

Articles from
The Jewish
Veteran

The Official Publication of the Jewish War Veterans of the USA

Volume: 56, Year: 2003 • Number: 4, Season: Fall

Lone Army Female Rabbi Called To Do It All

By Jon R. Anderson, Stars and Stripes, European Edition

Heidelberg, Germany—The rabbi warmly welcomes each member of the Jewish military community as the small congregation fills a side room in the Heidelberg chapel for the Friday Sabbath.

Offering the traditional holy day greeting, “Shabbat Shalom,” as the faithful filter in, the rabbi is among 84 Jewish chaplains serving in uniform among the active and Reserve forces.

But, this rabbi is unique among the select few. Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Bonnie Koppell is the only female Jewish chaplain in the Army and one of only two military-wide.

A reservist from Chandler, Arizona, where she leads Temple Beth Shalom in civilian life, Koppell is the latest member to join the U.S. Army Europe command team as an Individual Mobilization Augmentee. Instead of drilling two weeks a year and one weekend a month, IMAs fulfill all or most of their annual Reserve commitment all at once.

Part of those duties include offering the “thought for the day” during Gen. B.B. Bell’s three-times-a-week staff meetings.

“It’s like a mini-sermon,” she says. On Friday morning, for example, she asked the USAREUR brass to ponder what made a perfect soldier.

A perfect chaplain, she says, “would be constantly out visiting the sick and counseling soldiers and yet always in the office when you need her.

Her point, “I can’t do it all, but I can die trying.”

Quoting the Jewish writings from Pirke Avot, or Ethics of the Fathers, Koppell points out, “it is not your job to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

It’s like the two-minute sit-up section of the Army’s physical fitness test, she says. “They tell you that as long as you are still attempting to do the sit-up you can keep trying. It is a good thought for life. No one is perfect but just to keep



trying.”

The idea of perseverance and pushing through difficulties is something that has been resonating within Koppell since arriving in Germany.

‘It is very traumatic to come here,” she says. “I was wearing my BDUs when I got off the plane,” she continues, pointing to the Star of David insignia for Jewish chaplains on her collar.

“To think that so many Jews here were forced to wear this star and what happened to them, well, it is very emotional.”

Shortly after arriving, she says, she couldn’t help but recall the voice that described God’s anger with Cain for slaying Abel: “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”

“The word for blood is actually in the plural,” says Koppell, “most commentators suggest that’s because it’s not just Abel’s blood but also those from future generations that would have come from him.”

To her congregation in Arizona, she says she wrote: “I also feel the blood of those generations (from the Holocaust) crying to me from this land.”

Koppel grew up near the Army’s chaplain’s school in Brooklyn, New York. She says military service has interested her almost as long as she can remember.

“I was always very curious about what went on there,” she says.

“I always knew I wanted to be a rabbi from a very young age. It was a calling. I love Judaism. Being a rabbi gives me a way to study and teach something that I love.”

These two interests came together in 1978 when, in rabbinical school, she saw a recruiting poster advertising the chaplain candidate program.

Some 25 years later, she says, she “still loves it,” although like many reservists, she finds balancing military duty with civilian life can be a challenge.

Of being called to active duty for the first Gulf War in 1991 and then again for a year as part of Operation Noble Eagle after the September 11, 2001, attacks, Koppell says, “I could not do this without the support of the congregation back home.. They appreciate the work that I am doing.

Still she adds, It’s hard. There was just a death in the congregation and to be there for the funeral was very difficult.” But as the casualties continue to mount in Iraq, with many of the wounded coming to Germany for treatment, Koppell says she is standing by to minister to anyone who needs her help.

Adopting a Fighting Unit in Israel Shows Support, Improves Troop Morale and Welfare

By Aaron M. Zeff, Junior Vice Commander, San Francisco JWV Post #152

We, as veterans, have a special kinship and understanding of what it's like to be on the front lines. I believe we have a Jewish and moral obligation to use this bond to accomplish something positive for the soldiers in Israel, many of whom are still on the front lines in their fight against terror. If you think about it, these soldiers are truly fighting terror for the entire free world.

We've all heard the expression, "you're only as strong as your weakest link." Nowhere is this more evident than among Israeli soldiers. The environment in which Israeli soldiers operate is far more primitive than what we currently see in our military. They depend on each other every day for their survival. But with our dedication, Jewish War Veterans can be an important link in strengthening that chain.



This fall, Post 152 in San Francisco decided to create a simple and direct way to communicate our support to Israeli troops. We began collecting small donations for what we now call "The Morale, Recreation and Welfare Fund." Its mission—to boost morale, offer a temporary escape from thoughts of war, and improve the well being of the troops. Because most bases in Israel are temporary, and infrastructure is limited and rudimentary, we knew small improvements would make a big difference. For example, a simple air conditioning unit for \$500 could keep an entire platoon of soldiers comfortable and relaxed during the heat of summer. A VCR and videotapes would allow soldiers, in their spare time, to take their minds off the day's missions.

On a trip to Israel in May, 2003, I personally delivered the Morale, Recreation and Welfare Fund to the Sampson Unit in Rafiach in the Gaza Strip. I was picked up at the border crossing and transported in an armored personnel vehicle to the stronghold on the Egyptian border, which oversees the Rafiach refugee camp, home to more than half a million people.

Originally, I was to plan a pizza party for the troops and bring a new VCR to the base, but the unit unselfishly requested something more meaningful. A few months prior to my visit, a member of their unit was killed by a sniper attack as he delivered coffee to an observation site. The unit asked that our donation be made in his honor. Memorial uniform straps, embroidered with the name Daniel Levy and the unit insignia, were donated to his 100 fellow soldiers.

The response was overwhelming. I was honored to see the smiles on the faces of these 18-year-old soldiers and 21-year-old commanders. I could feel their heartfelt appreciation as they donned the straps over their uniforms with pride. These kids are the fighting units, the ones who are constantly in the line of fire. They've suffered casualties and losses and they remain the bravest of Israel's brave. To know that San Francisco Lt. Sidney Sommer Post 152, half way around the world, was there to support, encourage them, and show our gratitude, was a great comfort to these troops. It was also a shining moment in my life!

It was clear these soldiers understood the special bond that exists between soldiers. If our roles were reversed, they'd do the same for us. Ironically, they were still overwhelmed to learn someone would travel around the world to their foxhole to show their support. I walked away wanting all the soldiers of Israel to know we were behind them as well. This is when I knew Jewish War Veterans across the United States could help make a difference. A gesture from one post

can have a force multiplier affect. What can be done by our organization, The Jewish War Veterans of the United States? Our posts stand to create a lasting bond with these soldiers. Post 152 communicates through letters and pictures, and we know the unit continues to feel our commitment. Depending on your own post's commitment, you may choose to create a mission to Israel to deliver your Morale, Recreation and Welfare Fund to the front lines personally. Or you may connect with a unit commander to insure your donations are delivered exactly to your specifications.

The first MR&W Fund was so mutually rewarding, we have now committed to continue our support by contributing morale boosting and recreational items on a quarterly basis to our adopted unit. I urge JWV Posts across the country to do the same. Adopt a fighting unit in Israel. A small donation by every post can affect Israeli soldiers in a priceless way.

Your gesture will send a clear, tangible message that America is behind them as fellow soldiers and as Jews.

Israeli Technology Saw Action in the Iraq War

By Seymour "Sy" Brody, National Editor

While Israel's armed forces were not participants in the Iraq War, their weaponry and technology were involved in helping to defeat Saddam Hussein. Israel's arms technology and weaponry were used by the United States and their allies to defeat the Iraqi Army with a minimum loss of life and casualties.

According to Jane's Defense Weekly, Israel is the third largest exporter of arms, weaponry and military services; roughly surpassing Russia. The United States and Great Britain sold more. Israel earns over \$3.5 billion in arms and technology sales.

The United States is the top importer of Israel's arms and military technology. Others importers are Turkey, Brazil, India, Germany and Canada. China was a major importer until Israel stopped supplying them after protests by the United States.

During the Iraq War, Israel kept a low profile so as to not get physically involved. Many attempts were made by the Iraqi propaganda machine to charge that Israel was physically involved because they found fragments of shells with the imprints of "Made in Jerusalem." These shells and other armaments were sold to the U.S. and their Allies before the Iraq War started.

Many strange names were given to some of these weapons and armament, Popeye was an air-to-surface missile fired by a B-52 bomber. This precision-guided missile was designed by Rafael, a company partially owned by the Israeli government.

The Pioneer and Hunter are designed unmanned aerial vehicles which were created in the labs of Israel in cooperation with the United States. The Hunter drones are used by the United States Marine Corps. They are a close relative to the United States "Predator" which was used to kill six terrorist operatives last November in Yemen.

Israel technology helped to design the Listening Targeting Pods used to fire precision weapons from the Marines AV-8B Harrier jets as well as F-15s and F-16s used by the Air Force Reserves and the Army National Guard, Lova Drori, Rafael's director of international marketing, told The Associated Press.

Recently, The United States allowed Israel to sell its Phalcon airborne radar system to India. The United States pressure blocked the sale about a year ago, when tensions between India and Pakistan were very tense. The deal is worth about \$1 billion. In the past, the United States forced Israel to cancel a similar sale to China.



Israel arms and its technology are a vital source of their income. It also gives the free world the weapons and technology to help fight terrorism.

Israel has more than 3,000 high tech companies and start-ups. It has the highest concentration of high-tech companies in the world (apart from the Silicon Valley). Israel leads the world in the number of scientists and technicians in the work force with 145 per 10,000, as opposed to 85 in the United States, over 70 in Japan and fewer than 60 in Germany.

While Israel was not physically in the Iraq War, its weaponry was felt by Saddam Hussein's armed forces.

Passover in Iraq

By Commander Irving Elson, Chaplain, 1st Marine Expeditionary Force

For the first forty-two years of my life I have been celebrating Passover as a Jew who had been liberated from Egypt, but this year I had the privilege of observing this festival not only as one who had been liberated but as a liberator. This year I spent this Festival of Freedom with the men and women of the First Marine Expeditionary Force in Baghdad.



My Passover journey began the Monday before Pesach. Four days prior, I had returned from Iraq to Camp Commando Kuwait, long enough to take a shower, eat some hot food, and most important, pick up supplies for Passover before returning to Iraq. Through the generosity of the Jewish Chaplains Council, the Aleph Institute, family and friends, and countless other Jewish organizations, I found myself transporting 12 boxes of matzah, grape juice, gefilte fish, and the famous solo-seder kits to those marines who would not be able to attend a Seder. To understand the scope of this mission, you have to realize that the sailors, marines, soldiers and airmen in Iraq are literally scattered throughout the country, some in areas that are hours away by vehicle through sectors not 100% secured. The logistics of getting myself, my RP (chaplain's assistant) and the supplies up to Baghdad were quite mind boggling. The G-4 (Logistics) and G-3 (Operations) of the MEF had been instrumental, lining up C-130 transports, helos and HUMVEEs to get to our destination. The 1st Marine Division Chaplain and the various Regimental Chaplains also would play a key role in getting us to where we needed to be and getting the supplies to locations not on our schedule so that marines could do their own sederim.

The first step of our amazing journey began late Monday afternoon. We took a HUMVEE to an expeditionary airfield north of Kuwait City. From this field, a piece of desert where our C-130s can land, we took a "Herc" C-130 cargo plane to another field, actually a road turn airfield in the outskirts of Baghdad. Since we did not arrive until 2:00 am, we pulled out our sleeping bags and spent what was left of the night on the side of the road. At 6:00 am the next morning, we were promptly awakened by the noise of two CH-46 helos coming to get us and take us to Baghdad.

After a short ride, we found ourselves in the field by a huge, bombed out compound. We were met by the 1st MarDiv Division Chaplain who welcomed us to the former Special Republican Guard Headquarters, now home of the 1st Marine Division in Baghdad. The Division Chaplain told us of the busy schedule he had set up for us, doing what turned out to be a total of four sederim, two on each of the first nights of Pesach.

Regimental Chaplains from around the Division brought their Marines and sailors to the different Sedarim. Each was held in a different location around Baghdad. One was held in the lobby of one of the buildings in the compound, the

Headquarters of the Iraqi Secret Police, the other in the Republican Guards Headquarters, while the other two were held in the Iraqi Military Academy and in the official residence of the Minister of Information, the infamous “Baghdad Bob.”

This last Seder was particularly meaningful to me. Held in the area held by the 7th Marines, it was the largest Seder I would lead. As we pulled into their compound, one of the Jewish marines reminded me, “Hey Rabbi, you promised us you would be with us in Baghdad for Pesach, and here you are!!!” Indeed, G-d had made it possible for me to keep my promise. There were several challenges to meet in setting up the Seder. First, the residence had no water or power. Promptly, the Regimental Chaplain, Father Bill Devine, pulled out a box of sacramental candles. “Use these,” he said with a smile! Our Seder table looked like a combination of Pesach and Hannukah, all wrapped up into one. The second challenge involved security. The windows were covered, in fear of snipers. And finally, the Shulckha Oreckh, the main Passover meal. Since all we had to eat was MREs, we pulled whatever kosher goodies I could find from care packages from home. In addition to wine, grape juice, matzah, and maror, our meal consisted of a few cans of gefilte fish, some Pesach candy, and a can of pickled vegetables someone had sent me from Israel.

The wonderful thing was that we didn’t care. We were all together, we were all healthy, and we were celebrating the Feast of Freedom, surrounded by a people who were just beginning to taste the sweetness of being a people no longer oppressed. Our Seder progressed amidst the darkness and the sound of machine gun and sniper rifle fire. It was truly an amazing couple of nights. I went to sleep that second night, looking at stars and affirming the words of Jacob in the Torah, “Surely, G-d was in the place, and I did not know it!”

Our return to Kuwait and Camp Commando was also quite providential. I was not looking forward to a long return trip via helo, C-130, and HUMVEE. But as luck would have it, we stumbled upon a helo returning directly to Kuwait. We did not mind the 5 hr flight back and the three fuel stops. As we flew over the Iraqi countryside at 50 feet, I reflected on what our marines, sailors, soldiers and airmen had accomplished. We had been partners with the Almighty in doing for the Iraqi people what He had done for us in Egypt. This, indeed, was a season of freedom and redemption.

A Seder Somewhere in Iraq

Dear Family and Friends,

This morning started with a cold rain. This was a blessing, as it padded the loose sand and made for a clear, crisp day. Two other Jewish soldiers, the wonderful duo of Chaplain Yacovac, 3rd Infantry Division, and Chaplain Waynick, 24th Support Command, and I gathered the necessary six security personnel and four vehicles to convoy us the 40 minutes from our classified base at Logistic Support Area Dogwood to Objective Grady for a Passover Seder in the desert.

As we arrived, we were warmly greeted by ten other Jewish soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division and Chaplain (Rabbi) Carlos Huerta. Together, we made a motley group of infantrymen, pilots, medics, and truck drivers into a minyan and a family. Our table was meager but festive. Dispel all rumors of Army soldiers having Seder in palaces. That was not us. Our tent was small and non-descript from the outside. We used mess hall provided paper plates, flatware, and cups. No meat or main course. The simple Passover supplies of Matzah, gefilte fish and grape juice from the Aleph Institute and the Jewish Welfare Board, combined with generous packages of cookies, dried fruit, and candy mailed by Lynne from Arizona and my cousin Stephen Hirsch of Long Island, NY, constituted a table fit for a meal. We even used Army issued Louisiana hot sauce for the bitter herbs.

Rabbi Huerta motivated us all to a higher plane. Despite our soldierly harsh living conditions sleeping outside on the ground, without showers or toilets, there are always people who have it harsher. We the Jewish people were once slaves. On a similar idea, the Iraqi people were oppressed for over a generation by Saddam Hussein. And now, we are both free. The 10 plagues the Lord cast upon Pharaoh were cast upon Saddam Hussein with embargos, restrictions, war,

and perhaps death. Now, like the Jews who crossed the Red Sea, the Iraqi people must rebuild their lives and teach their children about freedom.

During the meal, soldiers talked about missing family and friends back in Pasadena, California; Pittsburgh, PA; Phoenix, Arizona; Brooklyn, New York; Orlando, Florida; and other home towns across the USA. Each participant was glad to get a few moments away from their military post and remember previous Seders with wives, children, parents, and friends. 1st Lt. Abraham Falkowitz remarked "I was surprised to see this much Judaism in the middle of a war zone." Others agreed. We laughed, cried, and had fun. The service concluded with songs and psalms, like this quote Rabbi Huerta read from Psalm 118, "The Lord is on my side, I have no fear."

Together, our unit made this tent a house; this house a home; a piece of Judaism; and a piece of America.

Chag Sameach,

Jonas (Jonas Vogelhut, is a Major in the U.S. Army.)

Passover in Iraq: Letter from Mosul

By Rabbi Carlos Huerta

Passover in Iraq: Letter from Mosul by Rabbi Carlos Huerta I am writing to you from the city of Nineveh, the same city of the Prophet Jonah. Its present name is Mosul. I have had the privilege to see its ancient walls, touch its stones, go to the Kever that present Islamic tradition says is the Prophet Jonah. There is a Mosque at the site but hundreds of years ago the Iraqis we work with tell me it was a Beit Keneset.



They tell me the reason that the site is so sacred is because of the sacredness that the Jews have held for it. Presently, there are no signs of this ancient synagogue.

We, the soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division, fought our way up from the south, from Kuwait. The battle took us past Ur, the city where Abraham Avinu was born. We maintained contact with the enemy, passed the site of the Great Talmudic Academies of Sura and Pumpaditya, to the city of Babylon where Daniel Hanavi was taken. There we engaged an Iraqi Armored Division known as the Nebuchadnezzar Division and obliterated them. We continued the battle to Baghdad where so many of our people lived and were massacred in the summer of 1948. It was the city of so many of our Sages to include the Ben Ish Chai. Now we are in Mosul. I ask about the Jews that lived here and very few remember them. Many say that Jews never lived here, but my heart tells me different. The old ones tell me that there was a Jewish quarter, synagogue, Betay Midrashot, and cemetery.

One day while I was searching the streets of the ancient city, I came across a building that was missing half of its roof. The site was a garbage dump and the inside of the building was filled three-quarters with rotting garbage, feces, and sewage. I had to crouch low to get into the building, as the doorway was almost completely buried. As I entered, the light came through the half-open roof and I could make out writing engraved on the walls. It was Hebrew, and then I knew that I had stumbled into the ancient synagogue of the city of Mosul/Nineveh.

My heart broke as I climbed over the garbage piles that filled the room, where for hundreds of years the prayers of Jews reached the heavens. I realized that I was probably the first Jew to enter this holy place in over 50 years. Over ten feet of garbage filled the main sanctuary and the ezrat nashim. I barely could make it out because of the filth, but there was Hebrew writing on many of the walls.

Many native Iraqis congregated around me and wanted to know what I was doing. My translator said that the American Army was interested in old archeological sites of all kinds. I asked them if they knew what this place was, and they all said in an instant that it was the house where the Jews prayed. They told me that the houses in the streets that surrounded the synagogue had been filled with Jews. They then took me to the children's Yeshiva, a marbled edifice that no longer had a roof. There were only walls and half rooms. There was a vagrant family living in there, and when I asked them what this place was they said that it was a Jewish school for children. As I walked through the quarter I was shown the grave of the Prophet Daniel, once a synagogue. I saw that many of the door posts had the lion of Judah engraved on the top.

I felt the presence of our people, felt their daily lives as merchants, teachers, rabbis, doctors, and tailors. I felt their rush to get ready for Shabbath, felt their presence as they walked to the synagogue on Yom Kippur.

I could hear their singing in their courtyards, in their succahs as they invited the ushpizin in. I could hear their Passover seders echo through the narrow streets as they sang the songs of Pesach late into the night. And the children, I saw their shadows as they raced down the alleys, playing around the corners. I heard their voices learning the Aleph Beth in the Yeshivoth as they prepared for their Bar/Bat Mitsvahs.

But I also heard the babies crying and I saw the young daughters of Tzion cling to their mother's dresses asking why the bad people were killing them and making them leave their homes.

Tears came to my eyes but I had to hold them back. I had to pretend that I was mildly interested in what they were showing me lest I put myself and the soldier I was with, in a dangerous situation. How does one absorb this kind of experience? How do I convey the feeling of hearing all those voices reaching out in prayer at the synagogue as I stood on top of all that garbage? How do I recover our history? How do I bring honor to a holy place that has been so desecrated? I have no answers. I only have great sadness, pain, and loneliness.