

# **Rabbis as Chaplains in America's Military: A Tradition of Service, Dedication and Bravery**

by Seymour "Sy" Brody

## **Genesis:**

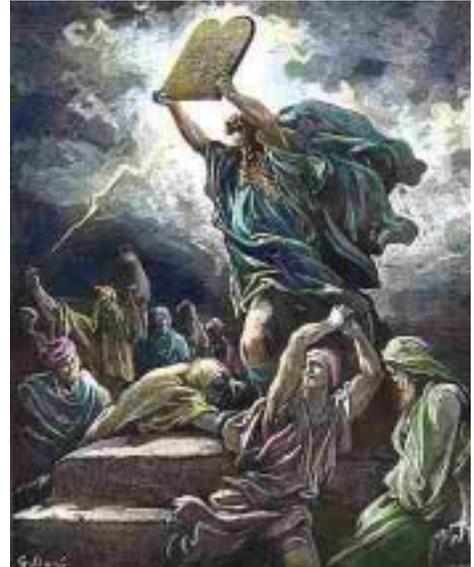
The role and importance of spiritual leaders in the military are recorded in the Bible. Holy men would address and inspire the armies before battle in the hope of achieving a victory. An example is that of Moses on a mountaintop rallying the Israelites in their battle against the Amalekites.

Throughout history, the armies had spiritual leaders with them as they went into battle. The word "chaplain" was derived from the French word "chapelain". It referred to the officer assigned to watch over the cloak of Saint Martin of Tours, which was a religious relic and an inspiration for the French military.

George Washington, then a colonel in the Virginia Militia, realized the importance of the chaplaincy in a series of letters written to the legislature. When he became General of the Continental Army, he encouraged the use of the chaplains in the military.

In the military, chaplains had many roles and responsibilities: They helped the soldiers with their spiritual needs and to encourage them onto victory; They dealt with the morale of the troops; They spoke out against gambling, drunkenness and any other activities that would weaken the unity of the military unit; They helped to maintain and develop the harmony and cohesiveness among the troops.

The importance of a chaplain in America's military was realized in March, 1791. Congress authorized the formation of a new army regiment which, for the first time,



Moses with the Israelites

included a chaplain. Reverend John Hurt, an Episcopalian, became the first chaplain of the new republic.

## **CIVIL WAR:**

The year 2004 was the 350<sup>th</sup> year celebration and commemoration of Jews in America. It was also the 350<sup>th</sup> year of Jews serving in America's military. Rabbis serving in the military didn't become a reality until the Civil War.

According to the old military laws, chaplains had to be an ordained Christian minister and appointed by the regimental commander on a vote of the field officers and company commanders. The chaplains received the pay and allowances of a captain in the cavalry.

Congressman Clement Vallandigham, of Ohio, introduced a bill in Congress to allow rabbis to become chaplains in the Army. The bill was defeated in July 1861. While this bill was being debated, the 5<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Cavalry, either in defiance or ignorance of the law, elected one of their men, Captain Michael Allen, to be the regimental chaplain.

Allen was well liked by the Christian and Jewish soldiers of his regiment. His services and sermons reflected the mixed congregation. He was a Philadelphia Hebrew school teacher who wanted to study to become a rabbi.

When the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment was encamped outside of Washington, D.C., a YMCA worker visited them and discovered that the regimental chaplain wasn't an ordained Christian minister. He saw this as a violation of the law and reported this matter to the Army.



Capt. Michael Allen conducting a service

Capt. Michael Allen resigned. The regiment, under the command of Colonel Max Friedman decided to test this law with the nomination of Rabbi Fischel, an ordained rabbi and experienced lobbyist.

Secretary of War Simon Cameron rejected the nomination citing the law “that a chaplain had to be an ordained Christian minister.” This started a year of lobbying in Congress to have the wording of the law changed. On July 17, 1862, Congress passed a bill that changed the wording of the law to include “an ordained minister of any religious denomination” instead of “an ordained minister of the Christian denomination.”

Rabbi Jacob Frankel, a well-known cantor of Congregation Shalom of Philadelphia, was commissioned on September 18, 1862, as the first Jewish chaplain. He attended the military hospitals in the Philadelphia area.

Rabbi Bernhard Henry Gotthelf, Louisville, Kentucky, was the second Jewish chaplain appointed. He served as a chaplain in the hospital ministry.

Ferdinand Leopold Sarner was the third rabbi appointed and he was the first rabbi to serve as a regimental chaplain. A native of Germany, he was elected to be the chaplain by the officers of a predominantly German regiment, the 54<sup>th</sup> New York Volunteer Regiment, the “Schwarze Jaegar.” He served between April 10, 1863, through October 3, 1864. He received a discharge for medical disabilities resulting from wounds received at the Battle of Gettysburg.



Rabbi Jacob Frankel

## **World War I:**

It was the hope of the United States that it could be neutral when World War I erupted in 1914. Fast moving events forced the United States to declare war against Germany and its allies.

More than 250,000 Jews responded to America's call to arms. They received over 1,100 decorations, including three Medals of Honor for bravery. Approximately 3,500 were killed and more than 12,000 were wounded. There were more than 9,000 commissioned officers, including two generals and an admiral.

There were 25 rabbis in the military as chaplains. This was the first large group of rabbis to enter the military in American history.

On April 9, 1917, representatives from seven major Jewish organizations met in New York City to develop and implement a unified national approach to service and support for our Jewish military personnel and Jewish Chaplains.



Jewish Chaplains insignia

The organizations were: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the United Synagogue of America, the Council of Young Men's Hebrew Congregation, the Union of Orthodox Congregations, Agudas ha-Rabbonim (the Federation of Orthodox Rabbis) and the Jewish Publication Society.

They created the Jewish Board for Welfare Work in the United States Army and



J.W.B. logo

Navy. The name was changed in March, 1918, to the Jewish Welfare Board (JWB).

There were many responsibilities and activities for the JWB in World War I: Taking care of the religious requirements of the Jewish armed forces personnel, supplying them with prayer books and other religious materials, training JWB civilian field workers, teaching English and the history and traditions of America to many of the new Jewish immigrants in the military and

providing them with recreational activities.

The Jewish Welfare Board's Committee of Chaplains had to approve all applications of rabbis to become military chaplains. The JWB was also active in recruiting rabbis for the military. In World War I, the JWB's rabbis recruiting drive achieved its goal.

The insignia for chaplains of the Jewish faith was adopted in 1918 and had Roman numerals on the tablets. The Roman numerals were changed to Hebrew numerals on November 9, 1981.

Captain Elkan Voorsanger was referred to as the "Fighting Rabbi" of World War I by the New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle and other newspapers. He received this title as a result of serving as the senior chaplain of the 77th Division, a melting pot of religions and nationalities.



Rabbi Voorsanger helping the wounded

Whenever the 77th went out of the trenches to attack the German soldiers, Captain Voorsanger went with them. He was the division burial officer, school and entertainment officer and the Jewish Welfare Board adviser to the 77<sup>th</sup> Division.

As the JWB adviser, he organized many activities and services not only for Jewish soldiers, but, also for the others. He found that if there were 200 Jewish soldiers in an attachment, 200 would come to the service—not because they had to, but because they wanted to be there to pray.

## **World War II:**

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was an unexpected wake up call for America that galvanized our country into action. We had more



Attack on Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941

than a million and a half men in uniform when we entered the war. When the war ended, there were over eight and one-half million men and women in America's military.

The JWB immediately responded by organizing and involving the Jewish communities into war activities. The Army and Navy Committee of the JWB represented thirty-seven Jewish organizations. The JWB worked with other service and welfare organizations to help the military and their families.

There was a need to recruit rabbis for the Chaplains Corps. Jews in the military were asking, "Where are our rabbis?" There were very few Jewish chaplains to take care of the spiritual and other needs of our Jewish men and women in uniform.

JWB started a recruiting campaign for rabbis to join the Chaplains Corps. It was very successful as there were 311 Jewish chaplains in the military in World War II: 147 were Conservative, 96 were Reform and 68 were Orthodox.



American Chaplain Rabbi Hershel Schacter conducts Shavuot service for Buchenwald survivors shortly after liberation, May 18, 1945

Jewish chaplains not only serviced the troops, but also the Jewish communities they encountered as the troops moved forward. They were one of the first to reach the liberated concentration camps to give help and solace to the survivors.

Eight Jewish chaplains gave their lives during World War II:

Chaplain Irving Tepper, of Chicago, was killed by bomb splinters in France, August 13, 1944.

Chaplain Louis Werfel, of New York, known as the "Flying Rabbi," killed in an air crash in Algeria, February 24, 1943.

Chaplain Henry Goody, of Philadelphia, killed in an automobile accident in

Washington, D.C., October 19, 1943.

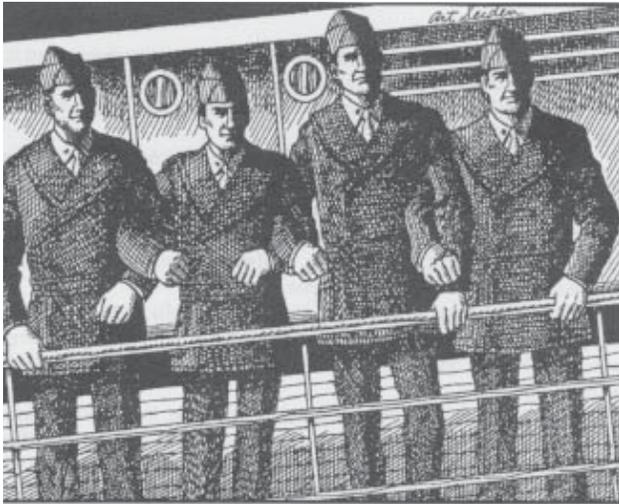
Chaplain Samuel D. Hurowitz, of Fort Wayne, died while on active duty with the troops in Texas, December 9, 1943.

Chaplain Herman L. Rosen, of Brooklyn, died by drowning, June 8, 1943.

Chaplain Frank Goldenberg, of Utica, NY, was killed in a jeep accident outside of Vienna, Austria, May 22, 1945.

Chaplain Nachman S. Arnoff, of Chicago, killed in an Army truck accident at Camp Kilmer, NJ, May 9, 1946

Chaplain Alexander Goode was one of the eight who gave his life in World War II. He was on the U.S.S. Dorchester which was carrying 900 servicemen for combat in Europe. On February 3, 1943. they were off the coast of Greenland when a



The 4 chaplains on teh USS Dorchester

German submarine sent two torpedoes into the hull of the ship.

Rabbi Goode and three other Christian chaplains put on their life jackets and went on the ship's deck to help the disorganized troops. All the available life jackets were distributed. However, four soldiers stood in front of the chaplains without any life jackets,

afraid and cold. The four chaplains, without hesitation, took off their life jackets and gave them to the four soldiers.

As the ship was sliding into the sea, Rabbi Alexander Goode, John P. Washington, a Roman Catholic priest, George L. Fox, a Methodist minister and Clark P. Poling, a minister of the Reformed Church of America, had their hands linked together as each said their prayers as they went to their death:

“Shma Isroel Adonio Elohenu Adonoi Echod....Our Father....Hallowed be Thy

name....Thy kingdom come....Thy will be done....”

The Chapel of the Four Chaplains is in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. It is a interfaith chapel that is a memorial for these immortal and brave chaplains.

During the battle for Iwo Jima, many Marines were killed. Division Chaplain Warren Cuthriell, a Protestant minister, asked Rabbi Roland B. Gittlesohn to deliver a nondenominational sermon to dedicate the Marine cemetery. Cuthriell wanted all of the fallen Marines honored in a single ceremony. Unfortunately, the Marine Corps being a reflection of our country at this time, was still strongly prejudiced and a majority of the Christian chaplains objected to having a rabbi preach over predominantly Christian graves.

To his credit, Chaplain Cuthriell refused to change his plans. But Gittlesohn wanted to spare his friend further embarrassment and decided it was best not to deliver his sermon. Instead, three separate

services were held. At the Jewish service, to

a congregation of about 70 who attended, Rabbi Gittlesohn delivered the powerful eulogy that he wrote for the combined service: “Here lie men who loved America because their ancestors, generations ago,

helped in her founding. Other men loved America with equal passion because they

themselves, or their own fathers, escaped from oppression to her blessed shores. Here lie officers and men, Negroes and whites, rich men and poor together. Here are Protestants, Catholics and Jews together. Here no man prefers another because of his faith or despises him because of his color. Here there are no quotas of how many men in each group are admitted or allowed. Among these men there is no discrimination. No prejudices. No hatred. Theirs is the highest and purest democracy.



Rabbi Gittlesohn has a service on Iwo Jima

Whosoever of us lifts his hand in hate against a brother, or who thinks himself superior to those who happen to be a minority, makes of this ceremony and the bloody sacrifice it commemorates, an empty, hollow mockery. To this, then, as our solemn duty, sacred duty do we the living now dedicate ourselves: to the right of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, of white men and Negroes alike, to enjoy the democracy for which all of them have here paid the price.

We here solemnly swear that this shall not have been in vain. Out of this and from the suffering and sorrow of those who mourn this will come, we promise, the birth of a new freedom for the sons of men everywhere.”

Among Gittlesohn’s listeners were three Protestant chaplains, who were so incensed by the prejudice voiced by their colleagues, that they boycotted their own service to hear him. One of them borrowed the script, and unknown to Gittlesohn, distributed thousands of copies to his regiment. Some Marines enclosed the copies in letters that they sent home. An avalanche of coverage resulted with major newspapers and magazines publishing parts or the entire sermon. It was placed in the Congressional Record and the Army broadcast the sermon to the troops all over the world.



Chaplain Joel D. Newman (right), US Navy, distributes a Passover Sedar Kit to PFC Sam Bonsky. The kits contained such items as a Haggadah, Mazot, grape juice and gefilte fish. The kits were distributed by the Jewish Welfare Board in the Persian Gulf.

## **Wars: Korea to the Present**

On July 5, 1950, North Korean troops invaded South Korea and attacked the troops of the United States and Korea. This would be the beginning of a string of wars and conflicts involving the United States: Vietnam, Persian Gulf, Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq. In all of these conflicts the Jewish chaplains were there with our military men and women.

In the Korean War, there were over 100 rabbis

in the Chaplain Corps. Each denomination recruited its rabbis for a two-year period to serve as chaplains. They recorded the names of the dead and helped the wounded communicate with their loved ones at home. The Jewish chaplains arranged for seders during Passover and special services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. They followed the troops into warfare to give them spiritual and material help.

In the period following the Korean War through today, many changes occurred. For the first time Jewish religious services for Jewish soldiers were held in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bosnia.



Rabbi Chana Timoner

Jewish women rabbis became full time chaplains in the military. Others enlisted in the military reserve and were called up to duty when needed.

In 1985, Rabbi Julie Schwartz was the first full-time active duty female Jewish chaplain, U.S. Navy. She and her husband, Steven Balaban, U.S. Navy, were the first rabbinic chaplain couple in the military.

Rabbi Chana Timoner, (1952-1998) was the first full-time active duty female Jewish chaplain in the Army.

Rabbi Karen Soria, U. S. Navy

Rabbi Bonnie Koppel, U.S. Army Reserve

Rabbi Daniella Koldony. U. S. Navy

Rabbi Sarah Schechter. U.S. Air Force.

Rabbi Michele Paskow, U.S. Army Reserve



Col. Bonnie Koppel at a briefing.

## **Addenda:**

Jewish chaplains in America's military have established a noble and historic tradition of dedication, service and bravery. Many of them have given their lives in the performance of their duties. Rabbis, as chaplains, have given the best years of

their lives so that they could be of service and comfort to our men and women in uniform.

Since the Civil War, Jewish chaplains have been in every major American combat. They were a major part of the armed forces in helping to defend America from its enemies. Today, they continue to serve valiantly in the military to protect and maintain the freedoms that we enjoy.

This exhibit is intended to be a source of information for reading, studying and investigating further the role of rabbis in America's military.

It is hoped that this exhibit will encourage you to include in your teaching curriculum the role of rabbis in the military as chaplains when studying about the contributions and sacrifices that Jews have made in and for America.

It is possible that this exhibit might inspire you to investigate the possibilities of becoming a Jewish Chaplain in America's military. For more information, contact the Jewish Welfare Board Jewish Chaplains Council at 15 East 26 Street, NY, NY 10010-1579 or e-mail: [david\\_lapp@jcca.org](mailto:david_lapp@jcca.org)

**May GOD Bless America!**



## **Acknowledgments:**

- **Molly Fraiberg Judaica Collections, Wimberly Library, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida**  
**<http://www.fau.edu/library/depts/judaica9.htm>**
- **Jewish Welfare Board Jewish Chaplains Council**
- **Rabbi Nathan Landman, Deputy Director, Jewish Welfare Board Jewish Chaplains Council**
- **American Jewish Historical Society**
- **U. S. Army Chaplains Archives**
- **U.S. Naval Chaplains Archives**
- **“Jewish Heroes and Heroines of America,” by Seymour “Sy” Brody**
- **“The Fighting Rabbis,” by Albert Isaac Slomovitz**
- **“Rabbis At War,” by Phillip S. Bernstein**
- **“Jews In Americas Military,” by Seymour “Sy” Brody**