

Women at War, in Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Israel

Shabbat Sh'mot 5784

January 5, 2024

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Lieutenant Colonel H, not otherwise identified, was at home on the morning of October 7, packing for an overseas trip. Describing her first moves that day, she says, “I had to summon the Paratrooper Brigade, where the brigade commander is my best friend. I had to summon my husband’s unit and simultaneously figure out arrangements for my five children—ages 3, 6, 12, 14, and 16... In that moment, a message from my husband reassured me; he had already prepared a bag, the children were with my mother, and he was on his way out. And just like that, we were thrust into action.”ⁱ

Women have been at the center of public consciousness about the brutal Hamas terrorist attack and the ensuing war. Too little has been said about the inhumane sexual violence that Hamas perpetrated against women on October 7, but evidence and horrifying details are now widely available. Women were among those cruelly taken hostage by Hamas. We celebrated when many of them were freed after seven weeks, and then were devastated by their reports of abuse in captivity, doubtless continuing for those who remain. We are devastated by the deaths of thousands of Palestinian noncombatants in Gaza, many of them women.

In Israel, yet another aspect of the role of women has been widely discussed—the role of women in the Israel Defense Forces.

Some twenty years ago, Ruth, the eldest of my three Israeli nieces, served in Caracal—at the time, Israel’s only coed combat force. Now, a large and growing percentage of combat units include women, and increasing numbers of women are joining them. In December, “The Israel Defense Forces said...it has seen a massive spike in female conscripts seeking to join combat units” since October 7.ⁱⁱ

The Israel Defense Forces enjoyed few successes on October 7, but one is attributed to “a group of women tank operators from the Paran Brigade that helped turn the tide and clear dozens of terrorists from [Kibbutz Holit]. Composed of young women in their early 20s, the tank crews were the first Western women armored soldiers to go into active battle.” Note: Not only the first Israeli women, but the first in all of the armies of the Western world! “[T]he young soldiers charged into battle, driving...through the region adjacent to the Gaza border, plugging holes in the border, and killing some 50 terrorists over 17 hours of continuous combat.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Tal Shalev, writing in *The Jerusalem Post* last month, highlights new gender integration of the infantry, noting that “female soldiers and commanders from [the coed infantry] Bardelas [Battalion] entered Gaza..., together with the rest of their unit, for the first time.” Lest this breakthrough be viewed as “merely” a victory for gender equality, the inclusion of women in combat and other significant military roles has made a difference. Shalev spoke with a “First Sergeant Tomer, [a man who] notes that fighting alongside women ... ‘helps to prevent [male] soldiers from feeling burnout. In general,’” he continues, “‘women’s brains work differently than men’s. They see things that men would never have noticed. And this has been a real advantage here in Gaza. Their brains are sharper, which is especially helpful for snipers, since they notice finer details.’”^{iv}

The second of my Israeli nieces, Sarah, was an officer in the elite intelligence Unit 8200. I was not surprised, then, when the Israeli daily *Haaretz* reported that the soldiers who repeatedly warned that “something unusual was happening” on the Gaza border were women. These women are “spotters,” a role that *Haaretz* explains, “involves staring at a screen for hours on end, studying surveillance cameras for untoward activities.” The Hebrew term for a spotter is *tatzpanit*, a feminine word, indicating that “Nowadays, only women perform the task.” After October 7, these *tatzpaniot* were enraged. “During their years of military service, they say they’ve grown accustomed to the fact that they ‘don’t count.’” No “notice was given to the repeated warnings they raised before Hamas’ infiltration on Black Saturday. Warnings that, it seems to them, were going in one IDF earpiece and out the other. These included reports about Hamas’ preparations near the border fence, its drone activity in recent months, its efforts to knock out cameras, the extensive use of vans and motorcycles, and even rehearsals for the shelling of tanks.”^v

Thankfully, not all women in the Israeli army are not so disregarded. Lieutenant Colonel H describes a conversation with a male counterpart: “At any given moment, I handle numerous calls, determining the deployment of each department and assigning specific resources to various units. ... I was in my office when an elderly reserve officer observed the weight of my responsibilities. He remarked, ‘I don’t know how you manage it,’ as I took a sip from my water bottle. To this, my colleague responded, ‘It’s straightforward—only women can juggle so many tasks simultaneously.’ I find this indisputable. There are certain things we excel at naturally.”^{vi}

I would not be surprised if tonight is the first time you are learning about the role of women soldiers in Israel’s current war. I had read about it in the Israeli

press. In my research for this sermon, I did not find articles on the subject in American media, not even in the Jewish press.

We do, however, read about women at war, in protection of the Jewish people, in this week's Torah portion. As Pharaoh begins to terrorize the Children of Israel, he turns to two women, midwives named Shiphrah and Puah. He orders them, "'When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live.'"^{vii} Torah continues, "The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live."^{viii} The medieval commentator Ibn Ezra argues that Torah could have made its point simply by saying that the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh. The phrase, "they let the boys live," would be superfluous if it did not mean something more. Ibn Ezra provides that meaning: "They worked with all their strength," even more as the days wore on.^{ix} They would not give up the fight to save the Israelites!

God rewards the midwives, establishing households for them.^x Rashi imagines that to mean that God made them the matriarchs of royal and priestly dynasties.^{xi} A less-known commentator, though, Hezekiah ben Manoah, hews closer to Torah's words, arguing that "houses" means "families." God rewards these women who saved Israelite children by giving them children of their own. I think now of the youngest of my Israeli nieces, Hannah, who also served in the IDF—in her case, supplying elite infantrymen as they went into battle during the Second Lebanon War, defending Israel when Hezbollah brutally bombarded civilians in 2006. Hannah and her husband Dvir, who were married on this *bimah*, now have three small children. Hannah is home with the kids, while Dvir fights terrorists on the ground in Gaza. May God bless Hannah and Dvir, James, Dylan and Adam, and all the households of Israel, defended by the men **and the women** of the Israel Defense Forces.

Amen.

ⁱ Rotem Izak, "Wonder women: Female IDF soldiers prove capabilities amid Hamas war," *ynet news*, November 17, 2023, <https://www.ynetnews.com/magazine/article/hkkygxvxp>.

ⁱⁱ Emanuel Fabian, "IDF sees surge in female conscripts seeking combat roles since start of war with Hamas," *The Times of Israel*, December 6, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-sees-surge-in-female-conscripts-seeking-combat-roles-since-start-of-war-with-hamas/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "All-woman Israeli Tank Crews Killed 50 Terrorists Over 17 Hours of Combat on October 7," *Haaretz*, November 26, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-26/ty-article/all-woman-israeli-tank-crews-killed-50-terrorists-over-17-hours-of-combat-on-october-7/0000018c-0bec-d65f-a7dd-fbfff6dd0000>

^{iv} Tal Shalev, "IDF co-ed battalion makes history by sending women troops to Gaza," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 15, 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-hamas-war/article-778101>.

^v Yaniv Kubovich, "The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Hamas Attack—and Were Ignored," *Haaretz*, November 20, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-20/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the->

women-soldiers-who-warned-of-a-pending-hamas-attack-and-were-ignored/0000018b-ed76-d4f0-affb-eff740150000.

^{vi} Izak.

^{vii} Exodus 1:16.

^{viii} Exodus 1:17.

^{ix} Ibn Ezra on Exodus 1:17:2.

^x Exodus 1:21.

^{xi} Rashi on Exodus 1:21:1.