

Kosher and halal MREs feed religious diversity

By Joe Gould
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Jewish troops observing the Passover holiday cannot consume bread or — in some traditions — beans and corn or their derivatives, making it difficult for deployed soldiers to comply with their religious obligations.

Often, they have cobbled together meals on their own from permissible foods, such as salami, canned tuna, fresh fruit and matzoh, said Army Reserve Col. Bonnie Koppell, a Phoenix, Ariz., rabbi and command chaplain with the 63rd Regional Support Command.

"People functioned as an Army of one, as it were," she said.

But when Passover, which commemorates the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, begins March 29, many Jewish soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines will have access to special rations supplied by the Defense Logistics Agency.

These are not the only rations tailored to support religious observance. Year-round, the DLA's Defense Supply Center Philadelphia ships thousands of halal and kosher rations for Muslim and Jewish troops, as well as detainees and foreign militaries.

In 2009, the center distributed 204,000 kosher meals and 1.32 million halal meals, according to Jim Lecollier, chief of DSCP's individual rations branch. For this Passover, it has distributed more than 7,500 Passover meals and a number of related kits used to conduct a ritual feast called a seder. The kits are full of Passover-specific foods and religious materials.

Kosher and halal meals cost the Pentagon roughly the same as other MREs, \$86 per case of 12, Lecollier said. The kosher-for-Passover meals cost more, \$126 for a case of 12.

This year, the Army ordered 341 cases of the meals, the Navy and Marines ordered 213, and the Air Force ordered 72.

Koppell said that providing specialty foods is an important way to support diversity and troops' free expression of religion.

"It gives them a sense that their religious observance is respected, that they're understood for who they are, they're supported and respected," she said.



Kosher and halal rations have been available since Operation Desert Storm, and rations adhering to kosher-for-Passover rules — which are more restrictive than normal kosher rules — were first offered in 2004.

Although the process varies by service, personnel in need of such meals should request them through their chaplain, said Lecollier. Often, units pre-purchase kosher and halal meals to have on hand, but kosher-for-Passover meals must be ordered three to four months before the holiday, he said.

While halal and kosher standards both prohibit some items, such as pork, the two standards are not interchangeable. Halal foods cannot contain alcohol, and kosher foods cannot contain shellfish or mix meat and dairy.

My Own Meals, a Deerfield, Ill., company, manufactures Glatt kosher MREs and — under its J & M Food Products division — Dhabihah halal MREs, company President Mary Anne Jackson said.

But the meals are not always easy for the troops to locate when their unit is deploying rapidly and has no inventory. In some cases, soldiers and their relatives have contacted Jackson directly to locate or order meals.

"For the most part, there are kosher and halal meals in theater at all times," Jackson said. "If someone tells you there aren't, they're wrong. They're in Kuwait, they're in [United Arab Emirates], Iraq, Afghanistan. They're everywhere."

My Own Meals, which has contracted with U.S. military since

1996, also makes its kosher and halal meals for grocery stores, universities and prisons.

To produce kosher meals, workers under the supervision of a rabbi must painstakingly dismantle, steam-clean and inspect the company production machinery and utensils. Each of the ingredients — including kosher meat from Minnesota and New Jersey — are certified kosher, assembled, cooked and packaged under rabbinical supervision.

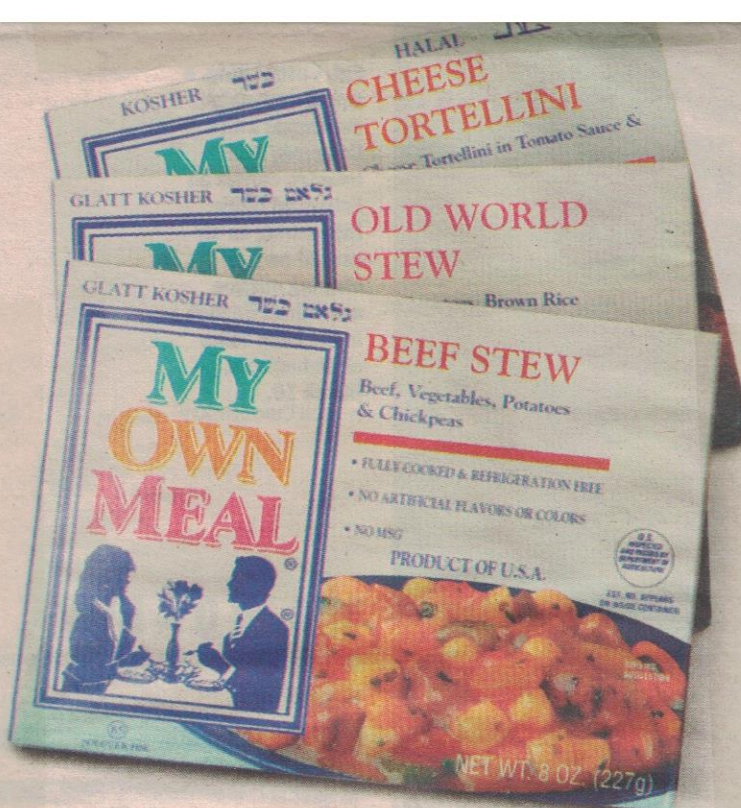
Abdenour Moussawi, an inspector with the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America, certifies halal food at J & M facilities. Moussawi inspects equipment for cleanliness and supervises production.

J & M purchases meat from halal butchers in California, Washington, Iowa and New Jersey, where Muslim butchers must invoke the name of Allah as the animals are slaughtered.

A Muslim has no choice but to eat, dress and live according to halal — meaning permissible — standards, Moussawi said. Lack of access to halal food could harm a soldier's job performance.

"It has to do with his psyche," Moussawi said. "If he's not comfortable with what he's eating, he's not going to be a comfortable soldier. You have to make everything proper for him."

Kosher company LaBriute, of Lakewood, N.J., is supplying Passover meals this year. Two entrees, bone-in chicken and beef stew with vegetables, are complemented by matzoh crackers, coffee, tea, dried fruit, nuts, maca-



PHOTOS BY THOMAS BROWN/STAFF

The Defense Logistics Agency provides kosher and halal rations year-round so U.S. and foreign troops can adhere to religious dietary restrictions.

WHAT'S ON THE MENU

Halal meals

Lamb & Lentil Stew
Lamb & Barley Stew
My Kind of Chicken
Chicken & Black Beans
Chicken Mediterranean
Chicken & Noodles
Old World Stew
Beef Stew
Florentine Lasagna
Vegetarian Stew
Cheese Tortellini
Pasta with Garden Vegetables

Kosher Meals

My Kind of Chicken
Chicken Mediterranean
Chicken & Noodles
Chicken & Black Beans
Beef Stew
Old World Stew
Pasta With Garden Vegetables
Vegetarian Stew
Cheese Tortellini
Florentine Lasagna

Sides and accessories

Bagel chips or snack mix
Peanuts
Raisins
Granola bars
Cereal, cocoa
Salt, pepper
Coffee, creamer, sugar
Flameless heater
Moist towelette
Spoon
Toilet tissue

rooms, canned salmon and gefilte fish (a pungent carp patty).

A sense of community

This Passover, Koppell is one of many chaplains with plans to conduct a seder for troops. She will travel to Kuwait and use a government-issued seder kit, which includes a plastic seder plate, a box of matzoh, religiously significant foods and a Passover prayer book called a haggadah.

"It builds a tremendous sense of community," Koppell said. "You have a private sitting next to a captain at the seder table, where under normal circumstances, they wouldn't have that kind of peer relationship. It's an opportunity to freely be who they are in a place they might not feel that freedom."

Abe Halberstam, president of LaBriute, said that when the gov-

ernment awarded him the contract in late January to provide kosher-for-Passover meals, not all his suppliers had begun producing kosher-for-Passover items. He had to wrangle the food from suppliers, assemble the meals and ship them — all in time for the holiday.

"The minute I get that contract, I start pulling all my resources together, and start nudging and making sure everyone is in sync," Halberstam said. "We go into high gear, and it's a big challenge."

The orders went out via Army Post Office and Fleet Post Office on March 5.

"I believe we all have to take care of our troops one way or the other," Halberstam said. "The most rewarding part of that is, when there are troops out there that need meals, I get these kits out to them on time." □