

Aleph Institute Helps U.S. Military Troops Obtain Kosher Field Rations

Thanks to the efforts of the Florida-based Aleph Institute, U.S. troops who want kosher food will be provided with complete kosher military field rations for the first time. Five years of concerted effort just ended with a Pentagon pact guaranteeing kosher meals for Jewish men and women serving in the armed forces.

On June 5, the military signed a contract with My Own Meals, Inc., of Deerfield, Ill., to provide rabbinically certified kosher rations. The Miami-based Aleph Institute, a Chabad-Lubavitch affiliate, played a key role in ensuring the availability and integrity of the kosher food.

Until now, the military never provided kosher food to its troops. Soldiers had to bring their own field rations on maneuvers or subsist on foods like crackers and sardines.

In a recent effort to meet diverse religious and dietary needs, the military proposed offering Multi-Faith MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat) that substituted the regular entree with a vegetarian one. Unaware of the complexities of a kosher diet, they thought that this would fulfill kosher requirements.

"This is where Aleph stepped in," said president of My Own Meals, Mary Jackson, who first alerted Aleph to the situation. Isaac Jaroslawicz, Director of Legal Affairs at Aleph, quickly contacted key military personnel to ensure that rabbinic kosher standards would be upheld. "They presented and supported a Jewish community position on what constitutes kosher rations," said Jackson.

"Our efforts were consistent with our mission to assist Jewish men and women in institutional environments (e.g., prisons and the military) and to help them observe their faith," said Jaroslawicz. "In this instance, military administrators just needed some guidance in how the system of kashrut works."

"The Aleph Institute came forward at every key stage to push this through," said Jackson.

Finally, in June of this year, the Defense

Personnel Support Center (DPSC), the purchasing arm for military personnel, contracted with My Own Meals to provide the kosher rations. Seven military agencies signed the agreement.

"We are really doing everything we can to satisfy the dietary requirement of the diverse group of fighting men and women," said Frank Bankoff, contracting officer for the DPSC. "I think we now have a ration that satisfies the unique dietary restrictions of an Orthodox Jewish soldier."

"We couldn't have fought this battle without Aleph," said Jackson. "The Aleph Institute made an impact on anyone in the military with religious concerns."

Aleph went as high as the Pentagon to ensure that kosher requests would be met. "I saw this immediately as an ethical and moral issue," said Chaplain Cecil Richardson, Executive Director of the Armed Services Chaplain Board at the Pentagon. "In the long run, the ones who benefit are the people in the field, looking for something to eat that is consistent with their faith. I am really thrilled about this."

People who have been in the field know what a benefit this will be. "When I was in the military it wasn't possible to keep kosher," said Michael H. Cohen, retired U.S. Air Force Major and Director of Military Programs at the Aleph Institute. "Now with this new contract, you can be in the armed forces and still maintain kosher dietary laws."

"[The new kosher meals] will be a benefit and a fulfillment of belief," said Major Norton Schectman, now stationed at the Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio.

In addition to their regular meals, My Own Meals will also provide special Passover packages and add customary holiday food like apples and honey on Rosh Hashanah.

"From my business point of view, this was not a big accomplishment," said Jackson, who worked tirelessly with Aleph. "This became personal to me and I have a sense of personal satisfaction."