The Israeli army employs the unique skills of autistic recruits
By Leora Eren Frucht
critical intelligence for the IDF. The fact that many people on the spectrum possess exceptional visual acuity and excel at detail-oriented work was one reason why Leora Sali believed they could be a valuable resource for the army, particularly in aerial reconnaissance’s Unit 9900. She had spent decades working in security when she was approached by a colleague, former Mossad chief Tamir Pardo, with the idea of utilizing the special abilities of autistic individuals to deal with autistic individuals before.

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A near Ono college for participants employment for those with disabilities,” says Sali.

Aside from grants from Israel’s National Insurance Institute and Ministry of Social Affairs, the lion’s share of the program is financed through private donations. The success of Roim Rachok in Unit 9900 led to its expansion into other army units. Now, in addition to deciphering aerial and satellite photos, there are also tracks in software quality assurance, information sorting, electro-optics and various tasks in the air force. With the increase in individuals diagnosed with some form of autism—in Israel, it was in one in 2,000 two decades ago, whereas today it’s one in 100, according to a 2016 Welfare Ministry report—Sali is convinced that the need for Roim Rachok will only grow. Because of careful screening, about 90 percent of those who are selected for the program complete the six-month training and go on to serve successfully in the army. Those applying must be Israeli citizens, know Hebrew and be able to converse. They must also be aware that they are on the autism spectrum. Most are considered fairly high functioning. Sali’s own son, now in his 20s, was enrolled in the course but did not go on to serve in the army. “He didn’t continue because it became clear that it wasn’t suitable for him,” she says. “There were emotional problems. I first became involved in this out of personal motivation, but I have moved on to a broader goal—to do something that has an impact on others.”

“Commands have told me that working with autistic soldiers has made them better commanders and better human beings,” says Sali. “They say they are better able to accept others, with their strengths and weaknesses, and develop more patience and sensitivity, which affects their relationships with all soldiers, not just the ones on the spectrum.” She recalls what one mother told her: “It’s not merely that you saved one soul, but that our extended family and even our neighborhood were affected by this. He comes home in a uniform—our boy who is on the spectrum, serving in an elite intelligence unit—and it’s a sort of statement, a declaration. “There is a ripple effect,” says Sali. “It’s a change in Israeli society. We’re part of that.”

Liora Eren Fruchter is an award-winning journalist who lives in Israel.

Advance Prep: Participants in the pre-army program are trained in military tasks and life skills.