

IllumiNations

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Shnas Hakhel

CHABAD SHLUCHIM WORLDWIDE SHARE THEIR STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINES.



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Dedicated to the Memory of Henya Federman - beloved and devoted Shlucha in the Virgin Islands

*Rabbi Chesky and Chani Tenenbaum,
JUSA-Chabad, Baltimore, Maryland*

The Rabbi in Uniform

By Chaya Chazan

After 9/11, my uncle, Colonel Jacob Goldstein, was Chief National Guard Chaplain at Ground Zero. I went to visit him a few weeks later and saw the devastation first-hand. Smoke was still curling up from the scattered debris. At that moment, I gained immense respect for the brave men and women in uniform, and was inspired to become a chaplain.

Although I have many relatives on shlichus, and my uncle is a famous chaplain, my journey to the Jewish Uniformed Service Association of Maryland-Chabad, or JUSA, began seemingly by a single chance meeting.

I was a volunteer chaplain at a local hospital, leading weekly Shabbos services for Jewish patients. That's where I met Mr. Hershkowitz, a military retiree. We had a short conversation, in which I mentioned my uncle, Colonel Goldstein, and wished each other a "Good Shabbos."

A few weeks later, Mr. Hershkowitz called and asked if I'd like to join the Maryland Defense Force, Maryland's state guard.

"Interesting idea," I mused. "But what about my beard?"

"I'll help you figure it out," he answered.

It took nine months, but eventually, I received a religious exemption. I became the first bearded member of any state guard in America (a fun fact featured on Wikipedia). I went through some basic training, and was affirmed as a captain in the Maryland Defense Force. I now hold the rank of major.

I also volunteer as chaplain for the police, law enforcement, fire, public safety, military, and veterans in Maryland. As I got more involved with our Jewish brothers and sisters in uniform, I recognized a desperate need for spiritual support and services. When I got an email late at night from a Jewish MDDF member, asking for help acquiring mezuzas, I knew something had to be done.

We opened a first-of-its-kind Chabad house for Jewish uniformed personnel as an affiliate of Chabad of Maryland, with a heavy emphasis on veterans. We host weekly class-

es, minyanim, holiday services, and women's programs. We recently purchased a new property, dubbed "The JUSA House," as a welcoming place to host our events and a home-away-from-home for local heroes.

We include our civilian friends and neighbors as much as possible to raise awareness and help honor our heroes. We have volunteers pack challos, shaloch manos, Shavuos flower bouquets, matzah boxes, and more, and deliver them to veterans across town. Everyone is happy to support our heroes and show their appreciation.

Maryland has the unique privilege of hosting one of the only Jewish sections in a veteran's cemetery in the country. JUSA, in conjunction with Jewish War Veterans of MD, just held our annual Memorial Day Kaddish service there, where we recited the Keil Mulei and Kaddish prayers for all our fallen Jewish heroes.

I kept in touch with Mr. Hershkowitz, who had been so instrumental in getting me started. A few years later, he became very ill and was hospitalized. I visited him and helped him put on tefillin. It was with great difficulty that he managed to say Shema.

"I have two requests," he said, laboring in a rasping voice. "I want you to officiate my funeral, and I want to be buried with military honors."

A few months later, just before Yom Kippur, Mr. Hershkowitz passed away. Baruch Hashem, I was able to fulfill both of his last requests.

I was invited to an army chaplain training conference at a Maryland army base. Most of the attendees were non-Jewish, so when I heard a chaplain introducing himself as "Asher," my curiosity was piqued. When I saw he was a Methodist minister, I was even more interested.

"I grew up in Ukraine," he told me. "My parents were both Jewish, but, as 'religion' was a criminal word, I never knew anything about being Jewish."

"Did you have a bar mitzvah?" I asked him.

"No way! It would've been way too dangerous!" he exclaimed.

"Well, Asher," I said, "According to Jewish law, you're 100% Jewish! One of the major parts of becoming bar mitzvah is putting on tefillin for the first time. We can do that now, and you can celebrate your 'bar mitzvah' right here! What do you think?"

Asher shrugged. "Sure, why not?" he answered.

I approached the non-Jewish Chief Chaplain. "How would you like to host a bar mitzvah?" I asked, a twinkle in my eye.

His eyes opened wide. "I think that would be so cool!" he said with excitement. "Let's do it right!"

The next day after lunch, the Chief Chaplain called everyone to attention.

"The rabbi has a special ceremony to perform," he announced. "Everyone, please give him your attention."

And so, with 40 pairs of wide eyed non-Jewish chaplains looking on, Asher put on tefillin. I briefly explained the significance and background of the mitzvah, and then turned to Asher.

"Repeat after me: Shema—"



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"Shema," he repeated dutifully.

"Yisroel," I continued.

"Yisroel Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad!" he concluded, fluently, tears shinning from his eyes.

I knew it had been years since he'd last said the Shema, but his pintele Yid never forgot the words.

As I helped him wind up the tefillin straps, I began a joyous rendition of "Siman Tov Umazal Tov," with all the other chaplains clapping along.

The chief chaplain rose. "I definitely felt the holy spirit resting here," he said.

A few days later, Asher sent me a message, asking me to read his blog. There was a heartbreaking picture of Nazis rounding up Belarussian Jews, captioned, "Any one of these Nazis could be the one who killed my aunts and uncles."

Under it was another picture of the two of us, Asher's arm enwrapped in tefillin. "This is my answer to them," the caption read.

It was 6:00 P.M. on a Sunday evening in 2020. I got a call from a community on behalf of a woman with an interesting request. Her father had just passed away in Florida, and his body was being flown to Maryland for burial. Unfortunately, the flight was delayed and wouldn't arrive until late Sunday night. Because of Covid, the airport hangar closed completely at 8:00, and her father's body wouldn't be processed. He'd have to remain in the hangar all night. With my law enforcement connections, he thought I'd be able to get permission for a shomer to stay with the nifter overnight.

I had just a few hours to arrange everything. I called the Maryland Transportation Authority Police and told them the story.

"Would it be possible to release the body, even though it's coming in late?" I asked.

"We'll see what we can do," was the answer.

Twenty minutes later, the commander called me back. "We can retrieve the body, but it cannot be released without filing the paperwork, and there won't be anyone in the hangar office to accept it!"

"Is there anything else we can do? Anyone else to speak to?" I asked.

"Give me some time. I'll work on it," he promised.

It was already 7:00 by the time he called back. "The airport supervisor agreed to stay late until the airplane arrives!"

"I'm on my way to the airport!" I said, grabbing my keys and running to the car.

I informed the funeral home director and asked him to meet us at the airport. As soon as we arrived, the police escort-

ed us to the hangar, and we awaited the plane's arrival. I escorted the meis directly to the hearse, reciting Tehillim along the way. With Hashem's help, the funeral took place at the scheduled time, early the next morning, and an elderly Holocaust survivor found eternal rest.

Covid was isolating for everyone, and I knew elderly veterans would especially be feeling it. I visited the VA living center and chatted with the residents.

Paul Benson* was a 95-year-old WWII veteran, whose frail body couldn't hide the inner strength he possessed. It was still early in the pandemic, so, of course, we began talking about the various restrictions being put into place.

"I can beat that!" he said, a smile in his voice. "In 1944, I was traveling on the troop ship, the *Queen Mary*, en route to France via Scotland with third infantry. It was my father's yahrzeit, and I wanted to say kaddish. I walked around the ship, rounding up every Jew I could find. It was very hard! I kept repeating 'Tracht gut vet zein gut' - 'Think good and it will be good' to myself. That's what kept me going until I finally found enough men."

I was familiar with the phrase, since the Tzemach Tzedek was famous for saying it, but this story breathed a special meaning into those five short words. We designed special JUSA face masks, adorned with *Tracht gut vet zein gut*.

The Seder table was full of veterans, each with a lifetime of stories. I asked them each to share their most unique Pesach experience.

Charlie*, a young veteran, shared his experience during Operation Desert Storm, in 2005.

"We were stationed in Iraq then. We were so happy to get all the seder items, and we set up a beautiful table. Throughout the day, there was sporadic mortar fire raining down on us. Sure enough, when it came time for the seder, the air raid siren went off again, and we had to abandon our table for the darkness of the bunker. After a while, the all-clear rang, and we were able to continue."

I shared Charlie's story the next day at our minyan. Barry*, another young veteran, nodded knowingly.

"I was deployed in Iraq then too," he shared. "But my unit was sent out on maneuvers, and it was too dangerous to attempt a seder."

He seemed sad to remember the lost Pesach. "You protect Americans," I told him. "And, as a Jew, you protect our right to religion as well. You had a special share in every seder held in America that night."

I was referred to Stanley*, a 90-year old WWII veteran. During our conversation, I discovered that he'd grown up right here in Baltimore.

"Really? Do you remember which shul you attended, or maybe the rabbi's name?"

"No, I don't remember," he answered. But, a few minutes later, he said, "Wait - Rabbi David Pattashnick. He taught me how to read my bar mitzvah parsha!"

"That's my wife's great-grandfather!" I exclaimed.

A few months ago, Stanley passed away, and his family asked me to officiate his funeral. Everything came full circle: the great-grandfather ushered him into Jewish maturity, and the great-grandson escorted him to his final rest.

We needed a Torah for our brand new shul. Our inaugural minyan would be that Rosh Hashanah, so I called Rabbi Chanowitz from the Torah gemach in New York.

"What hashgacha pratis!" he said. "I just got a call from someone not too far from Baltimore who wants to donate a Torah to the gemach. He wants to dedicate it to his brother, who was in the US Army and died stateside."

We picked up the Torah and embroidered the cover with his brother's name.

Fast forward a couple of years. I heard about a Jewish Baltimore police officer killed in the line of duty in 1935. I researched to see if he was actually Jewish and what had happened with his body. I discovered he was buried in the Jewish cemetery, just half an hour away. I decided to try and find his grave. It took a long while, but I finally found it. I scraped away the mud on the gravestone, and read the date of the yahrzeit. It was just one week away.

While I researched the police officer, a familiar name popped up - the donor of the Torah. I asked him if the police officer's name was familiar to him at all.

"Sure. That's my wife's grandfather," he said.

We are planning on re-dedicating the Torah, and adding the fallen police officer's name to the Torah cover.

*Names changed to protect privacy

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