



Special Soldiers FROM A SPECIAL SOCIETY

The IDF is known as the people's army because it goes well beyond military duty to ensure Israel's security. Army service and the IDF play an important social role in the lives of most young Israelis. It is a melting pot that brings together all sectors of Israeli society.

But what happens if a young Israeli adult does not develop "typically"? What if they spend their academic years in special education classes? In the past, and still today in most other countries in the world, individuals with special needs are locked out of serving their country.

Would you be surprised to learn that young men and women with autism, Asperger's and other disabilities are eligible to serve in the IDF?

Be inspired by one Special In Uniform soldier's story (read aloud):



Daniel Defur meets Prime Minister Netanyahu - Photo courtesy of JNF Special in Uniform

Daniel Defur was born in Israel 20 years ago as a healthy baby. As a child he developed vision problems and after five unsuccessful surgeries on the lenses of his eyes, the doctors pronounced his condition, certified permanently legally blind. At the age of 18 Daniel eagerly reported to the IDF enlistment office, determined to serve his country. Accompanied by his mother, he approached an officer who immediately ruled that his condition would prevent him from serving. But Daniel wasn't deterred.

He decided that no matter what, undeterred and determined to serve his country, Daniel refused to back down. Daniel applied to IDF through Special in Uniform. Special in Uniform is a Jewish National Fund-USA supported program working to integrate Israeli youth with disabilities—mental and physical—into the IDF, and to ensure that the army is a place for everyone. In addition, throughout their service, Special in Uniform soldiers receive life-skills lessons and are provided with career assistance and placement to ensure a smoother transition into civilian life. Daniel and his parents were ecstatic, and leapt at the offer.

If time/ability allows, you can also share [Omer's story](#) (6 minute video).

DISCUSSION ACTIVITY:

Ask participants the following questions. If they need help with coming up with answers, some suggestions are provided for each question.

1. What kind of tasks can special needs individuals perform for the IDF?

Some possible answers:

- Cooking/mess hall duty
- Laundry
- Organizing supplies
- Computer work/intelligence

2. What special talents do special needs individuals have that we might not consider?

Some possible answers:

- They often see things in different ways and so their talents are very useful in sensitive computer identification work.
- Their attention to detail, focusing, or other traits enable them to perform tasks that other soldiers don't have the time, or even ability, to do as well. By giving these tasks to the Special in Uniform soldiers, every soldier, whether "special" or "typical", is happier and the army works better as a whole.

3. What do you think it means to the individual serving and to their family and friends knowing they are able to contribute to their country like everyone else?

Some possible answers:

- It helps the person feel more confident, more productive and more independent.
- It helps everyone look more at what someone can do, and their special talents and abilities, than at their limitations or disabilities.
- The person or their friends and family don't have to "feel bad" that because of who they are, they are "denied" or "unable" to have the same experiences as everyone else.

Such a tiny country is teaching such a powerful lesson to Israeli citizens, the Jewish People, and to the world. The

experience doesn't end with the service either, which can last several years. The soldiers enter the workplace with this invaluable expertise, and companies such as Intel seek them out. Inclusion is possible, if we give it a chance.

The story of Special in Uniform has implications far beyond Israel. It demonstrates an inspiring new way of thinking about autism in particular, as well as other special needs, one that empowers both those on the spectrum, or those with other disabilities, and those around them.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

1. Why is it important to include all members of society?
2. Were you surprised to learn that individuals with disabilities serve in the Israel Defense Forces? What does this say about Israeli society?
3. What are some ways you can be more inclusive of others?

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