

Ten Questions For Israeli Soldiers

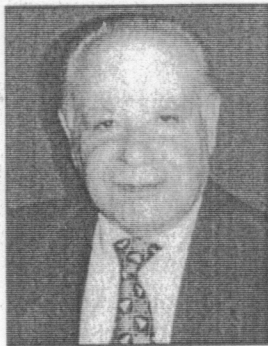
David Betesh, in collaboration with Captain Maurice D. Zeitouni and David and Shaul Cohen

The brave Israeli soldier has primary responsibility for defending the State of Israel, often setting aside concern for his own life as he selflessly puts himself in harm's way to protect others.

Captain Maurice D. Zeitouni, my grandfather, was part of the Israeli army from the birth of the state in 1948 until the late 1950s. I sat down with him to ask a few questions about his experiences in the Israeli Defense

Forces. He had a wealth of information to impart.

David and Shaul Cohen, my first cousins, are currently soldiers in the Israeli army. I put some questions to them as well (via telephone), regarding the current atmosphere in the army. In these interviews, I hope to provide American Jews a better understanding of the life of an Israeli soldier.



Captain Maurice
Zeitouni

Questions for Maurice Zeitouni

1. What were your childhood experiences as a Jew living in Egypt?

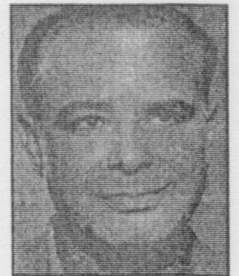
I was born in Cairo in 1932, and attended "College Des Freres of Bab El-look" from 1937 until 1948. The school was a secular one that did not teach us about Judaism. All my knowledge of religion, Torah, and the Hebrew language came from my maternal grandfather "Hatsadik

Nouri Levy." From him I learned that our family is originally from the Spanish city of Granada; he taught me to value our traditions.

During the years that I attended school, I was discriminated against for being a Jew. I was in the same school as Yasir Arafat – he was a few years older than me. The Egyptians kept on telling me to get out of their land, without telling me where to go. During the Hitler years, *yemach shemoh*, there were racial slurs from the Egyptians, expressing the feeling that Hitler ought to get rid of us as well. Life as a Jew in Egypt was not easy during the years leading up to the founding of the state of Israel.

2. When did you start getting involved with the Zionist movement?

In Passover of 1948, two friends and I decided to sneak out of Egypt via the Sinai desert, then occupied by the British. We were caught by the Egyptian military at the border. Since we were Egyptian Jews, we were released from detention and returned to our parents



A younger Captain
Maurice D.
Zeitouni

in Cairo. We had joined the Zionist movement called *Maccabi Hatsair*, and we were given assistance in applying for a passport and visas to Italy and France. We were already part of the *Palmach* movement at the time. In Italy, I was able to support the Zionists more freely, by helping them translate documents (since I know more than five



The Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert,
with Captain Maurice Zeitouni

Continued on page 176

Ten Questions...



was able to support the Zionists more freely, by helping them translate documents (since I know more than five different languages). At that time, I boarded the *Atzmaut* vessel to Haifa to join newly arrived immigrants from Romania, Poland, and Germany. From there I went to the army, where I provided them with certain services.

3. Once you got to the newly established state, what did you do for the Israeli army?

I went to school and learned how to become a radio officer in charge of a nearby station. I was sixteen years old at the time, and I was not old enough to serve as a soldier. Later that year, I passed all the required tests, and became a sergeant. Once again, I was especially useful to the army, since I knew many languages. I was able to translate different codes and documents for Israel. This task was essential for winning the war. There were many times when my life was in danger, but I always prayed to God to save me. In 1951, I was promoted to lieutenant. Six months later, I became Second Lieutenant, and two years later, in 1954, captain. Fifty years later, after I returned to Israel on the special F.I.D.F. tours with many community members, they promoted me to honorary major.

4. Why did you leave the army and ultimately move to the United States?

This is a long story, but I will make it short. I was respectfully discharged from the army after I disagreed with the main authorities on a certain issue (confidential and not to be discussed here). In 1958, after having

served in the Arava as a radioman in charge, I started to think about my future as an Israeli civilian. My girlfriend was blown up and killed by the Arabs during the war, right in front of my eyes, and being in the Negev desert brought back sad memories. I did not want to live and work in the desert, but rather, in an Israeli city. I looked and looked, but no job vacancies came up. At the time, my immediate family had already moved to the United States, and they informed me that there were jobs available for me. After having lost many loved ones in the two Israeli wars, I felt that I had fulfilled my obligation to help Eretz Israel and it was time to start a family in the United States. Though I moved to the United States, my heart is very much in Israel. In 1960, I was introduced to Florence Shrem, the daughter of Gabriel Shrem, and we have been in love ever since. No regrets.

5. What are some of the lifelong lessons that you learned in the army?

The question should be what didn't I learn in the army! I learned everything in the army. I learned to always distinguish between right and wrong. I learned that all Jews have to be united and help one another. I learned that extra safety precautions are always worthwhile, because nothing can replace your health and your life. Safety is each person's responsibility. Life is very precious and can never be replaced. The army taught me discipline, and how to be tough, like a soldier.

Questions for David and Shaul Cohen

6. Are you excited about joining the army? If so, what benefits do you have in society as a result of joining?

I think it is a privilege to serve Israel and to protect our country. I am proud to be a part of I.D.F. I'm also looking forward to meeting new friends from different parts of the country, with different points of view. Those who serve the army in Israel are viewed with respect and honor. Those who do not are looked down upon. Job opportunities are greater for people who have served in the army. A soldier gets a variety of benefits from the government, such as free public transportation, scholarships from the university and a monthly salary. Pilots and members of other prestigious or special units get degrees from university and get paid more than a regular soldier. A soldier who has completed his term receives a military bonus.

7. What are your opinions about the war that took place against Lebanon?

Continued on page 178

Ten Questions...



In these days of war, we are in a very difficult situation. Unfortunately, Israel has many casualties. Just last week, I went to the funeral of a friend's brother, a fighter in unit "Egoz," who fell in battle in Lebanon. Babies, mothers, fathers and grandparents are all under the threat of Hezbollah. I hope the kidnapped soldiers will return safely to their homes, and Hezbollah will officially retreat from south Lebanon.

8. Do you feel that one can be a fully observant Jew in the army?

In my opinion, religion and the army do not contradict each other. First, serving in the army is a *mitzvah*. How would we have conquered Eretz Israel in the first place without an army? Even King David, who was a rich man, commanded an army. The I.D.F must provide a soldier with all of his religious needs and rights. If a soldier is out in the field on a fast day, for instance, the *halacha* forbids him to fast, so that he can face the enemy to the best of his ability. Those who think that one can't be religious in the army are just plain lazy!

9. Do you think that your contribution to the army will make a difference?

Of course I do. The soldiers work 24/7 in order to keep the civilians living in Israel safe and protected from terror, whether they are finding smuggling tunnels with explosives in Gaza, or intercepting suicide attacks in Jerusalem. Without soldiers, Israel cannot survive as a country. Since the country is so small, the odds are that each and every soldier is important and needed for some type of task.

10. Do you think that being a soldier now is different from the way it was fifty years ago?

I think it is different, because 50 years ago, the army fought against other armies; today the army fights terrorists with different fighting tactics. The morale of the people is also very different now. The people don't feel as threatened as they did fifty years ago. □

David Botsh is an honors graduate of Brooklyn College and Yeshiva of Flatbush. You can read all his articles for Image on www.pizman-im.org.

What Are...



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EASE staff are recognized as experienced, seasoned professional as well as tough negotiators who do not spare any effort to obtain appropriate services for children with disabilities.

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