

*Four young former IDF soldiers, raised non-observant, share with Zman their experiences – first on the physical battlefield and later on the spiritual battlefield. . . .*



# Warriors Of A Different Breed

Yaakov Astor



Yisrael Desta

Emmanuel Binyamini

Ariel Itzchak

Yisrael Vaknin

*As sirens wail in Yerushalayim, and all Eretz Yisrael... as missiles from terrorist strongholds aimed at civilians soar through the sky (again)... as the IDF masses at the border in preparation to enter Gaza... Zman presents this very timely article about four young Israelis who fought against terrorists in Gaza and elsewhere in the past decade.*

*One of the soldiers we interviewed was wounded in battle, and the others nearly lost their lives on several occasions. Yet, what makes their stories uniquely compelling is that none of them were observant when they served in the army. Only afterward did they find their way back to Torah observance, and are now learning in yeshivah full time. Here, then, is a special opportunity to stand inside their shoes; to glimpse through their eyes and feel through their hearts what it means to be a young Jew on the front lines—in a very physical and very spiritual sense. Their personal stories, including how they grew up, their close brushes with death and their discovery of a love for Torah living and learning, have more meaning today than ever.*



**D**iplomacy, prayer and war – Yaakov Avinu braced himself with these in preparation for his epic encounter with his murderous brother Esav. As we go to print, *Klal Yisrael* braces itself for yet another encounter with a murderous foe. Diplomacy to this point has failed. That leaves us with two options: prayer and battle.

As Jewish soldiers find themselves in harm's way on the battlefield, being *moser nefesh* to protect Jewish lives, our *tefillos* are with them more firmly than ever. At the same time, now more than ever we need the *zechus* of Torah learning. The *zechuyos* needed for success on the physical front fully depend upon the *zechuyos* of the *lomdei Torah* who are *moser nefesh* for *Klal Yisrael* on the spiritual front. Torah and *tefillah* are the true “secret weapons” of a Jew.

Here then are the stories of four young Israelis, raised non-observant, who shared with *Zman* their experiences—first on the physical battlefield and later on the spiritual battlefield of life. Perhaps their stories can give readers an experiential understanding not only of what they went through but of what today's soldiers might be going through. And perhaps through that we will be able to increase the quality of our *tefillos* and Torah learning.

**A**riel Itzhak, with about 30 other Israeli soldiers, is stationed in Yitzhar, a settlement in the West Bank, south of the city of Nablus (biblical Shechem). It is in the midst of the Second Intifada—the summer of 2002—shortly after Operation Defensive Shield, the largest military operation in the West Bank since the 1967 Six Day War. The Israelis felt compelled to initiate the operation because of a sharp increase in terrorist attacks on civilians. The most recent tragedy was the infamous Passover Massacre, where a suicide bomber detonated himself in the midst of a crowd during a *seder* at a hotel in Netanya, killing 30 mostly elderly vacationers.

By May, the main objectives of Operation Defensive Shield have been achieved, with an initial 50% drop in suicide bombings. By the end of the year, the numbers will show a 70% decrease. The IDF seek to establish a strong military presence in many of the most prominent Palestinian strongholds in the West Bank. They quarantine PA leader Yasser Arafat in his compound in Ramallah

and bar aid from reaching him and other potential terrorists by imposing strict curfews. The strategy is clearly working, but Jews are by no means safe, especially those residing in relatively unprotected settlements.

On June 20, 2002, two Arab terrorists infiltrated Itamar (a settlement near Yitzhar), broke into a house, and began wildly shooting in all directions. They murdered a mother and her three sons and shot and wounded two of her other children. When security forces from the settlement arrived, they attempted to rescue the two wounded survivors who were trapped in the house with the militants. The commander of this rescue unit, a young father of five, was shot and killed by the terrorists. Soldiers then stormed the house and killed one of the combatants while the other attempted to flee. Eight soldiers were wounded as they chased and eventually killed the remaining militant.

Ariel Itzhak and the others know the danger of patrolling Yitzhar, but are

wholeheartedly engrossed in their mission: They are committed to protecting Jewish lives. The June 20 attack is still fresh in their minds. One *motzaei Shabbos*, around midnight, the soldiers are preparing to go to sleep....

Suddenly, the jarring staccato of assault rifles pierces the quiet of the night.

Instinctively, Ariel and the other soldiers immediately grab their weapons and run outside. They can hear the shooting, but cannot determine exactly where it is coming from.

The soldiers run and crouch behind a metal wall, even as they realize that it is too thin to effectively block an incoming bullet. But they need to hide behind something and this is the only cover available. Triangulating on a couple of possible sources of the enemy fire, they shoot back—without success. The gunfire continues unabated.

Then Ariel notices something. The command room is empty. The radioman must have run outside in his haste like everyone else when he heard the shooting. The soldier that maintains the command post is trusted with the job of radioing for help in the event of an attack. Vital information is conveyed by this venue, such as how many shooters there are and their exact locations. Ariel assumes that in the heat of the moment, the radioman must have left the command post and not radioed anyone. Without backup, the soldiers and settlers were all in great danger.

Ariel doesn't hesitate. He takes the initiative, and with bullets flying all over, runs into the open and then sprints into the command room. He grabs the radio and calls for help.

Just then, he looks out the window and sees something that makes his heart almost stop. One of his friends is hit in the chest. The force of the blow is so great that the man is thrown backwards. Ariel immediately runs outside to help.

As he runs toward his fallen comrade, he notices that his own leg feels numb. “Just

a sprain,” he thinks to himself. He keeps running.

He reaches his fellow soldier just as a paramedic arrives. Suddenly, Ariel's leg buckles and he falls. The paramedic looked at him and yells, “You got shot!”

Ariel still doesn't feel anything. His leg only feels numb and tingly. Then he looks at his leg and sees the blood. Suddenly, he feels weak. Bullets are still soaring by in every



A soldier stands guard in Nablus (biblical Shechem) during Operation Defensive Shield.



Israeli tank in Gaza. Yisrael Desta was among the soldiers who saw action in Gaza, trying to protect Israeli citizens from terrorists who had no qualms about using fellow Gazans as human shields.