Principle or Pathology? Adjudicating the Right to Conscience in the Israeli Military

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ABSTRACT The Israeli military’s Conscience Committee evaluates and exempts pacifists from obligatory military service, based explicitly on concern for liberal tolerance. However, I found that liberal pacifist applicants’ principled objections to violence challenged the state, and as such, applicants who articulated their refusal in such terms are rejected by the military review board. By contrast, pacifist conscientious objection based in embodied visceral revulsion to violence did not challenge the state and moral order, and such cases were granted exemption. Objections based in understanding pacifism as a physical incapacity depoliticizes it by making it incommensurable with public moral debate concerning military service. The pathologization of pacifism demonstrates a contradiction between liberalism’s ideology and its practices, revealing that the limits of liberalism are not only exterior, in nonliberal alterity, but also on liberalism’s own interior frontiers.

Military service is central to secular Jewish Israeli society and the basis of full citizenship. Jewish, Druze, Bedouin, and Circassian men serve three years and up to one month of reserve service per year until the age of 45, while Jewish women serve two years. The dominant role of the military and the primacy of what is called the “security situation” in Israeli life have been well documented (Ben-Ari 1998; Kimmerling 2001; Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari 1999; Sasson-Levy 2002). Belief in the necessity of the military for the continued existence of the state is fundamental to the collective consciousness and conscience of Israeli society. Also, military service is strongly linked to the principle of civic equality and the equal distribution of risk. Military service is also central to group identity, and refusal to participate in military service is a refusal of the foundational national sacrifice. As such, exemptions from military service are seen to compromise these values and are granted very reluctantly. However, in addition to religious and medical exemption, an individual will be exempted if he or she can demonstrate pacifist belief.

Pacifist exemption speaks to the ideology and practices of liberalism. The Israeli military has allowed for pacifists to be exempted from military service based on liberal principles of tolerance, asserting that on matters of religion and conscience, consent is required to maintain human dignity. Although the military, by commission, does not accept pacifism as morally correct, exemption of pacifists acknowledges that protections of conscience must be neutral with regard to content—that is, relativist. However, in my research, I found that pacifist refusal that was based on principled
objections to violence challenged the legitimacy of state’s use of force and the hegemonic moral order, and as such, applicants who articulated their refusal in these terms were rejected by the military review board. By contrast, pacifist conscientious objection that was based in embodied visceral revulsion to violence did not challenge the state, and such cases were granted exemption. Objections based in understanding pacifism as a physical incapacity depoliticizes pacifism by making it incommensurable with public moral debate concerning military service and preventing the military from having to engage or recognize pacifist moral claims. This creates a dilemma for pacifist applicants who wish not only for exemption from service but also to engage politically on questions of military service and violence—for those who want their pacifism to have political meaning.

As a dynamic set of principles and rationalities of governance, liberalism espouses individual autonomy in economic, political, moral, and religious matters. A central component of this ideology is the centrality of the concept of rights and a tolerance for difference. However, many scholars have drawn attention to the internal contradictions of liberal tolerance, and its potential to suppress nonliberal cultural difference deemed undesirable or dangerous. Shannon Speed has cautioned that “human rights and multiculturalism, particularly as state discourses, may manifest themselves in regressive politics, disempowerment, and regulation” (2005:29). Although the ideology of liberal tolerance posits a relativist position toward cultural difference, liberal policies often function to sanitize cultural elements that are threatening to either the hegemonic moral order or to liberal values (Kowal 2008:344–345). Traditions at the “limits of liberalism” such as polygamy, genital modification, and headscarves have been singled out as being ineligible for liberal accommodation, as have beliefs such as witchcraft (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004:188–189). Jane Collier and colleagues point out that liberal legalism simultaneously demands and disclaims difference, requiring people to emphasize their similarities to other abstract hearers of legal rights if they seek special rights (Collier et al. 1997:21).

The case presented here reveals a different dynamic. Rather than pacifist applicants being encouraged to stress their similarities and become more liberal, they are encouraged to exaggerate their alterity and disavow their liberal principles to protect the state from their challenge. Drawing influence from Wendy Brown, anthropological studies have shown that contrary to its ideology of neutrality, liberalism is embedded with Western individualism and moral norms. Here, the pathologization of pacifism also demonstrates the interior limits of liberalism. Although liberalism claims commitment to public debate, rationality, and democracy, it deploys its mechanisms of exclusion against pacifism not because it is illiberal but because it threatens the state, revealing the collaboration of liberal governance with sovereignty.

I take as a starting point that law is deeply entwined in the business of public morality; that law reflects (Foucault 1977) and produces (Geertz 1983:203; Sarat and Kearns 1995) public morality in an ongoing, unstable interchange. More recently, attention has been drawn to the fact that even law based explicitly on principles of moral and cultural relativism, rather than positivism, is not in any way exempt from power dynamics, political control, moral judgment, habits, and historical contingencies present in positivist legal practices (Barzilai 2008). This observation is essential to our understanding that although the oxymoron of military exemption of pacifists is necessarily based on relativist principles, it is not excluded from moral engagement and moral production. I begin by examining, in detail, the exemption hearing of one pacifist applicant. I then situate pacifist exemption as liberal policy in the Israeli context. Next, I delve into the conceptualization of pacifism by young applicants for exemption, to thickly contrast this understanding with the standards of proof for pacifism in the Conscience Committee. Finally, I explore the implications for our understanding of liberal governance.

**MAYA’S EXEMPTION HEARING**

Maya spoke with me often about her Conscience Committee experience, and I also had the opportunity to interview her family and study the transcript of her hearing. When Maya received her first order to report (tzav rashon), she had already decided that she would apply for pacifist exemption. This exemption is not advertised; when recruits receive their enlistment packets, pacifist exemption is not listed among the options. However, Maya knew about the exemption from her activist social circle. According to procedure, she should have sent a letter to the Enlistment Bureau requesting a hearing with the Conscience Committee to evaluate her pacifism. However, Maya, like nearly all the other applicants I met in her situation, ignored the order, keeping it and subsequent ones stuffed between books on her shelf, hoping in vain that the problem would disappear. This is partly a response to the fact that the consequences of refusal can be severe. Depending on the outcome of one’s hearing, one can face military incarceration, fewer social benefits, and difficulty acquiring a driver’s license, as well as social estrangement, career difficulties, and, in some cases, even public infamy. Eventually, Maya received a warning that a warrant for her arrest would imminently be issued. It read:

**Warning before issuing arrest warrant**

Regarding: You not reporting to a summons
1. As you know military service is required according to the national defense law.
2. Since you did not report to orders of summons that were sent to you until now, an arrest warrant will be issued against you that will be carried out by the Israeli police.
3. If you report immediately to the Tel Hashomer area enlistment bureau, room 9 at 8:00, the arrest warrant will not be issued against you.
4. For your benefit, in order to avoid arrest and additional unpleasantness, we are calling you to report as soon as possible.

Officer of the Enlistment Bureau
Tel Hashomer
Maya sent her letter. It was more than five handwritten pages, which systematically outlined her objections to all military service and the elements that she could not reconcile with her conscience, including sections on individual responsibility to think and act, the legitimation of violence through its institutionalization, the occupation of Palestine, gender, human dignity, and animal rights. She began, “I hereby proclaim that my values, my beliefs and worldview stand in complete opposition to service in the IDF,” continuing, “I believe that each person needs to think for themselves, and he is free to choose his deeds and his desires.” She quoted Tolstoy and presented a reading of Lysistrata from Aristophanes’ The Peloponnesian War (who convinced Greek women to withhold sex from their husbands and lovers to force peace) as a protofeminist peace activist. In response, the military sent a bulleted letter informing Maya that her arrest warrant had been put on hold, and she was granted a hearing with the Conscience Committee.

Created in 1995, the Conscience Committee consists of the head of the draft authority, the head of the movement and placement section at the central absorption and classification base, a psychologist from the behavioral sciences department of the manpower division, and a lawyer from the Judge Advocate General’s office. Since 2002, on the advice of the Supreme Court, the committee has also included a civilian member; however, this person is chosen by the military. There is no expert on pacifism on the committee, members receive no instruction regarding pacifism, and there is no definition or recognized canon of pacifism. This committee is part of the military itself rather than an external body. This, and the very low rate of granting exemption, situate Israel as being quite restrictive compared with other countries; however, this is hardly surprising given the small size of the state, its constant involvement in military action, and the centrality of military service to civic life.

Maya prepared an oral statement that focused on the same themes as her letter and practiced it repeatedly in front of her parents and friends. When Maya arrived for her hearing, she faced a panel of several men and one woman. She was asked by one of the men to give her reasons for requesting exemption. Maya nervously began to read her statement. But Maya recalled, “After two sentences, another man interrupted, waving his hand and telling me in an aggravated voice: ‘We have heard all of that stuff before! Every time it’s the same thing!’” Maya said that the woman added more gently, “We are looking for you to speak from your heart, to tell us how you feel and why you can’t go to the army.” Maya was silent while they stared at her, thinking how to translate her statement in the way they wanted, but all she came up with was “I feel... like a pacifist.” She recounted being asked when she first began to understand that she was a pacifist. Later, she said this confused her and complained, “I wasn’t a pacifist earlier; I became a pacifist. I even have issues with the word pacifist, not that I would tell them that, but I went through a really complicated, intense process to decide I am a pacifist.” But she told them, “a few years ago.” Maya recalled that they asked her more questions about how she felt when she was around violence (“not nice”) and whether, if she were on a crowded bus and there was a suicide bomber, she would use violence to stop him from killing many innocent people and children. She told them she didn’t know how she would react because she had never been in this situation, but she hoped she would not be violent.

The committee called in her witnesses. Maya brought her father and a friend with her to testify. Her father told me the committee asked him if Maya was a recluse, if Maya is stubborn, how she would react if she would be asked to carry a weapon, and whether he thought she would have a mental breakdown. To these questions, he told me he muttered answers because he didn’t know what they meant or what answer would help or hurt his daughter. They asked him about how she would react in different noncombat positions. He told them that Maya had decided she would not enlist. The committee called Maya back into the room. She told me they asked her if she was a vegetarian. This seemed out of the blue, but she was, so she said “yes.” They asked if she was released whether she would participate in the alternative civil service program for those exempted from military duty. She said “yes.” She was sent home. The transcript of the proceedings that she possessed confirmed her account of these interactions, although she disputed some of the details of the transcription. Shortly afterward she received notification in the mail that her application for pacifist exemption had been denied. There was no reason given. Maya’s family made some contacts through friends in the military and found out that the committee thought her objections to service were political and thus not pacifist. The family friends provided her with some coaching as to the types things the committee wanted to hear, primarily that she cannot tolerate violence and to say nothing that could be interpreted as “ideological.” Maya appealed the rejection, re-presented her case in a different light, and was released from military service.

Maya’s story was one among many I heard from pacifist applicants who were surprised by the committee’s refusing to hear their prepared explanation for their pacifism and by the committee’s fixation on the way they feel physically around violence. I conducted interviews with ten other applicants who all experienced the same approach from the committee, including an interest to hear about their physical reactions around violence, their vegetarianism, and their social maladjustment. I read many more accounts by other applicants that were posted on online forums meant to allow applicants to share information and to dispense advice on applying to the Conscience Committee and appearing before it. The advice is clear and consistent. Do not make a principled argument, do not argue with the committee, do not discuss soldiers or the military generally. Do keep it personal, say that you are a vegetarian and explain that you cannot stand being around violence, that you would panic if confronted with violence. Yonatan Ben-Artzi’s application to the committee gained some notoriety because he is the nephew of right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. He was rejected in part because he did not hesitate to get into
arguments with the committee. Frustrated by the outcome, Ben-Artzi’s lawyer commented, “Mahatma Gandhi would not be released by them. They would say to him: ‘Mr. Mahatma, you’re not solid [in your pacifism], come back next year.’ And next year they’d say: ‘You’re always arguing, making demands, you are not a pacifist’” (Hassin 2003).

PACIFISM AS A MATTER OF LIBERAL TOLERANCE

Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel are exempt from the national sacrifice of military service, a measure that functions as both a form of tolerance and a form of exclusion and is characteristic of the contradictions of Israeli democracy. Palestinian Arab Israelis encounter these contradictions more than other citizens; however, all that receive exemption from military service face a similar paradox of belonging. Since the beginning of the state, there have been exemptions from service for Jewish Israeli citizens for religious duty and conscientious objection. With the establishment of Israeli Defense Laws, compromises were made between secular and religious parties to exempt ultra-Orthodox Jewish men from service. Religious parties also argued for, and won, the right for women to be released based on “family status” (marriage, having children, or being pregnant) and “for reasons of conscience or for reasons of the family’s religious way of life” (Algazi 2004:15). Through this clause, many women were released whose objections were “selective”—that is, their objections were to Israeli military policies specifically. In contrast, eligible men were only exempted from military service at the discretion of the Minister of Defense “for reasons of the size of the regular forces or reserve forces of the IDF or for reasons connected with the requirements of education, security, settlement or the national economy or for family or other reasons” (Israel Defense Law 1986:sec. 39[c]). This clause does not constitute a right, although the policy that emerged released men if they could demonstrate absolute pacifism, understood as a refusal to fight in any military under any circumstances, which is a common requirement for pacifist exemption worldwide.

However, perhaps in part because of the limited historic tradition of pacifism in Israel, there is no formal definition or standards for pacifism, leaving much to interpretation of the Exemption Committee, commonly referred to as the Conscience Committee. In 2004, on the heels of waves of selective refusal by combat soldiers, the application for exemption of a woman, Laura Milo, who objected to the occupation of Palestine was rejected, and it was asserted that because her objection was political, it was not conscientious (Barak-Erez 2006:547). From that point on, the policy for exemption of women has likewise been based on proving absolute pacifism. Application and exemption statistics are not released; however, bits of information have been revealed during Supreme Court proceedings, which show that applicants number a few hundred persons yearly. Even under the equalized law, women have a higher rate of application for exemption and a higher rate of release than men, who face more pressure to perform service (Aviram 2006; Rimalt 2007). Military refusal in Israel is highly controversial, and as such, the actions of pacifists and the military take place to a great extent in the public eye.

Those governed by the Israeli state have incredibly diverse experiences as citizens and subjects in terms of freedoms and rights. Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir have persuasively argued that we should not think of the state’s manifestations as a liberal democracy and occupying force as separate regimes but, rather, that its governance in Israel and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are interdependent (Azoulay and Ophir 2008). Israeli bureaucracy and military restrict Palestinian noncitizens’ ability to move freely, own property, be employed, study, love and start families, and organize socially and politically (Gabiam 2006; Kelly 2006). Dan Rabinowitz refers to Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel as a “trapped minority” because they face not only ethnic discrimination but also constant dilemmas (selling property, segregated education, personal hospitality) of not being Jewish in the Jewish State that looks at them as inherently dangerous (Rabinowitz 1997). Even for Jews, Israel’s origin as a collectivist democracy (Ben Eliezer 1993) has had an ongoing legacy through subsequent processes of liberalization, especially in military service. However, Israeli Jews generally experience a far more liberal state, legal system, and bureaucracy that together protect their rights and encourage them to deploy them. The applicants for pacifist exemption, most often of Ashkenazi (European) ethnicity and having upper-class affiliations, are further ensured of receiving the liberal face of the state. They have not, by and large, experienced the disadvantaged conditions—such as poverty, poor education, being new immigrants, or intra-Jewish ethnic discrimination—that might prevent even a Jewish Israeli from accessing their rights. Recently, the state has shown willingness to suspend democratic measures even within this hegemonic group, utilizing politically motivated detentions and shooting at protesters. Yet, because pacifist applicants are acting through the military legal system, they are, in the context of their exemption proceedings, subject to liberal legalization. An obvious exception to applicants’ generally liberal experience is compulsory military service, which remains the hard core of Israeli sovereignty and that they have not encountered in a direct way until this point.

In Israel, pacifist exemption is established within the tradition of liberal tolerance. According to the Military Court, the basis of exemption of pacifist conscience is connected with the human rights awarded to religion, the commonality being that both rights and religion are thought to be “deeply held belief systems,” similarly inviolable. The Military Court explained that the origin of the right of a pacifist not to serve in the army is derived from freedom of conscience, which in turn is derived from the right to dignity (Sfrid 2003:8). As they put it, “pacifism is a matter of (almost religious) belief” (Sfrid 2003:28). In these legal opinions, the court is referencing Israel’s semiconstitutional 1992 Basic Law Concerning Human Dignity and Liberty, which contains Israel’s most explicit protections of human rights interests. According to the Israeli Supreme Court,
PACIFISM AMONG ISRAELI YOUTH

I went to Israel to investigate conscientious objection from the Israeli military—specifically, the social role that the concept of conscience plays in these refusals to serve. My interests concern how invocations of conscience as a reason for refusal affect the social and legal negotiation of this controversial act. The only legally permissible form of conscientious objection is pacifism, and although it is possible to apply for pacifist exemption after joining the military, most pacifists apply while still in high school. My fieldwork with this group investigated how young people come to consider themselves pacifists and ultimately apply for pacifist exemption. Many of these young people are part of a loosely formed social network that involves various political and social organizations. Among my activities, I conducted participant-observation in a weekly youth study and support group in Tel Aviv organized by the antimilitarism feminist organization New Profile (Profil Hadash). The youth group is called “Think Before You Enlist,” and each of the eight to ten regular members that participated during my time there were doing just that, considering whether or not they would enlist in the Israeli military and, if not, considering how they would avoid service. There are incarnations of this youth group in Jerusalem, Haifa, and Be’er Sheva. Maya, whose case we heard, was one of the leaders of the group. Several of the members of the group were considering whether they too should apply. Through this group, the New Profile network, the Israeli Communist Youth Alliance (Brit Ha’Noar Ha’Communisti Ha’Israeli), and other contacts I made outside the organization, I came to know many pacifists who had been through the exemption process, successfully and unsuccessfully. Over 20 months in the field beginning in 2007, I observed these young people in settings such as the study group, with family and friends, and at home. Although I was deeply concerned with the lives of my interlocutors and respected their ethical efforts, I maintained a separate identity as a U.S. researcher. I was not an activist, and my participant-observation was not equivalent to participation in their movement. I conducted audiotaped interviews. I wrote extensive field notes following each observation. The people I met through these networks cannot represent all of the people who apply for pacifist exemption. However, in recent years, many have come to apply for pacifist exemption through this network.

The pacifists I worked with became involved in this social movement because of dissatisfaction resulting from a political awakening to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories and a sense of social injustice. However, other issues that concerned them included the status of women in Israeli society generally and in the military specifically, ethnic discrimination, and cultural and economic imperialism. Trying to address this dissatisfaction, these young people explore avenues they hope will offer solutions, such as youth social movements, literature, philosophy, and music, and in this way some come to commit themselves to pacifist ideology. They come to oppose the use of force and violence as a solution to conflict. Not only do they forbid violence for themselves but also generally they come to see violence as an unethical practice for all, including states. I was in the field when the Tel Aviv chapter of “Think Before You Enlist” was inaugurated. After the first few meetings that took place at the headquarters of the political party Hadash (a leftist Jewish–Palestinian communist party), my own apartment became the more intimate meeting place for this group. We would crowd into my small studio, sitting on the futon and the floor. Each week, over vegan snacks provided by the New Profile budget, passionate philosophical discussions would unfold over moral and ethical dilemmas. Together the group did readings, watched films, and engaged in discussions that the leaders had prepared, often linking topics such as feminism, anticonsumerism, Palestinian culture, veganism, and, centrally, antimilitarism and antioccupation.

In my description of subjectivities and rationalities of these young people as “liberal,” I follow Gabriella Coleman and Alex Golub who, in their investigation of computer hacker culture, reject framing liberalism as a coherent body of philosophical, economic, and legal thought. Rather, they focus on liberalism as a cultural sensibility that is under negotiation and reformulation, replete with points of contention (Coleman and Golub 2008:256). In this case, I use liberal sensibilities to refer to the faith these young people put in public debate and the public sphere, the value they placed in open discussion free of coercion, a sense of individual responsibility for actions and conscience, expressive self-fulfillment, and a belief in ethical manifestation through legal recognition. Their rationalities are dependent
on a configuration of educational exposure, class, and cultural practices in Israeli society. These young people found themselves in a context that encouraged them to explore and develop their own ethical stances and to think, judge, and describe their actions in the terminology of conscience, which Nikolas Rose (2006:147) notes is typical of liberalism. They eagerly take up the components of ethical subjecthood that are available to them through self-making, agency, and responsibility. They pursue this aim with vigor, meeting on their free time to learn and discuss philosophy and ethics. With the instruction of parents and teachers, group members were exploring their individual ethical stances on their own and in school. They brought the theories of Immanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell, and Leo Tolstoy into the discussions as well as legal or policy information and unjust social conditions they discovered. In our weekly conversations, they deployed concepts and values of both human rights and civic rights and duties with ease and consensus. The group mission to “think” before enlistment and the commitment to accept any decision that members came to, including joining the military, demonstrates an ethical commitment to an idea of moral autonomy and individual responsibility for conscience.

Members also put faith in the value of rational debate. Debates in the meetings served as a space to exercise arguments and test rationales so they could later deploy these claims and commitments of responsibility more publicly. These public deployments were often class debates, activism, and public demonstrations. In these forums, their ethical claims were respected and protected by teachers, police, and authorities, developing their sense of a public sphere and public reason. They also displayed faith in rational debate and deliberation to produce moral truths and consensus when they engaged in such exchanges. This liberal subjectivity was also important when it came time to appear before the Conscience Committee, where they exhibited what Jürgen Habermas and colleagues (1989) call an “audience-oriented subjectivity” central to democratic public debate. Applicants gather with friends and family to rehearse their arguments and work to articulate them in compelling ways. In these statements, they highlight the philosophical and rational foundations for their pacifism.

Young pacifists seek to express themselves publicly and also see the law as an important forum through which they can not only express themselves but also manifest their conscience and receive a measure of social recognition. Charles Taylor (1992) refers to this satisfaction through individual public display as expressive self-fulfillment and identifies it as a characteristic of the modern age. That is, individual self-expression is a central means to full realization that offers a fundamental satisfaction. Observers of liberalism note that, in fact, liberal law establishes itself as a forum for negotiating expressions of identity (Passavant 2002; Rose 1999) as well as for making claims of difference against the state (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004). Likewise, Collier and colleagues observe that law and liberal legality play a role in encouraging people to find and express their inner qualities that distinguish them from others and to claim equal rights that are denied on the basis of difference (Collier et al. 1997). The exemption of pacifism seems to speak to this norm by which pacifists would be unfairly burdened by military service and thus are encouraged to seek this already sanctioned status as appropriate. To the young pacifists with whom I worked, pacifist exemption represents a recognition from the state of their conscience. Pacifists’ orientation to the state is one of active engagement, demonstrating their production as the type of social subjects the liberal state hails. This imagined relationship with the state is in contrast to many in Israeli society, including many new immigrants, who, faced with unwanted state demands, would seek to avoid the state, not to seek out self-expression through legal recognition. Far more people evade military service through “weapons of the weak” than pacifist exemption: for example, by making themselves seem unattractive to the military, socially or physically. It is also generally far easier to secure a release from military service through these methods of evasion than through pacifist exemption, and as such, applicants for pacifist exemption demonstrate their commitment to this type of recognition.

It is clear that the pacifists’ moral stance is not that of the state or of mainstream Jewish Israeli society. Typically, such a group would attract educational reform and government intervention. This is the case with immigrant groups who arrive in Israel with similarly antimilitary cultural dispositions. Reformatory intervention is also used with soldiers who have difficulty with institutionalization, such as following orders, obeying, and being disciplined. Rose identifies these reformatory strategies as central technologies of the liberal state (Rose 2006:148). However, in appealing to conscience, which is sanctioned as legally inviolable, pacifists mark themselves as unavailable to reformatory intervention and reject these state technologies of control. Thus, they assert a conscience that is incompatible with service and appeal to the law to facilitate their rights in a neutral way. Their desire for their pacifism to have political meaning is based on their perception that public debate only considers more and less violent solutions to political problems. They feel that recognition from the state that nonviolence also has legitimate ethical basis (as it seems to them the exemption does) would prevent the nonviolent position from being reflexively dismissed when raised in debate.

Despite their self-production as liberal subjects, pacifists present a severe challenge to the Israeli state and consensus that posits military service as a necessity. Militarism has been far more theorized than pacifism, although this is perhaps legitimate as the former is a far more widespread organizational rationality, while the latter is often only a fringe ideology without institutional or bureaucratic roots. Yet I would argue that pacifism by its nature challenges sovereignty power by delegitimizing its violence. Unlike governmentality, pacifism seeks not only to rationalize the
arbitrary expression of sovereign violence but also to elimi-
nate it altogether. In his article An Anthropological Analysis of 
War, Bronislaw Malinowski (1941:522) notes that the insti-
tution of worldwide pacifism would mean the surrender of 
state sovereignty. Pacifism condemns state use of force and 
the deployment of violence. If the state has the monopoly on 
the legitimate use of violence (Weber 1997), then pacifism 
challenges the state by claiming all violence to be illegiti-
mate. It also challenges the mainstream Israeli ideology that 
its military engagements are involuntary. Claims of pacifism 
assert that, within the frame of liberal democracy, recogni-
tion must be extended to radical nonviolence as a legitimate 
and livable option. As such, pacifism tests the limits of the 
hard core of Israeli sovereignty. It challenges the state’s abil-
ity to impose law—in this case, of universal conscription. 
Despite the liberal exemption that provides an ostensibly 
neutral medium for freedom of conscience, the claims of 
pacifism, despite arising from liberal practices, challenge the 
legitimacy of the state’s most fundamental capabilities. That 
pacifism in Israel is not necessarily attached to a religious, 
ethnic, or cultural sector makes it all the more dangerous 
for its potential to spread throughout new recruits.

ADJUDICATION OF PACIFIST EXEMPTION

I would like to unpack Maya’s encounter in light of the informa-
tion I gathered from interviews with committee mem-
bers and military personnel during multiple in-depth and 
recorded interviews concerning their understanding of paci-
fist belief and the evidence believed to demonstrate it. The 
committee asked several questions that confused Maya and 
herself as well as her father regarding how her pacifism “feels” and how she 
reacts physically around violence. When I first interviewed 
Tamir, a lawyer from the Military Advocate General’s office 
who has been involved in the prosecution of several appli-
cants rejected by the Conscience Committee, I had spent 
long periods of fieldwork with conscientious objectors and I 
was accustomed to their framing of the dilemmas of refusal. 
But he told me, “The basis of the military exemption is con-
cern for the mental state of the pacifist. Really, we try to 
have compassion for the pacifists because, from the army’s 
perspective, it is like they have a condition. Being a pacifist is 
like having a mental illness. Of course, they are not actually 
mentally ill, but they have a condition that is thought of in the 
same way, in their inability to fulfill their responsibilities.” 
He elaborated: “Pacifists are considered by the army to have 
a disability that prevents them from service, a mental dis-
ability rather than a physical one” (interview, February 22, 
2008). The members of the Conscience Committee echoed 
the understanding of authentic pacifism as an involuntary 
physical phenomenon.

Committee members describe pacifism physically. 
Throughout my conversations, Conscience Committee 
members strongly emphasized the visceral character of what 
they thought was an authentic belief in pacifism. Michael, 
a member of the committee told me that, “a real pacifist 
would wince at any violence” (interview, October 2, 2007), a distinctly physical reaction, while Yael, one of the civilian 
members who serves on the committee, shared that “the 
applicants need to show that they are repulsed by violence 
in a physical way, and for us this demonstration is more 
important than any philosophical justification, because it’s 
not fair to expect that from them” (interview, December 
23, 2007). Tamir, when speaking to me about Yonatan Ben-
Artzi, “For him it wasn’t real. If you are a real pacifist, the 
reaction to violence is physical, from the gut!” Gesturing 
emphatically to his stomach, “It is something that makes you 
literally vomit. Conscience is when there is something that 
you cannot do, you vomit otherwise, like maybe some peo-
ple get at a checkpoint” (interview, February 22, 2008). In 
a myriad of ways, committee members told me that ideally, 
applicants would describe their intolerance for violence and 
narrate specific circumstances in which they encountered 
violence and were repelled by it or were otherwise unable 
to cope, essentially the questions on which they prompted 
Maya to elaborate her answers.

The committee’s concern with a physical manifestation 
of pacifism is the basis of their expectation of vegetarianism. 
Yael explained, “For us this [vegetarianism] demonstrates 
that the person recoils from violence and that they are sen-
sitive kids who can’t stand violence” (interview, April 16, 
2008). Vegetarianism is not a feature of many streams of 
pacifism in the world, yet for the committee it is requisite. 
A theory of vegetarianism as revulsion further frames paci-
fism (and vegetarianism) as a matter of incapacity as opposed 
to obligation. As mentioned, veganism, a further restricted 
form of vegetarianism, is often a component of the ethi-
cal commitments of young pacifists; however, it is rarely a 
matter of repulsion. In fact, many of the young people who 
participated in the youth group, including Maya, occasion-
ally succumbed to indulgence in the presence of a particu-
larly aromatic steak. This discrepancy greatly frustrated the 
mother of one of the applicants, who spoke publicly about 
the committee’s understanding of pacifism. She expressed 
dismay that successful candidates must show they cannot 
cope with military service to be exempt, that they must be 
extravagantly “delicate, sensitive, emotional, vegans that 
pardon cockroaches.” She continued,

That is the style of the committee. But what is the connection? If 
you step on ants and eat meat, then you are not a pacifist? The fact 
that veganism has become a criterion in the eyes of the committee 
shows a basic lack of understanding. The committee’s under-
standing of conscience, if you want to give it a philosophical anchor 
and obviously there isn’t, is conscience as disease. Something in-
stinctive, visceral, connected to emotion and not to rational rea-
on. It erupts. Like vomiting after smelling a foul smell. In their 
perception, conscience cannot be social, political, collective; there 
is no communal disgust. And that goes as well for their preference 
for mellower people, confused people in hippie pants, a bit sick, 
and no ideological connection with pacifism. [Hassin 2003]

The physical understanding of pacifism produced through 
committee sessions demonstrates Naomi Mezey’s (2001:47) 
claim that the law is discursive and productive as well as co-
ercive. Although the legal setting typically demands liberal
subjectivities, rationalities, self-organization, and standardized narrativization, and appreciates rhetorical ability, here the subject who is required is a physical, embodied one that relies little on testimonial or rhetorical skill. This difference reflects a gap in the understanding of pacifism between applicant and the committee that is concerned with protecting the state. Whereas applicants are trying to present pacifism as an obligation, the committee is interested in producing the pacifist as a recognizable object. The framing of pacifism as physical is not necessarily inconsistent with liberal legalism. Speaking of identities based on economic interests, Collier and colleagues state that liberal law validates and requires identities that appear natural and innate, “even for people involved in overt struggles stressing identities based on social constructed interests” (Collier et al. 1997:5). Also, Tim Murphy (2004:128) notes the tendency of the law to turn obligations into things, citing the example of patents and copyrights.

Michael asserted that pacifism is an unnatural disposition historically, because it is indifferent to survival, which is contrary to human nature. And psychology has emerged as the dominant legal technology used by the committee to authenticate pacifists, with the psychologist playing the most prominent role in committee decisions. Maya’s philosophical justification was rejected in favor of her emotional and physical response to violence about which the psychologist’s insights are highly valued. This fact greatly frustrated one civilian member of the committee, Avi Sagi, who went public with his criticism after finishing his service. Speaking of the Yonatan Ben-Artzi case, he said, “The logic of the committee is one failure on top of another, and the reasons that led to their decision is quite annoying. For example, the statement that he could not adapt to the system. Who authorized them? If they think he needs a mental health officer, send him to one. Are they all psychologists? They diagnosed him? Do they have the tools at all? It’s an outrage” (Hassin 2003). Michel Foucault (1990) identified psychology as a technique for the control and discipline of essentially moral issues, with alleged scientific neutrality masking required conformity to bourgeois morality, and more recent studies have addressed this ethnographically (Kleinman 1988, 1999; Lakoff 2005). Here, exemption rights emerge from diagnosis, and the pathologization of pacifism as disability effectually individualizes pacifism, thus depoliticizing its moral claims.

And, indeed, the representation of pacifism in the Israeli media reflects essential elements of the military’s position regarding the nature of pacifism, even when it tries to be neutral or even sympathetic to pacifists. This is especially true with regard to the incompatibility of pacifism and political ideology (Galilee 2003; Mizrahi 2005). Although the media essentially ignores pacifist applicants who accept the military’s requirements, those who are politically active receive a great deal of media attention, focusing on the suspicion with regard to their authenticity. Israeli online news outlets also offer a very popular feature in which readers can respond to news stories and give their opinions. Articles about controversies involving pacifist applicants often elicit 60 to 120 comments, which express strong anger at what many see as the hypocrisy of pacifists’ political stance or which express support or sympathy. Everyday commentary on the issue often posed suspicion that applicants were using pacifism as a cover for political motivations and that if anything the military was being too compassionate. Several people expressed to me the belief that they were not pacifists but, rather, “just” (pashut) against the occupation.

Considering this case within the broader context of liberalisms claims and practices offers us interesting insights. Liberalism claims to be cultureless, a platform through which individuals can seek neutral protection (Brown 2008:21). Yet individualism and a bias toward certain bourgeois Protestant social norms reveal liberalism to have culture (Brown 2008:7). Also, it becomes clear that there exist external limits to liberalism in the form of beliefs and practices that cannot be accommodated. At these limits, subjects who exceed the boundaries of the hegemonic morality struggle for recognition of their alterity.

Several scholars have identified, as internal contradiction, the way liberal law solicits expressions of difference while simultaneously requiring people to stress their similarities to other abstract bearers of legal rights (Collier et al. 1997). For example, John Comaroff and Jean Comaroff (2004:194) show that when matters arising from alterity, such as the killing of witches, come through the liberal legal system, they must be distilled into conventional judicial categories and evaluated by “one standard” of individual guilt. Also, Emma Kowal demonstrates how liberal multiculturalism in Australia encourages indigenous Australians to embrace a sanitized alterity congruent with liberal morality (songs, dances) and to disavow unsanitized alterity that offends liberal morality (fighting, drinking; see Kowal 2008:344). Similarly, Brown claims that rights may become a “regulatory discourse, a means of obstructing or co-opting more radical political demands” (1995:98). Several ethnographic studies have revealed this strategy being deployed. Elizabeth Povinelli’s (2002) study of Australian multiculturalism describes a situation in which indigenous people are offered limited benefits if they are able to demonstrate their authenticity to standards of authentic traditional culture as idealized by liberal European bureaucrats. Charles Hale (2002:485) shows a similar dynamic in Guatemala in which minority subjects are lead to invest their energies in demonstrating their authenticity for what he calls the “minimum package of cultural rights” rather than demanding rights for more fundamental cultural differences. These cases are similar to that of pacifist exemption in that the standard of recognition is used strategically by the state in an effort to minimize the danger perceived.

In the cases presented above, the official state ideology of multiculturalism denies the existence of alterity that cannot be overcome or commensurated within the mechanisms of democracy and its legal systems, which anthropologists...
point out glosses over or regulates unpasteurized difference. These cases recognize that rights law is an arena where non-liberal difference can be quelled. But pacifist applicants are liberal subjects, and they have a liberal orientation to their pacifist belief. One would expect pacifist applicants to be competent practitioners in liberal legal encounter. Encouraged by society and state institutions in their practice of conscientious and ethical judgment, their testimony regarding refusal to perform military service is commensurable with the framing of the military’s demand for this service. However, alterity is created and exaggerated by the institutional power, framing claims of pacifism as incommensurable with the public conversation concerning military service. Theories of governmentality and liberal citizenship assert that subjects are expected to be self-regulating and to exercise active responsible citizenship, and if they fail to do so despite normative pressure, they are encouraged, through various reformatory interventions, to fall in line (Foucault 1991; Rose 2000:1398). Here, rather than co-opting alterity or reformatory intervention, pacifists are encouraged to disavow the liberal foundations of their claims. The physicalization of pacifist belief makes it incommensurable with the political and the ethical, and as such, this type of conscience takes on very specific meaning, one for which the potential to play a public role is undercut. In her 2001 article in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, entitled “Radical Worlds,” Povinelli prompts us to investigate how “the incommensurateness of liberal ideology and practice is made to appear commensurate” (2001:327–328). There, she explores how liberal refusal based on principled conscience and liberal exemption based on freedom of conscience are made to appear incommensurate.

Although other cases have illustrated the exterior limits of liberalism, this case demonstrates liberalism’s interior limits at the point of threat to sovereignty. The accounts that show liberalism’s exclusion of the Other, the “organicist, non-Western, and nonliberal” (Brown 2008:166), confirm Foucault’s (1977) claims that liberal subjectivities are created through the normalizing of certain behaviors and the pathologization of others. In these accounts, that the alterity of the Other is incommensurable with liberal values is not disputed by the authors. But in Israeli pacifist exemption, we see the potential of liberal mechanisms to also exclude the products of their own fabrication should these subjects go awry. Ideologies cannot predict or control all the manifestations of the seeds that they sow. Also, their rationalities are not perfectly crafted or hermetically sealed. Although they may frequently produce a preferred and governable subject, these same rationalities can be used to argue for positions that are unfavorable to the state.

In this case, pacifism’s threat to state sovereignty is more significant than the liberal conditions of its emergence and articulation. This serves to remind us that liberalism is not an end in and of itself but, rather, a form of governance that serves the state. Foucault argues that later forms of power and governance do not make sovereignty irrelevant: “Sovereignty is far from being eliminated by the emergence of a new art of government, even by one which has passed the threshold of political science; on the contrary, the problem of sovereignty is made more acute than ever” (1991:101). Although liberalism claims to be a system of values unencumbered by concern for state power, the practices presented here reveal it to be complicit. Liberal claims regarding rationality and public debate are in contradiction with the pathologization of pacifism for the protection of the state. This observation resonates with Foucault’s argument that “we need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of a disciplinary society by a society of government; in reality one has a triangle, sovereignty–discipline–government, which has as its primary target the population and its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security” (Foucault 1991:102). Although other considerations demonstrate the way liberalism is laden with cultural values, I show the collaboration between the organizational rationalities of liberalism and state sovereignty. This case reveals this collaboration by highlighting a location where they do not align. Other cases helpfully demonstrate the exterior limits of liberalism. However, they may implicitly give the impression that the basis of these exclusions is only the incompatibility of certain practices with liberal values and therefore that liberalism as a system of values stands alone as an end in and of itself. But producing liberal subjectivities is not enough; the state also wants the anticipated effects that make for cooperative subjects, which pacifists are decidedly not. In the case of pathologizing pacifism, we see that liberal values are a means of power rather than a self-contained objective.

The misunderstanding between Maya and the committee reveals how the incommensurable ontologies of pacifist belief manifest themselves, very often frustrating the members of the Conscience Committee. One focus of this disparity between a principled understanding and a physical one manifests in the meaning of intention, or conscious choice, which is deeply implicated in the Western understanding of conscience. Michael told me, “Sincerity of the applicant is really not enough because it is a matter of complex psychology.” To clarify this statement, he argued, “Applicants often convince themselves that they believe something that they do not, or that their aversion to violence is stronger than it really is” (interview, October 2, 2007). Likewise, after the rejection of conscientious objector Yonatan Ben-Artzi, Shlomi Simchi, head of the Advisory Committee on Matters of Conscience, said during Ben-Artzi’s trial: “I have no doubt that Yoni genuinely believes he is a pacifist and acts accordingly. Nevertheless, he is not a real pacifist” and the motivations for his actions lay “elsewhere” (Izenberg 2003). These statements make strong assertions with regard to the possibility for self-deception in pacifist belief. An epistemological understanding of pacifist belief that asserts that you can believe that you believe but...
in fact you are mistaken if it is not embodied as physical revulsion is certainly not one that emphasizes conscious commitment.

As such, it is problematic when applicants display that they are intentionally choosing pacifism as a worldview. There is a fear that the belief is not found in the applicants themselves but, rather, in their ideas, indicating that their identity as pacifists is not in fact prior to political and social forces and implying they could change with appropriate intervention. Members of the committee say, as with Maya, that applicants’ statements sound studied—“like a broken record.” Not only do committee members implore applicants to speak from the heart but they also employ a technique in which they metaphorically “take them into unknown territory” by giving them situational examples for which they have not prepared so the committee may see their instinctual responses. In Maya’s case, this was the hypothetical situation about the terrorist on the bus. This technique is used to force applicants to answer instinctually, without reflexivity, a kind of Rorschach test. Likewise, the conversational structure of questioning Maya, without knowing the significance of her statements, establishes the committee as the authority as in a relationship that analyzes an unaware applicant.

PATHOLOGY AS AGENCY? THE APPLICANT’S DILEMMA

That pacifist exemption depends on the satisfactory demonstration of physical, rather than principled, pacifism creates a paradoxical dilemma as to how and to what extent an applicant’s compliance or noncompliance with self-pathologization can be considered agentic. To tease out these issues further, I will briefly address two more pacifist applicants. Maya was fairly naive with regard to the Conscience Committee’s criteria. But some applicants are informed and prepared to perform to expectations to receive exemption. Liat was from a town in Northern Israel and had joined the New Profile youth group in Haifa. Liat heard there that the committee was looking to release people who are psychologically fragile, so in addition to telling them that she freezes and feels nauseous around violence and meat, she tried to physically demonstrate her fragility. After Liat moved to Tel Aviv to work in her aunt’s shop, she would sometimes stop by my apartment after work. One evening, she reenacted for me her physical performance in front of the committee. She turned her chair away from the table and hunched her shoulders forward, she pointed her toes inward toward each other and looked to the floor in front of her. “I tried to make myself seem very very small,” she told me. “And I lost weight before I went, so I was very skinny. I thought that this would show my distress” (interview, July 13, 2008). Although Liat saw this corporeal performance as unrelated to her pacifism, she felt ethically justified in the ruse because she considered herself truly pacifist. Liat was released by the committee.

However, accepting an exemption based on pacifism as disability is a dilemma for many who hope to influence public discussions on military service. This is especially true for women, who apply for and receive exemptions for pacifism more frequently and easily than men. Women worldwide face a similar dilemma with regard to military service: Should they advance female equality by proving women to be equal to men in all military tasks (Gusterson 1999) or emphasize their difference, invoking a tradition of women’s opposition to war and tropes of female pacifism? In Israel, because of the centrality of the military to political and often economic advancement, this dilemma is central for feminists, with some fighting for increased combat privileges while others, like Maya and the organization New Profile, reject the compatibility between militarism and feminism (Barak-Erez 2006; Rimalt 2007; Sasson-Levy 2003). However, many women who refuse military service because of their feminist and moral objections to service are surprised at the lack of efficacy of their critique in contrast to their male counterparts. Because women were released until 2004 for any conscientious objection and de facto continue to be released more easily than men under the same policy, women often find themselves freed from service through depoliticized pacifism while their male cohort are imprisoned and debated in the media. Although unabashedly political refusals are condemned by the mainstream, these refusals are engaged in debates on military service, which can be seen as an acknowledgment of full responsibility. Thus, it is debated whether the greater right to conscientious objection for women is an advantage or marginalization (Rimalt 2007), as is the imprisoned men who receive the media attention for their rebellion and become spokesmen for the peace movement. In the eyes of some young feminist refusers, this results in the replication of the military’s centrality of male sacrifice while mainstream women wait for men to come home from the army base and women refusers wait for men to come home from jail.

I met Ronit after she served two terms in military prison after being rejected from the Conscience Committee. Ronit was from a politically leftist family and was aware of the committee’s embodied criteria for conscience from this context. Her testimony before the committee could be considered more of a protest against this understanding than an attempt to receive exemption. She intentionally sabotaged her Conscience Committee hearing to make a point, knowing they would not release her on those terms. When I asked her about her rationale for doing this, she explained it was a conscientious act to represent her pacifism in her terms and not accept their assumptions. In her session with the Conscience Committee, she stated that she is against the occupation, that it is a moral issue and that all soldiers should refuse, and that no state needs a military. I believe Benjamin Arditi’s understanding of “agitation” in Politics on the Edges of Liberalism illuminates Ronit’s intervention. For Arditi (2007:98), agitation is an assertion of something impossible as possible, livable, rational, and desirable to partition the sensible
and offer an alternative. Ronit knew her assertion of undomesticated political pacifism would read as transgressive and would ruin her chances of release without serving jail time, but she feigned belief in the possibility of success for the spectacle of protest.

Ronit’s objection to the committee was that they were “trying to force us to say that the inability to serve is our own problem. To them, it is fine if you go there and say, ‘Yes, I just can’t stand violence, but I’m not judging you, go kill whoever you want.’ But the second you say, ‘I’m against violence and I think no one else should be violent either,’ they suddenly you are political and not a real pacifist. So I wasn’t really surprised that I didn’t get released” (interview, May 29, 2008. Her protest, although a pedagogical move meant to correct the committee on pacifism, failed. She tried to overturn their logic and invoke a position that is not available to her. Ronit was trying to accuse the state of not offering or presenting all of the possibilities, which was a constant complaint of the youth group I hosted regarding mainstream media and politics. After Ronit went twice to prison, she decided that going to jail over and over again was, like enlistment, institutionalizing her into the military experience. Ronit plans to be released under Profile 21, a medical release.

The depoliticization of pacifism has, until now, been presented mainly from the political and moral perspective of pacifists. However, from the perspective of the dominant moral order, the depoliticization of their actions is a generous interpretation, in that it prevents their moral condemnation, a perspective voiced by the military prosecutor Tamir. Just as the physicalization of mental illness or homosexuality are often applauded for removing the moral and social stigma that once attached to them, pacifism could likewise be seen as being destigmatized from other types of military refusal that carry heavier moral and social burdens in Israeli society. Pacifism is a cultural practice deemed dangerous for the safety of Jews as a people as well as for the survival of Israel as a state. Although the applicants make their claims on the basis of conscience, the content of the conscience proposed is a threat to the existence of the imagined moral community. The military is considered not only necessary but also essential to the Israeli “good life” and is credited with contributing to equality, strong character, and male friendship (Kaplan 2006). The compromise of pacifism as incapacity allows a formation of the practice to which the state can extend tolerance without the threat to its sovereignty but also without criminalizing the practice. Ultimately, the disparity between understandings of pacifism reveals a radical difference in the pacifist social imaginary of the fundamental meaning of the military in society. With all the discussion of violence in committee hearings, there is not even agreement on who’s violence is being discussed. Pacifist applicants are often talking about their refusal to participate in the violence of the military, while the committee focuses on the possibility that they will panic when faced with the violence of the enemy. When Ronit told the committee that she refuses to participate in violence, a woman on the committee burst out, “But what does the military have to do with violence?!” Tamir was angered by the hypocrisy he saw in political pacifists trying to have it both ways—that is, not sacrificing and yet entering into the political debate—which for him was untenable and reflected an unsustainable hedonism.

At the same time, however, the military’s position is not universally hegemonic, and the subjectivity that disadvantages applicants in the exemption process serves as valuable cultural capital in other aspects of their lives. Although the youth networks are rather small and have little mainstream influence, they are part of a counterpublic (Warner 2002) of dissenting Israelis with regard to military service, which is a relatively recent development. This new social imaginary is cultivated among a number of organizations including New Profile, which sponsors the youth groups, as well as the political party Hadash, which holds four seats in the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) of 120 members. Also, these young people have ideological support from refuser support networks like Yesh Gvul and other leftist activist organizations. These organizations maintain a public and online presence, which young people can access and join in communities of like-minded people. This is quite a contrast to the situation that previous generations of ideological dissenters to military service found themselves, wherein they were isolated and generally unaware of the existence of other refusers. With no public discussions of refusal, these conscientious objectors often found it necessary to do self-harm, such as wounding themselves with their own weapon to avoid military duty.

**CONCLUSION**

The military makes every effort to make military service a sensible and attractive option for young people so that they will approach it as a civic responsibility rather than sovereign coercion. However, military service remains the hard core of the Israeli sovereignty. Pacifist conscientious objection is felt to be dangerous not only because it might affect enlistment numbers but also because by extension it might undermine the state by marking state violence as violence and critiquing the legitimacy of its deployment. When Maya applied for exemption from military service, she had come to the conclusion, after much thought, that her conscience prevented her from participating in military service because of her commitment to nonviolence as a foundational principle for human society and interactions. She was ready to go to jail for this belief, but the military allows pacifist exemption, so she applied. In her Conscience Committee hearing, she was surprised to encounter an institution interested in producing and releasing pacifist subjects who are more in need of a fainting couch than a pulpit. This depoliticization presents pacifist applicants with another moral dilemma.

In pacifism, both the moral consensus and state sovereignty are seen to be at stake. Pacifist exemption is based, historically and legally, on principles of liberal tolerance. This exemption concerns conscience and the human dignity attached to it. Despite a dedication to relativism,
the discursive production of the pacifist subject that occurs during the adjudication of the exemption application has profound political meaning and consequence. Applicants for this exemption have liberal subjectivities, which is why they seek to manifest their ethical feelings through the language of conscience and legal rights, as opposed to alternative forms of refusal such as disobedience, desertion, or suicide (Arieli et al. 1996; Sasson-Levy 2003). Yet, to receive exemption, applicants must exaggerate their alterity and present their pacifism as physical revulsion. This depoliticizes the claims of pacifist applicants and prevents the military from having to violate their understanding of equality through universal military service or to engage with the claims of the applicants on matters of morality. In understanding pacifism as pathology, its exemption can be rationalized—not as a recognition of conscientious difference but as a compassionate gesture.

Anthropological work suggests that liberal multiculturalism and tolerance claim to incorporate alterity, in the process regulating, pasteurizing, and co-opting groups to eliminate cultural elements they find distasteful or dangerous. This case suggests that liberalism also has interior limits where state sovereignty is at stake. Although applicants for pacifist exemption are subjects who are oriented liberally toward the state, their beliefs, and other citizens, their pacifism challenges the state, and the potential spread of such beliefs threatens the state’s ability to enact its sovereign power. The pathologization of pacifism and its exclusion from accepted reason reveal the complicity of liberal governance and sovereignty, despite its ideology as being unconcerned with power. Just as different methods of rule (coercion, discipline, liberalism) are targeted at different populations in the interests of the state, the practices of liberalism remain accountable to these same interests. As such, the relationship of Jewish Israelis governed by liberalism to the state is not any less about sovereignty than West Bank Palestinians who experience a much harsher form of rule, although clearly the benefits of sovereignty fall very unequally. Here, liberal legal policy and even the process of adjudication are deployed to protect the moral consensus and the hard core of Israeli sovereignty. As such, the state protects its sovereignty while avoiding the need to use direct coercion, a governing technique of last resort.

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1. That some Palestinian Arab Israelis do, in fact, volunteer for military service in the Israeli Defense Forces, although this is a very controversial action in their communities, is a testament to the importance of military service to Israeli belonging (Kanaaneh 2009).
2. Yael recalled to me a case in which the applicant was essentially unable to say anything at all and was in a complete panic. However, she said that the committee could feel that she was genuine and just could not articulate herself, and they released her.

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1. That some Palestinian Arab Israelis do, in fact, volunteer for military service in the Israeli Defense Forces, although this is a very controversial action in their communities, is a testament to the importance of military service to Israeli belonging (Kanaaneh 2009).
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