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HOLIDAY FEATURE

Rabbis head for the Gulf, Bosnia to bring taste of matzah to military

By Peter Ephross

NEW YORK, March 15 (JTA) -- Somewhere on a ship in the Persian Gulf.

That's where Rabbi Joel Newman will lead a seder this Passover.

He'll also lead seders, throughout the Passover week, in Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, bringing the holiday to Jewish personnel in the U.S. military.

The seder provides servicemen and women the opportunity to "vote with their feet," Newman said in a telephone interview before flying off to the Gulf. "They're not coming for the food; they're coming because they're seeking a Jewish experience that is lacking in their everyday military life."

Newman, a military chaplain based at a naval station in San Diego, is one of about 30 Jewish chaplains in the U.S. armed forces who will be conducting Passover seders this year in places as far-flung as South Korea, the Mediterranean and Okinawa, an island off Japan.

In addition to flying the soldiers in for the seders, the military distributes kosher-for-Passover food kits for the whole week.

Although there are no precise statistics, there are an estimated 7,000 Jewish members of the armed forces, including the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps, out of the total military population of 1.4 million, according to the U.S. Department of Defense.

Seders -- some in hot spots -- have been conducted for military personnel since World War II, said Rabbi David Lapp, director of the Jewish Welfare Board Jewish Chaplains Council, which oversees Jewish issues in the military.

In 1996, for example, Lapp and Rabbi David Zalis led a Passover seder for 80 U.S. servicemen in Tuzla, Bosnia.

Seders have been conducted in the troubled Central European hot spot, where U.S. forces are stationed as international peacekeepers.

The seder in Bosnia, scheduled again for this year, is a tribute to those who are trying to "bring some semblance of freedom to people who don't know it," said Lapp.

In conjunction with the chaplains council, the military provides other programs during the rest of the year for Jewish soldiers stationed overseas.

Indeed, personnel who want to eat kosher meals can eat pre-packaged food that has been provided for the past three years by a Chicago-based company.

Vegetarian provisions and meals prepared according to Muslim dietary restrictions are supplied to the military by My Own Meals as well.

And there are programs for other Jewish holidays as well. For the High Holidays last year, Newman, 46, led services for about 30 on the USS Abraham Lincoln, an aircraft carrier then stationed in the Gulf.

With yarmulkes, candles and wine, a miniature Torah with camouflage cover and an ark provided by the Jewish Welfare Board -- what Newman describes as an opened-up metal briefcase-- "it looked like a nice little shul."

Since the services have to accommodate those who grew up in all Jewish denominations, as well as unaffiliated Jews, Newman, who was ordained at the Leo Baeck College in London and worked at congregations in St. Paul and Denver prior to joining the service in 1991, prepared his own prayer book.

Of course, there were some constraints: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur had to be conducted in one day, with a break for what Newman calls a "traditional yontif meal" -- fish, vegetables, and potatoes, as well as apples and honey.

The home base pays for the food that gets shipped to the servicemen, while the outfit to which the personnel belong -- in this case, the Fifth Fleet -- pays to fly in the servicemen.

In addition to working in the Persian Gulf, Newman has conducted services in Somalia and near Hawaii. He has also led a Tashlich service, the casting off of sins after Rosh Hashanah, in Tokyo Bay.

"You get around a little bit," he said.

Newman says that members of the military -- particularly younger personnel away from home for the first time -- often become more interested in religion during their time of service.

In San Diego, for example, where, like other military chaplains, he attends to the needs of personnel of all faiths, he leads a Hebrew class for Jewish members of the Marines.

This religious renaissance, which Newman says is often encouraged by the military itself, is even more pronounced among personnel serving overseas.

"They get more observant as they get further away from home," he says.

For the personnel in the Gulf, who work long hours in a heat that Newman estimates regularly hits 120 degrees, the services come as a welcome relief.

It's a breather for "sailors whose Monday becomes Wednesday becomes Tuesday becomes Friday," says Newman.

"It's bringing a little piece of home to them. When you bring out that first bite of matzah, there's no substitute for that."

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