




## AMERICAN JEWRY

 Print This Story

### BEHIND THE HEADLINES

## Saddam's out, seder's in: Passover in Hussein's palace

By Joe Berkofsky

NEW YORK, April 5 (JTA) — When Rabbi Mitchell Ackerson asks why this Passover is different than any other, the answer involves Saddam Hussein.

Ackerson, the senior Jewish chaplain for Operation Iraqi Freedom, was set to lead historic seders this week for Jewish servicepeople and civilians in Saddam's former Presidential Palace in Baghdad.

As he readied a seder for up to 125 Jewish troops, civilian administrators and diplomats, and even a few Iraqi Jews, Ackerson considered the prospect of celebrating the Jewish people's liberation from slavery in Egypt in Saddam's palace appropriate.

"We've all come in partnership to provide freedom for this country, in a place where freedom was ripped apart," Ackerson told JTA in a phone interview late last week from Baghdad.

The seder marked another historic milestone: In a rare move, the Department of Defense requisitioned "seder kits" from a civilian supplier for the estimated 1,000 Jews serving in the Iraqi war effort and elsewhere.

"This is the true spiritual victory over an evil empire," said Rabbi Jacob Goldstein, joint forces command chaplain for the National Guard in New York, who has helped ferry religious supplies to Jewish troops in the war.

"Our government takes the religious needs of its soldiers very seriously and goes out of its way to make sure they are met."

Other organizations are also pitching in for Passover. The Aleph Institute in Surfside, Fla., has sent Passover supplies to more than 1,300 soldiers around the world, continuing a tradition it has upheld since 1995.

The group, which is affiliated with Chabad-Lubavitch and also minister to the needs of Jews in U.S. prisons, shipped thousands of pounds of shmura matzah — the matzah baked especially for Passover following strict guidelines — as well as seder plates, Haggadahs, grape juice, gefilte fish and macaroons to soldiers from Haiti to Italy to Iraq.

E-mails to the Aleph Institute came from troops aboard Sixth Fleet ships off Italy; from Navy personnel in Haiti; and even from a Protestant Air Force chaplain asking for help for 6-8 Jews.

Rabbi Menachem "Mendy" Katz, of the Aleph Institute, said the organization sends out Passover and other holiday supplies to any member of the military that responds to its e-mails seeking out Jews.

"Not one piece of matzah was sent out without a specific request," Katz said.

Other organizations including the Jewish War Veterans of New Jersey, the Jewish Federation of Rockland County, N.Y., and a newly launched group called the Jewish Soldiers Foundation have also helped fund similar efforts.

These groups stepped in after some said Jewish troops were not receiving sufficient holiday supplies on time for other holidays. In the past the Jewish Chaplains Council of the Jewish Welfare

Board in New York was generally in charge of such efforts.

A series of reports in the Jewish Week of New York detailed delays and other organizational problems with the delivery of religious items under the Welfare Board's aegis.

Ackerson, for example, said he was still waiting to receive more than 400 Purim baskets that the National Council of Young Israel, a modern Orthodox group, had spent more than \$10,000 gathering and sent according to the Welfare Board's instructions.

A Welfare Board official could not be reached for comment.

Ackerson, meanwhile, said the Defense Department, via its Defense Logistics Agency, purchased enough supplies for Jewish servicepeople in Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait and Qatar.

They include two seder kits with Haggadahs, seder plates that include the necessary ritual foods, beef stew, fish, fruit, grape juice and gum, along with kosher-for-Passover rations for 14 more meals, he said.

The military's official kosher supplier, My Own Meals of Chicago, produced about 4,000 MREs, or meals ready to eat, at \$6.95 per ration, about 30 cents more than conventional rations, said its founder and president, Mary Ann Jackson.

This was the first year the company got back into the Passover business, she said. In 1995 and 1996, the company made thousands of Passover meals, but the Welfare Board only ordered a few hundred.


Goldstein is among those who welcome the government's supplying Jewish troops with food and religious items.

He spent this past Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in Iraq, and was "floored" to find kosher meals including corned beef and pastrami, bagels and lox, cakes and doughnuts — enough that troops had leftovers for Sukkot, which he marked by helping erect a sukkah outside the main doors to Saddam's main palace.

Goldstein also led High Holiday services in Saddam's compound, a massive area encompassing 40 buildings, gardens and lakes, greenhouses and an opulent palace featuring hand-painted vaulted ceilings, marble floors and gold fixtures.

"Spiritually it was uplifting to have two Torahs and be dancing in Saddam's palace and declaring the unity of God," he said.

Other Jewish chaplains leading seders in military hot spots include Rabbi Shmuel Felzenberg in northern Iraq; Rabbi Mordechai Schwab in Kuwait; Rabbi Avraham Cohen in Qatar; Rabbi Kenneth Leinwand in Afghanistan and Rabbi Brett Oxman in South Korea.

 Print This Story

[Back to top ^](#)