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## Soldiers To Get Passover Food All Eight Days

*But Jewish chaplains' group continues fund raising for its 'solo seder kit.'*

Stewart Ain - Staff Writer



The U.S. Department of Defense for the first time is buying complete kosher-for-Passover meals for Jewish military personnel, allowing hundreds of them to celebrate the Festival of Freedom even while in combat areas, The Jewish Week has learned.

The action comes even as the Jewish Chaplains Council of the Jewish Welfare Board continues soliciting money to provide what it calls "solo seder kits" for Jewish troops overseas.

The JWB has been the government's sole distributor of kosher-for Passover food to Jewish troops since World War II, but partly as a result of problems with distribution last year the government decided to contract with a different food vendor, My Own Meals in Chicago.

Bruce Greenfield, executive director of the United Synagogue's New York Metropolitan Region, said he was unaware of the government's decision and has been raising money for the Jewish Chaplains Council's efforts. United Synagogue gave the council \$10,000 last year.

Told of the change by The Jewish Week, Greenfield said: "If we find that the U.S. government is providing ample Passover food to our troops around the world, we see no need to support the JWB's effort and we will use our funds to support other needy persons and organizations in our own community."

Rabbi David Lapp, director of the Jewish Chaplains Council, said his organization is continuing to send the solo seder kits "to our chaplains in the Middle East, Germany, Italy, the 6th Fleet and South Korea."

The kit contains matzah, two cans of chicken soup, two cans of tuna fish, macaroons, grape juice, candy fruit slices and a Haggadah.

Asked why his group would continue the solo seder kit program, Rabbi Lapp said it is to "supplement" the meals the military is buying. And he expressed uncertainty about the government program.

"All of this is on paper," he said. "I want to see how it works. If it works, we can go with it for next year."



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"We're not charging [the military] anything for the kits because a lot of organizations are sending us money" for them, Rabbi Lapp added. "And there are people who saw advertisements the JWB took out in newspapers" and sent in money.

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The advertisement, which appears in this issue of The Jewish Week, makes no reference to the government buying kosher-for-Passover food from My Own Meals.

Instead, the ad notes that Jewish military personnel will be "far from the people they love" this Passover, "but with your help they will know they are not alone. You can make it possible for Jewish GIs to celebrate Passover with all of the Jewish people. Solo Seder Kits and other services provided by the JWB Jewish Chaplains Council will bring them the Jewish community's love and gratitude."

Robin Ballin, senior vice president of marketing and communication for the JCC Association, of which the JWB is a part, said her group's solo seder kits are being provided to Jewish troops "around the world" and that she understood the Defense department was providing kosher-for-Passover food to troops only in the Middle East.

But Maryann Bonk, an inventory manager specialist at the Defense Supply Center in Philadelphia, said she has received orders not only from Jewish troops in the Middle East but also from "those in Korea and Germany."

"They are the JWB, we are the Department of Defense and we're there to take care of our soldiers and make sure they get what they need worldwide," she said.

Ballin said the ad notes that the JWB provides not only solo seder kits but "other services" and therefore is not misleading. She noted that last year the board sent 1,000 Bibles to troops on the holiday of Shavuot, apple-favored snacks and honey for the High Holy Days, a lulav and etrog for Sukkot, and Chanukah packages.

Last year, Ballin said, the JWB spent \$325,000 and had income of \$56,000, about \$30,000 of which came from the government purchase of the solo seder kits at \$14 a kit. The rest of the money came largely from donations and fund raising.

In addition to providing kosher-for-Passover food for the seders, the military for the first time is providing Jewish members of the armed forces with Passover food for all eight days of the holiday, which begins April 5. A military Web site said a Passover Food for the Week Kit includes 14 meals — two for each day — and 14 fruit cans "so the serviceman/woman can observe the Passover dietary rules for the entire week."

The site noted that there are two meals in the seder kit, so only 14 additional meals are needed.

The seder kits include gefilte fish with sauce, boxes of grape juice, beef stew, cans of fruit, horseradish, charoset, a shank bone, pearl onions, a disposable seder plate, a Haggadah and yarmulke.

Bonk noted that her office buys about \$10.4 billion worth of food, clothing, medical and other supplies for the armed services worldwide each year. She said she has spent about \$40,000 for kosher-for-Passover food for the troops, but that orders are still arriving and will be filled until March 17 for Jewish service personnel overseas.

"It's wonderful that we are able to do this for our troops," she said. "This is

what they need to practice their faith and we would like to do it in the years to come."

Frank Johnson, a military public affairs officer, said that providing kosher-for-Passover food for the troops is "all part of our quality of life."

Bonk said her office became involved in buying the Passover food because of inquiries made after last year's Passover holiday. Rabbi Mitchell Ackerson, the senior Jewish chaplain in the combat zone, said in an e-mail that he began making inquiries "after last year's fiasco."

"There was not enough of anything and nothing to actually make a meal out of," he said. "I was directed to make sure it didn't happen again."

Rabbi Ackerson said he started working on the new seder kit in May or June.

"I worked the system and reminded everyone involved that they didn't want a repeat of last year or previous years," he said.

"I'm only happy to know that as long as a soldier, sailor, airman or Marine asks, they will have food not only for the seder but for the entire week. That's a first and I think that it's great and long overdue."

Rabbi Ackerson said the troops, especially the ones who were in the Iraq zone last year, were "thrilled" to hear about the government-supplied seder kit.

"As most of them said, it was too long in coming," the chaplain said.

Rabbi Jacob Goldstein, the joint forces command chaplain of the National Guard, said "the reason it is so important to provide kosher-for-Passover food this year is because of the hundreds of Jewish reservists who have been mobilized."

He added that this problem "has always existed but was overlooked because of the smaller numbers of Jews in the active forces. However, as reservists were mobilized in large numbers last year, the problem became very glaring and the lack of basic kosher-for-Passover food caused the Department of Defense to make sure that this would never happen again. Hence, the new program."

Mary Anne Jackson, president and founder of My Own Meals, said her company provides the military with kosher food throughout the rest of the year.

She said the beef stew in the kit "is placed in a pouch and cooked at high pressure, and as long as it is not opened it will stay for five years." The beef stew is stored in a box that has a self-contained heating coil.

Jackson said she hopes to diversify the menu next year. n

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