

PASSOVER NEAR BAGHDAD

by MAJ Jonas Vogelhut

Dear family and friends,

This morning started with a cold rain. This was a blessing, as it padded the loose sand and made for a clear, crisp day. For me and two other Jewish soldiers, the wonderful duo of Chaplain Yacovac, 3rd Infantry Division and Chaplain Waynick, 24th Support Command, gathered the necessary six security personnel and four vehicles to convoy us the 40 minutes from our classified base at Logistics Support Area Dogwood to Objective Grady for a Passover seder in the desert.

As we arrived, we were warmly greeted by ten other Jewish soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division and Chaplain (Rabbi) Carlos Huerta. Together, we made a motley group of infantrymen, pilots, medics, and truck drivers into a minyan. Into a family. Our table was meager but festive. Dispel all rumors of Army soldiers having seder in palaces. That was not us.

Our tent was small and non-descript from the outside. We used mess hall provided paper plates, flatware, and cups. No meat or main course. The simple Passover supplies of Matzah, gefilte fish and grape juice from the Aleph Institute and the Jewish Welfare Board, combined with generous packages of cookies, dried fruit, and candy mailed by Lynne from Arizona and my cousin Stephen Hirsch of Long Island, NY constituted a table fit for a meal. We even used Army issued Louisiana hot sauce for the bitter herbs.

Rabbi Huerta motivated us all to a higher plane. Despite our soldierly harsh living conditions sleeping outside on the ground, without showers or toilets, there are always people who have it harsher. We the Jewish people were slaves once. On a similar idea, the Iraqi people were oppressed for over a generation by Saddam Hussein. And now we are both free. The 10 plagues the Lord cast upon Pharaoh were cast upon Saddam Hussein with embargos, restrictions, war, and perhaps death. Now, like the Jews who crossed the red sea, the Iraqi people must rebuild their lives and teach their children about freedom.

During the meal, soldiers talked about missing family and friends. Back in Pasadena California, Pittsburgh PA, Phoenix Arizona, Brooklyn New York, Orlando Florida, and other home towns across the USA. Each participant was glad to get a few moments away from their military post and remember previous seders with wives, children, parents, and friends. 1LT Abraham Falkowitz remarked "I was surprised to see this much Judaism in the middle of a war zone." Others agreed. We laughed, cried, and had fun. The service concluded with songs and psalms, like this quote Rabbi Huerta read from Psalm 118, "The Lord is on my side, I have no fear."

Together, our unit made that tent a house. And that house a home.

A piece of Judaism. A piece of America.

Chag Sameach.

Jonas

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