

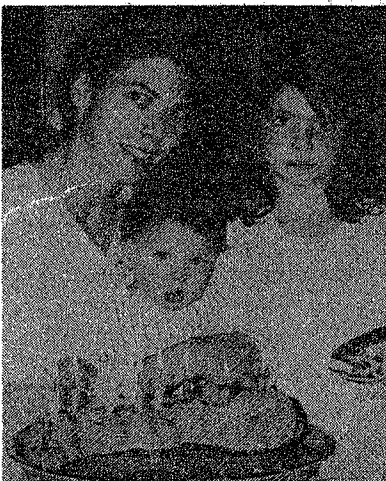
Creates temple in God's forsaken land

Punishing heat, savage winds, vicious bugs, snakes, sand, disease — that is the world Rabbi Joel Newman describes in his letters from Somalia.

The 40-year-old chaplain, who shipped out of Camp Pendleton writes that his temporary home is "truly a God-forsaken part of the Earth." And yet, he tells his wife in a letter, "I truly like what I'm doing, and each day I put on my desert cammos [camouflage uniform], I feel good about myself and where I am."

Janet Newman, whose contact with her husband has been limited to letters and highly erratic three-minute phone calls, says the Conservative rabbi has found unique ways to bring Judaism to U.S. personnel stationed in that troubled Moslem country.

For a while, Newman says from her home in San Diego County,



JANET NEWMAN, BABY EMILY and Rachel had to celebrate this past Hanuka without Daddy — he's the only Jewish chaplain in Somalia. August 19, 1993

her husband, who is the only Jewish chaplain in Somalia, held services "on a cliff overlooking the Indian Ocean."

But when the road became too dangerous, he moved his operation to an abandoned golf course — "i.e., one big sand trap," she says with a laugh — adjacent to the bombed-out U.S. Embassy in Mogadishu.

There, he made a Torah ark out of a metal-rations box, placed before it an "eternal light" consisting of "a candle in a grape juice can," and named the makeshift synagogue Beit Yonah (Dove

ently looked into it and concluded that they were ancient Jewish people who came from Ethiopia or maybe Israel."

Among Americans, however, there wasn't even a minyan until the middle of January. When he first arrived a month earlier, Weiner says, "there were only four of us" attending Newman's services by the sea. "It was by far the nicest place for an outdoor shul," the San Diego doctor says. Standing on a plateau overlooking the ocean and a large natural coral formation, "you felt you were out there by yourself. Around sunset it

the little "congregation" has grown slowly, as more and more Army personal ... joined the Marines ...

House), using his wife's Hebrew name. Janet Newman also supplied the Torah's camouflage-colored cover, as well as the rabbi's camouflage prayer shawl and matching yarmulkes.

Until recently, one of those worshipping at Beit Yonah was Dr. Richard Weiner, a Navy anesthesiologist who spent five weeks in Somalia. "It was a nice little shul," he says from his home in San Diego, and "it was very comforting to have other Jewish people there."

Not that Somalia is exactly overflowing with Jews, although Weiner heard an intriguing story from one of his translators about belonging to a group whose "traditions were apparently close to Jewish traditions." Weiner didn't know "if they're a Lost Tribe but [an American professor] appar-

was very peaceful and quiet."

But as the military mission progressed and gunmen were chased out of the capital city, they began to set up ambushes along the road. That's when Newman created Beit Yonah.

The little "congregation" has grown slowly, as more and more Army personnel have joined the Marines. Weiner says he heard the week after he'd left that there were 17 worshippers attending Shabbat services. "We had little prayerbooks that were so small you could put them in a shirt pocket," the anesthesiologist reports. "I liked the prayers, and there were transliterations in case you weren't up on your Hebrew."

And kosher MREs (Meals Ready to Eat) were a big improvement over military fare, according to Weiner, who says the

initials are jokingly said to stand for "Meals Rejected by Everyone." But he notes that some of the regular military rations "were so unpopular even the Somalis wouldn't eat them."

The JWB Chaplains Council originally supplied 200 pre-packaged kosher meals for the more than 100 Jewish Marines in the country. Last month they followed that up with another 4,000. Newman has been putting the meals to good use. In one of his letters to Rabbi David Lapp, director of the chaplains council, he wrote how he's gained a reputation for "caring for the Muslim service people by distributing copies of the Koran and some kosher MREs" since no meals acceptable according to Islamic law are available. "The good will is great," he added.

In another letter to Lapp he told of visiting an orphanage/feeding center that "depicts very clearly why we are here. The small treats we leave go a long way in such a miserable life." Also visiting the orphanage that day were some Saudi Arabians, "so, with 'tablets' blazing, I walked up and gave them a friendly 'Salem Alaykum' and a handshake and a smile," Newman wrote. The "tablets" are his chaplain's insignia — Tablets of the Law topped by a Star of David.

In letters to his wife, Newman has gone into detail about the daily grind — 15-minute waits for much-coveted three-minute showers, for example — as well as his

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exploits as Somalia's circuit rabbi. For instance, he wrote about flying to the "Jews out at sea" — those posted on ships off the Somali coast. The winds were so strong on deck that he wrote of "leaning" his way to stairs that had no railing, the ocean visible through the steps.

"Not cool!" he wrote. "I [while the ship rocked] stepped gingerly on the first step down...slipped and just sat down. Who was the idiot who invented that way off the flight deck?"

Janet Newman says that although she hopes her husband will return soon, she's asked the JWB to send him supplies for both Purim and Passover. Even if he's not still in Somalia for those holidays, other Jewish members of the service will be, she points out.

Meanwhile, though, he's missing a lot at home — "our daughter's first birthday and her learning to walk. She had a couple teeth come in, and now she's running and starting to talk."

recently, she explains. When another Marine father returned home from Somalia, Emily "thought it was her daddy and she ran to him. When she realized it wasn't him, she sat down and cried. It was so sad. We went home and watched the video again."

Tamar Kaufman is on staff of the Northern California Jewish Bulletin where this article appeared.

Newman sent little Emily a videotape for her birthday, though, and "she watches it and squeals, she's so happy to see him," Janet Newman says. "We play it all the time."

The gift was particularly useful



Surrounded by camouflage netting, Rabbi Joel Newman (left) and "congregant" share quiet moment in makeshift synagogue Newman created in Mogadishu. Rifle leaning in background underscores how fleeting such occasions must be in troubled Somalia.