

Who is Rabbi Eli Sadan?

Israel Prize recipient **Eli Sadan's** quiet revolution has had a major impact on our society and its youth

RABBI ELI SADAN'S army preparatory academy has given religious youth the tools to serve in the IDF and maintain their religious observance. (Illustrative/IDF Flickr)



PRESIDENT REUVEN RIVLIN meets with Sadan in 2014. (Courtesy)

• ALAN JOTKOWITZ

On Independence Day 2016, Rav Eli Sadan, head of the Bnei David mechina (army preparatory academy), will receive the Israel Prize for Lifetime Achievement.

Notwithstanding the fact that he has been called the most important and influential leader in the religious Zionist community in the last 30 years, many in the general public are unaware of the revolution he has led and its impact on religious Zionist youth.

Sadan was born in Budapest on May 13, 1948 (one day before the State was established). He was a member of Bnei Akiva as a youth and, after making aliya, served in the IDF Paratroopers Brigade. He studied for 13 years in Yeshivat Merkaz Harav as a leading student of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook and Rabbi Zvi Tau. In 1988 he co-founded and headed the first army preparatory academy, Bnei David, located in Eli, north of Jerusalem in the West Bank, and it is in this role that his influence has spread. There are now more than 50 pre-army mechinot, both religious and secular, throughout Israel.

The purpose of the academy is to prepare religious boys for the army. Aware of the fact that more than 50 percent of young men who enlist in the army directly from high school stopped being religious in the army – and the number is even higher for those who enlist in the elite units – Sadan founded Bnei David to help arrest this phenomenon.

The mechina's preparatory program, fostering spiritual and mental strength to enable religious boys to serve in the army, has completely changed the reality. Religious boys are no longer reluctant to enlist in the army. The idealistic spirit that they nurtured in Bnei Akiva, Ezra and Ariel (religious youth movements) pushes them forward in the army, in the security services after the army and in settling the land – in the West Bank, as well as in the Negev and development towns.

HOWEVER, SADAN'S aspirations were even higher. Bnei David is more than a preparatory yeshiva for those unable or unwilling to serve in the army through the *hesder* route; it views full army service (and sometimes even more through service in elite units and beyond) as the ideal route to take. This attitude is based on a theological perspective different from the one adopted in many hesder yeshivot, and is heavily influenced by the messianic thought of his teacher, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of British Mandatory Palestine. Kerem B'Yavne, the first hesder yeshiva, was the *b'diavad* (permissible) model of hesder; Yeshivat Har Etzion, under the leadership of Rabbi Yehuda Amital and Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, argued that in today's circumstances hesder is *l'hathila* (closer to the ideal).

As Lichtenstein expressed in his classic article "The Ideology of Hesder," hesder provides a convenient framework for discharging two different and to some extent



SADAN WITH a group of 'mechinot' students on Jerusalem Day at the Old City. (Courtesy)

conflicting obligations. It enables the student, morally and psychologically, to salve both his religious and his national conscience by sharing in the collective defense burden without cutting himself off from the matrix of Torah. Hesder at its finest seeks to attract and develop *bnei Torah* who are profoundly motivated by the desire to become serious *talmidei hachamim*, but who concurrently feel morally and religiously bound to help defend their people and their country.

Sadan goes further:

“Serving God means more than just wearing tefillin or observing Shabbat. Everything connected to protecting the Jewish People and enabling it to live a normal and healthy life on its land [Israel] is part of serving God, because He took us out of Egypt and gave us His Torah so we would be able to live a normal and healthy life on our land and do charity and justice. At Sinai, God did not say that He was giving us the Torah so we could be a collection of yeshiva *bochurs*, but rather to be a ‘kingdom of priests and

a holy nation.”

In his introduction to his new book *Musar Aviv*, Lichtenstein alludes to this phenomenon:

“My discussion of yeshivot hesder primarily dealt with the contention that *bnei Torah* should be completely absorbed in Torah and they should therefore defer army service. In today’s environment, it is important to answer those who want to limit or even disparage the value of intensive Torah learning and support full army service.”

The goal of Lichtenstein is to produce Torah scholars even among those who choose not to pursue a career in the rabbinate or education. A commitment to service at the expense of personal gain is a core value for Lichtenstein, but the years in yeshiva should first and foremost be spent mastering the details and minutiae of the Talmudic corpus.

SADAN’S GOAL is to produce leaders in Israeli society who are imbued with idealism, a passion for the Jewish people and the Jewish State, and a com-

mitment to Torah, mitzvot and the redemptive theology of Rabbi Kook. In his thought, “serving God is not just personal service, but dedication to the State, the nation and the public.”

How does Sadan go about producing these leaders who are charged with influencing and redeeming Israeli society? His approach is not one of coercion or argumentation:

“At Bnei David in Eli we emphasize personal example. In other words, don’t try to convince someone of the correctness of your approach and never attempt to prove to others that you are better than they are. Do only this – live your life filled with faith and joy. Why? Because I believe that [Moses] and his Torah are true. I believe that every Jew has a Jewish soul that is thirsty for the truth, and I believe that most of the apostasy in our generation is because of the wrongful actions of religious Jews. They did not lead in building the Jewish State, and even today the Torah world is on the sidelines; add to this the shameful behavior of many people considered religious Jews.”

Sadan is a supporter of democracy in Israel and is strongly opposed to soldiers refusing orders. According to him, religious Zionism stands on three pillars: The eternal truth of Torah; the State of Israel is the first flowering of the eventual redemption and the messianic age. “On 5 Iyar, 1948 we were reborn as a nation”; the importance of the unity of the Jewish people, as expressed in unconditional love for all its members.

Sadan’s receipt of the Israel Prize recognizes his personal achievements as a representative of the thousands of young people who have graduated from pre-army seminaries, both religious and secular, and have dedicated themselves to defending the Jewish people and rebuilding the Jewish homeland. ■

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