

How an Israeli With Cerebral Palsy Beat the Odds and Became an IDF Officer

Captain Yehonatan Cohen is noticeably different from other officers in the Israeli army. As a result of a severe disability, he is bound to a wheelchair and unable to move his hands.

He needs help with most day-to-day functions—including eating, drinking and bathing. With significantly impaired vision, he relies on others to read aloud to him. Cohen was born two months premature, and because oxygen was cut off from his brain at birth, he developed cerebral palsy—a condition that left him physically disabled.

Despite his physical limitations, Cohen's exceptional intellect and determination have allowed him to succeed.

"My parents are people who didn't give up on me along the way," he says, joking that his use of the phrase "didn't give up" may be an understatement. "They really taught me that I'm capable, and I grew up with that feeling."

At his parents' insistence—and driven by a deep desire to integrate into Israeli society—Cohen attended high school with non-disabled students and graduated with honors.

A Struggle to Serve

Like many Israeli teenagers, Cohen eagerly reported to the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) enlistment office, determined to join the military and serve his country.

"When all of my friends received their orders to enlist, I decided that despite everything, I wanted to enlist too," Cohen recalls, explaining his devotion to the IDF and the

Jewish state. "The truth is that it's something that's been with me since childhood. We are a family that believes that the state of Israel is above everything. Before everything else, you have the state of Israel; this is something that was very important in our education and in the values of our family."

Accompanied by his medical aide, Cohen approached an officer in the enlistment office but was immediately told that his condition would prevent him from serving.

"In my family, there was no such thing [as not enlisting]," Cohen says. "We enlist—no matter what. It's true that I wasn't obligated to enlist in a formal or legal sense, but from an ethical and Zionist standpoint, I certainly was."

Although the IDF exempted him from service, Cohen insisted the army accept him as a volunteer.

"That's how the process of my enlistment began," Cohen says of that first day in the IDF office.

Over the next year and a half, he wrote letters and made his case to officials throughout the IDF, speaking with some of the army's most senior officers about his commitment to serve. He eventually met the head of the IDF's manpower branch, who spoke with him about opportunities to enlist as a volunteer. After a long and determined struggle, Cohen finally fulfilled his dream and received the order to join the Israeli army.

Inspiring Others

Cohen earned a distinguished position in the Education Corps, where he became an adviser for Israeli teenagers about to start the army. He immediately connected with the role, realizing it would allow him to impart his passion to other people his age. Through presentations to groups of students, he helped hundreds of young Israelis understand why they should be motivated to serve in the IDF.

“There is the official requirement to serve,” Cohen explains, referring to the obligation of all Israelis to enlist in the army, “but there is another stage, another level, which is the privilege to serve.

“There are a lot of obligations in the state of Israel—paying taxes and stopping at a red light, for example—but here you have a privilege to come and say, ‘I am serving the state of Israel; I am serving the IDF,’ or, as I would say, ‘I contributed, I acted, and I didn’t leave the fate of my country in the hands of others.’”

These moving words became a central part of Cohen’s message to Israeli youth during his time as an adviser. Today those words still motivate him to serve and contribute as a full member of Israeli society.

Becoming a Leader

After nine months in the army, Cohen left for the officers’ course and returned to his unit as a lead adviser. Recognizing his talent for teaching, the IDF later promoted him to an elite intelligence role, where he taught Islamic history to soldiers.

After more than a year, Cohen left the army to earn a degree, but he stopped his studies in the middle and came back to the military.

“I had an enormous hunger to return to the IDF—a hunger that returns every time I find myself at a crossroads, and I tell myself, ‘Good, I want to leave the military because I’m a little tired.’ Suddenly, this hunger comes back.”

He returned to IDF Intelligence and after several promotions reached his current role as a senior officer in the spokesperson’s unit.

“Until today, every time I’m about to sign an extension of my

service, I say, 'OK, maybe it's enough,'" he explains and laughs, but suddenly becomes very serious. "But, no, I had this hunger, and I continued."

When asked if he has a message for others with disabilities, he doesn't hesitate for a second: "I think that we disabled people have to try as much as we can to enter the so-called 'normal' society and try hard to continue the revolution that we are starting in Israel and all over the world. We are part of this society. Just keep going and keep fighting."

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