

Answering the call



Aleksei Kolesnikov

Rabbi Steven Kaye Police Chaplain

To protect and serve ... the police

On the evening of Jan. 24, 2018, as Rabbi Steve Kaye relaxed at home, he received a text: “Officer-involved shooting. Respond to Denver General.” Kaye, the Denver police

ly aware that this officer is not from Denver but another jurisdiction (Adams County).

“I’m not sure whether other law enforcement communities will be there; if other officers are involved in the shooting; and the family —

progress in Thornton, according to media reports.

Gumm was pronounced dead at Denver General.

This was the scene awaiting Kaye, who became a volunteer police chaplain in 1990 with the

From a crisis — an officer who is shot — to quiet counseling

chaplain on call that fateful night, put on his uniform and sprang into action.

“What did I think of driving to the hospital?” he muses in the study at Temple Sinai. “I was keen-

wife, parents, children.”

Adams County Deputy Sheriff Heath Gumm, 31, a five-year veteran of the force, was shot multiple times with a .45-caliber pistol while responding to an assault in

Greenwood Village Police Dept. and transferred to the Denver PD three years later.

When he first arrived at the hospital he met with the charge nurse, social worker and police liaison,



Denver Police Dept. Public Affairs, Media Relations Unit

Chaplain Kaye talks with a Denver police officer. Kaye calls this volunteer job a ‘blessing.’

who briefed him on the incident. His training takes it from there.

“I ask about the family — where they are, who is with them,” he says of that night. “His wife is there. His parents arrive within the next hour. I introduce myself. ‘Is there anything you need?’ They are in shock, so I make sure they are hydrated and have access to lots of water.

“I explain what will happen over the next few hours: dealing with the coroner, transporting the body several miles to the coroner’s office.”

While police chaplains adhere to strict protocol, Kaye, who is the only active Jewish chaplain in the Denver PD, says his primary function is providing emotional support to the family and ensuring that red tape does not get in the way of their needs — and, when appropriate, offering a prayer.

“Chaplains will recite a generic prayer,” he says. “However, if the family attends a particular church, a priest or minister is called in to comfort and pray with them.

“We try and make sure that crisis care is appropriate care.”

Proselytizing disqualifies applicants interested in volunteering as a police chaplain, Kaye says. “It’s against all our protocols.”

Around 1:30 a.m. in the early hours of Jan. 25, Gumm’s coffin, draped in an American flag, is placed in a hearse that commences its grim journey to the Adams County Coroner’s Office.

“Police cars from Denver, Aurora, Arapahoe County, federal agencies, Homeland Security, Sheridan, Englewood, state troopers, line up their vehicles along Speer Boulevard to join the motorcade,” Kaye says, his voice trail-



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ing.

Kaye, rabbi at Beit Torah in Colorado Springs, director of Ohr Chadash and co-leader of Sinai’s Torah study class since 1985, has responded to at least six officer-involved shootings during his police chaplaincy.

The first one occurred in 1995, when Officer Shawn Leinen was shot dead after chasing a burglary suspect to an apartment complex at Monaco and Hampden.

Leinen “was very young,” Kaye adds.

Soldiers deploying to a war-torn country understand that death is a

distinct possibility. Police officers swear a similar oath and accept the identical risk.

Once cadets enter the Police Academy, their spouses and significant others attend classes on the stresses inherent in being part of the police force.

“But no one expects it’s going to be his or her partner, spouse or buddy who dies,” Kaye says. “They never believe it will be them.”

The conversation segues into the Black Lives Matter

movement and controversies fomenting current societal mistrust of law enforcement.

“I believe that all lives matter,” Kaye says. “Yes, there are many communities that have issues with racial profiling. Denver has done its best to correct this. Officers must complete forms after every contact: age, race, gender.

“Experts examine those statistics and ask, ‘Is there a pattern here?’”

Kaye says that police protocol ensures the safety of the officer as well as the person being stopped at

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Denver's memorial to fallen police officers

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a traffic light, even though the individual might strenuously object.

“If you’re patting down a person at a stop light, you want to make sure he isn’t reaching for a weapon. If someone puts a hand in his pocket and says, ‘I’m just grabbing my wallet,’ you must confirm that they’re going for a wallet and not a gun.

“Civilians may look at this and say the officer is being overly harsh.”

Kaye says no one dislikes a firefighter because a firefighter, in addition to running into burning buildings, “rescues your cat from a

tree. But not everyone loves a police officer because he or she might write you a ticket or hold people back in crowds.

Kaye became the go-to man on a variety of Jewish practices

“This may anger civilians. ‘Why did you write me a ticket?’ ‘Don’t we live in a free society?’ Well, we do — until you start destroying public property.”

Cognizant that rotten apples exist in every organization, Kaye says the Denver PD has changed dramatically in terms of diversity.

“We have a large number of officers who are Hispanic, African American and women. The chief of police is African American. One of the deputy chiefs is Hispanic. Several commanders are Hispanic, African American and women.

“Diversity does not mean that there aren’t going to be sporadic negative events. But that’s not what I’ve encountered.”

Regardless of one’s position on police tactics or profiling, a pall descends on Denver whenever a police officer perishes in the line of duty, Kaye says.

“A law enforcement officer

killed in the line of duty has encountered someone who intentionally inflicts harm. As Americans, we take issue with this, even though we may disagree with individual policies or have a beef with an individual.

“The uniform means something — democracy, order and, sometimes, making sense out of chaos.”

In 1990, Steve Kaye was invited to become a police chaplain at the Greenwood Village Police Dept. Assigned Badge 90-13, he focused on anti-Semitic rumblings within the department and community.

“When Greenwood Village began its chaplaincy program, they asked me to join,” he says. At that time, no rabbis actively served with any Denver metro police department, although some held the title of honorary chaplain.

Several incidents, classified as misunderstandings of the Jewish community, had occurred in the GV police department.

“I don’t think any of the police officers had ever met a rabbi, except for two Jewish officers, both of whom had encountered an anti-Semitic or hostile work environment,” Kaye says. “They welcomed me with open arms.

“The others engaged with me in respectful questioning about Judaism.”

He rode eight to 10 hours a month with police in their patrol cars, a requirement for past and current police chaplains.

For Kaye, the ride-alongs were an invaluable entry point to policing and establishing personal connections in the early days.

“The officers got to know me and I got to know them,” he says.



“Once they could ask any question without being embarrassed, we fostered deep friendships and officers developed great respect for Judaism and Jewish traditions.”

When Aish Denver opened in Greenwood Village in the mid-1990s, Kaye became the go-to man on a variety of Jewish practices. What does “*shomer Shabbos*” mean? When is it permissible to shake hands? What’s the Jewish attitude toward autopsies?

“The ride-alongs introduced me to communities and neighborhoods, streets and alleys, that I never knew existed,” he says. Traditionally, during the first ride with a new officer, Kaye underwent a test.

“I was asked to close my eyes and state where we were, because chaplains often used the car radio and identified locations in case the officer needed back-up.

“The officers had to determine if the chaplain was an asset — and not a liability.”

Over the past 28 years, Kaye has served on the Metro Squad; in southeast Denver’s District 3; DIA; District 6 in downtown Denver; and District 1 in northeast Denver.

He has met hundreds of police officers. Many refer to him as their rabbi, even though they are not Jewish.

“These officers have come to trust me when they are having personal, financial or on-the-job issues,” Kaye says. “They frequently turn to me before seeing the police psychologist out of fear they’ll be reported — which won’t happen.”

Sometimes officers seek out his advice before going to the department’s peer support program, an excellent resource that guarantees confidentiality.

“I spent an inordinate amount of time riding in patrol cars during those early years,” he laughs. “Now I spend an inordinate period of time doing one-on-one counsel-

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ing.”

Kaye is not complaining — quite the opposite. His fondness for these officers is palpable, loyal, enduring.

“I’ll tell you a story,” he says. “I have a police radio in my car, and I’m always scanning my districts. I know my officers’ car numbers. I know their voices. When they deviate from their normal behavior or I hear lots of unusual radio chatter, I pick up my cell and call them.

“‘Hey Joe, hey Officer Jones, how are you doing?’ And they say, ‘Rabbi, it’s really good to hear from you. Any chance you’re good for a cup of coffee? G-d must have sent you my way today.’

“Little do they know that I was scanning the radio,” he grins.

Officer-chaplain ride-alongs can generate meaningful exchanges of a religious nature, which Kaye responds to from both a Jewish and an ecumenical perspective. “My role is always by invitation, not imposition,” he qualifies.

During WW II and the Korean War, Jewish soldiers were sizably represented in military service, he says. “Now there are fewer and fewer Jews in the military, and only a small percentage of Jews are firefighters, in law enforcement or even EMTs.

“It’s just not there.”

While many reasons contribute to this lack of participation, Kaye narrows it down to a cultural mindset: “My son the doctor.” “My son the lawyer.”

“Due to the emphasis on

achieving a certain level of education and compensation, people often don’t choose the public sector.”

Kaye, an engaging rabbi who wears the chaplain’s uniform with pride, is aware of its significance to Denver’s Jewish community as a whole.

“I’m a volunteer. Police chaplains are not paid. As such, I help

‘A police chaplain is an angel of G-d’

first responders develop a thoughtful relationship with the Jewish community and introduce them to the richness of our tradition and our shared core values.”

Kaye says the new generation of Americans, including non-Jews, fit into the “SBNR” category: spiritual but not religious.

“They have no religious exposure except maybe at family holidays on Christmas and Easter, but lack real faith traditions,” he says.

“Their compass begins to spin when they start talking to a chaplain, because they have no idea what to ask.

“Once they are confident the chaplain is not trying to convert them — again, proselytizing is totally unacceptable — these discussions often lead some officers to seek out a house of worship that may give them comfort and guidance regarding the issues they struggle with as police.”

Rabbi Steve Kaye contemplates good and evil on a regular basis because he’s witnessed both sides

of the behavioral coin on the job. “I think about good and evil all the time,” he says.

“I see people who commit irresponsible acts that change their lives and the lives of others forever. I’ve also met individuals who are genuinely evil from their core.

“I have no compassion for those who sexually assault minors, children, infants,” he says. “That is evil.

From my perspective, I’m not certain there’s *teshuvah* (repentance).”

But he’s also seen the flip side of humanity — incredible courage, kindness and love.

“When people ask what I do as a police chaplain, I say I’m blessed to be an agent of G-d in this sacred work.”

Kaye, who is regional advisor for Red Cross Wyoming Colorado Disaster Spiritual Care and serves on the Red Cross Aviation Response Team, is unable to explain the “why” of tragedies, shootings and plane crashes.

But when it comes to helping the living survive a crisis — whether it’s the death of a 31-year-old deputy sheriff or 58 dead Las Vegas concertgoers — he has no doubt about the “how.”

“I strongly believe that first responders, chaplains and mental health providers are angels of G-d,” Kaye says.

“Countless volunteers make a crucial difference by offering compassion; listening, crying; even in their silence.

“You know the story of Jacob’s dream, as the angels are climbing up and down the ladder?

“They are all around us.”

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