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## OPINION

# How one Israeli general prepares his troops for battle

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By **Nancy Katz** Updated October 16, 2023, 12:51 p.m.



Israeli tanks massed outside Erez, near the border with the Gaza Strip, on Oct. 14. SERGEY PONOMAREV/NYT

How do you fight ethically against an adversary who lacks all ethics? How do you prepare soldiers for that challenge?

Three years and another era ago while working on a book, I had the opportunity to watch and listen as the commander of an Israel Defense Forces tank battalion led a training session with some of his soldiers. Brigadier General Bentzi Gruber, 65, has given this training to some 80,000 troops over the last 15 years.

I observed from the back of a spartan classroom at Tze'elim Army Base in southern Israel. At the front of the room, at 6 feet and 240 pounds, Gruber cast a formidable presence. He appeared desert-hardened, with deeply etched skin.

“Before you fire your weapon,” Gruber began, “you must always ask yourself three questions. First, is force necessary to accomplish the mission? In other words, is there an immediate threat? A threat to yourself, your soldiers, or civilians?”

“Second, if there is an immediate threat, are you using force *only* to accomplish the mission? Third, if you must use force to accomplish the mission, are you using as little force as possible?”

“Most important: When force is required and justified to stop an imminent threat, you might cause collateral damage. You are required to minimize that damage. Even if this involves putting yourself at risk.”



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Gruber ran through a variety of real-life scenarios. For example, drone video showed a Palestinian SUV approaching an Israeli kindergarten. “According to reliable intelligence, the SUV has kids in the front seat and explosives in the back. Do you fire on the SUV? Do you risk killing the Palestinian kids in the vehicle in order to protect the Israeli kids in the kindergarten?” He gave the soldiers eight seconds to respond.

Another scenario involved a terrorist who had already been thwarted. “Once this guy has been neutralized as a threat, he is your prisoner, and you are responsible for keeping him safe. You are also responsible for getting him medical attention if he needs it.” Gruber paused. “If you shoot him now, you would be a criminal, not a hero.”

A commander of a combat unit, called out, “But, Bentzi, he just tried to kill us. And he will try again. We must kill him before he kills us.”

Gruber replied, “No, listen, even if I take your point of view, it’s still not a good idea to kill him. That would just make him a shahid, a martyr.”

A commander of an Iron Dome unit interjected, “You want us to take risks — to risk even our own lives — in order to prevent collateral damage. I say, if they are using children as

human shields, we should teach them a lesson and kill the kids so they won't do it again.”

“First of all,” Gruber responded, “killing civilians never helps. It never causes them to reconsider the tactic. Second, even if it would help, I'm not going to do it. Why? For the simple reason that I am not a baby killer.

“War is not a blank check. Even when we are at war, even when we are attacked, we must conduct ourselves with restraint and integrity,” Gruber said. “Otherwise, who are we?”

The session continued for another 90 minutes. Afterward I asked Gruber how much impact this presentation — or really any presentation — could have? Maybe it could change attitudes. But could it influence behavior, especially in tense situations when adrenaline is pumping?

“Let me show you what we do.” We drove to the other side of the base to see a life-size replica of Gaza City. Here troops practiced dealing with mass demonstrations, sharp shooters on roofs, and terrorists hiding in a school. “With repeated practice, the lessons get truly absorbed,” Gruber said.

“We make mistakes. But I want you to understand how hard we try. During the [2014] Gaza war, 63 of my soldiers were injured as a result of risks they took in order to avoid causing civilian casualties. Do you know of any other army in the world where soldiers risk their lives to avoid injuring civilians?”

I asked Gruber what drove him to devote so much time to preparing his soldiers for ethical challenges. “In 1982, I fought in the first Lebanese War. Around Beirut, the fighting was particularly tough. In the course of responding to an attempted ambush, I accidentally killed a noncombatant. When you kill a noncombatant during battle, you carry that person on your back, and in your soul, for the rest of your life. I don't want my soldiers to have to live with that.

“Sometimes, in order to save Jewish lives from an imminent threat, it’s necessary to risk Palestinian civilians. In such cases, if my soldiers cause the death of a noncombatant, I want them to be able to look themselves in the mirror afterward and know that their actions were ethically solid. It is not enough for us to win. We have to win, and we have to remain human while winning.”

Three years after my visit to Tze’elim, Gruber’s words echo in my mind. Are they a quaint artifact of another time? Israel suffered an unimaginable trauma on Oct. 7. The IDF must chase down [terrorists who target Israeli civilians](#) and hide among Gazan civilians. In the face of that challenge, the [IDF is allegedly reconsidering its rules of engagement](#). But this grizzled general’s lessons still stand as a remarkable ideal.

*Nancy Katz is a former professor of public policy at Harvard University.*

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