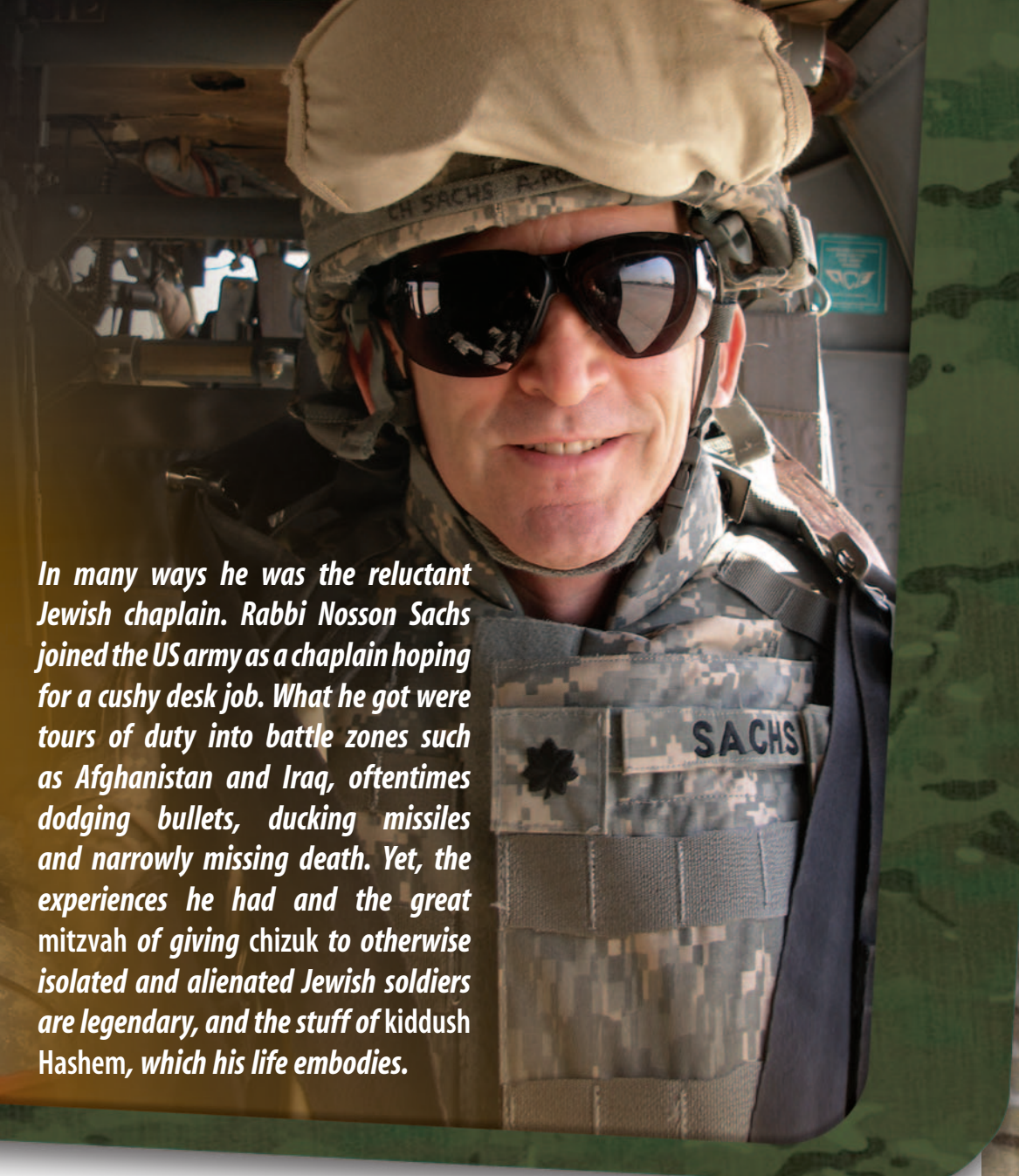


Jewish Chaplain In Lands Of Islamic Terror

Fascinating War Zone Experiences of Rabbi Colonel Nosson Sachs



In many ways he was the reluctant Jewish chaplain. Rabbi Nosson Sachs joined the US army as a chaplain hoping for a cushy desk job. What he got were tours of duty into battle zones such as Afghanistan and Iraq, oftentimes dodging bullets, ducking missiles and narrowly missing death. Yet, the experiences he had and the great mitzvah of giving chizuk to otherwise isolated and alienated Jewish soldiers are legendary, and the stuff of kiddush Hashem, which his life embodies.



As the large US Army transport helicopter rumbled through the pitch black of the desert night, most of its passengers lay slumped on their seats, legs shifted around the luggage at their feet, trying to sleep. An assortment of officers, mostly American, but some British and Arab, were continuing on to their next mission.

All of a sudden, a new, loud *whoosh* reverberated over the sound of the chopper rotors—startling enough to wake all

present. The fuselage lit up as if daylight was streaming in. Soldiers opened their eyes to view exquisite reddish flares shooting out from the helicopter in all directions. In milliseconds, they processed the implication of this development, their eyes widening fully in horror. Some of them became visibly pale. Everyone was praying—Muslims, Christians and one Jewish chaplain.

The chemical flares meant that the vessel's computer had detected a

heat-seeking missile... directed at them!

The flares were automatically ejected from the helicopter, burning at temperatures above 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit (hotter than a jet engine) and radiating large amounts of infrared light, in order to confuse the heat-seeking technology of the missile.

A good defense, but not foolproof.

As heart rates quickened, some of the officers temporarily second-guessed their

decisions to serve in the first place. Moments passed like eternities as they waited for the impact... and then silence, but for the chopper's own engines. As the soldiers realized that disaster has been averted, they soon drifted back into their much-needed slumber. None were really shaken—serving here means experiencing terror as part of daily life. Welcome to Iraq.

Not an Office Job

Colonel Nosson (Mark) Sachs has been serving in the US Army chaplaincy for 29 years, ten and a half of them in active duty. When he first signed up, he had no inkling that he would someday be facing enemy fire.

“The Jewish Welfare Board (one of the government-accredited endorsing bodies for Jewish military chaplains) assured me I’d get a nice eight-to-four office job and certainly wouldn’t have to leave the country,” he chuckled.

Several years later, he and his family found themselves on a plane to Germany for a long-term assignment.

We met with Rabbi Sachs at Shadyside Hospital in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he has also served as a hospital chaplain for the past 20 years, with the exception of the years he was mobilized due to the Afghan and Iraq Wars. He explained to us that hospital chaplaincy can be very similar to military chaplaincy, and that his seven and a half years of service prior to beginning work in the hospital equipped him well to respond to people in difficult situations.

“When people are facing tough circumstances, whether it is sickness or the trauma of the battlefield, they want a listening ear from someone that they feel they can respect. As a chaplain, you are viewed as someone that is close to G-d, and when you listen and empathize with people they feel as if G-d is listening to them. More often than not, they are happy to find that empathy in a rabbi, even if they are not Jewish, and certainly if they are.”

Boy Scouts without Adult Supervision

As a young married man, Rabbi Sachs was learning at the YU Kollel in the *semicha* program. He explained to us that although he was studying for *semicha*, he wasn’t necessarily interested in becoming a rabbi.

“I was there for the sake of learning. As far as *parnassa*, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. My father was a businessman—perhaps that would be my calling.”

His wife had been working, but soon they were expecting their first child and he began thinking about his employment options. The economy in the early 1980s was terrible, and he didn’t know how he might make a living. Around that time, Lieutenant Colonel Alan Greenspan visited the *kollel* to speak about army chaplaincy. Nosson Sachs was riveted. Serving as a rabbi in the army sounded exciting and enjoyable.

“It sounded like the Boy Scouts without adult supervision—hiking, camping and explosives!”

It also sounded like an amazing opportunity to do *kiruv*, something he had always had an interest in. Most importantly, it was a reliable source of good income. Lt. Col. Greenspan described all of the good things about being in the army, and Rabbi Sachs told us that everything he said was true. Only, he didn’t speak about any of the downsides—and there are many of those, as well.

After the talk, Nosson approached Rabbi Greenspan to speak with him. They had both grown up in Fairfield, Connecticut, and recognized each other. They spoke at length about the benefits and opportunities of army service, and Nosson was hooked.

After receiving *semicha*, Rabbi Sachs joined the US Army Seminary Program, taking a reserve commission. He made a three-year commitment, thinking, “In three years I’ll earn a little money... and then we’ll be able to move to *Eretz Yisrael!*” He engaged in basic training for chaplains, which is similar to that of army doctors and lawyers.

“You are joining the army as a professional, not a combat soldier. Of course you must be physically fit because you must be able to keep up with the troops. But the goal is not to break you and then build you up in their mold. The army wants you for the talents you are already bringing in,” he explained.

Chaplains-in-training are also required to fire weapons, but that’s only to familiarize them with what the troops are experiencing. They are never expected to pick up a weapon during the course of their duties.

The Life of a Jewish Chaplain

The US Army chaplaincy is the oldest military chaplaincy in the country, predating even the official creation of the United States on July 4, 1776. In July 1775, for example, the Second Constitutional Congress took a vote on wages for army chaplains, paying them \$20 per month (around \$580 in today’s money, according to one estimate). The army also has a strong history of supporting the Jewish chaplaincy, stretching as far back as the Civil War.

About 150,000 Jews lived in the United States at the time of the Civil War, which took place from 1861 to 1865. That was only about 0.5% of the entire American population. One Civil War historian estimates that 10,000 Jews served in the army, 7,000 of them on the Union side. About 600 Jewish soldiers were killed during the war.

Hostilities between the North and South officially commenced on April 12, 1861. On July 22, 1861, Congress in the Northern States passed legislation requiring all chaplains to be ordained Christian ministers, thus disqualifying rabbis from service. Now thousands of Jewish soldiers would not have spiritual guidance and support from a member of their own religion.

Jews lobbied Congress’ decision and signed a petition to change the law. On July 12, 1862, the law was reversed to allow rabbis to serve in an official capacity as military chaplains. Ironically, the small city of Bangor, Maine, received 200 signatures backing the petition to reverse the bill prohibiting rabbis from serving as military chaplains. There were three Jews living in Bangor at the time. (Now there is a *minyan* of *shomer Shabbos* families in Bangor!)

The number of Orthodox rabbis in the army has also risen over the years. Rabbi Sachs estimates that when he joined, around 30% of Jewish chaplains were Orthodox. Today, he says, that figure is much higher.



Moshe Miller interviewing Rabbi Colonel Nosson Sachs.



Rabbi Nosson Sachs in a military chopper.

Jewish chaplains as a whole comprise a tiny percentage of the entire army chaplaincy. A chaplain working in the communications department of the army informed *Zman* that there are over 2,800 chaplains in the army, with about 1,650 serving in active duty. There are 26 Jewish chaplains—10 serving in active duty as of this writing. As a result, rabbis encounter many Gentiles in need of a chaplain, and many non-Jewish chaplains encounter Jewish soldiers.

“In the army,” Rabbi Sachs explains, “I cut a deal with the Christian chaplains. ‘Look, there are more of your folk than there are of mine here, and plenty of your folk come to me with questions. You don’t want