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SOLDIERING ON

Love for Israel and its people draws locals to Israel Defense Forces

By Hannah Monicken



Just their first week on the job and Gil Kuttler's friends were run over by a terrorist.

As newly minted soldiers, the potential for terrorism and violence — in general, if not the specifics of a collision with a car — comes with the territory. Just maybe not quite so early.

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Gil and his friends are lone soldiers, those who serve in the Israel Defense Forces without the support of immediate Israeli family. In practice, this includes Israelis who serve either in defiance of their family or who do not have any family, but is predominated by foreign volunteers of Jewish descent, like Gil.

Gil Kuttler, 19, a class of 2015 Beth Tfiloh Dahan Community School graduate, was acclimating himself to his kibbutz while his four friends were waiting at a bus stop just outside Jerusalem when a car being driven by a Palestinian rammed into them in late November 2015. Two were injured and, after exiting the car to keep the fight going, according to Israeli media reports, the driver was shot and killed by a passing citizen with a pistol. The incident was covered across Israeli media and even made it overseas into U.S. outlets.

Though Gil was not (yet) in harm's way, it was certainly not the most auspicious beginning in the eyes of his mother home in Pikesville, Robyn Schaffer.

"I make the conscious decision not to go there [with worry] because if I do, I would go crazy," she said. Gil has about half of his two-and-a-half years of service left.

Instead, Schaffer said she is "bursting with pride" for her two sons, Gil and his elder brother, Joseph (who goes by Yossi) Kuttler, who both made aliyah to serve the Jewish homeland through the IDF.

The IDF is the official military of Israel, established at the same time as the State of Israel



in 1948, although it traces its roots back to relatively ad-hoc paramilitary organizations of the early 1900s, according to the IDF website. It encompasses the country's army, air force and navy. All Israeli citizens over the age of 18 are conscripted into service, barring certain exemptions made on religious, physical or psychological grounds.

On the other end of the spectrum are the lone soldiers, many of them specifically making aliyah to serve in the IDF. There are currently about 3,000 lone soldiers in the IDF, according to Friends of the IDF, a lone soldier support organization, out of about 176,500 active personnel. Of those from overseas (a total of 80 countries), a quarter were from the United States in 2014. The mid-Atlantic region, which includes Baltimore and Washington, D.C., is generally third or fourth in the country for how many recruits it sends to the IDF (vying with New Jersey, New York and California),

said Ari Dallas, executive director of the Midatlantic Region for FIDF.

"I think it's really the essence of what we are," he said about helping lone soldiers. "Their job is to protect Israel, and it's our job to protect them."

The FIDF provides plane tickets to lone soldiers to visit their families and

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— Ari Dallas, executive director of the Midatlantic Region for FIDF

and friends back home, along with other support, primarily in Israel.

Those plane tickets are

provided for free or very cheap by the Israeli airline, El Al, whose spokesperson said it is a service they are happy to provide.

"We are a national company," said Yoram Elgrabli, managing director for El Al in North and Central America who has a son serving as a lone soldier. "We know the importance of the soldiers. ... I like to say the real bridge between Israel and the U.S. is El Al."

Those from outside Israel who serve in the IDF all share a love of Israel, of course, but from there, individual motivations vary. The brothers Kuttler are a good example. Gil and Yossi are close, both in age and relationship, if not necessarily personality. Gil, though he joined up after his brother (they overlapped in service for about a year), is more gung-ho about his military service, a longtime dream of his.

"I don't know what [Yossi] told you, but it was my idea first," he said from his base in Hevron, where he had been enlisted to chop vegetables for dinner while chatting with the JT. "I've been thinking of this since I was 5."

Yossi doesn't disagree with

that characterization at all. He's more introspective about his service, which he viewed as his duty to Israel and the Jewish people. Now a 21-year-old freshman at University of Maryland, College Park studying English and English education, he's glad to be done with service but wouldn't trade his experience.

Before making aliyah in 2014, Yossi, a 2013 Beth Tfiloh grad, was all set to attend business school at the University of Maryland. Then he visited Israel on the senior class trip and felt a pull, not just to the country, but to protect its heritage, his heritage.

"It was something I thought I could look back on and be proud I had served the greater good of the Jewish people," he said.

He was "bit by the bug" of Israel, his mom said, as she had been at his age after her first trip to Israel. She was a little shocked, she said, by his decision but passed on the advice of her father.

"When Yossi called me [from Israel] and said, 'Mom, we have to talk,' I said, 'I know you have a whole speech rehearsed, but I'm going to tell

you what my dad told me: Come home for the summer, and if



Yossi Kuttler receives his beret upon completion of basic training.

you still want to do it, I'm all behind you," she said.

And he did. And then Gil followed a short time later. Both joined the Paratroopers Brigade, a unit with a storied history in the IDF.

Gil and Yossi are not the only from the Baltimore area to serve in the IDF. They're not even the only ones from their neighborhood. There's something in the water off the corner of Labyrinth Road and Smith Avenue in Pikesville, right by Pikesville High School. The number of young men and women who recently did serve or are serving the IDF is practically enough to form their own squad.

The Kuttler brothers on Labyrinth south of Pikesville High, the Harrison kids — Eyal, Qeshet and Baraq — on

Labyrinth just across from Pikesville High and Lily Walder on Smith have all donned the lone soldier uniform. Coincidentally, Yossi, Lily and Eyal even ended up on the same kibbutz that was their home away from home in the early days prior to full service in the IDF.

Lily, like Yossi, had other plans in mind before deciding to make aliyah and join the IDF. She had just been accepted into the five-year master's program for occupational therapy at Towson University. Also a Beth Tfiloh lifer, she had taken a Young Judea gap year in Israel and fell in love. Israel had always been relevant to her life, she said, but that year shifted her perspective, and she came to view Israel as "my home, my respon-



Lily Walder (left) and with a group of fellow soldiers



sibility, my territory." One year into school and she left. Israel was beckoning.

Her dream IDF job was as a weapons instructor, but first, she had to improve her Hebrew.

"I didn't leave everything in the states to be someone's secretary and get them coffee," she said. Luckily, her studying paid off, and Lily went on to teach handheld explosives to other soldiers.

"When I say it to Americans, it sounds badass," she said from Tel Aviv, where she now makes her home since finishing her two years this past April. "But when I say it to Israelis, it's normal."

Lily's parents, Charles and Suzanne Walder, worried about her, as every parent worries for their children, they said, but saw how happy and confident she was in Israel.

"She loved it," Charles said.

"Yeah, and she was good at it," Suzanne added. Watching their daughter's graduation ceremony from boot camp in Israel was "one of the proudest moments of our lives," Suzanne went on to say.

And, much to Lily's pleasant surprise, the army turned out to be welcoming and respectful to women, treating everyone as soldiers, she said.

"I am so impressed with the Israeli army and how they treat women there," she continued. "I always felt very much respected, very much appreciated and taken seriously."

It was Lily's love for Israel that carried her through aliyah and IDF service, and, at least for now, she's staying put. Israel is home.

Yossi, Gil and Lily all served either right after, or shortly after, graduation from high school. That's the most frequent

choice, but it's not how Alex Simone, 28, a 2006 Beth Tfiloh grad, did it. He did the college life first and, once graduating, felt a bit adrift in his early 20s.

"Part of it was just looking for adventure after university," he admitted. "I was only 22 and I thought, 'Yeah, I could do this.' This was something that really connected with me at the time. So, I decided I could do it and eventually found I had to do it."

For Alex, telling his parents was a little tricky. He knew they would force him to defend his position. So, he researched his way to success.

"They were tough conversations," he said. "I made sure I did my research and had some plans ahead of time."

His father, Vito Simone, agreed he and his wife, Gail, wanted to ensure their son knew what he was doing.

"When he first brought it up, of course, my wife was scared to death, and we both challenged Alex vigorously to defend his decision," said Vito, who served in the U.S. Air Force in the 1970s. "That's our parenting style, I guess you could say."

Alex made his case, and his family got on board "100 percent," his dad said.

Alex, in what is apparently the Baltimore special, also joined the Paratroopers Brigade. And what started out as adventure, well, was an adventure, but it was also something more.

"To me, [Israel] means we have a place in the world," he said. "We have no idea if we would even exist without this place."

There are a couple different ways to join the IDF as a lone soldier. The most popular is to make aliyah and serve as a new Israeli citizen. But non-



Alex Simone

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Israelis can also serve through Mahal IDF volunteers. That was the choice of Jordan Low, a classmate of Yossi's at Beth Tfiloh, who joined up, serving as a sharpshooter in the Golani Brigade, an infantry unit.

All those who join do so with the knowledge they may be putting their life on the line for the love of Israel — for Jordan and his parents, that became a much more tangible concern in July 2014 when he and fellow soldiers were searching a potential Hamas weapons stash during Operation Protective Edge and the building was struck by two rockets, according to local media reports at the time.

Jordan held the ladder for all his fellow soldiers to get out safely, his father, Jeffrey Low,

told the JT at the time, and was hospitalized for smoke inhalation.

It takes a certain kind of chutzpah — and commitment — to join up with the armed forces, any armed forces. Perhaps more than other military options, the IDF also has a specific ideological purpose, a tie to an identity that is bigger than just Israel.

"I spent part of my life dedicated to an idea greater than myself," Yossi said, summing up his complicated thoughts on his time with the IDF. "It was extremely difficult — mentally, physically, being away from my family and America — but, yes, I would do it again." Jr

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