

On The Front Lines Courageous Jews Serving in the US Military

From pogroms and inquisitions to slavery and holocausts, Jews have endured centuries of persecution at the hands of oppressors. The story of our bondage in Egypt is the first instance of this persecution on a national level, and this month, *Nissan*, is the month of redemption when we celebrate the deliverance of the Jews from Egyptian servitude. We thank *Hashem* for the miracles He performed then and continues to perform for us; miracles that have made us an enduring people.

Today, *baruch Hashem*, most Jews reside in countries where they can live openly as Jews. For many, the most patriotic way of showing appreciation to the land providing this freedom is through joining the armed forces. There are currently many Jewish men and women serving in the US military both in active and reserve duty. **Zman** is proud to present this series of firsthand accounts and reports about the military life of such Jews.

Our coverage begins with the insights of a fascinating person whose various encounters on and off the battlefield makes him unforgettable: Rabbi Colonel Nosson Sachs of the US Army. His dynamic approach to *kiruv* and charismatic personality, combined with his vivid description of wartime experiences, is riveting. After serving



Jewish chaplain in lands of Islamic terror
190

Serving those who serve...
204

Vietnam & Gulf War combat zone chaplain
225

"I was there" Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941
229

Rabbi, Officer, Mayor...
231

Beards in the military
233

Moshe Miller - Y. Lefkowitz

on the front lines, Rabbi Sachs returned with stories of fear and carnage as well as faith and restoration.

The next section is about the Aleph Institute, an organization that provides Jewish servicemen with a plethora of material and supplies to enhance their Jewish experience as they serve their country. The **Zman** team was invited recently to an exclusive Aleph-sponsored Shabbaton that offers advice and inspiration to members of the US military. We not only gained a new respect and appreciation for the life of a soldier (or sailor), but heard some of their incredible stories and share them in these pages.

Aleph's other focus is providing these same resources to Jewish prisoners scattered throughout every state in the country. Their incredible work in this field, too, is covered in our report.

However, let's first take a journey back in time, before all these services for Jewish soldiers existed – a time when some Jews serving in the army bravely decided to ask their commanding officers to take leave in order to conduct a *Pesach seder*. The first story involves Union soldiers fighting in the Civil War, while the second takes place in the European theater at the close of World War II, and involves both Jewish soldiers and recently liberated Holocaust survivors.

Civilian Guests at a Military Seder

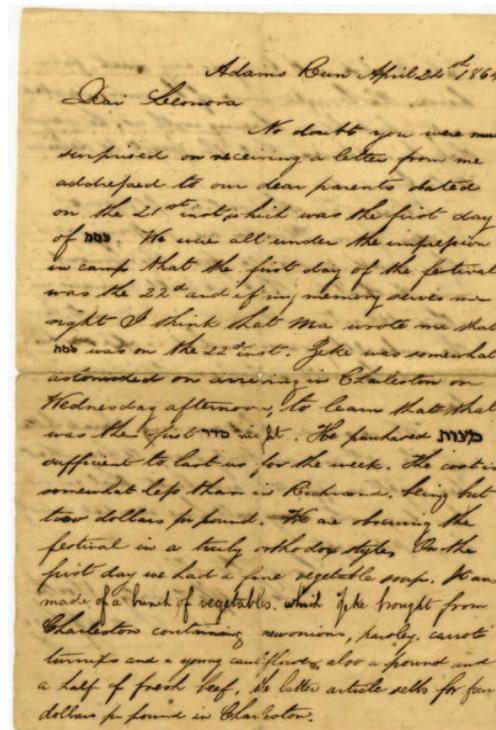
America has historically been a land of exceptional kindness to Jews. While other countries limited freedoms and severely persecuted Jews, America has, for the most part, provided Jews with the same rights and freedoms enjoyed by the rest of its citizenry. Even within the military, where the necessarily strict discipline means individuality must be curtailed, the general policy has been to allow religious rights to the extent conditions allow.

For religious Jews, military life presents innumerable difficulties, perhaps never more so than on *Pesach*. The extreme dietary restrictions can mean either obtaining a dispensation allowing special kosher-for-*Pesach* foods or going very hungry for eight days. Fortunately, the US Army enjoys a very positive reputation for permitting special foods and services – and as the following story about a *seder* during the Civil War attests, has enjoyed this reputation for a long time.

Seder in the Civil War

Normally Jacob Joel would have been busy preparing for the *seder* with his family around their dining room table at his home in Cleveland. This year, however, little was normal. Joel found himself far from his family and with no hope of being able to return home in time for the *seder* night. It was 1862 and the Civil War was raging across America. Jacob Joel was one of many Jewish soldiers who had volunteered to serve in the Union Army.

Disputes between the Southern States and the Northern ones over the issue of slavery had been boiling for many years. Now they had plunged the nation into the bitterest war it ever saw on its own home soil. The Confederate Army, under the brilliant leadership of General Robert E. Lee, won one smashing victory after another, and the Union forces soon found themselves badly pressed.



Letter Jacob Joel mailed to his sister describing the *seder* he enjoyed with fellow Jewish soldiers at the front.

Private Joel's regiment, the 23rd Regiment of Ohio, spent months fighting under adverse conditions. Despite having suffered heavy losses they had surged ahead through the mountains of West Virginia, forcing the Confederate forces to retreat hundreds of miles. The arrival of winter had finally brought the bitter fighting to a temporary halt. It was too difficult for either side advance in the cold and snow.

The 23rd Regiment wintered in the hills near the village of Fayette, West Virginia. Their task was to protect the railways from the Confederate forces holed up in the nearby Sewell Mountains. The Southern forces were lying in wait for an opportunity to sabotage the rails that were critical to the Northern supply lines.

The winter of 1861-2 had been a bitter one and everyone was pining for home. Nobody was as desperate for a leave of absence now, though, as the 21 Jewish soldiers in the regiment. *Pesach* was fast approaching and their families were so

far away. The only connection they would have with the joyful *Yom Tov* would be their memoirs of years past, sharing the *seder* together with their loved ones.

Private Joel sat down with his friends Saul Reich, Joseph Lewenstein, Berel Leffler and Isaac Altman to figure out a plan. Maybe they could obtain permission from the commanding officer to return home for *Yom Tov*? Everyone agreed that even if they would explain the significance of the *seder* a leave was very unlikely.

Their commanding officer, William Rosencrans, was a dignified and understanding man. Although he maintained strict discipline, the troops under his command appreciated his readiness to do anything for them.

"Do you think," Joel asked the others, "that the commander would allow us to make our own *seder* right here?"

If they couldn't join their families for *Yom Tov*, the least they could ask for was a chance to experience a taste of freedom by holding their own *seder* together. The group decided to pen a letter to Rosencrans explaining the importance of *Pesach*. Since they would not be able to celebrate the holiday at home, would he allow them a brief leave from their duties to conduct the two *sedarim* according



Jewish servicemen at a *seder* after WWII. The room is decorated with portraits of President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill (nether was in office by then).