
Faith & Freedom

Rabbi Chaplain Colonel Mitchell Ackerson

Noam Prutzer

Rabbi Chaplain Colonel Mitchell Ackerson is the Deputy Command Chaplain of the 311th Signal Command. When not leading High Holiday services in Saudi Arabia or eating a Friday night meal in Saddam Hussein's palace in Iraq, Rabbi Ackerson lives with his family in Baltimore, Maryland. Having served in the First Gulf War and the current war in Iraq, Ackerson has brought Jewish tradition and culture to places in the world where Judaism is otherwise absent. His persistent optimism, even after witnessing battle, is inspiring. As he believes that "we could use some well-educated Ivy Leaguers in the military," he has allowed *Kedma* to gain a little insight into the life of a Jewish Army Chaplain.

Kedma: Is there anything specific you want people to know about your job? For example, is a chaplain a soldier? Are there any misconceptions about the Army?

Ackerson: The main misconception is that there are no Jews in the Army and that there are no *frum* [religious] Jews in the Army. There is also the misconception that chaplains don't go to the front. Chaplains go wherever their soldiers go. We don't fire weapons. We have a chaplain's assistant who takes care of that for us. We are soldiers and officers of the U.S. Army whose job is to be a chaplain. Just like someone is Personnel Officer, someone is Finance Officer, and someone is tactician. We all have jobs and roles to play in the military.

Kedma: How did you decide to become an Army chaplain?

Ackerson: I needed a summer job and wanted something purposeful to do. When I was in rabbinical school the Army has a seminarian/chaplain candidate program. It allows people who learn in rabbinical school to check out the military. You do basic training and can intern up to 45 days a year, see if you can handle the military. If [participants decide they can handle it] it's a boost to their pay and pension, and, if not, they can get out. Folks who normally wouldn't try the military get a chance to give it a test run. I went to basic training and I realized there were a lot more Jews in the Army than I thought and they really wanted a rabbi.

Kedma: What inherent skills does a chaplain need?

Ackerson: I think if you want to be successful you have to be open-minded, you have to be flexible, you can't be a picky eater. I think those are the real key. Oh, and I think you have to have a love of people, not just your own people but a general love of people. Because if you don't have that you'll never succeed in the military. A large part of your work is done with non-Jews and if you think less of non-Jews than of Jews, you're going to be a failure.

Kedma: What are the responsibilities of an Army chaplain?

Ackerson: The Chaplain Corps talks about bringing God to the soldiers and soldiers to God. To be a ministry of presence. You do a lot of counseling, life cycle events. You can be with them where no other clergy can be. We teach, we preach, like any clergy. Obviously things like *britei milah* [circumcisions], *kashrut* [maintaining Jewish dietary laws]...

Kedma: To whom do you feel your obligation? Soldiers? Jewish soldiers? Believing soldiers? The USA?

Ackerson: First of all, [as a chaplain] you're a soldier in the U.S. Army and you take the same oath of office as any officer. I have a responsibility to my unit.

As I am a denominational-specific clergyman I have a dual responsibility to my Jewish soldiers.

Kedma: Why did you choose to serve in the American Army as opposed to the Israeli?

Ackerson: Because I'm an American. I love Israel and I'm sure I will eventually live there. But this country has given us enormous blessings and freedoms like no other country in the world. *Hakarat hatov* [showing appreciation] is an intrinsic requirement in Judaism, we need to show *hakarat hatov* for all America has done for us.

Kedma: Do your political views on Israel ever effect/hinder your ability to perform your job?

Ackerson: No. I mean I think that the overwhelming majority of military personnel probably side with Israel, more so than the general population. They understand them [the Israelis] better. I don't think it's ever come up as a conflict. I hold a strategic position now, but the average chaplain isn't in a strategic role. So it wouldn't really form a conflict. In terms of American politics there is no impact on what I do as a chaplain.

Kedma: As a rabbi you probably have strong religious beliefs. How do you approach situations or people who are antithetical to those beliefs?

Ackerson: In the civilian world, if someone doesn't want to see a clergyman, he just doesn't see him. In the military, the chaplain's there whether you want him or not. You don't have to interact with him on a religious level, and that's what often happens. The chaplain is a senior officer; we become more their counselor rather than their pastor, although sometimes it leads into that as well. We don't get soldiers really who are anti-chaplain where he doesn't want to see the chaplain at all.

Kedma: What is the most difficult religious situation you have to face as a chaplain?

Ackerson: In combat certainly when a soldier dies. Because of the distances and the dangers it is very hard to make sure the body is taken care of properly *halakhically* [in accordance with Jewish law]. To get it back for burial, and have it treated with the proper respect, is certainly difficult. But a significant number of *halakhic* issues come up, it is hard to point to any one.

Kedma: How is your interaction different between believing and non-believing Jews?

Ackerson: Just like in the civilian world, some folks are more involved, some are less. My responsibility is to all Jews. Different things will bring a soldier to think he wants to practice. I had a soldier with me at one of my bases; his wife and kids came to services and he never came to services, not even Yom Kippur. Didn't even consider it. In Saudi Arabia during the First Gulf War he was already sitting in the tent waiting for Friday night *Kabbalat* services to begin when I got there. He says, "I'm in Saudi Arabia. Everyone wants to kill me. Maybe I could use a little insurance." You never know what will strike a person, so we keep the lines of communication open to all Jewish soldiers whether they want it or not. Obviously, for those who are observant, we deal with a variety of things, *kashrut*, etc. Ultimately, everyone is our responsibility.

Kedma: Have you ever seen anything that has made you question your faith?

Ackerson: I think that anyone who sees a young man blown up or shot to death has that as an initial reaction; it would be unnatural not to. But those are initial reactions and we get over it and we kind of work through it. But certainly with Judaism questioning and doubt...of God are encouraged and we don't shy away from asking tough questions, where in other faith groups you're not supposed to ask those questions.

In a *Newsweek* article a number of weeks ago with another chaplain, with

everything he saw he questioned faith...the Jewish chaplains said yes, that's normal. The Christian chaplains were very upset, "You can never challenge, never doubt..."

So initially certain challenges make you question, make you challenge. But you reaffirm your faith and why you're there.

Kedma: What is your most memorable experience overseas?

Ackerson: That's a tough one. Jeez, just one huh. In terms of this war, the Rosh Hashanah retreat in Saddam's palace was very memorable. Getting 140-160 soldiers sitting around Saddam's dining room table to have *davening* [prayers], have meals, was a really remarkable memory. A really positive event for a lot of Jewish soldiers, and a lot of Christian soldiers as well who witnessed it.

There was a Shabbos in Iraq. Being in Babel and *davening* [praying] the *Kabbalat Shabbat* with a *minyan* [prayer quorum] right next to the Euphrates and to be able to say "On the Rivers of Babylon...and how can we sing..." You can just look in front of you see the ruins of Babylon and we're still here *davening*. That was a very moving experience; certainly for the 30 Marines there that Shabbos. You can really appreciate it, singing...they'll be gone, we're still here, and here we are 2,500 years later, we're still here and they're gone.

There were many experiences over the years that have ingrained in me why it is so important to have a chaplain there and why we should be there doing what we do.

Kedma: What do you think the affects have been on your family?

Ackerson: Well you know, I certainly think that there's been some impact, obviously. My kids, I think, have a greater appreciation of other faiths and traditions. They've experienced things that a large number of Orthodox kids don't experience. My kids have a much better sense of politics and worldview. They've been encouraged to study and research and speak their minds about these things, which I think is also very helpful. I think they're relatively broader-

minded for me having done it.

Kedma: Have you ever been really afraid for your life?

Ackerson: Too many times, all too many times. If I never get shot at again I'll never complain. That's what I tell my young soldiers when they get excited, "I just got shot at by a sniper and he just missed me." I tell them if I never get shot at again I'll never complain. That's not one of the parts of the job I enjoy.

Kedma: Do you think you're done?

Ackerson: I'm going to stick around for a while. I still have a few good years left in me.

Kedma: What is the most important lesson you've learned?

Ackerson: That there is more that unites Americans than divides them, and there really is. The willingness of young men and women to sacrifice their lives for a greater good is a very inspiring thing to see day after day.

Kedma: Would you recommend this job to others? To your children?

Ackerson: Yup. I mean, it's not for everybody. You have to have a certain mindset and personality to deal with it. I encourage folks and rabbis to do this. Not necessarily for 20-30 years, but just for three years serve God, your country, your people. It's a great opportunity for growth and personal maturation. You are needed, too; that's the biggest reason of all to do it. There's a desperate, desperate, need for rabbis in the military.

Kedma: Is there anything else we should know, that you want to add?

Ackerson: I think that it is incumbent on the American Jewish community to be more supportive of Jewish soldiers, soldiers in general, but certainly Jewish soldiers. Jewish communities tend to want to support us in what they want rather than in what the soldiers need. That's a big issue. We're certainly better

than we were during the Vietnam War but there's room to improve. It's an honorable thing to serve in the military. We're looking for a few good rabbis, rabbinical students to try us out. People should pray for the members of the Armed Forces just like they pray for *Tzahal* [the Israeli Defense Forces]. You rarely see that in a synagogue in America, they'll say the prayer for *Tzahal* and the *Medinah* [the State of Israel] but not for the American government and the American soldiers. I think that's very much a mistake and a problem.

Noam Pratzner is a freshman from Toronto studying in the College of Arts & Sciences. He is planning on double majoring in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics and Jewish Studies. His interests include Jewish political thought and philosophy of economics. He hopes you all enjoyed reading his interview and suggests that you all get involved in the production of Kedma.