

REFLECTIONS

Where are the Chaplain Moseleys?

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From the days of Abraham, Jews have been “othered” in the societies in which they live. Jews were others in the pagan societies of Egypt, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire and the Roman Empire. Jews were others under Muslim rule in the Ottoman Empire, and Jews were others in Christian Europe. Jews were “othered” for the sole reason of being Jews.

Being “othered” has ranged from benevolent tolerance to violent persecution and expulsion. For millennia, Jews were denied the status equivalent to that of societies’ majority faith citizens, whatever the majority faith. This paradigm continues today in much of the world, even in liberal democracies in countries that have state religions. However, even in many countries that do not endorse a specific religion, religious discrimination continues.

But the United States of America is supposed to be different. In his famous letter of 1790 to Moses Seixas, the leader of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, George Washington, our first president—and, of course, the first commander-in-chief of the United States Army—wrote:

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy—a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they

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who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.¹

Washington was explicit: the United States would not merely tolerate Jews but would consider adherents of every faith to be full citizens, the same as the nation's Christian majority. The First Amendment to the Constitution, which guarantees the free exercise of religion and proscribes the establishment of a state religion, codifies Washington's assurance.

Washington's letter also implies that in return for their rights, citizens have obligations to their nation. Jews have always believed that one of those obligations is military service. Indeed, Jews have served as American soldiers for as long as the United States Army has existed (the fifth great grandson of Moses Seixas, the recipient of Washington's letter, was Everett M. Seixas, Jr., an American soldier who was killed in action at the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944).²

Yet even with the constitutional promise that Jews will not be "othered" in the United States, implementing that promise for American Jewish soldiers has always been a challenge. In the early days of our Army, and as late as the Korean War, the challenge was overt anti-Semitism. Although nearly seven percent of the nation's small Jewish population served in uniform during the Civil War, non-Christian military chaplains were expressly proscribed by law until President Lincoln interceded with Congress in 1862.³ While recovering from wounds in World War I, Second Lieutenant Maurice Rose, the son and grandson of rabbis, listed his religion as Protestant. Rose, who would rise to the rank of major general, command the 3rd Armored Division in World War II, and become the highest ranking officer killed by enemy fire in that war, never changed that false statement in his Army records, for fear that antisemitism would derail his career.⁴ In 1945, Christian chaplains blocked Navy Chaplain (Lieutenant) Roland B. Gittelsohn, the first rabbi to serve with the Marine Corps, from speaking at the dedication ceremony of the

1 George Washington, "From George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, 18 August 1790," Founders Online, National Archive, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>.

2 Doree Lewak, "After more than 75 Years, Jewish World War II Service Members Killed in Action and Buried Under Crosses are Getting Proper Headstones," *Business Insider*, Apr 26, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/us-service-members-jewish-wwii-operation-benjamin-headstones-2022-4>. In the ultimate act of unconscious religious exclusion by the Army, Technician Fifth Class Everett M. Seixas, Jr., United States Army, was buried in an American military cemetery in Luxembourg under a cross, a wrong that was not rectified until 2022. "The American Battle Monuments Commission Changes Seven Headstones to Stars of David to Correctly Honor Jewish-American Service Members from WWII," Army Battle Monuments Commission, April 29, 2022, <https://www.abmc.gov/news-events/news/american-battle-monuments-commission-changes-seven-headstones-stars-david>.

3 Karen Abbott, "Rabbi-Chaplains of the Civil War," *The New York Times*, Dec. 11, 2011, <https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/11/rabbi-chaplains-of-the-civil-war/>.

4 Kieran Nicholson, "Who is the Military Hero Denver's Rose Medical Center is Named For?", *The Denver Post*, May 30, 2023, <https://www.denverpost.com/2023/05/29/major-general-maurice-rose-world-war-ii-denver/>.

Marine cemetery on Iwo Jima.⁵ Chaplain Gittlesohn did speak to a smaller, largely Jewish audience; his sermon became famous as a paean to pluralism and inclusion.⁶ And Corporal Tibor Rubin, a Hungarian immigrant and Holocaust survivor, was recommended more than once for the Medal of Honor for heroism in Korea; each recommendation was mysteriously “lost” because his company first sergeant was a virulent anti-Semite.⁷ Rubin finally received the decoration in 2005, but only after congressional intervention.⁸

Overt anti-Semitism is largely (but to be sure, not completely) gone from our Army, which is a cause for thanks. The Army certainly does not tolerate it. Nevertheless, challenges remain for Jewish soldiers. Those challenges are subtler and less obvious than explicit anti-Semitic behavior, and I worry that they are becoming more prevalent.

The assurance of Jewish soldiers’ right (and that of soldiers of other minority faiths) to exercise their religion freely remains a challenge for the United States Army. That challenge rests squarely on the shoulders of commanders. But chaplains—whom the Army trains to function within a religiously plural environment and who are uniquely imbued with reverence for the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment—must serve as their commanders’ advocates for religious freedom. They must be the conscience of their commands on religious matters and must facilitate the free exercise of religion in the Army. Army chaplains, therefore, must address the free exercise challenges facing Jewish and other minority-faith soldiers. And, given the dearth of Jewish chaplains in the Army, addressing these challenges falls primarily to Christian chaplains. There are good historical precedents within the Army and the Chaplain Corps of Christian chaplains doing just this kind of work.

An Historical Lesson in Facilitating Free Exercise of Religion: Chaplain Moseley and Rosh Hashanah 1943

It was September of 1943, and Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, was fast approaching. Rosh Hashanah is one of the most important and sacred holidays in the Jewish calendar; for Jewish soldiers in combat, attending services on Rosh Hashanah provided (and still provides) a spiritual respite from the horrors of war.

⁵ Seth Paridon, “The Highest and Purest Democracy: Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn’s Iwo Jima Eulogy to his Fallen Comrades,” The National World War II Museum, New Orleans, February 19, 2022, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/gittelsohn-iwo-jima-eulogy>.

⁶ The full text can be read here: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/rabbi-roland-gittelsohn-s-eulogy-dedicating-the-marine-cemetery-on-iwo-jima>.

⁷ Kali Martin, “Corporal Tibor Rubin’s Medal of Honor,” The National World War II Museum, New Orleans, July 12, 2021, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/tibor-rubin-medal-of-honor>.

⁸ Martin, “Rubin’s Medal of Honor.”

In the Solomon Islands, the Army's 25th Infantry Division was engaged in combat operations near Munda Point on the island of New Georgia. The XIV Corps, to which the 25th Infantry Division was attached, had just captured Munda Point and its key airfield after ten bloody days of fighting.

Chaplain (Major) Evans T. Moseley, a Southern Baptist minister, was a captain in 1942. A mere year later, in August of 1943, he was the 25th Infantry Division chaplain. The division had no Jewish chaplain. Chaplain Moseley knew that Rosh Hashanah was approaching, and he knew that it was his job to provide for the division's Jewish soldiers.

Seeking help conducting Rosh Hashanah services, Chaplain Moseley approached Captain Elliott Davis, a Jewish artilleryman whom Chaplain Moseley knew from his time as the division artillery chaplain. As the division artillery chaplain, Moseley had arranged regular Sabbath services for Jewish soldiers, had found matzah (unleavened bread) for them on Passover, and had gathered the ten-person prayer quorum necessary to conduct a service when a Jewish soldier was killed in action. As Davis wrote in a 1943 letter:

It was no surprise to me to have "Chappie" as he is affectionately know[n] approach me on the subject. It was a surprise however when he asked me to take charge of the services. I had been reared in a small town in Kansas with no opportunities for a formal Hebrew education and I doubted my ability to organize a suitable service. However, the officer who had been conducting the services previously had been evacuated, and it was obvious that someone must carry on. Recognizing this and knowing I had another Jewish officer in the battalion from Pittsburgh who could help me I undertook the responsibility.⁹

Chaplain Moseley and Captain Davis arranged for a Rosh Hashanah service at Munda Point. Captain Davis's unit relocated from Munda Point two days before Rosh Hashanah, but Chaplain Moseley knew what to do. He got the corps to publicize the service throughout its area of operations, including to Navy and Marine Corps units. He arranged boat transportation to Munda Point for over one hundred Jewish personnel scattered across the Solomon Islands. He found an organ and a soldier to play it, the music during the service competing with the noise of aircraft taking off from the adjacent airstrip. Chaplain Moseley even delivered the sermon at the service (and, although no record of his talk exists, undoubtedly it was pluralistic and inclusive).

⁹ Michael Rugel, "Rosh Hashanah in the Solomon Islands 1943," National Museum of American Jewish Military History, September 17, 2020, <https://nmajmh.org/2020/09/rosh-hashanah-in-the-solomon-islands-1943/>.

Captain Davis aptly summed up his chaplain's efforts to take care of Jewish soldiers:

This is the story behind the most isolated [Rosh Hashanah] service in all the world. It is the story of a service prepared and nurtured by two Jews who knew no Hebrew but were proud and aware of the of their Jewishness and a Baptist preacher from the hills of Kentucky who possessed an understanding heart and a will that knew no defeat. It is the story of inspiration and hope, of tolerance and understanding, of pride and patriotism.¹⁰

There are several important takeaways for chaplains today in this inspiring story. Chaplain Moseley understood pluralism; he knew that if he didn't consciously include minority faiths, then he would unconsciously exclude them. He knew enough about the traditions of a religion not his own to be able to coordinate religious support for Jewish soldiers (and, I'm sure, he knew that he didn't have all the answers and used his initiative to find them); he knew, for example, the traditional Jewish importance of communal services on the Sabbath and holidays. He understood that his commander was relying on him to provide for the spiritual needs of a minority faith. He sought out Jewish soldiers to assist him and did not sit back and wait for Jewish soldiers to ask for his help. He obtained his commander's backing and knew how to work as a staff officer to get things done. And he knew that his mission was making the service happen and getting Jewish soldiers to it, and not merely "putting the word out."

Have We Forgotten Chaplain Moseley's Lesson?

Fast forward about fifty years. My own unit deployed to Haiti in Operation Uphold Democracy in 1994. There was no Jewish chaplain in the combined joint task force, the two-star command to which my unit was attached. After arriving in Port-au-Prince, I approached the task force chaplain and volunteered to lead Jewish Sabbath services on Friday evenings. I asked the chaplain to arrange a location for the service, to publicize the service throughout the task force, to provide a religious support specialist to assist me, and to coordinate transportation to services for Jewish personnel. He was grateful for my assistance and enthusiastically provided all the support I requested. He even gave me a portable Jewish chaplain's kit.

When I tell this story to new Army chaplains, I ask them whether it is a good-news story or a bad-news story. Most say it's a good-news story. But it is useful to contrast the situation at Munda Point in 1943 with that in Haiti in 1994. One division chaplain took it upon himself to ensure the free exercise of religion for Jewish soldiers; the other waited to be asked by a Jewish soldier

¹⁰ [Rugel](#), "Rosh Hashanah."

to do so. Unlike Chaplain Moseley fifty years earlier, the chaplain in Haiti had no plan to provide for the spiritual needs of Jewish personnel. Although he enthusiastically supported my request, had I not stepped forward and asked for his support, the Jewish chaplain's kit he deployed with to Haiti might have remained packed away.

Fast forward another 30 years. As an Army retiree, I am now the Jewish lay leader (or distinctive religious group leader, in Army parlance—a lay person authorized by the Army to conduct religious services in the absence of a chaplain of a particular faith) on a basic training installation, and Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) were approaching. The installation informed its chaplains of the time and location of services. But several Jewish trainees did not show up—not because they chose not to or were unaware of the services, but because their units did not transport them to the chapel. In the Solomon Islands in 1943, a chaplain was able to arrange the transportation of Jewish soldiers hundreds of miles by boat during active combat operations to Rosh Hashanah services. Yet 80 years later we could not get Jewish soldiers to Rosh Hashanah services across post in the United States.

On the installation I serve as the Jewish lay leader, Jewish basic trainees for years were denied the opportunity to attend worship services on Friday evening, the Jewish Sabbath—those same Sabbath services that Chaplain Moseley arranged for Jewish soldiers in 1943 and that I arranged in Port-au-Prince in 1994. Instead, the only service provided for them was on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath.¹¹ When this was brought to his attention, the commanding general authorized a Jewish Sabbath service. But chaplains—the champions of free exercise of religion—were hesitant to advocate for that authorization, even when Jewish trainees asked for their help. And, still, problems persist with getting Jewish trainees—who are solely reliant on their units for transportation—to the service.

One final anecdote highlights the cause for my concern that Jewish soldiers, and perhaps soldiers of other minority faiths, are subtly, if unintentionally, being denied the opportunity to exercise their religion freely and fully. I learned that a Jewish basic trainee at another installation was unable to attend services there. I called that installation's religious support office and was informed that the Jewish lay leader had departed the installation, that no one had volunteered to replace her, and that, consequently, the installation no longer provides Jewish services. Failing to provide worship services for Jewish personnel on an Army installation for any reason should be unacceptable to

¹¹ This is eerily reminiscent of earlier times when West Point required Jewish cadets to attend Sunday Christian services—not only did the Army deny them the right to freely exercise their own religion, but it forced Jewish cadets to attend the services of a religion that was not theirs. Lewis L. Zickel, *The Jews of West Point* (Jersey City, NJ: KTAV, 2009), 49.

any chaplain. The departure of the Jewish lay leader should have been a red-star-cluster event, but the response was evidently the equivalent of a shoulder shrug.

A shoulder shrug, obviously, is not a suitable course of action. I am confident that Chaplain Moseley would not have done so; he would have identified the problem and would have found a solution. Any number of suitable and feasible courses of action come to mind—finding another Jewish lay leader, like Chaplain Moseley did; streaming Friday evening services from another location; hiring a contract rabbi; bringing a reserve component Jewish chaplain to the installation; arranging for an active component Jewish chaplain to travel to the installation in a temporary duty status; or arranging for transportation to an off-post synagogue, at least for major holidays. Chaplain Moseley solved a much tougher free exercise challenge, in combat and under much more trying circumstances.

Tackling Today's Free Exercise Challenges for Minority Faith Soldiers: Be a Chaplain Moseley

In 1943, Chaplain Moseley understood that it was his job to provide a worship service on Rosh Hashanah (and Sabbath services, for that matter) for Jewish soldiers and to get them to that service. He unhesitatingly and enthusiastically assumed and executed that responsibility. In 1994, the task force chaplain in Haiti enthusiastically supported Jewish services—when asked to do so. Today, at least in some cases, chaplains' support for Jewish services is less than enthusiastic, even when chaplains are asked.

The Army now explicitly permits some forms of individual religious observance that previously were more difficult or prohibited altogether. For Jewish soldiers, these accommodations include wearing a yarmulke (ritual skullcap) in uniform, beard waivers, and the provision of kosher packaged combat rations ("meals ready to eat"). Most Jewish soldiers today, however, don't want to wear yarmulkes in uniform or grow a beard (this is reflective of the majority of the American Jewish community). But, especially in the most stressful environments, like basic training, many of them do want to attend a communal worship service; the Army recognizes worship practice as a matter of spiritual fitness. Ironically, at least for many of the basic trainees I serve, it is easier now to wear a yarmulke in uniform, but it is more difficult to observe that most basic and fundamental of Jewish traditions—attending a communal service on the Jewish Sabbath or other Jewish holy day—than

it was in combat during World War II. It is also increasingly commonplace to hear chaplains offer exclusive, distinctly Christian prayers at mandatory ceremonies, prayers that “other” Jewish soldiers.¹²

The two most common responses I hear from chaplains when I raise issues like these—issues that were intuitively obvious to Chaplain Moseley and that he saw as his responsibility to resolve—are, “I put the word out,” and “Chaplains don’t make the rules.” Chaplain Moseley did not merely put the word out; he ensured that Jewish services were conducted and that Jewish soldiers got there. And although it’s true that commanders, and not their chaplains, make the rules, when the commander’s rules infringe upon a soldier’s right to observe their religious traditions in the absence of a legitimate mission conflict¹³ (and the Army manages to resolve most mission conflicts even in combat), then the staff officer charged with advising the commander on religious matters—the chaplain—has an obligation to inform the commander of the unintended consequences of the rules and to recommend and advocate for changes or exceptions to those rules.

Chaplain Moseley knew that chaplains are uniquely positioned to advocate for the religious rights of Jewish soldiers (and others of minority faiths). And if chaplains aren’t willing to get their boots dirty doing the staff work of providing religious support—such as coordinating a Jewish service and getting Jewish personnel to that service—then soldiers’ religious needs are not being addressed as the Army expects and requires. Chaplain Moseley solved these problems in much more austere and dangerous conditions than exist on stateside Army installations today. And yet these problems continue to rear their heads in the Army.

We need Chaplain Moseleys, chaplains who are committed to pluralism and inclusion, and to understanding—and actively supporting—the traditions and needs of faith groups other than their own. Like Captain Davis’s moving description of Chaplain Moseley, today’s chaplains must possess understanding hearts and a will that knows no defeat. They must exude inspiration and hope to those of all faiths.

Every soldier learns the Soldier’s Creed during initial entry training: “I am an American soldier. I am a warrior and a member of a team.” That team has no official religion; the Army welcomes soldiers of every faith, or of no faith. Without Chaplain Moseleys, I fear that Jewish soldiers—who have proudly worn the uniform of our Army for 250 years—will be “othered,” merely

¹² I realize that this is a sensitive and nuanced issue. Although I believe the issue of government-endorsed sectarian prayer has drifted into a legal gray area, some Christian chaplains believe that they are permitted to, and thus do, offer Christian prayers at military ceremonies (not religious services) that soldiers are required to attend. Regardless of whether the answer to this question is certain, however, the issue is not whether chaplains can offer such prayers, but whether they should.

¹³ See Department of the Army, *Army Command Policy (AR 600-20)* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2020), P-1a.

benevolently tolerated and not considered full members of the Army team. I fear that General Washington's words to Moses Seixas will someday soon ring hollow.

My graybeard advice to Army chaplains is simple: Be a Chaplain Moseley. Jews (and other minority-faith soldiers) depend on all Army chaplains to understand our religion and to advocate for and enable Jewish soldiers to freely exercise it.

As for Dr. Evans T. Moseley, he continued to serve after World War II both as a civilian Baptist minister and as an Army chaplain, retiring from the Army Reserve as a colonel. He died in his home state of Kentucky in 2004 at the age of 93. His headstone is inscribed:

Evans Taylor
Moseley

Born
July 16 1911
Died
August 3 2004

Baptist Minister
Chaplain WWII¹⁴

Yes, Chaplain (Colonel) Evans T. Moseley was both a Baptist minister, who faithfully ministered to his own faith group in the best traditions of that faith group; and an Army chaplain, who faithfully ministered to all soldiers of every faith in the best traditions of the United States Army Chaplain Corps. Those two things overlap but are not the same.

I encourage Army chaplains to be both.

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¹⁴ "Evans Taylor Moseley, Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/12170765/evans-taylor-moseley>.