



Why d'you wanna go and put stars in their eyes?

By Robbie Gringras, Artist-in-Residence

*Here we argue that the values underlying the search for instant celebrity, as exemplified by the Israeli version of American Idol, have presented a direct and deep challenge to Israeli Army conscription for all. Drawing on the recent DVD release of the award-winning film **Beaufort**, this article asks questions about the ubiquity of the military in Israeli cultural discourse, and its challenge for Israel Engagement work.*

A great song came out of Britain a few months back, full of Anglo-Saxon wit and glottal stops, lamenting the instant-celebrity culture of the early 21st century. The song contrasts the dreams of stardom pumped up by the popular media and 'reality' TV, with the modest joys of karaoke in the pub on a Saturday night.

Here in Israel we have similar issues, with TV shows such as *A Star is Born*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *The Next Big Thing* doing their very best to dumb down the culture of this complex and dynamic society. Huge amounts of airtime and internet space are devoted to one of the rare forms of democracy that seems to satisfy Israel: the phone-in vote for your favorite nobody. The talented and the talentless line up expecting to realize the artificial

dreams pushed on them by promoters and the surrounding culture.

Poisoned Stars

The song, *Starz in Their Eyes*, with its cute little 'z', gained a surprising amount of air-play on the radio here. It clearly struck a chord... In Israel collective aspirations have always been a powerful force in our society. Irrespective of the huge ratings gained by all these 'get famous quick' shows, our young people are still poisoned by the far more serious social pressures of serving in the army. The word 'poisoned' is not used here by way of comment. When a young man is eager or happy to serve in a combat unit, and will brook little critique of the army ethic, he is said to be

'poisoned'. Among Israeli youth this is not necessarily a derogatory term, often seen to be synonymous with the more ambivalent 'infected'. In Israel poison is a concept in flux, often used with pride, admiration, and feelings of belonging. Though it is also, like most poison, sometimes lethal.

I came to think about this a great deal last week, when I attended the funeral of a young soldier who was killed in a battle with Islamic Jihad terrorists. The hill-side pine forest of Misgav cemetery was full of the scent of wild hyssop, and the sound of cicadas, speeches, and sobbing. A beautiful son of the Galil had 'gone to his world', as the Hebrew phrase has it. His childhood friend stumbled up to the microphone to give his eulogy. The loudspeakers amplified his heavy breathing, almost as if he'd run several miles to reach the funeral, though we all knew he was just trying not to break, still winded from the terrible emotional blow to his heart.

He described a friend who had always been ahead of the pack. Just like his proud father before him, this young man had always aimed to serve in a top-notch combat unit. Initially he'd actually been refused entry, but had fought his way into the unit nevertheless. Full of love for the land of the Galil, and an admirable sense of communal responsibility, he had fought in Israel's Defense Forces with dedication. But while his best friend painted for us this picture of a strong, committed, mature young man, I began to hear a strange

undertone growing under the words. The pain and the regret began to work against the story he was telling. He struggled to the end of his eulogy, bestowing on his dead friend the ultimate compliment and accusation. "You died," he stumbled, "a Hero." He almost shouted the word, and the implied ambivalence of the word 'Hero' echoed throughout the forest-clearing. He had paid the ultimate compliment to his deceased friend, while the timbre of his voice had cried: Fool.

Making mistakes

It would seem that fewer and fewer young people are choosing to be 'foolish'. The innocent enthusiasm which once drew our youth to the conscription centers, is no longer. It's now official: a quarter of eligible males in Israel avoid the draft. If we include the 'ineligible' - Arabs and Ultra-Orthodox - then our People's Army is in fact only an Army of *half* the people, as newly-re-appointed Defense Minister Ehud Barak commented bitterly last week.

With uncanny timing, in the same week that the army released their annual conscription figures, the excellent Israeli war movie, *Beaufort* came out on DVD. It is a stark and striking film, set immediately prior to the Lebanon withdrawal in 2000, constantly asking 'why' and 'what for' through its action and images. An early scene features a telling dialogue between two soldiers serving at an exposed and endangered military fortress deep in enemy territory:

- So are you here because you wanted to be here, or was it a mistake?

- It was a mistake. But to be honest, I have no regrets. And what about you?

- I wanted to be here. That was the mistake...

More than anything this disturbing film leaves us not only with questions about the motivation of the soldiers, but about the motivation of their parents. The withdrawal of Israel's army from Lebanon in 2000 was, if not brought about then certainly colored by, the grass roots movement led by four mothers. They deliberately labeled themselves as such, not as a post-feminist statement, but more so as to ensure the soldiers would in turn be labeled as 'children', rather than as military collateral. One of the more powerful moments in the film is when the father of a soldier we see killed early in the movie is interviewed on television. Speaking with excruciating honesty and vulnerability, he blames himself. He blames himself for 'not looking after' his son. Clearly the point he is making is that you don't 'look after' your children by encouraging them to be soldiers. Bombs and bullets are not the kind of starz you want to put in their eyes.

The battle for the army

As Michael Billig so succinctly observed: "All societies that maintain armies maintain the belief that some things are more valuable than life itself" (*Banal Nationalism*, 1995). While questions still rage over whether the Israeli army itself had been sufficiently maintained during last year's war (many soldiers returned from Lebanon with demoralizing tales of going days without food or water, lacking basic equipment and ammunition) the more fundamental fight is being waged, over maintaining belief in army service itself.

Settlers who insisted on the obligation of left-wing secular soldiers to guard settlements in Judea and Samaria (West Bank) despite their ideological misgivings, now encourage religious soldiers to refuse to facilitate their evacuation. Radical leftists who urged conscientious objection to policing the occupation (Our Biblical Homeland), now watch in horror as their desire to dismantle Jewish settlements may be rendered impossible by the religious soldiers' conscientious objections of their own. And beyond all this are all those young people who simply don't care. Worn out by diplomatic dead ends, worn down by political corruption, swimming in what Zygmunt Bauman terms the liquidity of 21st century life, these young people prefer to vote for *A Star is Born* than in the local elections. When asking themselves what is more valuable than life itself, they find it hard to come up with an answer. And so they exploit the

many loopholes available to avoid army service altogether.

The back-lash has begun. Battling not politically but culturally, those concerned about the demise of army service are attacking no other than *A Star is Born*. Recognizing that we now live in a community whose thinking is "aesthetically, rather than ethically, operated" (Bauman, *Community*, 2001), they have chosen to kick where it hurts: in the aesthetics. A significant media campaign is now being waged, calling on viewers not to vote for those contestants on *A Star is Born* who did not serve in the army. Four of the leading contestants have been singled out, and one has already been voted off the show. The fight is on to ensure that the eyes of our youngsters should be dazzled by heroism and sacrifice, and not by footlights and paparazzi. The escape-arena of reality TV and talent contests has itself become poisoned.

As always in this place I find myself disagreeing with both sides. I know that not every Palestinian is a terrorist. I am even happy to be convinced that not every Palestinian even supports terrorism. But I also know that terrorists there are, and when an Islamic Jihadist wishes to enter Israel in order to blow up (my?) children, I am greatly reassured to know that a courageous, poisoned young Israeli boy is around to make sure that he will fail.

Fictional Khaki

It has become fashionable in the Israel Engagement field to attempt to emphasize the 'normality' of life in Israel. We often hear that young people are 'tired of soldiers and wars', and so we are urged to find other topics with which to engage them. Entire educational and cultural programs are built in order to celebrate the 'normality beyond the conflict'. More and more I find myself convinced that there is no such thing. This place is fascinating, dynamic, challenging, and crucial, but it is not 'normal' in any Western sense of the word. As long as we succumb to the desires of our 'clients', and present a picture of Israel with all khaki colors filtered out, we are collaborating in a fiction, however pleasant.

Not that fictions are always a bad thing. While *Beaufort* is based on true events, *Nina's Tragedies* is a delightful and highly successful fictional feature film from 2003. It is by no means a war film, but the main plot catalyst in this whimsical, nuanced rite-of-passage movie is the visit of an army unit charged with the task of informing relatives of the death of their loved one. This unit, in its cramped car, pops up throughout the background of the film, and finally greets death with life as it stops to give a lift to a woman in labor. The army runs through *Nina's Tragedies* like water, invisible yet fundamental as air. If fictions are what we collaborate in, it should be in fictions like this that reveal the unseen, rather than hiding the unavoidable.

*By Robbie Gringras, whose
advanced age on making aliya
meant he was never called up...*

August 2007

Ellul 5767

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