

Passover on the Front Lines

Imagine being in the army and being an observant Jew. For starters, how does one get kosher food to a war zone? Or to tashlich in Kuwait? Better yet, how does one conduct a seder in Kuwait? With great difficulty, but it gets done. And who comes to such a seder? Read on and meet two Jewish chaplains who take care of all the needs of the Jewish military members stationed around the world.

Rabbi (Chaplain, Major) Henri Soussan is a full-time United States Army Chaplain for the Jewish cadets stationed, for now, in the very prestigious United States Military Academy at West Point, NY, located 50 miles north of New York City. It must be noted that most military installations are located in, shall we say, not the most desirable locales in the United States. Rural, desolate and out of the way places are the norm. To be stationed at West Point is like being in a five star hotel. Let's just say Rabbi Soussan has paid his dues, having served as chaplain in Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Rabbi (Chaplain, Major) Bruce Bublick was, until his recent retirement, a United States Air Force reserve chaplain for 14 years. For more than 11 of those years Chaplain Bublick was assigned to West Point. Like Rabbi Soussan, Rabbi Bublick served as a chaplain for all religious denominations. Chaplain Bublick's primary focus was Camp Buckner, a satellite training facility of West Point. At Camp Buckner, Chaplain Bublick mentored cadets, who are, in fact, young students training to become United States Army officers. Don't try to google it. The US military keeps all of its locations top secret. You may find directions, but that's about it. Let's just say it's also in upstate New York in case you have to visit someone there. And although now officially retired from the military, Chaplain Bublick continues to serve the West Point community as a volunteer chaplain.

Rabbi Soussan, as his name implies, is a Sephardic Jew, which makes his posting even more interesting. He never planned to enlist in the army. He received rabbinic ordination from Midrash Sephardi in Jerusalem and still has very strong ties there. After becoming a rabbi, he went on to university. Then 9/11 happened.

At the time he was a PhD thesis student in England. He received a call soon after that horrific event from a friend in the US army. "We need you here." Rabbi Soussan's patriotic side kicked in and after speaking with his wife, he decided to take his friend up on the offer. As his wife is American, he was able to enlist, which he did. He completed basic training, as do all soldiers, learning the ropes: read – rigorous, heavy-duty physical training.

As chaplains, both Rabbis Soussan and Bublick work across denominational lines. They are often called upon to deal with non-Jewish cadets and other military personnel.

Here's a little tidbit of information: West Point is the Ivy League of military academies. They get over 13,000 applications a year and of that number, only 1,300 students are accepted. After four years in West Point, which is the equivalent of four years of university, those enrolled receive a Bachelor of Science degree and are 2nd Lieutenants in the US Army.

Jewish Holidays in War Zones

Just being in a war zone is not for the faint of heart. Imagine conducting a seder or trying to do 'tashlich' on Rosh Hashana?

On one of his many tours of duty, Rabbi Soussan was in Kuwait for Passover and that's where he set up a seder one year.

As he told this author, Kuwait is most likely the hottest place on earth, with temperatures soaring to 120 degrees Fahrenheit. Given the oppressive heat and dangerous conditions, soldiers stationed around the Middle East made herculean efforts to attend this very special seder. They actually came in convoys due to the IED's (improvised explosive devices) along the road. One American diplomat flew in from Syria.

Mercifully, the tents are air conditioned as the food would most likely spoil within a couple of hours. In Arabic countries, liquor and wine are prohibited, but for the seder, wine was allowed into the country (no mean feat) allowing everyone at the seder to drink the minimum four cups.

The food at the seder looks like the food we all have with one exception: the maror. At that seder, as Rabbi Soussan said, "People eat huge quantities of the bitter vegetable as they are literally in the desert."

What he tried to convey was the feeling of camaraderie of those at the seder. They first decided to give their little place a name: Or Hamidbar, which loosely translated means a light in the Desert. Certainly a fitting name for their little shteibel.

The electric atmosphere was very hard for Rabbi Soussan to put into words. Conducting a seder in a country who would rather see us obliterated from the earth, brings one to a very deep understanding and appreciation of what it means to be a Jew. Close your eyes and picture yourself sitting in a tent in the middle of a desert, reciting the Hagaddah. It's almost impossible to imagine.

Not all is so happy over there. Rabbi Soussan had to conduct a memorial service in Kabul for two Jewish soldiers killed in an IED attack. It was one of the most difficult things he ever had to do.

Chaplain Bublick also officiated seders at an "exotic location" in 2006, when he was deployed to the United States Navy Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The Rest of the Story

So how do cadets keep kosher in the army? If they are in West Point, both Rabbis Bublick and Soussan take care of them. They are able to have kosher meals at the Jewish Chapel including beautiful Shabbos meals. Those 'in the field' are given what is termed in the army as MRE – meals ready to eat. We're not quite sure we're ready to taste one of those meals.

There are three US military bases in the world that have a designated synagogue, West Point being one of them. This affords both chaplains a chance to do more than just counsel people. They can hold Friday night services, teach Hebrew as Rabbi Soussan does, and connect to Jewish men and women in an environment in a peaceful and comfortable atmosphere.

We brushed by teaching Hebrew, but in fact, it is quite a feat. There are quite a few official foreign languages in the army, of which Hebrew was not one of them. That is until Rabbi Soussan presented a proposal accompanied by a syllabus to his superiors. Hebrew is now considered one of the official foreign languages.

After speaking to both Rabbi Soussan and Rabbi Bublick, we were in awe of what they are able to accomplish in a setting not exactly conducive to being a Jew. They are to be commended, endorsed and complimented on what they have been able to achieve.