

SESSION FOUR

he Army and Military Experience

The early Zionists never conceived of a situation in which the Jewish state in the ancient homeland of the Jews would have to devote a great deal of its resources for defense against enemies determined to obliterate it. Herzl's blueprint for the Jewish state in his famous book of that title imagined it as a neutral country that would require a small professional army "to preserve order internally and externally." The history of modern Israel reveals the evolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict as probably the most troubling aspect of national life. The many wars and other violent confrontations have taken a high toll on human life; in addition, psychological wounds and moral scars persist. Golda Meir once said that she could forgive Arabs for hurting Israelis, but could not forgive Arabs for making Israelis hurt them.

The Beginning of Self-Defense

The early Jewish settlers encountered Arab bandits who coveted their property. In 1909, the first defense organization was founded by the pioneers. During World War I, Zionist leaders formed special units to contribute to the war effort on the side of the British against the Turks.

Following the conquest of Palestine by the British and the Balfour Declaration in 1917, the conflict shifted to national terms of Arabs against Jews struggling to gain control of the same land. The Arabs' hostility was directed against the settlers and the Jewish presence in Palestine, resulting in several massacres of civilians, the most notorious being in Jaffa in 1921 and in Hebron in 1929. Between 1936 and 1939 there were numerous terrorist attacks against Jews, causing thousands of casualties. The policy of the Yishuv leadership was not to retaliate, but several units, inspired by a British officer sympathetic to the Zionist cause, Captain Orde Wingate, were formed to provide protection against assailants.

British policy was perceived by many Jews in Palestine as pro-Arab, especially after the adoption of the White Paper in 1939 that restricted Jewish immigration and

the purchase of land by Jews. This appeasement of Arabs on the eve of World War II, coupled with other tendencies, seemed to signal a shift from the original promises of the Balfour Declaration. Thus, in the 1930s and 1940s, Jewish underground organizations were founded, seeking to throw the British out of Palestine in order to gain independence and to protect Jews from future attacks by neighboring Arab states. (The British prohibited the local population, both Arab and Jewish, from possessing arms.)

In 1948, the War of Independence began with clashes between the Arabs and Jews of Palestine, following the United Nations decision to partition the land into a Jewish state and an Arab state. After the British departure on May 14, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the independence of Israel. The following day, the newly born state was invaded by neighboring Arab countries. The fighting between Jewish forces and the armies of the Arab states lasted several months, ending in unexpected (some would say miraculous) Israeli victories and the exodus of many Arabs from those areas that became part of the Jewish state.

Israel's history can be divided by its wars. After 1948, the major wars included the 1956 Sinai Campaign, the 1967 Six-Day War, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the *Intifada* that broke out in 1988, the Gulf War in 1990 in which Israel's civilian centers were attacked by Iraqi missiles, and the *Intifada* that began in September 2000, a war of attacks by Palestinians (many of them armed by the Israelis and trained by Americans in the course of the Oslo process) and suicide bombers against the major cities of Israel, individual soldiers, and Jewish settlers. In addition, Israel suffered from infiltrations of Arab *fedayeen* in the 1950s (leading to the Sinai Campaign), Syrian bombardments of civilian settlements before 1967, the War of Attrition along the Suez Canal after the Six-Day War, Palestinian international terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s, and suicide bombings of Israeli citizens in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem following the Oslo Agreements.

A State Surrounded by Enemies

Every Israeli adult has experienced several wars as well as the continuous threat against the existence of the state and daily fears of terrorism. Israel is a small country, facing numerous enemies much greater in size who have huge resources and political support, and many of whom are motivated by the declared intention of exterminating the Jewish state. These conditions have been responsible for a certain level of anxiety regarding the survival of the state, a strong desire for true peace, and perhaps above all, a commitment to defend the country against its enemies. "We have always said that in our war with the Arab we have a secret weapon—no alternative," Golda Meir said.

The dangers of terrorism call for constant vigilance, the assignment of soldiers to defend the borders against infiltrations, and thorough intelligence work on terrorist groups and individuals. The casualties of terrorism are always especially painful, for they are mostly innocent civilians. But terrorism is only a reminder of the precarious situation of the Jewish state, facing enemies in close proximity who threaten it with

war and destruction. The radical regimes of Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Iran adhere to attitudes that basically do not recognize Israel's right to exist. Islamic fundamentalist groups, totally opposed to any Jewish sovereignty in the region, threaten the stability of moderate Arab regimes and radicalize their positions on Israel. And in general, the armaments of the Arab countries in the region, most of them officially in a state of war with Israel, are of staggering dimension. It is clear that even when peace between Israel and her Arab neighbors becomes a real possibility, the potential for danger remains, for there are extreme elements in the Islamic and Arab worlds that regard Israel as a foreign entity that must be uprooted and as a state that represents much-hated western culture in the Middle East.

Israel's doctrine regarding the challenge of external threats is based on three factors: its small population, the small size of the country, and the fact that its enemies have stronger armies in terms of number of troops and material resources. Thus, the major principles of Israel's doctrine have been to try to achieve swift victories in order to avoid the paralysis of the country when all civilians are recruited; engage enemy forces in their territory because Israel has no strategic depth geographically; and to be resourceful, ingenious, and unconventional to overcome the numerical advantages of the Arabs.

IDF, Inc.

The Israeli army, known as Israel Defense Forces (IDF, or *Tsahal* in Hebrew), is the vital organ that defends the very existence of the state. In comparison with the size of the country, Israel's army is very large. Israel has the highest ratio of soldiers to civilians of any country in the world, 1 to 22; in the United States, the ratio is 1 to 100, and in the former Soviet Union it was 1 to 71. In fact, in proportion to the country's population, the IDF is the largest army in the world. All adult males are required to serve three years, usually between the ages of 18 and 21, and women are required to serve twenty months. The military forces consist of conscripts performing their mandatory service and career officers or other professional servicemen (in 1980 the estimated figures published by the London-based Institute of Strategic Studies were 125,000 conscripts and 44,000 regular servicemen and women). But the army's manpower is based on reservists—all Israeli males have to serve three to six weeks a year until age 49. One of Israel's leaders, Yigael Yadin, once described the male population of Israel as being "soldiers on leave eleven months of the year."

Defense expenditures account for an average of 40 percent of government spending. In terms of goods and services produced in Israel, defense spending makes up more than 27 percent of the gross national product (in the United States it is about 5 percent). Israelis are among the most heavily taxed people in the world in order to meet these enormous expenditures. In addition, security exacts sizable indirect costs like the production lost by factories and businesses whose workers are called to the obligatory reserve duty, the requirement that all buildings construct special shelters, and the employment of paid guards to inspect handbags and packages in public institutions, theaters, and stores.

The IDF is an organic part of Israeli society—highly prominent in the personal experience of every citizen, in the daily news that covers border incidents and casualties, in the presence of soldiers in everyday life, and in the number of political leaders who were distinguished army commanders before turning to politics (prominent statesmen who came from military careers include Moshe Dayan, Yigael Yadin, Yigal Alon, Haim Herzog, Yitzhak Rabin, Ezer Weizman, Ehud Barak, and Ariel Sharon). Visitors to Israel can't help but notice the presence of the military as an accepted part of life. One sees many uniformed soldiers, male and female, on city streets, buses, hitchhiking (and getting picked up by ordinary citizens) on the highways; there's much talk of reserve duty, and almost every family has lost someone close to them in one of the wars. Nevertheless, Israeli society—heeding Chaim Weizmann's warning not to become a great army that has a state but instead a state with a great army—has not become subordinate to security considerations and military mentality.

The Israeli army is unique because of its position as a people's army—i.e., consisting of all citizens because of mandatory conscription, providing equal opportunities to rise in rank, and committed to the defense of the entire population. Like any military organization, it is based on strict codes of discipline. On the other hand, the relationships between officers and soldiers tend to be less formal than in other armies. In Israel, army service is the place where young people become adults; it is also the ground for romantic connections and marriages, deep friendships, and social circles that last long after the completion of military service. In combat units, dangerous assignments lead to genuine friendships that cross the gaps of rank or role. The Israeli army is credited with being a social leveler, character builder, and releaser of potential violence, evidenced by the fact that the incidence of random violence and murder is fairly low in Israel.

Israel drafts women as well as men; still, the army is not an egalitarian place. The image of women fighting alongside men is a myth, perhaps true in the fight for Israel's independence but no longer so. Women serve mostly in behind-the-scenes capacities, but since the nineties have also been assigned to combat units. The High Court of Justice has ruled that the air force must initiate an experimental program to facilitate the integration of women into pilot training courses. In recent years a number of women have received coveted pilot's wings, after successfully completing the highly demanding training course.

Experiencing Loss

Since the founding of the state, more than 20,000 have died in Israel's wars and military service. But each time a soldier is killed, the shock is great, as if it is happening for the first time, drawing people closer together with a solidarity based on a sense of shared tragic destiny. It is not surprising or unusual to find sensitive, reflective, and even critical attitudes on the part of Israeli soldiers; anguish is frequently experienced over the loss of comrades and the moral dilemmas imposed by terrorists hiding among civilians. Often, respected commanders or generals are the

first to publicly convey their pain and grief over a soldier's death. Poetic reflections on horrors or triumphs are characteristic of this army and its soldiers.

The value system of the Israeli army reflects the values of the population as a whole. The legacy of liberal humanism and Jewish ethics imposes special restraints on army operations. As a result of a massacre of Arabs during the Sinai campaign, every Israeli soldier is now entitled—indeed in some cases obligated—to disobey orders if they are obviously immoral. (The case that prompted this ruling involved the killing of Arab workers returning to their village, Kfar Kassim, after a curfew was declared. Another test case was Yitzhak Rabin's instruction in the beginning of the *Intifada*, when he was Defense minister, to “break the bones” of the rioters.) One of the most remarkable outcomes of the military's concern with ethics was the making of the film *Ricochets* (1986), an army production of a dramatic story set in Lebanon, which examines the proper conduct of soldiers when fighting terrorists amidst a civilian population. Another celebrated work along similar lines is a book of soldiers' conversations and confessions after the Six-Day War, called *The Seventh Day* (1967). And it was a group of 348 army reservists who during the war in Lebanon started the Peace Now movement, which has argued that Israeli resolve to reach peace and greater receptivity to Arab demands will bring peace to the region.

Artistic expressions inspired by wars and military experience have a unique quality. Amos Elon defined it succinctly in his book *The Israelis* (where he mentions in a footnote that he had in mind prominent Israeli writers like A.B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz, S. Yizhar, and Yehuda Amichai):

Much that is written by Israeli-educated or Israeli-born younger writers has as a main theme the experience of war, which has been the central experience in the life of the young generation. I am not aware of a single novel, poem, or play that even remotely extols the so-called virtues of war. In literature—less so in daily journalism—the tone is set by nausea, not by pride or glory. Victories are portrayed as terrible defeats. At its best, new Israeli literature has been marked by an instinctive pacifism and by so compulsive a desire to understand and empathize with the “enemy” that some critics have warned against the “suicidal” tendencies it may reflect.

Some observers have charged that the Oslo agreements and restrictions on army operations vis-à-vis the Palestinians are evidence of a self-defeating society burdened with the moral price of violence and loss. On the other hand, Israeli popular culture as manifest in folk songs, some journalistic reports, statements at public ceremonies and the like tends to express a positive view of the army and the value of patriotism.

Israeli cinema, like any national cinema, combines elements of popular culture with the critical reflections of high culture. The distinction between popular and high culture is not intended to imply any value judgment. Indeed, in modern Israel, popular culture is often more authentic and more representative of the sentiments of

the people than the works of distinguished artists, who, especially in the last twenty years, have tended to disassociate themselves from the sentiments of the general public. *The Wooden Gun*, the next film in the course, belongs to the domains of both popular culture and high culture. This drama of children's war games was based on the personal experiences of a sensitive artist and supported by the government-sponsored fund for the promotion of quality Israeli films.



The Wooden Gun

Feature film, 1979

Director: Ilan Moshenson
 Producers: Eitan Even, Richard Sanders, and John Hardy
 Screenplay: Ilan Moshenson

Yoni: Eric Rosen
 Yoni's mother: Judith Sole
 Yoni's father: Michael Kfir
 Palestina: Ophelia Shrahl

Running time: 91 minutes

This 1979 film looks back on the early years of the state, reconsidering the values of military strength and power. Marking the beginning of a new phase of Israeli cinema, *The Wooden Gun* explores national issues from the perspective of authentic personal experience. It reflects the views of a later time, questioning the validity of central tenets of the national ideology.

Complex relationships between the generations of founders and children, native Israelis and immigrants, insensitive Sabras and troubled Holocaust survivors, are explored in the film. The focus of the film is Yoni, an innocent child who gains new understanding of the world through dramatic experience. In *The Wooden Gun*, the usual pain of growing up is amplified by the burden of historical reality as represented by the struggle to build a Jewish state, the legacy of the Holocaust, and the existence of codes of behavior that take a heavy emotional and moral toll.

Editing the Past

The film's opening credits are set against a background of documentary pictures, representing the historical process leading to the establishment of the State of Israel. These are familiar heroic images, which have been impressed on the national memory as the visual content of the 1930s and 1940s, evoking a sense of pride and glory. In this film, there is an attempt to subvert the traditional nationalist triumphalism, for the final picture of the opening sequence features an elderly couple looking confused, uncertain, and apprehensive about the future in the new land.

Yoni's mother: *How was Jerusalem?*

Yoni: *Without the wall, like a king without a crown.*

Mother: *We'll manage without that crown.*

This beginning defines the main approach of reconstruction and revision. Based on the experiences of director/writer Ilan Moshenson, the film includes scenes and moments familiar to many Israelis and evoking the collective nostalgia of the 1950s. Urban centers like Tel Aviv are filled with a mosaic of people, notably Holocaust survivors from various European countries (most immigrants from Arab countries arrived after 1950) and local Israelis who fought in the War of Independence, living in undeveloped neighborhoods of small apartments and improvised housing. The neighborhood is under continuous construction, with nearby fields and beaches marking the frontiers of the city before the rapid development that came later. Reconstructing the era based on memories of personal experiences, the film effectively portrays the children's world, their popular games, standard school ceremonies, typical conflicts with teachers, and encounters with refugees.

The children's war games imitate the world of their parents—reflecting the prevalent values of a nation that came into being as a result of battlefield victories. The main characters are introduced when the protagonist, Yoni, is ambushed by boys of the opposing “army,” led by his chief antagonist, Adi Kaufman. Whereas Yoni begins on essentially the same moral level as his rival, as the drama develops he undergoes a significant change. From seeing the world in terms of battles, animosities, and defeating the “other,” Yoni comes to distance himself from his vulgar buddies.

A field trip to Jerusalem satirizes a central school experience in the new state. The distracted teacher presides as his young charges range over a field like soldiers in battle. Such trips used to be a highlight of school activity for students, involving the pleasures of traveling to distant places and hiking over hills and along streams; they were also directed toward serious educational goals. Jerusalem, the destination in the film, was often the first significant objective for such trips. In a land loaded with a rich past, almost every place lends itself to a lecture on history or archeology. Known as the “battle heritage,” the history of modern Israel was stressed through heroic stories about settlement and battles crucial to the creation

Yoni: *When will you tell me about the Holocaust?*

of the state. Full of pathos, these presentations concentrated on the predicament of the few against the many, the critical value of the place fought for, and the heroic victories or tragic sacrifices.

In *The Wooden Gun*, this entire experience is rendered as comedy. The manifest disinterest of the children is contrasted with the teacher's exaggerated enthusiasm, and the boy who complains that he cannot see Jerusalem recalls the child in "The Emperor's New Clothes."

A Child's View of Zionism and War

The film ridicules the lofty rhetoric of Zionism, expressed by the schoolmaster and other teachers. Bialik's celebrated poem *El HaTsipor* ("To the Bird"), which expresses the poet's yearning for the Land of Israel through an imaginary dialogue with a bird that had flown there (a modern version of Psalm 137, expressing the yearning for Zion) held a special place in Zionist education. Here, the pupils regard the teacher's passionate presentation with indifference, laughter, and disdain. "If Bialik came to the Land of Israel," one of them insolently asks, "why was he sad?" The children are punished with a conference with the schoolmaster, whose stern preaching combines the guilt tactics of a Jewish mother with evocations of Zionist ideals and national obligations. He tells the students that they are the first generation of free Israelis, reproaches them for denying all that is sacred and dear, and reminds them that the nation is looking up to them and that they face an "awesome task." The comic effect of this grand speech is punctuated by Herzl's picture falling off the wall. The theme of the incongruous place of high Zionist idealism in the world of small children reaches a climax in a school ceremony of Independence Day—taken seriously by the teachers and as comedy by the children, with a bearded Adi Kaufman playing Herzl.

The lofty but, to the children, irrelevant words of the schoolmaster are contrasted with stories of war, which hold a genuine fascination for the boys. Yoni's room is decorated with battle photographs, which seem to come to life. The children's games reflect their admiration of military heroism. Yoni returns from the field trip to Jerusalem speaking of wanting to retake the Old City. His

mother counters, “There is peace now,” and is upset by Yoni’s talk of war games. His father, remembering fondly the War of Independence in which he fought, tells Yoni, “We’ll make a soldier out of you.” He states, “This country needs tough men. It’s a tough country.” When his mother wants Yoni to stop the war games, his father argues, “It’s a game,” to which she counters, “It’s not a game.”

But when Adi ransacks their apartment Yoni’s father is furious, pulls out his belt and beats his son, saying “No more wars.” Yoni argues, insisting that war is necessary. He fails to understand his father’s position, asking him if he insists on “no more war” because of the Holocaust.

Echoes of the Holocaust

The Wooden Gun explores the presence of the Holocaust in Israeli reality. Desperately, Yoni’s mother searches for family survivors, while his father expresses impatience with her “hysterical outbursts.” Beyond Yoni’s home, the film presents the more general attitude toward the Holocaust on the part of children, who call the neighborhood bully *einschwein*. Their insensitivity to the plight of Hitler’s victims is illustrated by their mistreatment of survivors in their community; they pour a bucket of water on a woman who expresses admiration of the little Sabras, and they throw stones at Palestina, the local madwoman. An angry neighbor who yells at the children after they kill a pigeon with the wooden gun is answered with their call that she should go back to Germany. After Yoni hits Adi with the wooden gun, he hears voices saying “Nazi, Nazi.” The Holocaust is depicted as both a trauma of survivors bearing terrible secrets and as a part of everyday discourse, mindlessly used by children who are exposed to details and ideas but who are able neither to connect them with their own lives nor to appreciate their import and tragic dimension.

Palestina stands out as an alien, living by herself in a small hut on the beach, tortured to the point of insanity by the trauma of her Holocaust experience. Her name was given to her by the children, because she keeps talking about the political redemption of the Jews in Palestine (although not entirely clear in the film, this information is based on a personal interview with director Ilan

Palestina: *God told Ben-Gurion: “All will be well. There will be peace. The Messiah will come.” We’ve gotten a country, a land. This is what God said.*

Yoni's father: *We're through with the wars. Got it?*

Moshenson). Palestina is a sort of artistic muse, associated with music and with visionary madness. She is the target of ridicule as well as the source of fear because of her unstable behavior and the mysterious agony of her existence. When, later in the film, Palestina gives Yoni refuge in her shack, her care and warmth help him gain new understanding of her predicament.

In the climactic moment, as Yoni stares at photos of Holocaust victims, the famous picture of the child from the Warsaw ghetto raising his hands before the SS trooper transforms to images of his friends and the boy that he hurt. Yoni begins to appreciate the agony of Palestina's personal loss and to realize the horror that she and all other survivors have suffered. The implication of this realization bears a special moral lesson, for now he can identify with the victims. In addition, he feels guilty for being in the role of victimizer. The ending shows Yoni's reconciliation with Palestina and the world she represents, while he turns his back on the friends who invite him to join the celebration of their "victory" over the other gang.

While you watch, consider . . .

- ◆ How do the children's games reflect adult behavior?
- ◆ What strikes you as particularly "Israeli" about Yoni and his friends?
- ◆ How are you made aware of the film's perspective of looking back at an earlier Israel?
- ◆ What are the comic elements of the film, and what makes them funny?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ◆ How is Yoni different from the other children? Do you consider the film a story about children, or a story of children? Whose point of view is dominant in the film?
- ◆ How does the young boy Yoni compare to the soldier Yoni seen in the last film, *Operation Jonathan*? How does a child's fascination with war translate into adult behavior?
- ◆ What is the significance of photographs in the film? Note the presence of pictures on walls and the moments when photos "come alive." How do photographs and images influence historical memory, national consciousness, and values?
- ◆ In what ways does the film seem faithful to the era in which its action takes place, and in what ways does it look back from the perspective of a later time?
- ◆ In the film, Yoni learns through his own actions the consequences of the "games" the boys have played. What, in your opinion, is the film saying about the consequences of war on those who take part in it? Does it propose an alternative? Do you agree?
- ◆ What are the values that Israel's emphasis on military prowess promotes? How do those values relate to the values of Zionism? Are Zionism and militarism necessarily closely linked?
- ◆ How might an American child view war differently from an Israeli peer? What do these differences reflect about the two societies?