A CHAPLAIN’S TALE DURING THE KOREAN WAR

By Chaim Feuerman z”l, as told to Ruchama Feuerman

At age twenty-four, I served for two years (from 1953 to 1955) on active duty as a Jewish chaplain in the United States Air Force. There was a war going on in Korea, and the United States Army was requesting volunteers. The National Jewish Welfare Board put pressure on the yeshivot, and so I was “volunteered.” Before I joined though, I spent a year studying full-time at Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin in Brooklyn, New York, under the tutelage of Rav Yitzchok Hutner, z”l.

Volunteers had a choice of serving in the United States Army, Navy, Marines or Air Force. I chose the Air Force and was assigned to the Air Training Command at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

Rav Hutner wasn’t too concerned about my joining the Air Force. He brushed it off, like it was some kind of initiation into a fraternity. Okay, so you’ll be there for two years. You’ll get in and get out. You’ll go and you’ll come back.

It didn’t feel that way when I first arrived.

On my first day of active duty, an officer inducted me and then accompanied me into a building. I was wearing my Air Force cap. He said, “Take it off.” A military man wasn’t allowed to wear a cap indoors. I didn’t know it, but if you wore a yarmulke, you would be considered officially “out of uniform” and subject to a citation and severe penalties. The same was true of facial hair.

I said, “Do you mean—take it off and then put on my yarmulke?” He barked, “No! Off!” I obeyed because I had no choice, but afterward I spoke to Rav Hutner about it. “What do I do?” He said, “You have to take off your yarmulke, and see to it that in your heart things are the way they should be. Don’t worry about the externals right now.”

I wasn’t completely at ease with that, but Rav Hutner said it, so I did it. By this point, he had assumed the stature of a father in my eyes, a spiritual father. People have no idea what it was like in those days, how profoundly students were connected to their roshei yeshivah. Our generation had been completely orphaned. Many like myself had Galician parents who were traditional but didn’t have much of a Jewish education and certainly didn’t have the tools to help us succeed in the world of learning [Torah]. Zero. Along came Rav Hutner, a towering personality, a gigantic soul, handsome and dashing, unbelievably well-spoken in many languages, a wise man who was street smart and savvy and had received the luminous wisdom from the Alter of Slabodka. To us, he was like Moshe Rabbeinu. He was everything to me.

Throughout my time in the military, I experienced many conflicts between my service and my Torah observance. Praying with a minyan was impossible. Shabbat davening itself was challenging. You weren’t free to do whatever you wanted. Even though I had enormous latitude as an officer, I was still subject to the Air Force’s regulations.

Rav Hutner told me, “Whenever there is a halachah that you cannot keep, you should learn the laws that pertain to the mitzvah you can’t observe.” The rationale behind that was simple. Every mitzvah has four components: l’limod, l’lamed, lishmor v’la’asot—to study, to teach, to guard and to do. So if you can’t perform “la’asot” (to do), at least be sure to perform the other three.

That first day I received the requisite crew cut and uniform. No gun, because chaplains weren’t allowed to carry guns. But later, when I attended an officers’ basic military school, they taught us how to march, and proper military protocol.

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Most of the chaplains were in their mid-forties or fifties. I was a very young chaplain, just twenty-three. My trainees were much younger—seventeen. These boys, fresh off the farms of Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Mississippi, saw the military as an opportunity to get out from behind the pigs, the goats and the cows and expand their horizons.

When the trainees first landed on the base, their heads were shaved right away; they were then sent to the showers and stuck into loose-fitting dungarees—fatigues. No snappy uniforms for them yet.

The next stop on the assembly line was the chapel. The boys now had to hear an inspirational talk from a chaplain, any chaplain, be it a reverend, priest, rabbi or imam—it was all the same to the military. My assignment was to tell them to be good boys, to stay away from drinking and nonsense. (Drugs weren’t a problem in those days.) It didn’t matter that my “congregants” weren’t Jewish. My job was to serve the spiritual needs of all faiths—to encourage the men to be patriotic, honest, “brave, courageous and bold.”

Many of the Christian chaplains gave very long and tedious “derashot.” To their thinking, they finally had a captive audience—a chapel full of people—and they weren’t going to let these boys go so quickly. Their long sermons would then hold up the next group of inductees waiting to get into the chapel. This put the chaplains in conflict with the barbers, who wanted the assembly line to move quickly—they were paid by the head.

One barber was named Benno F. Wotipka. We became friends, good ole Benno and I.

I would ask him, “Benno, what do you want? The sixty-second special or the two-hour special?” Sometimes it was to his advantage if my sermon went more slowly. Whatever he said, I would do. Because I didn’t really care if the men listened to my derashah. All I knew was, I had to say a derashah.

I did the same thing with the guys who issued the uniforms—I kept the line moving. They probably were also paid by the uniform. I was very popular with everyone in that unit.

It was fun. I had a grand time. Well, most of the time.

Every now and then, I’d be overcome with an intense longing for home and my yeshivah, especially soon after I first arrived. One day I was walking along the base moping, missing my family. Ahead of me, a platoon of airmen was strung on the grass; the men were catching their breath after an exercise or a march. All I did was walk by, despondent with my head down, when the sergeant gave a full-throated yell: “Plato-o-o-n!!” At that instant, these exhausted trainees all leapt to their feet, saluted crisply, and chimed in unison: “Good morning, sir!” They stood there and waited. I looked at them like they were crazy. Was I supposed to do something in return? Somehow I intuitively raised a feeble hand to my right eyebrow. The sergeant in charge of the platoon snapped, “At ease!” whereupon all the men plopped back onto the grass.

Did their salutes lift my mood? No. It wasn’t personal, just the protocol toward officers, as I learned soon enough. Whenever I happened to walk by, those in uniform leapt to their feet, saluted me and stood at attention. Another “benefit” of being an officer—I was allowed to have separate rations, so I could buy and eat whatever I wanted. But it wasn’t easy to get kosher food in San Antonio, Texas in 1953. Where would I get tuna fish that was kosher? StarKist didn’t yet have an OU.

So what did I do? I ate candy. Chocolate candy bars. For two years. They eroded my teeth, and I had a mouthful of cavities. Of course I could’ve eaten fruits and vegetables. But where was I going to get fruit on an Air Force base? It would involve going into town in a car. As an officer, I used a motor scooter, but it wasn’t so simple to travel thirty miles on a motor scooter. Texas is spread out. The only food readily available on the base was...
candy bars. I lost a lot of weight because I didn’t eat much.

In retrospect those bars were probably treif, laden with questionable ingredients, but at the time we thought they were kosher.

There was another dimension to my job. On Sunday mornings we conducted a special prayer service for the few Jewish men on base—maybe twenty-five people at most. Afterward we ate bagels and lox, which was a lucky break for me. These men were not the basic trainees but cadets training to be pilots.

Come September and October, I knew I’d have to take time off from my more mundane weekday chaplaincy duties to observe Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Seven days off from work within the same thirty-day period was a bit much to expect my non-Jewish fellow officers, airmen and chaplains to accept graciously. And so, to forestall potential resentment among my peers, I came up with a plan. When Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s Day rolled around, I would wait for someone to be assigned chaplain duty. Then I would approach that individual and let him know that he could enjoy his holiday because I would assume his duties. I did that for every possible holiday or quasi-holiday: Election Day, Columbus Day, Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. It worked.

One time, though, Christmas fell on a Shabbat. Now I had a dilemma. I didn’t want the duty chaplain to miss out on his holiday, but I certainly did not want to desecrate Shabbat. I hit on an idea. The base headquarters contained a cot. I could sleep there on Shabbat. This way, the sergeant on duty could reach me without the use of a telephone and I could walk to take care of any emergencies which might arise on base. It was a restful Shabbat.

By the way, from Thanksgiving through New Year’s Day, the base’s loud-speaker continuously blared Christmas carols in honor of the season and in order to bring good cheer to the troops. Many of the airmen, even though they were Christian, soon tired of hearing the carols over and over again. They wanted to complain to the base commander but did not have the courage to do so. Then they came up with what they thought was a marvelous idea. They figured the Jewish chaplain (me) must be at least as tired as they were of hearing those Christmas carols. They sent a delegation to me. “Could you ask the base commander to cut down on all those Christmas carols?”

Sure, I thought. And be the Jew/Grinch who stole Christmas? Without missing a beat, I said, “Not on your life!”

At one point, the Christian chaplains wanted to build a baptistery on the base—a sunken receptacle where you baptize people. After I looked at the plans and dimensions, I realized the baptistery could also serve as a kosher mikvah. I could use it for immersing vessels (tevilah), for conversions (which were rare) or for immersing before Yom Kippur.

I asked Rav Hutner if I could use it. He told me I could, because the baptistery was owned by the US government, which is committed to the separation of church and state. I wanted to make sure from the outset that the baptistery would be kosher by ensuring that there would be mayim chayim—living waters. So I said to the engineer, “I’d like to first fill the baptistery with ice from a river and let it melt.”

The engineer drawled, “Raaabbi, you can fill that thing with beer, for all I care.”

Then I told the Christian chaplains what I wanted to do. I even wrote about it in the Air Force newsletter. I don’t think the Baptists were thrilled about sharing the baptistery with the Jews, though, because shortly thereafter the project was abandoned.

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One day I got a call from a Reform rabbi who led a synagogue in San Antonio.

“Howard?” Rabbi Jacobson said. “I have a man out here who is in need of spiritual guidance.”

“Okay, what’s the problem?” I asked. He said, “Well there’s a buck private keeping kosher in the army.”

I said, “So what’s the problem?”

The Reform Rabbi Jacobson seemed upset. He tried to explain. “He’s keeping kosher and it’s very difficult. I want to send him over to you to straighten him out.”

I scratched my head. Why would a Reform rabbi of a synagogue who had nothing to do with the military bother calling me about this?

A little backstory is necessary. Rabbi Jacobson shared a backyard with his neighbor, General Shambora, a four-star general. Let me explain the hierarchy in the military. At the very bottom of the ranks is a buck private—no stripes on his sleeves. All the way at the top, right beneath the president of the United States—who is the commanding officer of all forces—is the four-star general. So a four-star general was pretty close to “God.” General Shambora was in command of the Fourth Army area, which included Texas, Oklahoma and quite a few other states—a whole chunk of America.

A certain Yossi Itzkowitz—the buck private—was eating kosher in the mess hall, which meant he was hardly eating anything—sometimes fruits, if they served an apple, pear or orange. His captain noticed that he wasn’t eating.

“What’s this about?” he asked.

“I’m Jewish, I’m Orthodox. I keep kosher,” Yossi explained.

His captain knew Yossi was a good soldier, so following proper army procedure, he put in a request to a major for Yossi to obtain separate rations. This was something that normally only an officer would receive.

When the major received the request for separate rations, he couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Separate rations
for a buck private? What was that about? Maybe the private was a senator's son or nephew. He didn't know what to do, so he sent it up to a lieutenant colonel, who didn't know what to do with it, and it kept getting sent up the ranks all the way to the four-star general. When General Shambora received the request, he became afraid. Maybe this was a president's grandson! What on earth was he going to do? Then he remembered his next-door-neighbor, Rabbi Jacobson. He'd know what to do. General Shambora called up Rabbi Jacobson, and Rabbi Jacobson called me.

Rabbi Jacobson and I had a frustrating conversation, and it ended with, "Howard, will you have a look at him?"

I said, "Sure, why not?"

So they stuck the buck private, a Torah Vodaath yeshivah bachur, in a staff car reserved for high-ranking officers. The driver was a corporal. He drove Yossi from Fort Sam Houston all the way to the other side of San Antonio to have a "spiritual guidance interview" as it was called, with a Howard Feuerman.

I looked at Yossi and said, "What happened?"

He said, "I'm keeping kosher, and my captain put in a request for me to get separate rations."

I said, "What will you do if you don't get the separate rations?"

He shrugged. "I'll just keep doing what I'm doing. I'll eat grapes, pears, bananas and oranges when I get them."

"Are you a good soldier?" I asked him.

"Yes, I'm a very good soldier."

"What do you do on GI Party Night?"

I wanted to know. That's when everyone cleaned up the barracks Friday night for inspection on Saturday morning. Inspection was a big deal. Officers went around with white gloves and checked if there was dust on the shelves. They even checked the toothpaste tubes, making sure nobody had squeezed from the top, and that there were no soap bubbles in the soap dishes. It had to be spit spot. Of course, to clean the barracks on Shabbat was a distasteful task for any frum Jew. I wanted to know how Yossi handled it.

He said, "It's Shabbat, what can I do?"

"But after Shabbat," I persisted, "what do you?"

He replied, "I make sure to do other work that will make up for the fact that I wasn't at the GI party."

Yossi Itzkowitz sounded legit. So I sent him back to his army post in the staff car.

Now I had to deal with Rabbi Jacobson. I said, "This young man is legit. If he gets separate rations, he'll be grateful. If he doesn't, he'll just continue with what he's doing."

Rabbi Jacobson relayed this report to General Shambora, and that's how a four-star general gave a buck private from Torah Vodaath separate rations for kosher reasons.

Thirty years later, in the 1980s, I was sitting in a shtiebel on the corner of 70th Road and Main Street in Queens. I saw a man praying in the minyan who looked dimly familiar. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I walked over.

"Are you Yossi Itzkowitz?"

"Yeah."

"I'm Howard."

He understood right away. We were very happy to see each other. And we've been buddies ever since.

Once, we reminisced about how I had brought him a sandwich when he was on bivouac—that's when you go out in the field and simulate war conditions. In such a situation he didn't have access to separate rations. He couldn't starve, so I contacted a friend of mine who lived in town—his wife made him the sandwich and I delivered it.

In the mud, even in those fatigue out in the field, Yossi looked like a Torah Vodaath yeshivah bachur.

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When I had initially packed for my service, I had taken along parchment, quill and ink with the idea that in my down time I would practice to become a sofer, a scribe. As an officer, I did have leisure time, and so I would take out my quill, ink and parchment and practice writing the Purim megillah, the Book of Esther. A megillah is actually the book that all scribes use to learn to become a sofer, because God's name doesn't appear in it, and therefore a beginner scribe won't be desecrating Hashem's name if he makes a mistake.

Every now and then I was able to take a few days leave to go home, as long as it didn't interfere with my chaplain duties. One of the best ways to get anywhere in the US was to hitch a ride on an Air Force plane that was going in your direction. If there was room, you could hop on. Hitchhiking, they called it. You needed a place to land, though, and there were no Air Force bases in New York. The closest Air Force base was in Springfield, Massachusetts, which I figured was close enough, and from there I'd get a ride somewhere to New York.

En route, as we were flying over Brooklyn, I joked with the pilots on the plane, "Could I bail out over Brooklyn?" which was an impossibility, I knew.
There was no place for the plane to land. They joked back, “Chaplain, if you sign out for the parachute, that’s all we care about.” To their thinking, as long as someone was responsible for the government property—the parachute—I could go kill myself, as long as I signed out.

There actually was an Air Force base in New York—a very tiny one called Mitchell Field, which is now the site of the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County. We were flying over Mitchell Field, not scheduled to land, when out of nowhere we were hit with a cloud burst and a very intense storm. Pilots normally fly around a storm, or over or under it, but this time they couldn’t. They had to make a forced, unscheduled landing.

As soon as we hit the ground, the storm stopped. The pilots opened the door to let me out. They said, “Chaplain, you must live right,” and they flew off.

From Mitchell Field I took a very short taxi ride to the Bronx. It was my first trip home. My mother was horror-stricken when she saw me. I was gaunt from eating mostly candy bars. In my buzz cut, I looked like a zombie, absolutely frightening to my mother. I imagine she tried to fatten me up, but there was only so much she could accomplish in a few days.

I took another leave for Purim. I went to Yeshiva Rabbi Chaim Berlin in my uniform—it was classy, you know—and brought my Purim megillah with me. I showed Rav Hutner what I had done in the Air Force, and he examined it. The megillah I had written was kosher, but not considered mehudar—not the ideal, best kind of megillah. Therefore it couldn’t be used by the cantor on Purim. Rav Hutner looked up at me and said, “Chaim, I want to fulfill the mitzvah of hearing the megillah by following along with your megillah.”

Throughout the reading of Megillat Esther, I stood next to Rav Hutner in my Air Force uniform, with Rav Hutner holding my megillah and carefully following each word.

It was a great moment. I had written and practiced to become a scribe so I wouldn’t waste my time on nonsense, and here was my rav, whom I loved like a father, using this megillah. And thus I served two years in the Air Force, and then came back and went on with the rest of my life, just like Rav Hutner had said.