

Article

The IDF Military Rabbi: Between a “Kohen Anointed for War” and a “Religious Services Provider”

Aharon (roni) Kampinsky

Department of Citizenship Studies, Efrata College, Jerusalem 9362325, Israel; ronikampinsky@gmail.com

Received: 24 February 2020; Accepted: 8 April 2020; Published: 10 April 2020



Abstract: Military rabbis in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are an integral part of the army and currently posted in almost all army units. The role of the military rabbi has undergone fundamental changes since the founding of the State and the IDF, most notably in the past generation. While the formal definition of the military rabbi’s role has remained relatively stable; in practice it has undergone dramatic changes on the backdrop of processes in the IDF Military Rabbinate and in the religious-Zionist sector in Israel. Whereas in the past military rabbis were viewed as religious service providers, during the term of Chief Military Rabbi Rontzky (2010–2016) they viewed themselves in the role of a “Kohen anointed for war” (Meshuach Milchama). Harking back to the biblical description of the Kohanim who strengthen the people at a time of war, this military figure is entrusted with strengthening soldiers, morally and spiritually, before they go into battle. Nonetheless, a return to the religious services provider model can be discerned in recent years, mainly in response to the contention of religionization in the military. The article focuses on the changing role of the IDF military rabbi and identifies three major explanatory factors of these changes: (a) Differences between the formative period of the IDF Military Rabbinate and later periods; (b) Demographic changes in the composition of the IDF, mainly the growing number of soldiers from the national-religious sector; (c) The changing character of the Chief Military Rabbi’s background which affected the nature of the military rabbi’s role. The article aims to show that the Military Rabbinate has not been immune to the struggle over the collective Jewish identity of the State of Israel, and its underlying processes reflect the complexity and diversity of Israeli society.

Keywords: military rabbinate; military rabbi; religion officer; chaplain; kohen anointed for war; fighting spirit

1. Introduction

Israel Defense Forces (IDF) military rabbis are the backbone of the Military Rabbinate which is responsible for religious affairs in the army. The role of the military rabbi is broad and diverse, including the provision of religious services to soldiers, halachic (Jewish Law) rulings in the army, organizing Torah lessons, caring for fallen soldiers if needed (identification and burial), and morally strengthening soldiers in routine and emergency times, for example during war or a military operation (Kampinski 2015).

In this article I argue that the role of the IDF military rabbi underwent a dramatic change in the beginning of the 2000s. While the formal definition of the military rabbi’s role has remained relatively stable, processes that occurred within the IDF Military Rabbinate and in the religious-Zionist sector in Israel have created a change in the role perception of the military rabbi as a “Kohen anointed for war”. In other words, a military figure whose role is to strengthen soldiers, both morally and spiritually, before they go into battle. This is described by Rabbi Eliyahu Blum:

In the history of the People of Israel that is recounted in the bible, the Kohen anointed for war is mentioned when he encourages the spirit of the soldiers going out to battle. This is also the current

image of the military rabbi who accompanies the soldiers and is trusted as a spiritual support in times of need. (Blum 2015)

While this role was embodied in the military rabbi's role since the beginning of the Military Rabbinate, it was only explicitly stated and presented as a significant function of the Military Rabbinate in the beginning of the 2000s. The article traces the changing role of the Military Rabbinate, on the continuum between a religious services provider and a "Kohen anointed for war". Following continuing contentions regarding religionization processes in the IDF, the pendulum has to a certain extent swung back toward the original religious service provision model.

I begin by comparing the IDF Military Rabbinate and Chaplains Corps in other armies and then discuss the shifting role of the IDF military rabbi as a reflection of changes in Israeli society, identifying three major explanatory factors for the fundamental changes.

2. The IDF Military Rabbi Compared to Military Chaplains in Other Armies

While the IDF Military Rabbinate is a unique case in the institutionalization of religion in the army, many countries and armies in the modern world also have frameworks for providing religious services to soldiers. Several comparative aspects are presented below, showing that processes occurring in Israel correspond to those in western armies.

The organization of religious services in different armies in the modern world can be roughly divided into two main models. In the first model military chaplains are involved in the army's operational policy and are an integral part of decision making processes. In this case the role of religion is to "sanction" military operations—at the ethical and values level and according to religious law. Thus, a process of indoctrination can be identified—the re-education of soldiers—in which military religious personnel play a major role. In the second model, military chaplains provide religious services to soldiers who want them, nothing more. Thus, those providing religious services in the army are not directly involved in military matters and, except for the technical provision of religious services, religion does not play a role in the military framework and religious personnel do not seek to "re-educate soldiers". In reality, there is a broad continuum between these two distinct poles.

Islam is comprised of a wide-ranging and detailed system of practical religious laws pertaining to all areas of life (Lazarus-Yaffe 1981, 1982). Christianity, on the other hand, does not penetrate every area of the follower's life, except of course in the case of the church clergy. Therefore, in the armies of Islamic countries clerics are involved in the army's military policy and decisions, while military chaplains in western armies are not directly involved in military matters. Moreover, except for the technical provision of religious services, religion does not play a role in western armies (Abercrombie 1977).

The first model, characteristic of armies in Islamic countries, can be illustrated and examined through the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army, simply known as the Iranian Army. Islam is prominent in all aspects of the military, far beyond providing religion services to soldiers. Thus, officers in the Iranian army are selected according to their degree of religiosity, not only their military competencies. Moreover, lessons on religion and faith delivered by senior clergy are routinely part of military courses, and obeying military commands is considered a religious duty (Zabih 1988).

In general, religious Muslim soldiers do not face religious difficulties serving in the Iranian army. Prayers are organized by the Defense Ministry's Department of Services and Public Relations and lessons about Islam are organized and taught by Muslim clerics (Zabih 1988). As military service and Islam are intertwined in the Iranian army, there is no need for a dedicated military unit specifically responsible for religious matters, contrary to the situation in all western armies. Thus, even if not explicitly stated, we can assume that soldiers in the Iranian army receive impressive amounts of "moral strengthening" as part of the army's religious activity.

The situation is much more complex in western countries and western armies. The common thread among western armies is the institutionalization of religion based on the liberal-democratic outlook, rather than imposed by the state. In the U.S. Armed Forces for example, chaplains in the various units are responsible for providing religious services to all soldiers, of all religions. Even if the

chaplain officer is Jewish, he is expected to provide religious services to all soldiers, irrespective of religion, even to Muslims. The army as an organization does not seek to operate according to religious law, however, as part of the liberal-democratic outlook it does the utmost to provide religious services to every soldier who would like them (Slomovitz 1999).

There is a large network of chaplains, serving under the Chief of Chaplains in the U.S. Armed Forces. These chaplains are posted in the various army units and provide religious services in a variety of areas such as religious dietary laws and freedom of worship. The spiritual-educational dimension is also emphasized, with the unit chaplain providing mental support to soldiers in need, for example in the case of tension and anxiety. An interesting aspect has to do with the chaplain's broader role—advising commanders on issues of conscience and morality and even assisting soldiers regarding prayer (Hansen 2012; B. Levy 2002). A significant change can be identified in this area, as dramatic liberal processes in American society have led military religious entities to return to their technical role: exclusively providing religious services (Rosman-Stollman 2014). More specifically, multicultural trends do not go hand in hand with one-sided education of soldiers by religious entities. These processes are also found in the IDF, as discussed below.

In Britain and the British Army, military-religion relations differ in certain aspects. The Church of England, sometimes referred to as the Anglican Church, is fundamentally tied to British national identity. In the past, the political legislative system was based on the “power triangle”—monarchy, parliament, and church. On the one hand, Britain has what is considered, though not officially, a “state religion”. On the other hand, along with a strong church with public standing, Britain also has a tradition of religious moderation primarily characteristic of western countries. Furthermore, although the strength of religion in Britain weakened over the years (mainly at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century), the church remains strong and significant, at least at the symbolic level (Ofer and Gutfeld 2004).

This has had a significant impact on the role and institutionalization of religion in the British Army—ranging from the special status granted to the church to fundamental freedom of religious ritual granted to soldiers of other religions, as is the case in liberal-democratic countries. The special status granted to the church is reflected in a variety of aspects (Graves 2007), first and foremost in the Army Chaplains' Department that was established in 1796 as an integral part of the British army (B. Levy 2002). The church is responsible for providing religious services to soldiers and their families. The chaplains are commissioned and appointed by the church to which they belong to serve as chaplains in the British army. They are not officers, although they may be granted the authority equivalent to that of a commissioned officer. They must be ordained by the church to which they belong in order to fill the position of chaplain. Every decision regarding the continued activity of a chaplain is made by his church, which is authorized to terminate the chaplain's activity in the army.

Chaplains in the British Army do not carry arms, reflecting the separation of the military and the religious spheres. In addition to classic religious services (to soldiers who want them), the chaplain's main role is to raise soldier morale. This role which, as mentioned, also exists in the U.S. Armed Forces, reflects the cultural dimension—beyond the legal requirement to provide religious services to soldiers. However, it should be noted that, similar to the U.S., in Britain the cultural dimension in the religious officer's role does not pertain to matters of religious faith and remains exclusively in the realm of soldier morale.

The case of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) reflects a complex reality that combines both the Western (technical) and the Islamic (involved) model. To a certain extent, the IDF is similar to armies in Islamic states. Case in point is the fact that Judaism serves as a collective framework of the absolute majority of the citizens of Israel, similar to Islamic states rather than western countries. Moreover, the Jewish secular majority in Israel also recognizes that in the IDF, in which service is mandatory, military-religion relations must be institutionalized throughout the army, not just for soldiers who want religious services. Thus, for example, training is not conducted on the Sabbath, as specified in the IDF General Staff Orders. However, at the same time and contrary to the situation in Iran and its army,

the State of Israel is a western-democratic state; hence the basic similarities of its army to western armies. Institutionalization of religion in the army stems from the nature of Israel as a democracy in which every soldier, regardless of religion, can observe his or her religious rituals. Similarities between IDF military rabbis and chaplains in western armies are also found in the decreased centrality of the psychological role and the educational and psychological dimension. Hence these dimensions are weakened in the IDF as well, as liberal trends leave the military rabbis with the limited role of providing religious services.

Nonetheless, the standing of the Military Rabbinate in the IDF is unique to the State of Israel. Even though many countries contend with tension between religion and the army in various ways, there appear to be significant differences between the various countries in the political-social conditions under which they operate (Rosman-Stollman 2014). In this sense, the uniqueness of Israel as both a Jewish state and a democratic state is manifest in many aspects, specifically regarding the place and institutionalization of religion in the IDF—as defined and carried out by the Military Rabbinate. This is the basis for the “Kohen anointed for war” model which dominated the Military Rabbinate for many years. This is discussed below.

3. Background—The Military Rabbinate in Israel: At the Nexus of Military-Society Relations

Religion-military relations in Israel are not detached from the complex relations between the army and society. As far back as the 1970s, Luckam (Luckam 1984) formulated the essential relationship between the army and the state by characterizing three types of boundaries: integral (impermeable), permeable, and fragmented, and (Lissak 1991) showed that in Israel the boundaries are fragmented. In other words, an interim state in which some areas are permeable while others are not. The IDF Military Rabbinate is one area with fragmented boundaries when it comes to military-society relations in Israel.

The IDF Military Rabbinate was established in 1948, close to the founding of the State and the establishment of the IDF. It was created parallel to the “Religious Service” (headed by Lieutenant Colonel Natan Gerdi)—the first framework tasked with institutionalizing religious services that would be provided by the new army. The need for such an organizational framework arose earlier, even before the pre-State Palmach and the Haganah paramilitary organizations—in the British Army with the Jewish Legion in WWI and the Jewish Brigade in WWII. A Military Rabbinate was formed in the British Army during the period of the world wars in order to provide religious services and support to the Jewish soldiers who served in these units (Knohl 1989; Keren 2008; Urbach 2008). In many respects, it served as the foundation for the IDF Military Rabbinate, despite the fundamental differences between such an organization in a non-Jewish army and in the Jewish army of the Jewish State (Kampinski 2007).

Both the Religious Service and the Military Rabbinate were established to contend with the myriad difficulties facing religious soldiers in the army. These difficulties included problems entailed in making kitchens kosher, desecration of the Sabbath, and a secular atmosphere incompatible with the religious way of life. These problems reflected the complex dilemma between military service and religious commitment and the desire to maintain the latter in the various army frameworks (Gerdi 1973; Keren 2008).

One of the ways to address the numerous religious problems in the IDF is to establish separate units for religious soldiers. In his comprehensive essay about the separate units in the Palmach and the Haganah, Friedman maintains that the National-Religious sector viewed these separate units as a necessity rather than a desired vision or an ideal of self-segregation (Friedman 2004).

Nonetheless, and despite their important contribution to the army, the religious units that were exclusively comprised of religious soldiers did not satisfy religious needs. A host of religious problems emerged, heightening the need to institutionalize religious affairs throughout the army with the establishment of the IDF. This was particularly important when it was decided on compulsory service, and many traditional (*masorti*) and religious soldiers were assigned to the various army units (Kampinski 2009; Kedar 2009). The range of the required religious solutions went beyond providing religious services and ad-hoc solutions for the religious soldier. A consolidated and detailed halachic

framework was needed that would address Jewish law pertaining to war and the military. Such a comprehensive framework would constitute the broad and fundamental foundation for addressing the host of problems at the intersection of Jewish law and military service.

With the founding of the State, the Minister of Religious Services acted to expand the religious organization in the army and to establish a military rabbinate in addition to the Religious Service. The initial agreement was that the Religious Service and the Military Rabbinate would collaborate, with a clear division of responsibilities between them. However, going forward, and after arguments on the issue, the two entities were consolidated and the Military Rabbinate, headed by Rabbi Shlomo Gorontzik (Goren), became the exclusive authority on all religious matters in the IDF (Ostfeld 1994).

Over the years, the Military Rabbinate grew to become one of the significant entities in religion-state relations in Israel: charged with institutionalizing religious matters in the army which is considered, at least declaratively, the “people’s army” (Nevo and Shur 2002; Levy 2007). The duty of every Israeli citizen to serve in the IDF led to the application of halachic principles to every soldier and commander: food served to soldiers is kosher, training is prohibited on the Sabbath (except for combat purposes), and every soldier is entitled to receive religious services as part of his/her service. The uniqueness of the observance of these halachic laws in the IDF is that it does not create controversy, contrary to other areas of state-religion relations in Israel in which disputes and discord are continuous and at least for now appear to be irreconcilable.

The Military Rabbinate is headed by the Chief Military Rabbi, at the rank of General or Brigadier General. The first IDF Chief Military Rabbi was General Rabbi Shlomo Goren: 1948–1971, followed by General Rabbi Mordechai Peron: 1971–1977, General Rabbi Gad Navon: 1977–2000, Brigadier General Rabbi Israel Weiss: 2000–2006, Brigadier General Rabbi Avichai Rontzky: 2006–2010, Brigadier General Rabbi Rafi Peretz: 2010–2016 (who would later become the leader of the Habayit Hayehudi right-wing national-religious party), and currently Brigadier General Rabbi Eyal Karim who began his tenure in 2016. Below the IDF Chief Military Rabbi there are military rabbis, religion officers, religion noncommissioned officers, and kashrut inspectors (Michaelson 1981).

The Military Rabbinate underwent significant change in recent years. Zilberstein notes that “the trend to place a military rabbi in all military units, in light of his practical and theoretical authority, changes the perception of his position and makes him a central figure who is involved in the life of his unit and employs various spiritual and emotional support practices in the unit” (Zilberstein 2019). The role of the military rabbi and changes in this role are discussed below.

4. Development of the Role of the IDF Military Rabbi

There were very few military rabbis throughout the tenure of Chief Military Rabbi Goren (1948–1971), who was the first IDF Chief Military Rabbi and served in this position for over twenty years. Military rabbis were only posted in the General Staff, the regional commands, the various army corps, and the districts. Religion officers served in the units lower down the hierarchy: the divisions and below. The military rabbis were responsible for halachic rulings and Torah lessons, while the religion officers focused on technical aspects: supplying religious equipment and preparing for emergency times. The first military rabbi courses opened in 1971, in the aim of significantly expanding the pool of military rabbis and assigning a rabbi to every unit, even at the reserve battalion level (Peron 1972). Numerically, there were many more religion officers than military rabbis, and the number of military rabbis has risen consistently since the beginning of the 1970s.

The military rabbi, as a uniformed officer, is expected to be first and foremost a soldier—in other words to be knowledgeable about the military situations in which he operates. In terms of his rabbinical/religious profession his role is directed at his essence as a soldier or an officer. The military rabbi has an additional role—to issue halachic rulings. In fact, it appears that this is a central component of the military rabbi’s role as part of his responsibility for resolving halachic issues arising in his military unit. In addition to the two above-mentioned roles, the military rabbi also has a psychological

role. In fact, as early as the first year of the State, the editor of Hazofeh (the newspaper of HaMizrahi national-religious movement) adeptly described the military rabbi's psychological added value:

The military rabbi issues halachic rulings and also exerts spiritual influence through his moral personality, loyalty to each and every soldier, wisdom, wisdom of the heart, his ability to strengthen those going out to battle, and consoling those injured in battle. All youth are concentrated in the army. Their encounter with rabbis in uniform sometimes determines their attitude toward the Torah and the commandments. Therefore, individuals of stature are needed here. (Don-Yichye 1949)

A similar attitude, at the initial stages of the Military Rabbinate, is reflected in an article of one of the main journalists in Hazofeh newspaper, Nehemia Aminoach (Aminoach 1948). He defined the role of the army rabbi as "special" and noted that he must be "the spiritual link between two clashing worlds". He also stated that this role is not "a service of livelihood" and that the army rabbi must not feel that he is "superfluous in the army" but rather give the soldiers a "fatherly and paternalistic feeling" (Aminoach 1948).

This reflects the main distinction between the military rabbi and the religion officer in the IDF. While the latter is tasked with caring for "technical" matters, a military rabbi must be a spiritual and moral figure whose role extends beyond the official functions of handling religious matters. This was one of the reasons that the Military Rabbinate decided to open a training course for military rabbis. At the time, the second Chief Military Rabbi, Rabbi Peron, argued that "the religion officer is a technician who lacks religious authority. The military rabbi will be able to present the values and spiritual assets of the religion of Israel to the soldiers" (Peron 1972). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the main role of the military rabbis was directed towards the educational sphere. In the Six Day War, for example, it was noted that the main role of the Military Rabbinate during the war was to boost soldier morale—where this role was noted as having taken precedence over the other roles assigned to the Military Rabbinate during the war. It was also further emphasized that this role was specifically assigned to the military rabbis (Prime Minister's Office 1968). In this regard, it is important to note that Rabbi Goren, the Chief Military Rabbi during the war, wrote a prayer for the welfare of IDF soldiers before going to battle which is included in the Military Rabbinate's uniform prayer book (*siddur*).

In a "Rabbi Discourse" conducted in the BaMachaneh (the IDF magazine), the educational component of the military rabbi's work was conspicuous. For example, Rabbi Danny Freeman, the rabbi of the IDF officer school, described the "psychological role" of the military rabbi. He recounted that in heart to heart talks with soldiers "we also try to solve personal, private problems that sometimes bother them a great deal in filling their missions . . ." (Zemer 1982). In the same discourse Rabbi Lev-Yona also reiterated this dimension, noting that the soldier "feels that he has an adult person close by who helps him with many things that others can't solve . . . an individual needs such a person, and for the soldier this is one of the rabbi's roles" (Zemer 1982). Rabbi Aharak shared that as part of his role as a military rabbi he was among the officers who conducted the first interview with a soldier posted to the military company—along with the mental health officer, the company commander, the psychologist, and the service conditions officer. He added that he would "go out into the field, to training and to drills. Would conduct personal conversations with each and every soldier who wanted to talk. And the soldiers, commanders and NCO's knew that every soldier who wants to talk to the rabbi, it is his right to do so". The military rabbi Avshalom Katzir also viewed his role as a bridge to all soldiers in the unit. In a newspaper article he noted that "one of my goals as a rabbi—renewing the tradition of the [Diaspora] village—the rabbi's door is open to all . . . the book of Psalms and a pat on the back do more than formal words . . . the rabbi's role in the unit is especially important in war, more than that of all other non-combat position holders in headquarters". (Ariel 1976).

On this backdrop it is interesting to examine the perspective of a secular officer regarding the essence of the military rabbi's role. Avigdor Kahalani, who was a senior commander in the armor corps (among other things, the commander of the 77th battalion in the Yom Kippur War, and later the commander of the 7th Armored Brigade) describes the image of the military rabbi, as he saw it:

The military rabbi can be like a stone on the side of the road, or like a traffic light standing in the center, directing and guiding . . . the role of the military rabbi, in my opinion, is not to deal exclusively in matters of kashrut, meat and milk—but rather to be a spiritual person, who handles a broad range of issues. He must also have military knowledge, not only comprehensive Torah knowledge, so that he knows what the soldiers go through. I would say that a rabbi has to be sort of a semi-psychologist, able to handle personal matters in a special way. (Michaelson 1981)

For Kahalani, the military rabbi's role embodies an unofficial dimension. He does not view the military rabbi's official roles, in other words kashrut, the Sabbath, etc. as significant but rather the "unofficial", "spiritual" roles. In fact, this was the reason for expanding the number of military rabbis in the beginning of the 1970s: more rabbis were needed in light of the added spiritual dimension to the role of the Military Rabbinate.

In summary, during the first generation period, the Military Rabbinate was positioned between the army and Israeli society. As such it did not engender power struggles between the religious and secular sectors, as it was perceived to be an entity entrusted with strengthening the role and standing of "the people's army" in Israel, without indoctrination goals—enabling all soldiers to serve together. (The Army and Society Forum 2002).

5. The Change Since 2000

In the year 2000, General Rabbi Gad Navon ended his long 23-year tenure as Chief Military Rabbi. In addition to the beginning of a new period in the Military Rabbinate, it also signified a generational change as well as a shift in emphasis. His replacement, Rabbi Israel Weiss, underscored the military rabbi's role, at all ranks, to accompany soldiers and commanders in two spheres: the personal and the annual. The personal sphere pertains to the relationship of the military rabbi to the individual soldier in times of happiness and sorrow, including help resolving personal problems. The annual sphere refers to all the activities during the year (Jewish holidays, etc.). (Weiss 2010).

During the Second Lebanon War, in the summer of 2006, the educational role of the military rabbis was particularly pronounced. In addition to providing religious services to soldiers in Lebanon, the military rabbis strengthened the soldiers before going into battle and handed out the prayer for the welfare of IDF soldiers written by Rabbi Goren.

The fifth Chief Military Rabbi, Rabbi Avichai Rontzky, highlighted the role of the military rabbi as a "spiritual figure". After meeting with the rabbi of the U.S. army, Colonel Yaakov Zvi Goldstein, he noted that the role of the military rabbi in the IDF must be similar to that of a chaplain in the U.S. army. He noted that "The conversation strengthened my position about the importance of the role of the military rabbi . . . in the U.S. army the role is not limited to providing religious services. He is first of all a spiritual figure involved in the he soldier's life" (Wolf 2007).

In Operation Cast Lead (end of 2008 and the beginning of 2009) the Military Rabbinate focused mainly on strengthening the soldiers' spirit, which sparked a fierce debate. Most likely the small number of casualties in this operation enabled the military rabbis to dedicate time to this educational component.

This emphasis accelerated significantly during Rabbi Rontzky's tenure, was continued by Rabbi Rafi Peretz as the sixth Chief Military Rabbi and currently by his successor, Rabbi Eyal Karim. The Military Rabbinate strives to integrate *yeshiva hesder* and *mechinot* graduates into military rabbi positions. It also places help wanted ads in religious newspapers calling on individuals to join its ranks. While not an official policy, priority is given to members of the religious-Zionist sector. Moreover, the Military Rabbinate currently has a distinctly Zionist character, generating criticism among army rabbis from the ultra-Orthodox camp.

An empirical study of military rabbi practices found that they use several methods to establish their standing in an army unit, to be efficient and of service: conduct Torah lessons, disseminate Torah knowledge, and educate unit commanders in Judaism and Zionism, in addition to attentiveness to soldiers (Zilberstein 2019).

The military rabbi's changing role engendered a new discourse in religious-secular relations in Israel. The secular sector claimed that the army was undergoing a "religionization" process, in other words, expanded religious elements which signified strong indoctrination and a more religious Israeli army (Gal and Tamir 2012). Yagil Levy went even further, arguing that the religionization process in the IDF was in fact more dramatic: the "theocratization" of the military (Y. Levy 2005). Thus, the Military Rabbinate became one of the central points of contention in religious-state relations in Israel, part of the raging battle over the Jewish identity of the State. More specifically, the clash centered on the question as to who would have the upper hand in determining the content and character of this identity—the Orthodox rabbinate or liberal entities that are for the most part more secular.

6. Defining the Role of the Military Rabbi as a "Kohen Anointed for War" during the Term of Rabbi Rontzky

Rabbi Rontzky's term as Chief Military Rabbi in the years 2006–2010 was characterized by a central process-espousal of the "Kohen anointed for war" model in practice, not only as a religious tenet.

"Kohen anointed for war" refers to a Kohen anointed with the oil of anointment and is tasked with observing the commandment to strengthen the hearts of soldiers before they go into battle (Ariel 2010). The origin of the commandment is found in Deuteronomy (20, 2–4):

When you go out to war against your enemies, and you see horse and chariot, a people more numerous than you, you shall not be afraid of them, for the Lord, your God is with you who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. And it will be, when you approach the battle, that the kohen shall come near, and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, "Hear, O Israel, today you are approaching the battle against your enemies. Let your hearts not be faint; you shall not be afraid, and you shall not be alarmed, and you shall not be terrified because of them. For the Lord, your God, is the One Who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

The essence of the military rabbi's roles can be defined on a continuum of possibilities, with the provision of technical religious services and the military rabbi as a "Kohen anointed for war" at the two polar ends. Currently, most military rabbis are located on the continuum, yet for the sake of distinguishing between the two models, I examine the two polar possibilities.

The military rabbi that only provides religious services focuses on religious matters in his unit, and theoretically can even be a civilian and function outside the military framework. His role is exclusively limited to the technical sphere: Jewish dietary laws, the Sabbath, prayer arrangements, equipment for the holidays, etc.

The military rabbi who serves as a "Kohen anointed for war" is a dynamic figure involved in the unit's military functions. His role is not only to handle religious matters but also to function as an organic part of the army, like all other IDF officers. Moreover, in the religious sphere the military rabbi not only ensures the provision of religious services, but also, and in fact mainly, imparts religious and moral values. As part of this role he remains with the soldiers wherever they go—during combat activity and in training—and acts to boost soldier morale.

As noted, these two models have implications for religion-state relations. According to the "technical" model: (a) The Halacha and the army are viewed as two clashing spheres; (b) The educational role is nonexistent, and if it exists only focuses on the religious aspect (c) and the military rabbi's target audience is limited to religious soldiers, because they are the only ones who need the relevant religious services.

According to the "involved"—"Kohen anointed for war"—model: (a) The Halacha and the army are considered two complementary worlds; (b) The educational role is expanded to other areas of life, not only the religious domain; (c) and the target audience is expanded to all soldiers, not only to those who are religious.

During Rabbi Rontzky's tenure as Chief Military Rabbi, the classic functions of the Military Rabbinate remained the same, but the role of the military rabbi was increasingly interpreted as that of a "Kohen anointed for war" (Zilberstein 2009). This change has myriad ramifications depending on

the answers to several key dilemmas: should the military rabbi focus mainly on observing the Sabbath and maintaining Jewish dietary laws in the military unit, or is he also a partner to its operational activity? Should he obey every military order? Should his role also include the education of soldiers (in Judaism, Zionism, and values), or only provide for their religious needs? Is he only the rabbi of religious soldiers, or of all soldiers?

The model espoused by Rabbi Rontzky, of the military rabbi as a “Kohen anointed for war”, was significantly different from the Military Rabbinate’s accepted model up until his term. However, it is also important to note that he explicitly declared that he objected to a soldier refusing to disobey an order to evacuate a settlement. Moreover, during his term the Military Rabbinate indeed practiced what he preached, obeying the orders issued by the government and the army. In fact, this was the case in all decision dilemmas under all the Chief Military Rabbis ([Maariv NRG news 2006](#)). He initiated several measures to realize the vision of the “Kohen anointed for war”: (1) He insisted that military rabbis have combat experience; (2) He changed the role of the Military Rabbinate so that it would be more involved in the military unit’s activity—mainly in decision making stages and participating in patrols and training; (3) The Military Rabbinate command was changed: Rabbi Rontzky created the position of “HQ Head” in every IDF corps—reporting to the Chief Military Rabbi. The underlying reason for this organizational change was to underscore the “military” nature of the Military Rabbinate; (4) Military rabbis now had a new structured career path in the army: the first position, at the rank of major, is the rabbi of a rear army base. The military rabbi can advance to the next position, the rabbi of a brigade training base, only after receiving a favorable job assessment. From there he can advance to the third position—the rabbi of a regular brigade (which up until then was the military rabbi’s first position). This is the basis for advancing to the position of the rabbi of a military division, and on through the chain of positions; (5) The military rabbi will not serve more than three years in each position, as is the case in most field units; (6) Furthermore, a military rabbi in the standing army will not be over 45 years of age. These changes are still in place and are considered the main changes instituted in the Military Rabbinate since 2006. Rabbi Yuval Cherlo accurately described the new functions and roles of the military rabbi:

Where is the military rabbi found? According to Rabbi Rontzky’s outlook, he is with the soldiers. His roles are highly varied. He is indeed also responsible for meeting religious needs and for decisions pertaining to General Staff Orders on religious matters; as the State of Israel is a “Jewish Democratic” state he is in principle charged with bringing Judaism to IDF soldiers, in the spirit suitable to the spirit of the IDF and to the collective identity of the State of Israel; As he is a spiritual authority of some kind he is tasked with encouraging soldiers, and for providing additional sources regarding the IDF’s fighting strength; He is charged with removing casualties, encouraging the parents of the wounded and maintaining a deep relationship with families of fallen soldiers. In all these he does not function as “an outsider”, but as an organic part of the system. He acts by virtue of the army’s orders and not in opposition to them, and, like every officer, he is also subordinate to the military framework. (Cherlo 2020)

The following incident illustrates the changing view of the role of the military rabbi: one Saturday night in the year 2007, Rabbi Rontzky, the Chief Military Rabbi at the time, was visiting a military unit in southern Israel. Following a security event near the Gaza Strip, several soldiers were sent to the incident area. The Chief Military Rabbi decided to join them in the battalion commander’s vehicle and also returned to the unit the same day. The event, which was leaked to the media, generated fierce criticism from the ultra-Orthodox media and from prior army rabbis who argued that that this was a desecration of the Sabbath on the part of the Chief Military Rabbi. In a letter to the soldiers, Rabbi Rontzky explained his decision to act as he did, claiming that “the attitude towards this issue derives from the understanding of the role of the rabbi in his unit”. His words illustrate how he perceived the role of the military rabbi:

Going back to biblical times we meet the military rabbi in the image of the Kohen anointed for war. That rabbi, the Kohen, stands before the soldiers before they go out to battle and infuses them with a warring spirit, and then—even goes out with them on to the battlefield.

The main mission of the unit rabbi is to strengthen the soldiers. This strengthening is highly needed and imperative for victory in battle, because it is known, that attacking the enemy confronting you and risking your life is not natural for man, and certainly not for our young soldiers. In any case, a rabbi who is well involved in his unit, who participates in their training and operational deployment, can be of great help in overcoming mental distress and crisis that characterize such times.

The rabbi is an integral part of his unit and goes out with the soldiers on their missions, even on the Sabbath. Therefore, it is evident that the military rabbi, and primarily a rabbi in a combat unit, must always carry his mobile phone with him day and night, as well as on the Sabbath. And this may also be the place to add and remind that besides the rabbi's partnership in his unit in strengthening most of the soldiers and the commanders during routine deployment and when going into battle, the rabbi is also a partner to his unit in routine times. (YNET 2008)

As noted, the highlight of Rabbi Rontzky's term was the changing role of the military rabbi to that of a "Kohen anointed for war". However, the intensity and visibility with which Rontzky applied this model created a counter-reaction in the army and Israeli society. On this backdrop, the following two Chief Military Rabbis, Rabbi Rafi Peretz and the currently serving Rabbi Eyal Karim, were selected in order to mitigate the indoctrination trend instituted by Rabbi Rontzky. While not explicitly stated, the "Kohen anointed for war" discourse was significantly reduced, and the Military Rabbinate reverted to its limited activity of handling the technical aspects of religious services provision, similar to its role perception in the first generation.

7. Discussion

The changes in the Military Rabbinate can be divided into three periods: (a) the first period, from the founding of the State up to 2000, during which the military rabbis focused mainly on providing religious services; (b) The second period (about 2000 to 2010) during which the concept of "Kohen anointed for war" entered the lexicon and the military rabbis were more "educators" than "service providers"; and (c) The third period, from 2010, when Rabbi Rontzky ended his term as Chief Military Rabbi, and the role of military rabbi returned to that of "religious services provider". The following examines the changing role of the military rabbi and the underlying social and personal processes.

7.1. Differences between Periods

The first years of an organization are usually fundamentally different from proceeding periods. The initial period is characterized by the need to define the organization's main goals and establish procedures and rules. From this perspective we can understand why the Military Rabbinate devoted the years after its formation to establishing and delineating religion-military relations. The natural commitment created with the founding of the State was to adapt halachic war and military laws to the new reality of a sovereign Jewish state. The Military Rabbinate also had to lay the foundations for its organizational structure and functions. Thus, for example, during the tenure of Rabbi Goren, the first Chief Military Rabbi, there was a need to: design training and continuing education programs for Military Rabbinate positions; establish how Jewish dietary laws would be enforced in IDF kitchens; define how religious services are provided and to ensure army commanders are familiar with and understand them; and to delineate the organizational structure of the Military Rabbinate and additional activity areas. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the first years the Military Rabbinate did not address religious educational content, except for the Passover *Seder*, Jewish-Zionist awakening programs, and the general framework of religious culture in the IDF.

In the second period, with the main halachic and logistic arrangements already in place, the Military Rabbinate could focus its efforts on additional activity areas and directions, such as establishing

a Jewish studies academy and the military yeshiva, and going forward also developing the field of Jewish consciousness. Perhaps any Chief Military Rabbi, even if his outlook differed from that of Rabbi Goren, would have done the same: first organize and delineate the halachic area, and only then turn his attention to the educational contents and components of the military rabbi's role. In addition, it is important to note that the increased strength of the religious political parties significantly impacted the role and standing of the Military Rabbinate, which now gained political backing for its religious struggles in the army (Sandler and Kampinsky 2009).

The current period, considered "the third generation" of the Military Rabbinate, is characterized by marked concern of the radical secular camp regarding "religionization" and "theocratization" trends. Combined with the demographic changes discussed below, this led to a counter-reaction and a return of the pendulum to the other side, limiting the military rabbi's functions to his technical roles, as in the past.

7.2. Demographic Changes

The significant demographic change over the years was the increasing number of religious soldiers in the IDF (Cohen and Bagno 2001; Y. Levy 2005, 2007; Magal 2016). While in the past religious soldiers comprised a small minority in the IDF, their share has increased in recent years. Rabbi Goren contended with a significant gap between the small number of religious soldiers compared to secular soldiers. Thus, in a reality in which religious soldiers were frequently a minority and their religious needs had to be protected in army units, there was a need to delineate General Staff Orders regarding religious matters. This was certainly true with respect to the IDF senior command, which was distinctly secular. Nowadays, however, the number of religious soldiers has increased and continues to increase dramatically throughout the IDF, with even greater numbers of religious commanders in field units (Hendel 2012). Thus, the Military Rabbinate must currently function under significantly different conditions, creating friction with other population groups, for example regarding women's service in the army (Yefet 2016; Yefet and Almog 2016; Lumsky and Sasson-Levy 2018).

Another marked change is the character of the religious soldiers, many of them with a yeshiva and Torah background. With the increased number of *yeshivot hesder* and *mechinot*, mainly since the 1980s, the Military Rabbinate must now contend with new issues and questions (Cohen 2007). One major issue has to do with the large number of religious soldiers and yeshiva graduates for whom the military rabbi is a "Kohen anointed for war" (Cohen 2007). This is accompanied by the increasing number of traditionally religious (*masorti*) soldiers, that while not defined as religious certainly do support the spiritual strengthening in the army—particularly when it is not considered coercion (Yadgar 2012).

Nonetheless, despite the above description, it is doubtful whether at a time of increasing secular trends in Israeli society, and when Israeli society is also comprised of soldiers who are not considered to be Jews according to Orthodox Jewish law, the "Kohen anointed for war" model—that accelerated in the years of Rabbi Rontzky as Chief Military Rabbi—can be realized. An event such as a war will most likely strengthen this model, while a quiet security front weakens its realization to the point of its obliteration.

7.3. The Changing Role of the IDF Chief Military Rabbi

The changes in the Military Rabbinate and in the role of the IDF military rabbi cannot be explained without addressing the contribution and character of the Chief Military Rabbis over the years.

Rabbi Shlomo Goren (tenure period 1948–1971) focused on publishing halachic rulings and addressing religious matters in the various IDF units and left a legacy of rulings about war and the military based on Jewish law. Rabbi Peron (1971–1977) emphasized religious education and thought in the Military Rabbinate. He explained courses opened for army rabbis in the need to add a universal/educational dimension to the officer ranks in the Rabbinate. Rabbi Navon (1977–2000) continued this direction, also underscoring the moral and ethical aspects of Military Rabbinate's work. At the organization level he acted to appoint army rabbis up to the battalion level. Rabbi

Weiss (2000–2006) integrated the “fighting spirit” as a central educational message. Rabbi Rontzky (2006–2010) focused on establishing the status of the Military Rabbinate as an IDF corps like all the other corps. He emphasized the “combat” character of the military rabbi, and at the educational level continued the policy established by Rabbi Weiss—an emphasis on the educational message of a “fighting spirit” while placing lower priority on technical aspects of the military rabbi’s role. Rabbi Peretz (2010–2016), who continued the same policy although with less intensity than Rabbi Rontzky, and the current Chief Military Rabbi, Rabbi Karim (from 2016), did not explicitly voice their reservations about the “Kohen anointed for war” model, yet they did not support it overtly. It may be assumed that they prefer the role of providing religious services to soldiers and nothing more.

8. Summary

In summary, social processes and the personal background of Chief Military Rabbis will impact the future image and role of the Military Rabbinate. Currently, with the raging battle over Israeli’s Jewish identity, the “Kohen anointed for war” model will not be as dominant as in the past.

The processes and trends examined in this article show that the Military Rabbinate and religion-military relations in Israel reflect broader cultural processes in Israeli society in general. Thus, for example, the demographic growth of the religious sector is accompanied by growing liberal and secular sector distrust of religious entities that have the power, political or otherwise, to impose more religious restrictions and lead to further religionization. These entities include the religious parties as well as the Military Rabbinate. Paradoxically, at a time when the religious sector is as strong and robust as ever, the sense of a shared Jewish identity is undermined and replaced by power struggles between the conservative and liberal camps in Israeli society, in which the religious sector does not have the upper hand. In this sense, the Military Rabbinate in Israel is a case study of current changes and processes in Israeli society, particularly regarding its Jewish identity, that most likely will not be resolved in the future.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Abercrombie, Clarence L. 1977. *The Military Chaplain*. Beverly-Hills and London: Sage Publications, pp. 105–9.
- Aminoach, Nehemiah. 1948. The Rabbinate in the Army. *Hazofeh*, July 2, 3.
- Ariel, Yosef. 1976. Like the Rabbi of the Village. *BaMachaneh*, December 8, 14–15. (In Hebrew)
- Ariel, Yaakov. 2010. *Halacha in Our Times*. Edited by Yaakov Epstein. Ashkelon: The Institute for Torah and the Land of Israel, pp. 379–80. (In Hebrew)
- Blum, Eliyahu. 2015. The Military Rabbi—Kohen Anointed for War. *Kipa*. Available online: <https://www.kipa.co.il/> (accessed on 23 February 2020).
- Cherlo, Yuval. 2020. Rabbi Rontzky—Great Success. Yeshivat Orot Shaul. Available online: <https://www.ypt.co.il/beit-hamidrash/view.asp?id=5537&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwii4Ivb25bnAhWikFwKHXQMDowQFjAAegQIAxAB> (accessed on 23 February 2020).
- Cohen, Stuart. 2007. The Kippa and the Beret: On the Identity of National-Religious Soldiers. In *Army, Memory and National Identity*. Edited by Moshe Naor. Jerusalem: Magnes, pp. 48–59. (In Hebrew)
- Cohen, Stuart, and Orr-Yisrael Bagno. 2001. The Societal Consequences of Military Service in Israel: A Reappraisal. *Democratic Culture* 4–5: 131–50. (In Hebrew).
- Don-Yichye, Shabtai. 1949. In the Matter of Rabbis in the Army. *Hazofeh*, March 27.
- Friedman, Mordechai. 2004. *The Religious Units in the Haganah and the Palmach*. Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University. (In Hebrew)
- Gal, Reuven, and Libel Tamir. 2012. *Between the Kipa and the Beret—Religion, Politics and the Military in Israel*. Edited by Reuven Gal and Tamir Libel. Ben-Shemen: Modan. (In Hebrew)
- Gardi, Nathan. 1973. *Life of a Religious Volunteer*. TEL-AVIV: The National Religious Party Information Department.
- Graves, Joel Curtis. 2007. *Leadership Paradigms in Chaplaincy*. Boca Raton: Dissertation.com.

- Hansen, Kim Philip. 2012. *Military Chaplains and Religious Diversity*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Hendel, Yoaz. 2012. Religious Zionism—Trends in Attitudes towards IDF Service. In *Between the Kipa and the Beret—Religion, Politics and the Military in Israel*. Edited by Reuven Gal. Ben-Shemen: Modan, pp. 293–305. (In Hebrew)
- Kampinski, Aharon. 2007. Religion, Military and Society in Israel: Changes in the Shaping and Development of the Military Rabbinate. Ph.D. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.
- Kampinski, Aharon. 2009. Support and Reservations: Ben-Gurion's Attitude towards the Institutionalization of Religion in the IDF. *Iyunum Bitkumat Israel* 19: 425–48. (In Hebrew).
- Kampinski, Aharon. 2015. *Rabbinical Ordinances: The Development of the Military Rabbinate in Israel*. Jerusalem: Carmel, pp. 129–71. (In Hebrew)
- Kedar, Nir. 2009. *Mamlakhtiyut: David Ben-Gurion's Civil Thought*. Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi. (In Hebrew)
- Keren, Shlomit. 2008. *Military and Religion in the War of Independence*; RAMAT-EFAL: Israel Ministry of Defense Publishing House, pp. 230–41. (In Hebrew)
- Knohl, Dov. 1989. *Be-Hitnadev Am: Religious Volunteers in the Second World War*. Tel Aviv: Moreshet Publishing House. (In Hebrew)
- Lazarus-Yaffe, Hava. 1981. Judaism and Islam. *Petachim* C–D: 62–67. (In Hebrew).
- Lazarus-Yaffe, Hava. 1982. Some Halakhic Differences between Judaism and Islam. *Tarbiz* B: 207–25. (In Hebrew).
- Levy, Baruch. 2002. *Religious Rights and the Provision of Religious Services in Foreign Armies*; Jerusalem: Knesset Research and Information Center. (In Hebrew)
- Levy, Yagil. 2005. *The Divine Commander: The Theocratization of the Israeli Military*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved and Sapir Academic College. (In Hebrew)
- Levy, Yagil. 2007. *From the 'People's Army' to the 'Army of the Peripheries'*. Tmunat Matzav Series; Kerala: Carmel Publishing House. (In Hebrew)
- Lissak, Moshe. 1991. The Civil Components of Israel's National Security Doctrine. *Iyunim beTkumat Yisrael* 1: 191–210. (In Hebrew).
- Luckam, A. Robin. 1984. A Comparative Typology of Civil-Military Relations. In *State and Society—A Reader*. Edited by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, pp. 102–20. (In Hebrew)
- Lumsky, Feder Edna, and Orna Sasson-Levy. 2018. *Women Soldiers and Citizenship in Israel: Gendered Encounters with the State*. London: Routledge.
- Maariv NRG news. 2006. Chief Military Rabbi Candidates: Those Opposing Disobeying Orders. *Maariv NRG news*, February 12. (In Hebrew)
- Magal, Yaniv. 2016. *Srugim Bakaneh-The Story of Religious Zionists' Army Integration*. Tel Aviv-Yafo: Yedioth Books. (In Hebrew)
- Michaelson, Menachem. 1981. The Military Rabbinate. In *IDF in Its Corps: Army and Security Encyclopedia*. Ramat Gan: Revivim Publishing, pp. 132–83. (In Hebrew)
- Nevo, Baruch, and Yael Shur. 2002. *The Contract between the IDF and Israeli Society: Compulsory Service*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.
- Ofer, Mosseri, and Arnon Gutfeld. 2004. Church, State and National Identity in Great Britain: On the Distance Between Buckingham Palace, Ten Downing Street and Canterbury Cathedral. *Democratic Culture* 8: 55–72.
- Ostfeld, Zehava. 1994. *An Army is Born*; Tel Aviv: Israel Ministry of Defense Publishing House. (In Hebrew)
- Peron, Mordechai. 1972. Military Rabbis will be Replaced by Religion Officers in Units. *BaMachaneh*, February 23, 22. (In Hebrew)
- Prime Minister's Office. 1968. *Israel Government Year Book*. New Delhi: Prime Minister's Office, Central Office of Information, p. 127.
- Rosman-Stollman, Elisheva. 2014. *For God and Country?: Religious Student-Soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Sandler, Shmuel, and Aaron Kampinsky. 2009. Israel's Religious Parties. *Contemporary Israel*, 77–95.
- Slomovitz, Albert Isaac. 1999. *The Fighting Rabbis- Jewish Military Chaplains and American History*. New York: New York University Press.
- The Army and Society Forum. 2002. *The People's Army? Reserve Duty in Israel*. Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.
- Urbach, Efraim Elimelech. 2008. *Writings at Wartime: Diary of an Israeli Rabbi in the British Army*; Tel Aviv: Israel Ministry of Defense Publishing House. (In Hebrew)

- Weiss, Israel. 2010. *In My Heart: From the Diary of the Fourth Chief Rabbi to the IDF*. Tel Aviv: Yedioth Books. (In Hebrew)
- Wolf, Pinchas. 2007. Alliance of the Rabbis. *BaMachaneh*, January 26, 15. (In Hebrew)
- Yadgar, Yaakov. 2012. *Traditionalism and the Critique of Israeli Secularism*. Jerusalem: The Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad. (In Hebrew)
- Yefet, Karin Carmit. 2016. Synagogue and State in the Israeli Military A Story of 'Inappropriate Integration. *Law & Ethics of Human Rights* 10: 223–94.
- Yefet, Karin Carmit, and Shulamit Almog. 2016. Religionization, Exclusion and the Military: 'Zero Motivation' in Gender Relations? *Iyunei Mispas* 39: 243–316. (In Hebrew).
- YNET. 2008. Rabbi Rontzky Explains: Why I Rode in a Car on the Sabbath? *YNET*, May 20. (In Hebrew)
- Zabih, Sepehr. 1988. *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*. New York: Routledge, pp. 145–46.
- Zemer, Hanna. 1982. Uniform Version. *BaMachaneh*, March 3, 26. (In Hebrew)
- Zilberstein, Yaron. 2009. The Character of the Chief Rabbi of the IDF: Past, Present and Future. In *Emdot*. Elkana: Orot College Publications, vol. 1. (In Hebrew)
- Zilberstein, Yaron. 2019. The Military Rabbi and Spiritual and Emotional Support Characteristics in the Military Unit: Personal Intuition as a Tool for Intra-Organizational Mediation. *National Resilience, Politics and Society* 1: 109.



© 2020 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).