

 KOSHER CERTIFICATION

# KOSHER SPIRIT

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Kosher by the Numbers

by Chanie Brod

Deep in the woods a young man crouches, peering through the shrubbery. His fatigues are dusty and his beard is tangled. He is searching. After a diet of tuna, crackers, and the occasional fruit, the new 2nd Lieutenant Jacob Goldstein is hungry for some variety in his diet. His mission: track down berries.

A Lubavitch *yeshiva* graduate, Goldstein never expected to replace his rabbinical hat and jacket with a helmet and khakis. In 1967 the young rabbi, along with several friends, left *yeshiva* study halls for military bases, where they met with Jewish soldiers and helped men don *tefillin*. The conduct of the young rabbis impressed the Catholic chaplain, who persistently reminded Goldstein of the lack of religious provisions for our Jewish troops. After receiving a blessing from the Lubavitcher *Rebbe*, Rabbi Goldstein donned fatigues over his *tzitzis* and a helmet over his *yarmulke*, and took his first steps in his new combat boots.

The transition to military life is a difficult one. With wake-up any time between 03:30 and 05:00, the day begins whilst the birds still sleep. A large proportion of time is dedicated to physical fitness and combat training. After around ten weeks of boot camp soldiers are required to take a physical test where they are graded on push-ups, press-ups, and running. Meal time at the mess-hall is a time where the soldiers can unwind and enjoy a nutritious stew, chicken, or lasagna, but what's on the menu for the thousands of Jewish soldiers?

The soldier's diet requires 3500 calories. Meals need to be able to survive the impact of a paratrooper's 1000-foot jump, the heat of the Iraqi desert, and the freezing temperatures of the Russian winter...

Proper nutrition is of critical importance to support the soldiers' demanding routine, but feeding an army is complex business. Whilst the recommended daily intake for the average adult is 2000 calories, the average adult doesn't usually jump from planes and spend several hours running. The soldier's diet requires 3500 calories. Meals need to be able to survive the impact of a paratrooper's 1000-foot jump, the heat of the Iraqi desert, and the freezing temperatures of the Russian winter. Soldiers are supplied with MRE's (Meals Ready to Eat). These boxes, which are roughly the size of a VHS video, hold a foil packed 1200-calorie meal with a shelf life of three years. MRE's are made to survive extreme temperatures ranging from -40 to 140 degrees F.

When Goldstein joined the military, there were no kosher provisions for Jewish troops. Throughout his military career he was dispatched to dozens of countries. "Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Pakistan.... A lot of -stans. Russia. Somalia. Iraq. Kuwait..." he begins to list. For Goldstein and the Jewish troops, keeping kosher presented an additional battle. "We scrounged." Goldstein recalls. "I ate tuna, lots of it. Fruits and veggies. When we were in the woods we'd hunt for berries for variety. We're America and we gotta do better than that. It had to change."

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 they were unwittingly pivotal in improving the army life for thousands of Jewish soldiers. The 1991 Gulf war highlighted a problem in military food supply. With thousands of Jewish soldiers mobilized to the deserts of Iraq, there were no provisions of kosher meals. Goldstein saw his opportunity. His position as military Chaplain enabled him to be instrumental in changing the landscape for Jews in the military. After raising this issue with his superiors, the army opened the floor for bids for Kosher MREs and Rabbi Goldstein was appointed Kosher Food Advisor.

A bid came through that satisfied both the strict US military regulations and Cpl.

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Goldstein's high kosher standards. The process of manufacturing and preserving the food was overseen by Goldstein several times. Manufactured entirely in the USA, the kosher MRE's are made to withstand temperatures of -40 to 140 degrees and a 1200-foot drop.

The first four kosher MRE's produced included fish, chicken, beef and vegetarian. The meat meals are *glatt* kosher. In 1994, 10,000 of these pioneering kosher MREs joined the Marines in combat, experiencing the extreme weather conditions of Somalia. "They didn't want to eat anything else!" He says with pride. "They tasted great."

The meals can be eaten hot or straight from the box. When being dispatched to extreme hot climates an oven or microwave may not even be necessary to heat dinner. After leaving his MRE outside his tent for several hours one day in Iraq, Goldstein opened the box to a piping hot, cooked meal.

For the Jewish soldiers in the US military there is now one less battle to fight, and healthy, kosher MRE's are now available in the military mess halls. Keeping kosher without dropping the pounds is now a reality. Hunting for berries is no longer necessary when craving a change from tuna, and the expanded My Own Meals range now includes sixteen meal choices, with more varieties of beef, chicken, fish, vegetarian, and dairy. It's not only the Jews who are keeping kosher. Cpl. Goldstein reports that he frequently gets requests from non-Jewish soldiers for the kosher meals. Soldiers need only request the kosher rations and they are available in the mess hall or in combat. Josh, a 22 year-old Marine, did not expect that joining the military would give him an appreciation for keeping kosher. "Kosher is something I took for granted, having grown up with a kosher version of almost everything I wanted available at the local supermarket." he says. "In Afghanistan it's not like that. I can't pick up a candy bar or box of cereal with a kosher symbol on it. These kosher MRE's are a life saver".

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