi Eleazar's aphorism, therefore, was to emphasize the need for the House of Israel to discriminate between these two very different paths to national and personal fulfillment.

Generations of traditional Jewish commentators have dutifully followed that prescriptive lead. Indeed, many extended the thrust of Rabbi Eleazar's teaching, transforming it into a proof text adduced in order to advocate the inherent superiority of a life dedicated to the devotional study of the entire rabbinic corpus. Typical, in this respect, is the interpretation provided by a Hebrew work entitled *Yefeh To'ar* ('Beautiful

¹ *Sifre: A Tannaitic Commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy* (trans. & ed. Reuven Hammer, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), parag. 40:7, p. 82. The passage also appears in: *The Midrash: Leviticus* (trans. J. Slotki, London: Soncino Press, 1939), parag. 35:6, p. 449; and *The Midrash: Deuteronomy* (trans. J. Rabbinowitz, London: Soncino Press, 1939), parag. 4:2, p. 90.

Countenance'), compiled in the 16th century by Rabbi Samuel Jaffe ben Isaac Ashkenazi of Constantinople, and which has since been printed as a marginal gloss on Rabbi Eleazar's adage in all standard editions of one of its principal sources. As portrayed by Rabbi Eleazar, writes Ashkenazi, the scroll and the sword do not simply depict the discretionary choices open to man. Properly understood, those two seemingly inanimate objects in effect convey value-laden concepts, and reverberate with connotations which are expressly Divine.² Because the *Torah* (Divine Law) is a 'tree of life' — indeed, is specifically referred to as such in Proverbs 3:18 — the 'scroll' denotes God's grace. On the other hand, the 'sword' signifies the Almighty's disfavour, a meaning evident ever since Adam and Eve were barred from re-entry into the garden of Eden by "a flaming sword which turned every way to preserve the way of the tree of life" (Genesis 3:24). It follows, therefore, that scholarly and military activities can never be reconciled. They are to be regarded as incompatible alternatives rather than equal imperatives.

Contemporary Israeli uses of Rabbi Eleazar's imagery tend to be entirely different. To an extent, that is hardly surprising. Modern political Zionism, the movement founded in the late 19th century with the express purpose of re-establishing "a Jewish homeland openly recognized, legally secured", constituted far more of a reaction to traditional Judaism than its extension. Motivated almost entirely by secular impulses, most early Zionists in fact self-consciously rebelled against the rabbinic precepts and practices which they diagnosed as being at least partially responsible for the depths of cultural stagnation and physical weakness into which their nation had sunk. This attitude of disdain towards so extensive a swathe of the Jewish historical

² *Yefeh Tò'ar* on *Leviticus Rabbah* ('The Midrash to Leviticus') 35:6. See also Samuel Eliezer Edels (1555–1631), *Hidushei Ha-Maharsha* ('Novellae') on *The Babylonian Talmud* (hereafter BT), tractate 'Avodah Zarah', folio 17b: s.v. 'Either the scroll or the sword'. Edels' commentary is appended to all standard Hebrew editions of the Talmud.

experience did not prevent Zionist spokesmen from invoking traditional Hebrew symbols, motifs and expressions when communicating with the audiences which they sought to galvanize into concerted political action. But it did result in a far-reaching exercise in displacement, now rendered 'counter-memory'.³ Far from simply adding new nuances to the cultural treasure-trove which they mined for polemic purposes, political Zionist pronouncements (even when articulated by observant Jews, as became the case once an expressly 'religious' wing of the movement was founded in 1902) tended to invest those sources with entirely new meanings, many of which blatantly contradicted their original sense and intention. So forceful was this process, and so conspicuous its success, that in several instances the traditional interpretations of passages of Jewish liturgy and homiletics have during the past century virtually disappeared from view. In colloquial discourse, certainly, they have been subsumed beneath a thick varnish of modern Zionist readings.

Such has been the fate of the aphorism attributed to Rabbi Eleazar of Modi'in, quoted above. Recent Zionist interpretations almost invariably turn that text inside out. Instead of being portrayed as contradictory entities, the scroll and the sword are projected as complements to each other. More explicitly, they are said to be intertwined rather than in conflict, and hence regarded as equally necessary for the survival of the modern Jewish state. In some cases, that effect is achieved by a sleight of the scribal hand. Only the first line of the teaching is cited; the codicil contained in the sentence commencing "God said to Israel..." is conveniently ignored.⁴ In other instances, mat-

³ Yael Zerubabel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of the Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). See also: David N. Myers, *Re-Inventing the Pages of the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁴ See the complaints to this effect expressed on the floor of the Kneset (Israel's parliament) in March 1983 by a representative of the ultra-Orthodox religious party, Agudat Yisrael, in *Kneset Protocol* (Hebrew), vol. 96 page 1826.

ters take an even more succinct and graphic form. Thus, the term '*safra* and *saifa*' (with each of those words inscribed on facing leaves of a bound book, and mounted by an army helmet) has been employed as a logo of the privately-funded Israel Institute of Military Studies, one of the country's most prestigious 'think-tanks' on security affairs. The same phrase, in this case accompanied by a sketch of two soldiers sword-fencing with pens in hand, also serves as the running title in the book review section of the Hebrew-language strategic studies journal *Ma'archot*. This has been issued since 1949 under the imprint of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, and is generally acknowledged to be by far the most authoritative of the Israel Defense Force's in-house publications.

Whichever the medium employed, the message is the same. Indeed, '*safra* and *saifa*' has become a slogan, used to communicate two separate meanings. Strictly speaking, one is instrumental: if they are to be successful, Israel's military operations must reflect the application of 'brain-power' as well as 'muscle-power' (a teaching also conveyed in the frequent citation of Proverbs 24:6: "Wisdom prevails over strength, knowledge over brute force; for wars are won by skilful strategy, and victory is the fruit of long planning"). The second meaning implied by the twinning of *safra* and *saifa* is still more extensive, and when contrasted with the traditional interpretation of Rabbi Eleazar's text, also far more revolutionary. In modern Israel, it implies, religious practice and military service are not anathemas. Rather, they make up two sides of the same coin and create a reciprocal dynamic. In this sense, the phrase encapsulates a particularly resonant vision of the dual nature of the new Jew's responsibilities. Duty-bound to serve his country as both a scholar and a soldier, he (and she) must endeavour to blend those charges and ensure that the possible tensions between them never preclude their joint fulfillment.

To what extent have the latter aspirations in fact been realized? Does the structure of Israel's armed forces indeed enable serving troops to harmonize their religious and their military

obligations? Can their adherence to compulsory conscription be sustained at a time when increasing numbers of practicing orthodox young men are claiming exemption from the draft in order to pursue a scholarly vocation? Above all, to what extent is Israeli society equipped to face the challenge which might be presented to its stability by servicemen who could harness their martial expertise to ultra-nationalist religious zeal?

For many years, such questions — if ever posed — aroused only marginal public interest. Born into war in 1948, and thereafter subjected to persistent military threats to its survival, the new Jewish state wittingly (and in some accounts enthusiastically) adopted several of the characteristics conventionally associated with the notion of 'a nation in arms'.⁵ The needs of national defence created a common patriotic denominator around which the religious and secular communities, and indeed all strata of society, could unite and rally. Hence, Israel's citizens determinedly closed ranks around their armed forces. Although otherwise resolutely committed to democratic norms and procedures, they also acquiesced in the liquefaction of many of the civil-military distinctions which are usually considered to be necessary hallmarks of western democracies.⁶ At the apex of the Israeli social structure, for instance, the country's civilian and military elites forged a particularly intimate partnership, cemented by the ease with which senior officers often attained access to executive positions in either public service or the private sector on their retirement from active duty. Still more

⁵ Uri Ben-Eliezer, "A Nation in Arms: State, Nation, and Militarism in Israel's First Years," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37, (1995), pp. 264–285.

⁶ Amongst the landmarks in the literature are: Amos Perlmutter, *Military and Politics in Israel. Nation-Building and Role Expansion* (London: Frank Cass, 1969); Dan Horowitz, *The Israel Defense Forces: A civilianized military in a partially militarized society*, in *Soldiers, Peasants and Bureaucrats* (eds., R. Kolkowicz and A. Korbonski; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982), pp. 77–106; Yoram Peri, *Between Battles and Ballots: Israeli Military in Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Rebecca L. Schiff, "Israel as an 'uncivil' state," *Security Studies*, 1, (1992), pp. 636–658.

extensively, a military ethos also pervaded Israel's wider social fabric. Military service in TZAHAL, the Hebrew acronym for the Israel Defense Force [IDF], became endowed with a ritualistic public status as the most meaningful of civic obligations, incumbent upon women as well as men and on middle-aged reservists as well as young conscripts. Moreover, in its corporate capacity as the guardian of national survival and as the custodian of national values, the Force constituted an essential ingredient of Israel's 'civil religion' and one of the principal vehicles for the dissemination of the new Jewish concept of 'statism'.⁷ Largely as a result of all these circumstances, the dichotomies which traditional Jewish teachings had posited between religious practice and martial duty virtually disappeared from view. Instead, there prevailed a powerful aura of public consensus, which at times of military emergency became almost mystical. Embracing both religious and secular segments of Israeli society, that aura expressed the absolute priority of state security in the hierarchy of all interests, personal as well as national.

Those conditions no longer apply. As subsequent chapters in this book aim to demonstrate, they have in part been modified by ideological processes at work within the introspective world of religious Israeli Jewry. At this juncture, what needs to be noted is that they have also been undermined by a more widespread erosion in the status of many of the civic values and symbols, which were at one time considered axiomatic features of Israel's political culture.⁸ Far from being immune

⁷ Charles S. Liebman & Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel: Traditional Religion and Political Culture in the Jewish State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). On the evolution and implementation of 'statism': Mitchell Cohen, *Zion and State: Nation, Class and the Shaping of Modern Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), esp. pp. 202–227.

⁸ This is a central theme in: Dan Horowitz, & Moshe Lissak, *Trouble in Utopia: The Overburdened Polity of Israel* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); and *Israeli Democracy Under Stress* (eds. E. Sprinzak and L. Diamond; Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1993), esp. pp. 255–359.