

The Branded Bus and the Brit

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 21 October 2026

Military Neutrality, Non-Domination, and Covenantal Recalibration in the Final Weeks of the 2026 Campaign

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Abstract

On 14 October 2026, Channel 14 journalist Hallel Bitton Rosen documented IDF soldiers returning from operational duty in northern Israel boarding a bus fully wrapped in the branding of Gadi Eisenkot's Yashar! party—Israeli flags, Star of David motifs, campaign imagery, and Eisenkot's portrait. The IDF characterized the event as a “point failure” (תקלה נקודתית) of an external transport company, summoned the company manager for inquiry via the Ministry of Defense, and reiterated standing orders forbidding the transport of soldiers in any vehicle carrying political branding, even in civilian areas, and prohibiting such vehicles from entering IDF bases. This incident, occurring two weeks before the 27 October elections in which Yashar has polled near or ahead of Likud, is not merely a logistical glitch. It is a concrete symptom of the deeper contest over whether the Israel Defense Forces remains the servant of the covenant and the *res publica*, or becomes an instrument of factional ambition—whether through structural exemptions from service or through the instrumentalization of military prestige and imagery in campaign materials.

Drawing on Orthodox Jewish sources (Devarim 1, 16, 17; Rambam Hilchot Melachim; areivut; milchemet mitzvah) and republican political theory (Philip Pettit's non-domination, Machiavelli's *virtù* and *corruzione*, the Hebrew Republic tradition recovered by Eric Nelson and others), this essay maps competing approaches, criticizes the structural domination of unequal burden and the parallel politicization of campaign branding, and proposes standards for restoring military neutrality as a precondition for both security and the *brit*.

I. The Hour and the Symptom

The documentation appeared on the morning of 14 October. Soldiers in uniform, some carrying gear, were filmed boarding and standing near the branded bus at a sandy assembly point in the north. The visual language was unambiguous: party colors, national symbols repurposed for a list, and the face of the former chief of staff now heading the largest opposition party in recent averages. Channel 14 framed the scene as “the IDF in the service of Eisenkot.” The IDF's response was procedural and immediate: an external contractor had failed at a single point; the company would be called to account; the rule against political branding for troop transport was restated and would be enforced. The electoral context is tight. Polls published on 14 and 15 October 2026 put Yashar between 20 and 26 seats and Likud between 18 and 20 (Channel 13; Zman Yisrael), with neither camp at 61.

Eisenkot has publicly prioritized a statutory state commission of inquiry into 7 October, a universal national-service law without loopholes, repeal of recent judicial-selection changes, and an eight-year limit on the prime minister's term. The bus episode arrives while the

campaign is actively seeking to become the largest party in order to claim first-mover advantage in forming a government. The timing does not prove intent. It does raise the cost of any appearance that military logistics can be borrowed for campaign aesthetics.

II. Torah Frameworks: Limited Kingship, Milchemet Mitzvah, and Areivut

Devarim 1:16–17 charges the judges: hear the small as the great, do not respect persons, do not fear the face of any man, for the judgment is G-d's. The same logic of non-recognition of faces governs public institutions more broadly. Devarim 16 places judges and officers in every gate and forbids the taking of bribes that blind the eyes of the wise. Devarim 17:14–20 limits the king: he is chosen from among the brothers, he does not multiply horses, wives, or silver, he writes a copy of the Torah and reads in it all his days so that his heart not be lifted above his brothers. Rambam, Hilchot Melachim 2–3 and 4–5, draws the practical consequence: the king is under the law; war is conducted under rules that distinguish milchemet mitzvah (obligatory war of the people) from optional campaigns; the army serves the covenant, not personal or partisan glory.

The citizen-soldier is therefore not a private resource. Areivut—mutual responsibility—requires that the burden of defense be shared among the brothers rather than concentrated on some while others are structurally exempted. The spies of Shelach returned with partial truths that demoralized the camp; the Golden Calf arose when leadership was delayed and the people sought a visible intermediary. Both episodes warn against the use of public power or public symbols for factional reassurance. A bus that carries soldiers under the colors and portrait of one list performs, however inadvertently, a small version of that intermediary function. The soldiers are not being asked to vote; they are being asked to appear inside a campaign vehicle. The distinction matters, and the institutional ban correctly treats the appearance as the problem. Chassidic sources sharpen the same point.

The Alter Rebbe's distinction in Tanya between the animal soul's self-regard and the divine soul's orientation toward truth supplies a psychology of why institutions prefer a convenient concept or a convenient image to an inconvenient document or an inconvenient neutrality. Truth is the seal, not an instrument. Holding the army above parties is not a political preference; it is the condition under which milchemet mitzvah can be recognized as such rather than as an extension of one camp's virtù.

III. Republican Non-Domination and the Citizen-Soldier

Philip Pettit defines liberty as non-domination: the absence of a power that can interfere arbitrarily, even on the days it chooses not to. An army whose logistics can place soldiers inside a vehicle carrying one party's branding, even once, and even if later corrected, demonstrates a residual capacity. The silence or the correction on other days does not erase the capacity. Machiavelli's analysis of virtù and corruzione treats the citizen-soldier as the military form of a free people only when the army remains the people's and is not captured by private ambition or by the prestige of a single commander. A politicized army is already a step toward the prince who treats the state as his own. The Hebrew Republic tradition recovered by Eric Nelson, Daniel Elazar, and others supplies the older biblical form of the same constraint.

Early modern republicans read Samuel and Devarim as refusing an uncommanded king and as embedding limits that keep power from becoming possession. Federalist 10 and 51 do not trust virtue alone to neutralize interest; they multiply and check factions so that no single interest can dominate. Applied to civil-military relations, the same logic requires that the armed forces not become the vehicle through which any one faction's face is made to appear as the face of the covenant. Non-domination constrains both sides of the present argument. Structural exemptions that lift some hearts above their brothers constitute a form of domination by non-service. Instrumentalization of military imagery and logistics for campaign purposes constitutes a form of domination by selective visibility. Neither is cured by pointing to the other's greater fault. The republican standard is the design that removes the capacity for arbitrary interference, not the temporary restraint of one camp.

IV. Map of Approaches and Critique

The institutional response—labeling the event a point failure, enforcing the ban, and directing alternative transport—is the correct procedural minimum. It protects the rule without requiring a finding of partisan intent by the company or by the party. Its limitation is that it addresses the symptom after the fact. A standing rule that is violated by an external contractor still reveals that the contractor's incentives were not fully aligned with the rule. Channel 14's framing treats the incident as evidence that the IDF is serving Eisenkot. The documentation is real; the causal leap from "soldiers boarded a branded bus" to "the institution is in the service of the list" requires additional evidence that has not been presented. The framing performs useful vigilance against boundary erosion. It also risks converting a logistics failure into a loyalty test.

Has Yashar's campaign given its own public account of the bus episode, beyond the IDF's statement? I have not found one. Silence is not proof of design. Does the party treat the boundary as inviolable, or as a constraint to be managed? That is a fair question for voters to put to it. The coalition's longer-standing structural problem remains the unequal burden of service. Exemptions that are politically entrenched and defended as communal autonomy become, in Pettit's terms, a capacity for arbitrary non-contribution that the serving public cannot effectively contest. Torah's areivut and Devarim 17's prohibition on lifting the heart above the brothers name the same problem from within the tradition. Pointing to the bus incident does not dissolve that structural fact; it simply shows that the temptation to instrumentalize the military is not confined to one side of the aisle.

Each approach fails a test it needs to pass. The institutional response fails if it remains only reactive. The media framing fails if it collapses logistics into institutional capture without further evidence. The campaign fails if it continues to treat military visibility as available aesthetic material. The coalition fails if it treats exemptions as non-negotiable while demanding that the army remain above politics. *Lo takiru fanim* is not a verse reserved for the other side's faces.

V. Practical Horizons and the Ballot

A people that has completed a full Knesset term for the first time in a generation can complete a service law by procedures it is not ashamed to show its children. The practical demands that survive the criticism are these: Publish and enforce the chain of custody for military logistics and imagery. Standing orders against political branding are already on the books; their

consistent application, including against external contractors, is the minimum. Separate the army's operational neutrality from any party's campaign materials. The IDF ban is the correct direction. It should be treated as non-negotiable rather than as one-off corrections. Restore equal burden as the condition of areivut. A universal service framework with narrow, transparent exemptions and civil sanctions for non-compliance is the design that removes the capacity for arbitrary non-contribution.

Vote. The bus is not the election. Turnout, threshold effects, and the refusal to bend judgment toward a face will decide more than any single logistics failure. Treating the incident as decisive is another form of conceptzia. None of these measures returns the dead or ends the security challenges. They refuse to let the next concept be maintained by unfearful faces or by selective visibility. Pittsburgh taught that a shop does not accept a sealed report from the man who ran the furnace. Jerusalem teaches that the judgment is not ours to own.

It is ours to refuse to counterfeit.

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