

# Military chaplains: An Orthodox rabbi mixes faith and patriotism in Afghanistan

Army Capt. Shmuel Felzenberg juggles outreach to local Muslims, interfaith counseling, and the kosher quest

By Lee Lawrence, Correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor | NOVEMBER 13, 2007

Bagram Airbase, Afghanistan

When the bus doors open, 20 soldiers clamber out, laughing, reaching for their cameras like college kids on spring break. Yet they haven't traveled far. Part of the Army's 82nd Airborne, they've driven 10 minutes across this coalition forces base from their US camp to the Egyptian-run hospital compound.

Still, in a space bound by blast-walls and concertina wire, this qualifies as an adventure because, during the next couple of hours, they will bring together two disparate worlds: that of Afghan villagers who've suffered the ravages of consecutive wars and that of Americans who have gathered in church basements and synagogues, private homes and community centers from New Jersey to California, filling boxes with donated items – everything from toys to toiletries.



**SPONSORED CONTENT**

Project: SET THE PAGE FREE

By Xerox

Directly or indirectly, the boxes wend their way to the offices of US Army chaplains, who turn the distribution of donations into a feel-good outing for their soldiers.

At the helm of this base outreach program is Shmuel Felzenberg, an Army captain who darts around the grounds as soldiers unload boxes from a truck and set up tables. Under his military cap he wears a black yarmulke, and on his uniform the insignia that mark him as a Jewish chaplain – two tablets topped by a star.

"Ready to go hot," he calls out, and the soldiers position themselves behind the tables.

Minutes later, Afghan women in dark-colored head scarves and blue, pleated chadris (full head and body veils) queue up at the gate. Egyptian soldiers usher them in, and as the Afghans move from table to table, American soldiers, semiautomatic rifles slung across their backs, reach into the boxes and hand them sweaters, shoes, baby clothes, notebooks, and toys.

Chaplain Felzenberg rummages through a separate box and extracts woolen caps that one of his daughters knitted – "Bless her heart, he says, "she put them in separate bags but didn't mark the sizes." Then he pulls out a loose-fitting top he last saw on his wife. "It's going to be emotional to give some of this out," he says, "but hey...."

While his supplies last, he hands clothing from his ultra-Orthodox Jewish home to Muslim Afghan children whose mothers wear the orthodox-Muslim chadri.

The scene says much about Felzenberg and his duties as brigade chaplain. While remaining faithful to his own religious convictions, he reaches across faith lines, both in his work with the Egyptians and in his daily interactions with his troops. And, even in this ostensibly charitable mission, the troops are his priority. Coming here gets them out of their routine, while handing out gifts can make them feel good about themselves. And it is, as he tells them in his briefing, "a photo op." For when else do soldiers confined to the base get the chance to snap photos of women in sky-blue chadris, men with embroidered caps, and children with black, kohl-rimmed eyes?

•••

Felzenberg had been a rabbi for eight years when, in 1999, he walked into an Army recruiter's office in Morristown, in his native New Jersey. Aware and grateful, he says, "of the persecution and hardship that I did not grow up with," he felt an obligation "as a Jew living in America, reaping the benefits afforded by the Constitution, to pay back."

Patriotic fervor, however, cut no ice with the recruiter, who wondered what to do with this grown man in the traditional full beard, dark clothes, and hat of a Chabad rabbi. He enlisted soldiers, he did not handle chaplains. The recruiter politely showed him the door .

"So I went back in," says Felzenberg, who is five feet tall and exudes enough energy to power a city grid. "As a taxpayer, I said, show me what it's about." In the stirring recruiting video and brochures, Felzenberg saw both need and legitimacy. The next day, he called the Army chaplain headquarters.

Now on his second wartime deployment – his first was in Iraq – Felzenberg is militantly patriotic and staunchly supports President Bush's policies, with views that often echo pro-war fundamentalist voices back in the US.

"To lose the global war on terrorism," he says matter-of-factly, "would be the downfall of either our great nation or the world as we know it." America, he continues, "leads the way in a fight against evil," against an enemy that "has directly given notice that they mean no good, they mean no benefit, they cannot be negotiated with. To deal with them with clear effort and extreme prejudice," he believes, "is the only way to dispatch the appropriate message."

Because the majority of chaplains in all branches of the military are affiliated with fundamentalist Christian churches, one might expect to hear such views often. But of some 20 chaplains extensively interviewed over the course of three months in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rabbi was one of only two who saw in the war elements of Biblical prophesy. A few stated point-blank that they disagreed with the decision to go to war, but most eschewed politics, all the while asserting that they did not see this as a religious or holy war.

All, however, believed their presence to be necessary in order to support the troops and help commanding officers stay the moral course in the conduct of war.

•••

One of the key ways chaplains communicate their faith is by living it in public – and for none is this harder than for Felzenberg.

"I don't know of another faith that is so full and encumbered with religious observances and requirements," he says.

At a Friday Seder with six other soldiers, Felzenberg passes the gefilte fish and jokes that it's easier to keep kosher in Afghanistan than it was when he was based in Hawaii. With no Orthodox community and no kosher stores there, his wife had to have meat flown in from Seattle. In Bagram, on the other hand, he gets raw vegetables from the cafeteria and supplements them with shipments from home and Army-supplied kosher meals. For holidays like Passover, the Army provides supplies, right down to Passover-approved wine.

Much more difficult for him was the Army requirement that all soldiers be clean-shaven. "I put in a request through military congressional channels" for a dispensation, he says, one foot tapping lightly on the rug. When it was denied, "I debated [the issue] with others and, in concert with the appropriate rabbinic authorities," he cobbled a compromise he could live with. From the minute he goes on leave to join his wife and six children until the instant he returns to duty in uniform, Felzenberg does not shave. And while on duty, he uses an electric razor, thereby obeying the prohibition against straight razors. "That was ultimately a strong, bitter pill to swallow," he says. But the compromise was worth it: "I was afforded the opportunity to serve."

•••

As the only Jewish chaplain deployed in Afghanistan last spring, Felzenberg traveled a fair bit to conduct services at other bases.

"I've come to agree," he says, "with the saying 'it is better to minister to one in the field than 500 in garrison.' "

Still, more often than not, he helps Jewish soldiers come to Bagram, particularly for holidays best celebrated in fellowship. At Passover this year, 20 soldiers shared a Seder that stretched well into the night in the unit's chapel.

As brigade chaplain, Felzenberg also makes sure that the Christian chaplains under him meet the needs of their communities and that everyone, regardless of denomination, can participate in morale-building activities like the outreach program with the local Afghans, or can simply knock on his door if they need to talk.

In fact, Felzenberg's rigorous prayer schedule and dietary restrictions make it easy for soldiers to track him down, especially at mealtime, when they can simply follow the smell of latkes or eggs back to the long, narrow room where he ricochets like a pinball between a one-eyed burner, a minifridge, and the microwave.

While he cooks, he talks. "Pain is just weakness leaving the body," he says, at one point, echoing a Marine recruiting slogan, "and though nobody likes to be deployed for an extended period of time, it's ultimately a job and a mission that must be done, and if we don't do it those who come after us will either have to do it or not even be afforded the opportunity to do it."

His unwavering certainty appeals to many of the soldiers, including some, like Staff Sgt. Greg Dean, who are neither in his brigade nor Jewish yet attend services and Bible study with Felzenberg because his firm beliefs enrich rather than stifle a conversation with people who hold other views. When he returns stateside, Sergeant Dean doubts he'll have this kind of ready access to a rabbi. Fond of puzzling out the intricacies of the Old Testament, Dean will miss the intellectual contact.

"I enjoy talking with him," Dean says over a hasty dinner in the cafeteria. "Lots of Orthodox rabbis are very brittle – he's not. I like his mind."

