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Chanukah in Iraq, 2006

By Rabbi Mitch Schranz

There is only one word to describe this year's Chanukah in Iraq: INCREDIBLE! Services and Menorah lightings took place on many bases and FOBs. Rabbi Mordechai Schwab and I traveled throughout Iraq, where we were able to spend some time with many of the troops, at least for one or two days. At Al Faw Palace a huge Menorah was lit (a la Chabad!) in the lobby of Saddam Hussein's one-time seat of power (and who knows what else!) Since Saddam had no shortage of palaces, there was another Menorah lighting in the International Zone Palace under the able leadership and coordination of Lay Leaders Col Nelson Mellitz and Maj Adam Torem. In fact, last Thursday we had a second candle lighting in one of the conference rooms where more than likely that wicked man held court. Nes gadol haya sham—a great miracle happened there!

The outpouring of support from Synagogues, schools, and private citizens all across America to their Jewish brethren in Iraq was mind-boggling. Boxes and boxes of Menorahs, candles, dreidels, cards, goodies poured into the post office like a tidal wave. You could feel the love these fine people packed into each box, with their messages of support and encouragement. It was heartfelt.

We are working at getting thank you letters out to everyone who sent us these gifts. It will take awhile as we are all very busy with the mission at hand. If you are reading this and you sent us something, I know I speak for all Jewish personnel when I say thank you from the bottom of our hearts! You made our Chanukah one we will remember the rest of our lives.

Another group of people that deserves much praise are our intrepid Jewish Lay Leaders. They are all doing a magnificent job keeping Jewish life alive and well in the outposts where there cannot be a full-time rabbi. We also thank LTJG Laurie Zimmet for coordinating the Menorah lighting and construction of the Menorah at Al Faw. I could not be there, but by all accounts it was an unforgettable moment. The Hard Corps Chorale Choir sang traditional Chanukah melodies, and a buffet of potato latkas, donuts, and other treats was served. SGT Moshe Lans deserves a big Yasher Koach for accompanying me on part of my trip, protecting me with his trusty M-16, and for helping work out the logistics of sending Chanukah boxes from Camp Victory elsewhere in Iraq. Chaplain (Major) Matt Goff, MNC-I Plans & Ops, and a Baptist pastor, was incredible and I owe him—big time. Matt was brilliant, cutting through the red tape to make things happen in order to facilitate Chanukah observances. Truly, this was a team effort.

In reflecting back on the past two weeks, I kept asking myself if the Almighty is perhaps trying to tell us something, or is there a lesson we should take away with us? Personally, having just returned from Tallil, Abraham and Sarah's home, it was confirmation (if any is needed) that the Brit (Covenant) between G-d and the Jewish people is eternal. Tyrants,

heartless regimes come and go, but there will always be a Jewish people. It was also a potent reminder that the little jar of oil can keep the Menorah burning brightly forever!

JWV in the Heartland

By Margo Lemberger

War is an unfortunate and inevitable reality of Man's past, present and most likely, future. As long as there are wars, there will be veterans. The oldest war veterans' group in the United States wasn't founded solely to remember those who have served our country, but specifically to honor Jews who have given their lives to that end.

The JWV is involved in veterans' rights and benefits, Jewish and Israeli issues and humanitarian efforts. In Indianapolis, this tradition is being continued with the local JWV chapter, Post 114 of Indiana, named for Fredrich Knefler, a Hungarian immigrant from Indiana who was the highest-ranking Jewish Civil War officer and a member of the family critical to the formation of the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation.

The Indianapolis Post counts 65 members among its ranks--both men and women--who have served in various conflicts, including World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War and Bosnia. Many of the post's activities are what one would expect of any veterans' group.

The members are proud to march in the Veteran's Day Parade and to take part in the annual MIA-POW Recognition Day Ceremony at the War Memorial in downtown Indianapolis. Post 114 is one of only six organizations bestowed the honor at that ceremony of ringing the bell recovered from the USS Indianapolis in memory of the lost soldiers. One of Post 114's most meaningful rituals is the annual Memorial Day Service to pay tribute to those Jewish servicemen and women of Central Indiana who have died, although not necessarily during wartime.

This is more than a dust-off-the-uniform-once-or-twice-a-year group. On the third Thursday of every month at the Arthur M. Glick Jewish Community Center, Post 114 members hold a meeting to keep current on issues, exchange ideas and information, and share the common experiences unique to veterans and Jews.

Because the concerns and interests of the membership are as varied and personal as the individuals who comprise it, each meeting features a different speaker to lead a discussion on a relevant topic. Recent meetings boast an impressive and varied list of influential leaders in their field. Dr. Myron Weinberger, who was one of the first physicians to draw the link between salt intake and high blood pressure, has spoken before the group, as has Dr. Stephen Rappaport, a recognized geriatric specialist. Post Commander Louis Lemberger, who led the pharmacological team that developed Prozac, has even taken the podium on occasion.

Speakers from within the legal community have included Hamilton Superior Court Judge Bernard "Buddy" Pylitt and Justice Ezra Friedlander, both of whom have been key in deciding Indiana's position on same-sex marriage issues, and District Attorney Scott Newman. Fifteen-term Congressman Andy Jacobs, whose efforts to revamp Social Security and Medicare still resonate today, has addressed the group, as has Indiana State Representative David Orentlicher, a Harvard-educated physician and lawyer, professor at the Indiana University School of Law, and a member of Beth-El Zedeck Congregation.

Looking to the future of the group as well as honoring its past, Post members reach out to the community--especially to its youth--to emphasize that the link between the past and future is the present. To that end, Post 114 remains visible and contributory to Indianapolis and Central Indiana-at-large, and not strictly as a Jewish-interest organization.

Post 114 annually recognizes Junior (JROTC) cadets within the Indianapolis Public School System who have excelled and are all-around representatives of the ideals JWV strives to perpetuate, regardless of their race or religion. In recent years, students from North Central, Pike, Ben Davis and Northwest High Schools have been awarded this medal of achievement.

Every year on Christmas and Valentine's Day, JWV members also visit with veterans at the Richard L. Roudebush VA Medical Center to pass the time and talk about their common experiences and concerns as veterans.

Selected members also act as representatives of the Post by addressing groups and organizations in and around Indianapolis to impart the importance of serving your country and being proud of and true to your religious roots.

This past Fourth of July, for example, members traveled to Goldman Union Camp Institute (GUCI) for a Question and Answer session with area 12-to-15 year olds.

The discussion included everything from the experience of serving in a conflict to what life as a soldier, nurse or other enlistee is like, how it could be reconciled with their Jewish identity, and questions about Jewish life in general. Post members also led Kaddish and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

It is these types of outreach activities that appeal to David Weintraub, a ten-year JWV member and Former Post Commander who came to Indiana in 1942 at age 15 from New York City. Weintraub doesn't believe that belonging to a veterans' group promotes war, but rather serves as a support system for the troops and the community. He sums up his reasoning for joining the Jewish War Veterans in two words:

"'Tikun olam'—repair the world," Weintraub says. "It's one of the mitzvahs that God has laid down for us-- it's a commandment-- so do whatever you can do to help repair the whole world or one person."

Through these acts, Weintraub hopes increased membership will reflect their good intentions. "Doing things that people know we're doing will make them more eager to join an organization that is doing things instead of a send-in-your-dues-and-then-you-don't-hear-from-them-until-next-year kind of group."

Two warriors cross paths: Moshe Dayan and Abe Baum

By Paul Flanzer

It began after a New York City Jewish War Veterans meeting in early July 1948. The speaker was Abraham J. Baum. The audience was comprised of recent veterans of World War II. Baum held them in rapt attention. He was one of the army's most decorated Jewish soldiers: two Silver Stars, two Bronze Stars, four Purple Hearts and the nation's second highest military decoration - the Distinguished Service Cross.

This was an exciting and terrifying time for Jews everywhere. Just a few months earlier, on May 14, David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel. A few hours later from the north, east and south the armies of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Transjordan (later just Jordan), Egypt and a formation from Saudi Arabia crossed the borders set by the United Nations and invaded Israel. Baum, along with other Jewish veterans, was supporting the Hagganah by recruiting Americans willing to fight in Israel's fledgling army.

At the conclusion of the JWV meeting, he was approached by another veteran who said, "There's a macha from the Hagganah who wants to talk with you, Abe. He wants to meet you at Hotel 14 just above the Copacabana." The macha turned out to be Teddy Kollek, future mayor of Jerusalem for almost three decades. At the time, he was the head of the

Hagganah mission in New York, raising money for armaments. Baum could not have predicted the meeting would begin a little known story about Israel's War for Independence.

Abe Baum was born in the Bronx in 1921. His father, Harry, owned a lady's apparel company in the teeming garment district of Manhattan. Unfortunately, Harry's business failed during the Depression. Abe dropped out of high school to enroll in the McDowell School of Costume Design so that he would have a trade and not be a burden to his family. When Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941, he enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army.

Later, stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia, this urban street kid met with redneck anti-Semitism from his sergeants, who tormented him. The way out turned out to be Officer Candidate School. Baum was short on book learning, but he had street smarts and a fiery will to succeed.

His leadership skills and courage became evident to the men in his battalion, who called him "Able." He stood out as an officer who had the will to fight assertively and intelligently. In France he was awarded two Bronze Stars and a Silver Star at the Battle of Troyes. Stories of Baum's exploits at the Battle of the Bulge, leading a lightning raid of light armor through the enemy lines, reached Lt. General Patton.

George Patton, one of the most colorful and successful American generals of all time, commanded the Third Army, which included the 4th Armored Division, to which Captain Baum was assigned. He ordered an attack to free 300 American officers, prisoners of war in a camp some 60 miles through enemy lines. It so happened that his son-in-law, Lt. Colonel John K. Waters, was being held in that camp located in Hammelburg.

A lightning raid by a small force of armored infantry was planned for this dangerous mission, and the dubious honor of commanding this unit fell to Captain Abraham Baum. Had this sortie concluded with a Hollywood ending, Spielberg might have produced an even more exciting and controversial motion picture entitled "Saving Colonel Waters." Unfortunately, while over a thousand POWs were momentarily freed, the mission met with disaster.

The task force battled through overwhelming forces to the Hammelburg prisoner of war camp. On the way, the column destroyed enemy troop trains, shot up towns, knocked out armored vehicles, and routed countless enemy forces. Along the route they freed Russian slave laborers from a camp as their guards fled in terror. Captain Baum's decimated column finally reached the stockade near dark on March 27. Instead of the expected 300 officers they found over a thousand prisoners who tried to pile on the few vehicles that were not destroyed by enemy tanks. The return to Allied lines was disastrous.

By the morning of the 28th all the task force's vehicles had been knocked out, and most of the prisoners of war were forced to return to the POW camp, including the wounded Captain Baum. Of the 293 officers and men of Task Force Baum, 32 were wounded, 9 killed and 16 missing in action. Quoting from the 4th Armored Division history, "The story of Task Force Baum will serve as a stirring example of individual courage and small unit leadership as long as nations have armies."

Experienced leadership was an essential need for the newly formed Israel Defense Force as it fought desperately against Arab armies in 1948. An American officer, Col. David Marcus, volunteered under the assumed name of Mickey Stone earlier in the year to help train the Hagganah. When the war began, he was given command of the key Jerusalem sector. Eleven days later he was accidentally shot and killed by an Israeli sentry.

While at West Point for the funeral of Col. Marcus, Moshe Dayan received a telephone call from Teddy Kollek. He felt that it was important that Dayan meet with someone who could possibly be a replacement for the late Col. Marcus. The meeting was set at the Hagganah headquarters at Hotel 14, where Abe Baum had first met with Kollek only days earlier.

As Baum related the tactics he used in Task Force Baum, Dayan became very excited because that was what he envisioned for his new battalion. Up to this point, Israel was fighting a defensive war. Dayan saw in Baum an aggressive officer with a “can do” attitude similar to his own. Baum said to Dayan, “I don’t know what you’re doing in Israel, but I suggest that the moment you come to an obstacle, you open fire in all directions with whatever you have, machine guns and mortars. You should shoot and drive, shoot and drive.” According to Robert Slater’s biography of Dayan; “It was as if Baum had just given him a prescription for victory in Israel.”

What started as a conversation in the bar of Hotel 14, turned out to be a mini-war college for Dayan. Baum instructed him how to use the element of surprise when attacking a larger force with a light armored lightning attack. He urged Dayan to direct the action from the front line where he can vary his tactics as new obstacles arise. “Keep your vehicles moving,” he asserted, “and throw enough artillery rounds to make your enemy think that a brigade has attacked them instead of a battalion.” Firepower is needed to frighten and infantry to secure positions while the armor continually attacks. Before he returned to Israel, Dayan boasted to newsmen that the Israeli army could take all of Palestine in four to six weeks of fighting.

As Dayan returned to his battalion, Baum resumed his work in the garment industry. Shortly afterwards he received a request from Hagganah representatives, asking him to fly to Los Angeles, at his own expense, to interview three veterans who indicated their interest in serving with the IDF. It didn’t take him long to realize that two of them were aspiring Hollywood actors who were looking for publicity. He sent the third, a former Marine officer, to New York for further vetting. Meanwhile, another group of Israel supporters invited Baum to meet some of their contributors, especially a Mr. Cohen.

Some weeks later in New York, Baum was approached by two FBI agents who said, “Major, we know that you’re a decorated veteran, but we would caution you about continuing to recruit American citizens into a foreign army.” “What’s wrong with that?” Baum asked. “For one thing, it’s illegal, and secondly you’re playing with fire.” “Why is that?” Baum asked. “You know that Cohen guy you met in LA?” “Yeah, so what?” “He’s Mickey Cohen, the gangster, and he is funneling money into the Irgun.”

On July 9, just days after the meeting of Baum and Dayan, the cease fire arranged by United Nations mediator, Count Bernadotte of Sweden ended, and Dayan rejoined his command. Israel was ready to take the offensive under what they called Operation Danny. Dayan found that his second in command had spread his troops along a defensive position. Dayan, remembering Abe Baum’s advice, brought all his troops and equipment together for a lightning attack early in the morning. So early, in fact, that his second in command was still sleeping when Dayan moved out with his battalion.

In his autobiography, *Story of My Life*, Dayan gives credit to Baum for the action that followed. The town of Lod, with its important airport, was a key objective. Utilizing a captured Jordanian armored car, Dayan led his battalion on an attack of Lod, which was defended by British trained Arab League troops. Dayan had only 150 men. He formed his column with the armored car in advance, and half tracks and jeeps following them in quick succession. Baum had counseled that a small force, making a lot of noise through constant firepower, would tend to frighten the enemy and make them think they were being attacked by a major force. Racing through Lod, the battalion also captured the town of Ramle. The Lod-Ramle Road was cut, preventing the Arab Legion from joining up with the Egyptians. This was a key objective for Operation Danny.

Moshe Dayan, recognizable by his eye patch, played an important part in four of Israel’s wars and became a controversial figure in Israeli politics.

At 84, Abe Baum and his wife, Eileen, are happily retired in San Diego, California. He is active in veteran and service organizations and is a featured speaker on patriotic holidays. San Diego, a Navy and Marine town, does not forget

Veterans Day, 2005

By LT. Meredith Steingold, at Congregation Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston, S.C

It was 8 years ago that I experienced my first Veterans Day as a uniformed member of the Armed Forces. I was a plebe (freshman) at the United States Naval Academy. I had reported to the Naval Academy July 1, 1997, and had spent about five months being worn down physically and emotionally by my new military lifestyle. The months had started to seem long, and as the weather changed from Annapolis summer heat to a fall chill. I started to wonder if I really was all that interested in letting the military pay for my education. I was wearing a uniform to class everyday, but I was very unsure of what it meant to wear the uniform of the U.S. Navy. On November 11, my upperclassmen took a few of us to Arlington National Cemetery to hear the President speak in honor of Veterans Day. Every year, the President honors those men and women who had served this great country. I remember watching as President Clinton laid a wreath at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier and then proceeded to deliver a moving speech to the assembled crowd. He spoke of honor and sacrifice, dedication and glory. It was overwhelming to me to be surrounded by hundreds of veterans, wearing their VFW caps, many in wheelchairs, and to stand among them, not as an equal, but as a young person aspiring to earn their respect. Veterans Day gave me purpose as a midshipman: it became an annual opportunity to see those great Americans who had stood up for freedom, and who had honored our nation by keeping it strong and secure. Wearing my uniform among that crowd made me very proud, and I vowed that day to return every year to hear the President speak and to shake hands and pay my respects to all of the veterans who attended; I honored that vow for my next three years. In fact, when the time came that the Academy allowed me to bring my car to Annapolis, I took my own plebes to hear the President speak, hoping that just for a moment, they would have the same pride that I had experienced on that cold fall day in 1997 when my uniform started to make sense to me, and the word sacrifice took on a whole new meaning.

Veterans Day is a day of remembrance and respect. It officially commemorates the end of World War I, but has become a day to honor all those who have served and who serve now in our nation's most trying times. At the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, I watched veterans honor their fallen comrades by speaking to the Wall or reaching out to touch it as if the spirit of their brothers in arms were within the wall reaching back towards them. We honor veterans by singing songs like "God Bless America" and "America the Beautiful", but veterans do not sing a song. They don't give a speech or write a poem – they honor America not with words, but with actions. They are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of our homeland, or sometimes simply in the defense of our ideals. And what great ideals to stand for! There is a humanist saying attributed to Voltaire that says "I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it". I feel that veterans, including myself, would agree with this notion – we may or may not agree with every policy that our nation would have us defend, but the idea that it is our right, given to us by our constitution in our great democracy, to speak freely, makes us stand proud in defense of our country. Often we defend ideals, more than we actually defend our physical homeland. We defend the very freedoms that we have given up in order to have the opportunity to raise our right hands and serve. We have put our life plans on hold, today by choice, although for many years by means of the Draft, to show our resolve and our dedication to the nation that has given Americans such great choices and freedoms.

In the Fleet today, Navy chaplains serve both onboard ships and are stationed throughout the world. Christian chaplains are typically assigned to large ships when they leave on deployment, but the Navy honors its Jewish service members by flying Rabbis out to ships for the Jewish Holidays. In 2003, when I deployed in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, I was frustrated with the fact that I was going to spend my seventh consecutive Jewish Holiday season away from home. I understood that serving my country would involve some sacrifice, but I was worn down by

the number of years that I had been away. But two days before Rosh Hashanah, a Holy Helo arrived. A Holy Helo is the name we give to any helicopter that carries chaplains from ship to ship throughout the Navy. This specific Holy Helo had onboard a Rabbi, who after retiring from military service as a Captain, had volunteered to be reactivated into the Navy, to leave his own congregation in Maryland during the High Holy Day season, and to fly to the Persian Gulf to conduct a series of services to the Jewish service members currently deployed. In truth, there aren't that many of us. In my Battle Group, which consisted of seven ships, we had about twenty practicing Jewish sailors and Marines. But the Rabbi came nonetheless. He spoke to each of us personally, led our prayer services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He reminded us of our homes and our Jewish heritage. In the Navy, I am often the first Jewish person some people have ever met. Thus, I am very accustomed to the lifestyle of never encountering other Jews. But during that holiday season, I encountered one amazing Rabbi – someone who understood the sacrifices active duty service members were making and honored us with his presence.

So, why do we, the Jewish service members, serve? I think the answer to that question lies in another question: what other nation has been so giving? We serve to uphold the ideas of freedom and democracy that have allowed us, as a Jewish people, to thrive. Thus in serving, our children and our grandchildren can remain free. I do not need to stand here today and give you statistical data about the number of Jewish people removed from their homes, their homelands, and their communities, over the course of the history of our people. We know these facts by heart. We Jews that serve America serve to give our humblest thanks, our most devoted duty and sometimes our lives, just to demonstrate our resolve and dedication to this great nation that has provided us the security and freedom that no nation before has ever given the Jewish people.

President Calvin Coolidge once said, "The nation which forgets its defenders will itself be forgotten."

We thank our veterans.

We praise them.

We celebrate the fact that they willingly sacrifice so much that others may be free.