

Military Service as a Formative Experience: Reflections from Bronfmanim

edited by Matti Friedman (BYFI '94)

Military service, with its trials, frustrations and hard-won personal victories, is nearly always a formative experience for those who undergo it, voluntarily or otherwise. The experience remains seared into the memory of the Amitim and Bronfman Fellows who have spent time in uniform, long after they return to civilian life. In these essays, Israelis and an American who served in the Israeli Defense Forces write of what they learned and what they taught, and of how the military changed them or others for better or for worse.



Matti Friedman '94 grew up in Toronto, was a Bronfman fellow in 1994 and moved to Israel the next year. Since then, he has been a dairy farmer, soldier, university student and reporter. Today he works as a correspondent in the Jerusalem bureau of the Associated Press. He is married to Naama and has twin boys, Aviv and Michael.



Michael Grumer serving in the I.D.F

Eating Dirt in the Desert

Michael Grumer (BYFI '04)

When I made aliyah in 2007, I took the obligation of service on myself.

I could have waited a few years to move to Israel, at which point my age would have exempted me from the draft, but I decided that that wouldn't be right. Everyone does their time in the army, and after they resume their lives they benefit from others serving and keeping them safe. I felt I needed to serve my time to feel right about continuing to enjoy that protection. I have spent nearly the last two years in an infantry unit – the 50th Battalion of the Nahal Brigade.

I ended up in a platoon with a number of other Americans. The Israelis all had similar reactions to us: they could not figure out why we would want to leave our cushy lives behind to eat dirt with them in the desert. Each one of the Americans had his own story, mostly to do with ideology and Zionism and wanting to serve Israel. Most of the Israelis eventually came to admire this, while others remained convinced we were crazy.

I chose combat service because I felt, and still feel, that it is the best way for me to give back to this country, to learn more about Israelis

and Israel, get to know the land (mostly by marching on it), and to really become a part of Israeli society.

I chose military service because I know that while I am in uniform, there is one more soldier who acts with a moral compass and exercises the IDF's value of purity of arms.

I chose military service because today one in four Israeli 18-year-old boys does not go into the army. I hope some of these boys notice me or others like me and realize that while they shirk their duty to their country and people, others leave their lives behind to serve.

Ideology is one thing, of course, and actually living it is another. Serving in a combat unit is trying, mentally and physically. I have thought many times, "how did a kid from the Bronx end up running around in a Middle Eastern desert with an assault rifle?" At the same time, the challenging experiences forged friendships that will prove to be lifelong. Every soldier eventually realizes that he depends on everyone else and everyone else depends on him. You don't make friends like these in college.

Some people say that the Israeli winter is not so cold. I say that those people haven't spent any time guarding the Lebanese border, camping out in the bushes on stakeouts for days at a time. Rain is naturally depressing, but even more so when you do not have an umbrella and you can't go inside. That aside, the winter I spent on the Lebanese border was one of the most rewarding times of my

service, because I felt something I've never felt in any other situation: I saw the distant lights of towns and kibbutzim at night and I knew that the people there were sleeping peacefully because of the work I was doing.

That feeling is what keeps me going, during patrols and stakeouts and mind-numbing shifts of four hours on, four hours off in a guard tower for days at a time. When we get out for weekends and sleep normally it builds us back up physically, but mentally is a different story. Mental strength is all about motivation, and my motivation comes from the fact that my work is enabling people to go about their daily lives while worrying as little as possible.

Eventually a day will come when we will not need to send our children to the military. While I pray that day will come soon, I am proud to perform this service until it does.

Michael Grumer was born and raised in the Bronx. He is currently serving in an infantry unit for the 50th Battalion of the Nahal Brigade for the Israeli Defense Forces. Michael is a 2004 Bronfman Fellow.

On the State of the Military

Zvi Benninga (Amit '02)

As any military expert will tell you, in order for an army to work well it has to work in



Zvi Benninga relaxing on vacation after three years of service in the I.D.F

perfect synchrony. It cannot have dissenters and free thinkers among its ranks. It cannot accept soldiers who question the authority of its commanding officers or their judgment of a situation. Military training is therefore devoted to a large extent to displacing personal impulses and replacing them with the ability to follow orders, an ability which is not learned until it is internalized. As Elias Canneti, the writer and Nobel laureate, wrote, "No one can truly be called a soldier until he has intensively incorporated into himself this whole body of prohibitions," until he recognizes himself only within the orders of others. Archimedes discovered that an object submerged into a full bath will displace water in volume equal to its own. A similar phenomenon can be viewed when training soldiers – their ability to follow orders and believe in the judgment of their superiors is directly proportionate to the degree to which they reject their faith in their own ability to fully understand a situation and decide upon a proper course of action.

Israel is a military state. We have been, legally, in a state of emergency since the inception of the state, and this mentality has trickled down into the frame of mind of its citizens – the Jewish ones, that is – who believe we are constantly on the brink of extinction. The school system devotes a lot of time and money not only to preparing teenagers for their military service but to enhancing the military

ethos, the heroism, the sense of calling in their wards from a very young and impressionable age. In adulthood many men continue to serve in the reserve corps, and when strangers meet they often appraise each other's worth according to their military experience.

I fear being dismissed as just another liberal, guilt-ridden, self-hating Jew, so allow me to state: Israel is my homeland and my home. I am not a pacifist. I have served my full military duty and still serve in the reserves. I truly believe the army is a necessary part of life in Israel. However, just as an organism in which one of the organs swells beyond proportion is diseased, so is my country, which has lost itself to the stranglehold of the military. Since my release from the army I have started to reassess the state of my country. I have seen what happens to those who live under military occupation and I have seen what happens to those who occupy them. I see a state obsessed by violence and devoured by hate.

I have seen what happens when the entire population is composed of soldiers who have forsaken their ability to criticize their commanding officers, and I have seen what happens to those few who have retained a critical and independent view of the country: they are labeled self-hating Jews and are considered traitors in our midst. As a country we have lost the ability to accept criticism,

since it is always perceived as an unjustified attack; we have lost the ability to change, to grow. Unless we regain these, our hopes for a better future will be lost.

Zvi Benninga (Amitei Bronfman '02) - After finishing a year of community service with the Amitei Bronfman Garin (group), three years of military service, and a short stint of travelling, Zvi is now studying Medicine and Liberal Arts at the Hebrew University.

Strength and Modesty

Daphna Ezrachi (Amitah '05)

I never decided to join the army – it was a simple fact of nature since I was born. My father was a pilot, my sister an education officer and my brother an infantry soldier. As I approached army age the only question was where I would serve.

About thirty years ago the army set up a project whose importance was more social than military – drafting delinquent youth with the hope that time in the military would help them become better citizens. I can say with certainty: these are the toughest soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces.

That's where I ended up, a 19-year-old girl from a middle class Jerusalem family – as a commander of these recruits. I found myself standing opposite a group of 13 men at a base in northern Israel and telling them what to do.

Each one of them had his own terrible story, things I had never been exposed to. I spent one Shabbat on the base with a soldier who started having a mental breakdown, crying and hitting himself. I stuck to him and didn't let him hurt himself until it passed.

Slowly, I began to understand that I was the commander. That for these soldiers, I was everything. The responsibility was overwhelming. That goes for every commander in the army, but with these soldiers there could be nearly no margin of error – every mistake you make can have a much greater effect on a soldier who is less stable than a typical recruit.



Daphna Ezrachi (second from left) with friends

The amazing thing is that I, the commander, went through a process of learning and change just like the soldiers.

As a girl who was given everything I needed to succeed in life, when I faced a boy my age whose mother died of cancer in his arms, whose father wouldn't speak to him, who had been paying his own way since he was 15 and who had a criminal record, I learned something about modesty and about how lucky I am.

I learned about being strong. I saw soldiers dealing with the most difficult things, like being ordered to stay at the base when one of their brothers was being threatened because he owed money to some gangster. Their emotional strength stunned me.

I saw soldiers undergoing incredible change: soldiers who stopped swearing, who found they could deal with challenges instead of running away as they had always done before, soldiers who discovered after a grueling day in the army that they were actually succeeding at something for the first time. My soldiers are now scattered throughout the regular army – some are combat soldiers in the Givati Brigade, one is a mechanic, another is a driver, one runs the storeroom at the military radio station.

I know that I taught every one of them at least one thing, even if it was something little. And I also know that they taught me a lot. Some of them are doing well in the army, and some aren't, but they have all changed since being drafted. So have I.

I love my soldiers and I will always be their commander. Even now, when I call them, they laugh and call me *hamefakedet* – "sir." I can tell that it is still important for them to tell me how they are doing. I may not be in uniform anymore, but I will still be here for them when they need me.

Daphna Ezrachi, (Amitei Bronfman '05) was born and raised in Jerusalem. She is a graduate of the Reform Movement's pre-army Mechina program in Yaffo. After serving in the IDF, Daphna plans to work in NYC before travelling to South America in July 2010.

"Because of You We're Alive"

By Yair Agmon (Amit '04)

I am now in infantry officers' training, on my way to becoming a commander of new recruits. My job will be to educate them – but toward what goal?

I'm trying to remember why I signed up for a combat unit. I didn't have to. I was not supposed to.

Children of bereaved families and only sons need their parents' permission to join frontline units. I am the only son of a single mother who for her whole life feared and anticipated the moment her son would come to her and ask her permission to join a combat unit.

When that day arrived, we went together to the local army office to sign the release form. Unfortunately, and in typical army fashion, they didn't have the "only son" form. So they took out a "bereaved family" form and erased the title with white-out.

Then they lost the form. So we came again.

A few days ago I got a call from a soldier who was under my command for eight months, from the moment he joined the army until he left for commanders' training. He is now commanding recruits himself. He told me that he hung up a picture in his own soldiers' tent – the very same picture I hung up in his tent when I was his commander.

It was Hanukkah, and the freezing recruits under my command had received packages of sweets from kids all over the country. In every package there was a note: "Brave soldier, thank you for protecting us," "Don't be afraid my soldier, I'm with you and I love you," "Thank you – because of you we're alive." In every letter there was a telephone number written by a child who was waiting for a brave soldier to call. As commander, I made my soldiers call these kids to say thank you, and I put the drawings in a picture frame and hung it up in their tent.

"What's that picture, *hamefakedet*?" they asked, using the Hebrew equivalent of sir.



Yair Agmon

It's so that you remember why you're here."

It's not for no reason that those children were thanking my soldiers. This land, which I am learning to protect, is the great love of my life. I love to touch it, to study it, to taste it, to see it. I love the people in it: the Jews, the Arabs, the rich and the poor, the Yemenites and the Anglos. I love this land because it protects me and people like me.

It seems to me that there is no more tangible expression for this love than significant service in the army. For me, and for the country, a soldier standing with an Israeli weapon, on an Israeli frontline, and fighting the enemy, is someone who loves the country and is doing something about it. But it's not enough to be there. You must also educate others and get them to dream of being there too. You must give others the opportunity to become addicted to the love of this land, in the most significant way, in uniform, with a rifle, facing an enemy that must be defeated or facing soldiers who need to be taught.

That's why I'm a commander.

Yair Agmon (Amitei Bronfman '04) was born in Jerusalem. He is serving in the Israeli Defense Forces in Southern Israel and training to be an officer. This year, he published a book in Hebrew, entitled "Hapash." The book includes the discussions Yair and his soldiers had about the weekly Torah portion; the second printing is coming out soon. ■