

Golden State Warriors

Deborah Dash Moore

**GI Jews: How World War II
Changed a Generation**

*Harvard University Press, 2004,
352 pages.*

Haim Watzman

**Company C: An American's Life
as a Citizen-Soldier in Israel**

*Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005,
387 pages.*

Reviewed by Samuel G. Freedman

For a fatal disease, tuberculosis has enjoyed an unusual cachet. It was the illness of tragic heroines, of Mimi in *La Bohème* and Violetta in *La Traviata* and Camille in Dumas' eponymous novel. The fatigue and pallor suffered by these beautiful victims were seen as somehow alluring. So, too, in Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain*, the infected protagonist's commitment to a sanitarium becomes the means of his enlightenment. Even in contemporary youth culture, the Goth style

appropriates the pale, haunted soulfulness of another one of tuberculosis' bards, Edgar Allan Poe.

One might similarly imagine weakness as the tuberculosis of modern American Jewry, an affliction invested with moral grandeur and artistic insight. A century after Zionism disowned the feeble, bespectacled, and inevitably persecuted *galus Yid* in its embrace of the rifle and hoe, Jews in the physical safety and material comfort of the United States are deeply discomfited by the coreligionist who picks up arms. "Never Again" was a motto abdicated by the mainstream and the Left to the extremist Rabbi Meir Kahane. He, in turn, perpetually delighted in taunting his establishment opponents as "Nice Irvings," a disparagement that stings with a certain truth, even when uttered by an outcast.

Since the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, this uneasiness with Israeli military force has increasingly become a feature of American Jewish discussion, especially among those Jews born too late to have

experienced the Holocaust, the birth of the state, and the existential wars of 1967 and 1973. The first intifada, with its enduring image of Palestinian Davids hurling rocks against the Israeli Goliath, only deepened this discomfiture. Not even the enthusiastic Palestinian embrace of suicide bombings during the last five years has changed the perception in certain American Jewish quarters that Israel is the unprincipled aggressor, and, more broadly, that being a soldier is somehow a deeply un-Jewish thing to do.

The same sensibility informs a good share of American Jewish opinion on the home front. With draft deferments for college students during the Vietnam War and the subsequent shift to an all-volunteer army, Jews have fallen to a flyspeck within the American military. They make up less than 1 percent of current forces, which is below half the Jewish share of the population. Not even al-Qaida's attacks on New York and Washington, attacks on the American mainland by a group with a stated program of killing Jews, brought about any notable increase in Jewish enlistment. Regardless of how American Jews express themselves about support for Israel or the Iraq war in opinion polls, their personal attitudes about military service and

armed conflict look a lot like the Western European model: Pacifism at virtually any price.

Yet in the relatively recent past, the very opposite was true, and this truth was essential to the success story of Jewish life in America. In her indispensable history, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation*, Deborah Dash Moore explores how serving in World War II transformed both Jews and America. In her persuasive telling, the war emerges as perhaps the last century's single most important factor in integrating the Jews fully and deeply into the American mix. "Collectively," Moore writes of Jewish soldiers and sailors,

they had become the agents of a shift in the legitimization of American Jewish identity, one that would deepen the sense that Jews were at home in America.... Military service strengthened Jewishness in part by changing its meaning. Jewish GIs would realize that their Jewish identity lived inside of them, as part of their personalities. They were Jews in all sorts of complicated ways that had little to do with faith and observance and a lot to do with dignity, fellowship, and humanity.

Partly, of course, that "shift in legitimization" occurred because the war led to the revelation of the Holocaust. General Eisenhower himself

insisted that American politicians and journalists visit the newly liberated concentration camps because he understood that their testimonies, articles, newsreels, and still photographs would settle the question of whether wartime reports of German atrocities had been merely special pleading and exaggeration by self-interested Jews. With such undeniable knowledge, the United States could no longer tolerate the old style of polite, gentlemanly anti-Semitism—the restricted neighborhoods, the blackballing at social clubs, the quotas on students and faculty at Ivy League schools, and so on.

When those impediments fell away, Jews enjoyed upward, outward, and social mobility on a scale unprecedented in two thousand years of Diaspora existence. The very concept of a “Judeo-Christian” tradition, Moore points out, was framed during wartime. She is admirably unsentimental, and includes a number of examples of anti-Jewish comments and actions by gentile GIs. Yet precisely because of her intellectual honesty, the countervailing examples of brotherhood—a Catholic chaplain saying *kaddish* in a death camp, for instance—carry enormous impact, even at the remove of sixty years.

These broader changes in society reflected the sum total of countless

instances of individual re-invention. Moore draws most extensively on fifteen Jewish veterans, one of them her father. A few of them had been Zionists even before the war, and thus were especially disposed to believe in the notion of the *Yiddishe kempfer*, the Jewish fighter, as *Farband*, the magazine of the Jewish workers’ alliance, was titled. Still others had been yeshiva students, the very stereotype of the scrawny, bookish Jew, the type chased home by the local Irish Catholic kids and roughed up for being a Christ-killer. Others had dallied with Popular Front politics, awkwardly trying to reconcile their intuitive bond with European Jewry with the party line against American intervention as long as Hitler and Stalin were allies. Taken together, then, Moore’s informants provide a reasonable spectrum of American Jewry circa December 7, 1941.

The effect of military service on each of them is vast and varied: Being radicalized against racial segregation during basic training in the South; learning to use weapons and stay calm during battle; enduring military food that violated innumerable laws of *kashrut*; and developing a new or heightened appreciation for religious ritual through the Passover seders and High Holy Day services conducted in the field. These men returned

home, like most war veterans, preternaturally mature and grave, indelibly aware of evil in the world. They also returned home with the most essential and irreplaceable credential of American citizenship: Military service. It was, in the end, the ultimate rejoinder to any homegrown Jew-hater.

A generation after World War II ended, however, so did military service as a rite of passage for American Jews. A disproportionately well-educated part of the population, they benefited disproportionately from the college deferment from the draft. How many Jewish parents were going to put their dreams of “my son the doctor” (or lawyer, or accountant, or dentist) at risk in Vietnam? Moreover, American Jews figured prominently in the opposition to the war. Then, with the adoption of an all-volunteer military in the mid-1970s, there no longer existed a requirement for any American to serve. Thus, while the ideal of a citizen-soldier still exists for others—a striking number of immigrants have signed up since the September 11 attacks, many of them in hopes of fast-tracking their request for citizenship—it rarely engages Jews.

For the first twenty-five years of its existence, Israel provided a vicarious sense of military duty for American Jews. They cheered, they rallied, they wrote checks, they lobbied

politicians, all without risk of shedding blood. They joined in the communal swagger after the Six Day War; I still remember a deli in Washington during the summer of 1967 with a sign in its window saying, “Our Specialty: The Nasser Sandwich. One part chicken, one part tongue, on Jewish rye with Russian dressing.” The near-catastrophe of 1973 brought out the greatest level of American Jewish philanthropy to that point in history.

But the American Jewish love affair with the sabra soldier depended on the absence of ambiguity that 1967 and 1973 supplied: Survival versus extermination. With the Lebanon invasion and both Intifadas, with nearly forty years of occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli military became a less appealing surrogate for American Jews, at least for many who are left of center. How could American Jews be resolutely liberal on social policies and international affairs while supporting the oppressor in Palestine? The solution to this seeming dissonance was to detach oneself emotionally not so much from Israel as a state, as from the reality of a state needing to defend itself.

Which brings us back to tuberculosis. If military duty and action are seen as un-Jewish, then weakness becomes a venerated Jewish

value. Weakness, that is, not as a sense of vulnerability, and not as the risk of being killed by an enemy, but rather as the essence of morality. The devious genius of the late Palestinian activist Edward Said was to tell American Jews that their intellect, their artistry, and their virtue were all the flowering of weakness. Indeed, the exilic Jew, untainted by power and arms, is the truest Jew. In such a reverie, it is easy to forget that tuberculosis, untreated, is fatal. Mimi, Violetta, Camille—in the end, they all die.

Implicitly, if not explicitly, Haim Watzman's book *Company C* seeks to address this American Jewish ambivalence about military Israel. Even though Watzman has lived in Israel for nearly thirty years, the book's subtitle features the phrase "an American's life." As an American who made *aliya* and still has relatives and friends in the United States, he must experience their bewilderment that he would (as the phrases invariably go) "live *there*," "put yourself in the line of fire," "do *that* to your kids." *Company C* follows Watzman over twenty years of reserve duty in the IDF, and it culminates with the impending entry of his oldest child, a daughter, into the army. Very little, from an American Jewish perspective, could seem as implausible as the narrative he relates—and not only for

Jewish liberals who cannot imagine any cause worth dying for, but for the many right-wing activists who prefer to hang on to the territories so long as they can do so from a fundraising dinner in a Manhattan hotel.

Not being an Israeli myself, I must leave it to others more knowledgeable to judge the accuracy and perceptiveness of Watzman's portrayal of army life. Coming to the book as an American Jew, though, lets me read it as a kind of companion volume to Moore's. *Company C* is about the connection of soldier and citizen, individual and nation, comrade and comrade. Those bonds hold even, or one might say especially, when the cause is complicated and troubling, as the Israeli occupation is to Watzman.

Among the reservists in his unit, he is one of the doves, and the frequent object of mockery as a result. He regrets the duty that requires him to barge into Palestinian homes at night, even as he concedes the deterrent logic of such shows of force. He yearns for a peaceful solution that he grows increasingly certain will never come. His war, then, is not the black-and-white moral arena of World War II, 1967, and 1973, but it is nonetheless a war worth his service.

His description of the company puts an Israeli face on the classic American World War II movies. Here,

instead of the bomber crew with its farm boy, Irish pug, and wisecracking Jew, a reader gets Yemenites, Ethiopians, gays, religious nationalists, and North Tel Aviv cosmopolitans, all of them lashed together in mutual dependence. Israelis are bound to read the pages about the soldiers' internal debates over the Oslo process with particular attention and anxiety as the disengagement from Gaza approaches, and, with it, the question of whether religious nationalist soldiers and officers will obey military orders to evacuate Jews. From an American perspective, what is most striking is the way military service forms a community out of disparate elements, and how it magnifies each reservist's credentials as a citizen. When Watzman nearly dies from toxic shock late in the book, for example, his fellow reservists make the pilgrimage to his hospital bedside. And when he

finally recovers, having lost his toes to gangrene and gone deaf in one ear, he insists on resuming his duty.

The GI Jews of Moore's book lived out such experiences. The confidence, the agency, the gravitas, the profound nationalism that they gained as a result informed their later lives as Americans and Jews. No veteran, I am sure, wants to see the next generation march off to war, but some veterans, like Watzman, accept the necessity and indeed the purpose of service. The children and grandchildren of Moore's men, people like me, may not have tuberculosis, but we never took the vaccine, either.

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