



Presidential Religious Liberty Commission

Religious Liberty in the Military

Dec. 10, 2025

The Aleph Institute submitted the following packet which includes hard copies of the following documents as public comment to the Religious Liberty Commission:

1. [Kosher at Sea](#)
2. [Jewish Religious Practice in a Military Environment](#)
3. [Memorandum to Jewish Servicemembers](#)



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY COMMISSION

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

**HEARING ON RELIGIOUS
LIBERTY IN THE MILITARY**

**ALEPH MILITARY TESTIMONY:
ADDITIONAL MATERIAL**

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2025



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ALEPH MILITARY TESTIMONY

DELIVERED BY RABBI SANFORD L. DRESIN

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ENDORSER, THE ALEPH INSTITUTE

Good morning,

Ladies and gentlemen of the commission, we greatly appreciate the opportunity to testify before you to assist in your mission to mend the very broken and dysfunctional spiritual environment in today's US military.

To be sure, President Trump and Congress have taken steps to support religious liberty in the military, such as policy changes under the first Trump administration that protected religious accommodations for beards for Jewish service members, and legislation by Congress in the 2012 and 2020 National Defense Authorization Acts that required protection for religious liberty and mandated military training on religious freedom laws.

But, as you will see from my testimony today, more work is necessary. Even the existing protections are at risk of being rolled back, with Jewish service members being forced to choose between serving their country, OR their religion. That dilemma runs counter to the very values on which this nation was founded.

At every stage of a service member's career—beginning at the recruiting office and continuing through basic training, deployment, and beyond—we see mounting obstacles to Jewish religious accommodation and Free Exercise rights. Given the central place of the First Amendment in our constitutional framework, we believe religious accommodation should not be treated as an exception to policy. It should be policy.

My name is Rabbi Sanford Dresin. I served for over 26 years as an active duty Army Chaplain, retiring in the rank of Colonel. I have been the Chaplain Endorser for the Aleph Institute for nearly 20 years.

The Aleph Institute was founded in 1981 to serve the needs of Jewish men and

women who find themselves distant from the support of a Jewish community. Ever since the 1990's, Aleph has served the US military, first by providing religious supplies and materials, and then in 2007, becoming a DoD recognized chaplain endorsing agency. We now endorse over 50 Jewish chaplains and contract rabbis. We also advise and advocate for Jewish service members to ensure their Free Exercise rights are respected. We estimate that 50-75% of the religious accommodation needs that come to our attention require our intervention. Yet, while our advocacy has been strong, Aleph's power is only advisory. All too often, Jewish needs are dismissed outright. The cases we see each year number in the hundreds—and that does not include those who never reach us because they are in basic training, deployed, or have simply given up after repeated denials.

Let me walk you through what Jewish service members experience—starting with the earliest stage: recruitment.

Recruiters are rarely familiar with religious accommodation policy. Moreover, they are incentivized to meet recruiting quotas above all. Because of that, recruiters fail to advise recruits about receiving exceptions to policy. Many recruits who do request accommodations are told, "That will be taken care of at basic training," or "Your request is being processed," when, in fact, it is not. Testimonies in the packet you will receive illustrate this chronic situation.

At basic training, these problems intensify. Trainees are intimidated easily by cadre, and their religious liberty rights are routinely disregarded. Many troops report that during Basic Training, the religious preference on their dog tags and person-

nel records is automatically set to a generic "none" or "non-denominational", and they are told to fix it at their first duty station. This is unacceptable. In addition, kosher MREs are not consistently available. The need for Jewish Sabbath and holiday worship is regularly not acknowledged. Non-Jewish chaplains rarely advocate for their Jewish personnel, and most training bases do not have a Jewish chaplain or contract rabbi assigned to them, so the burden is left on the individual recruit.

Unfortunately, the struggles do not end after Basic. Jewish service members face regular impediments to their religious observance at all stages of their careers. They need to fight for accommodation for every Sabbath and holiday, and fight to receive kosher MREs at every field training exercise and deployment.

That brings me to our first major area of concern: food.

Religiously observant - and even many less observant - Jews keep a kosher diet. The parameters of a kosher diet are complex and beyond the scope of these proceedings.

The US military does provide Kosher MREs. However, there are many problems with the availability and distribution of these MRE's:

- Pre-accession or pre-movement requests for kosher MREs are not taken seriously, and orders often don't get processed.

- The process of acquisition of Kosher MREs is complex, and lends to breakdowns in communication. This ordering process must be simplified. Who is responsible for the order being filled: supply chains, the unit, or the chaplain? How does the information flow to the Jewish service member? How can the service member

follow up to ensure their food will be available? A Jewish soldier who is currently deployed wrote to us last week, quote: “Most of my calories are stuff like chips, hunny-buns, and chocolates, because they can’t get MREs.” Why is that okay?!

- Even when supplies exist: how do personnel get them? A Command Chaplain in the Middle East told us that he has “a warehouse full of Kosher MREs” in his area of responsibility, but our Jewish service members arriving on station can’t easily access them. In one case, an officer in the Space Force was interrogated by a Wing Chaplain when she requested kosher MREs. It was only when Aleph intervened that she was given the MREs!

- In addition, there is a lack of training as to what constitutes kosher: as you will see in your packets, many supply sergeants have substituted non-kosher alternatives - vegetarian, halal, or “porkless” food, instead of kosher.

Finally, the quality of kosher MREs is far below nutritional standards. Thanks to an amendment in the 2026 NDAA, which was shaped by Aleph in concert with Representative Abraham Hamaday, the law now requires “functional parity and equitable treatment” for kosher MREs. We look forward to seeing that requirement implemented before July 2026, as required.

Focusing on commissaries: few substantive Kosher products are found in their facilities in comparison with the average American supermarket. This is because commissaries in the United States are limited by local distributors. For commissaries outside of the United States, the situation is exacerbated.

Service members are unable to cook kosher in the barracks, and most chapels no longer maintain a kosher kitchen—though many installations did so in the past. The “Separate Rations” program, once part of the solution, is increasingly difficult for service members to obtain.

The second major area of concern is Jewish Sabbath and holidays. There are

no standardized policies permitting their observance—not even for the weekly Sabbath. Service members’ ability to worship properly, or even at all, is often completely at the discretion of their commanders. Again, we have dozens of tragic testimonies that you can read in the packet we have submitted. This situation is exacerbated in basic training environments, in which very little effort to accommodate trainees’ religious holiday observance is made.

Even outside of training environments, things aren’t much better. Jewish holiday supplies are not usually made available to Jewish service members. Aleph spends hundreds of thousands of dollars each year supplying free religious materials that should be provided through military channels. But even when they are provided, lack of education and inconsistent policies makes things ridiculous: For example, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar had to buy a new Sukkah, a large expense, four years in a row, as the previous year’s Sukkah was discarded each year because chapel staff didn’t know what purpose it served! Another common issue, the display of a Menorah publicly for Chanukah is a decision made on a local level, at the whim of the commander of each individual base.

Third, there is a systemic neglect of chaplaincy support for Jewish personnel. When formulating the chapel budget for the coming fiscal year, Jewish needs are rarely considered. Chaplains often claim, “We receive no Jewish requests”—but that is because Jewish service members are never solicited. Jewish chaplains and lay leaders are routinely denied access to religious preference personnel rosters. This is particularly egregious in Joint environments, as personnel rosters are not shared across branches. The results are predictable: there is no Jewish community, because no effort is made to develop one. Jewish lay leaders are not frequently recognized, given mentorship, or budgets.

But even the funding that is available is inconsistent. Chapels use so-called

“Appropriated Funds” to spend on mission-critical items, including essential religious needs. However, when it comes to Jewish religious needs, often the Jewish chaplain or community finds itself at the whim of the military lawyers as to whether or not a specific religious need constitutes a truly “religious requirement” – for example, the payment for a Jewish ritual circumcision, Passover seder meals vs. just matzah and wine, and more. The base-by-base decision-making leads to dramatic inconsistencies. We believe the use of Appropriated Funds to pay for Jewish needs should be standardized.

Finally, instead of our Jewish chaplains being allowed to be a part of the solution, as they should be, our Jewish chaplains instead find their sincerity and veracity questioned by command.

- Jewish chaplains are occasionally penalized for providing Jewish services! At least two of our chaplains were reprimanded by their commanders for ministering to Jewish personnel. Both of those cases are summarized in your packet. Jewish chaplains must be able to lead Jewish services, even if that may call the Jewish chaplain away from his unit.

- Jewish chaplains are often sidelined to garrison positions, instead of forward-leaning positions. This limits their career progression. They are not competitive for advancement and promotions if they are not assigned to line units, which may demand 100% of their time and attention, thus limiting their ability to focus on their communities.

- Housing is another major issue: In order for Jewish chaplains to conduct services on base on Sabbath and holidays, they need to live within walking distance of the chapel, as we are unable to use motor transportation on many of those days. Yet, this significant need is not taken seriously by housing officials or base commanders, and they are not given priority on housing lists.

- On deployments, Jewish chaplains are

not permitted to leave their unit to travel within the areas of operation to provide ministry outside of their unit, nor to travel to specific areas to conduct Jewish worship. At the same time, transportation is rarely provided for Jewish service members to get to Jewish services when they do exist.

· Finally, the Secretary of War has stated that those with beards should be undeployable. The consequence would be that Jewish service members in the field or in combat zones would never have access to Orthodox Jewish chaplains, and Jewish chaplains with beards would be signifi-

cantly disadvantaged regarding their career progression. The latest information indicates that a more definitive policy will be available in writing within the next few weeks, but we do not know how this issue will be resolved.

In conclusion, the chaplaincy lacks the command authority to enforce solutions, and the systems intended to resolve problems are effectively broken. Yet, all these problems have solutions. Our belief is

that mandatory training of commanders, chaplains, and non-commissioned officers regarding the military's requirement to accommodate religion in accordance with the Free Exercise Clause and RFRA must be universal. Military doctrine clearly states that it is the commander's responsibility and duty to implement the religious program. Commanders who fail to do so should be held accountable.

If time allows it, it would be our pleasure to present our further suggested solutions to this Commission.

I thank you for your time and concern.



PERSONAL TESTIMONIALS

KOSHER

A former ROTC cadet wrote: "I went to Basic Officer Training in the summer of 2018 at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Before I went out there I made sure to contact the Jewish chaplain who was gonna be there that summer. I told him I need kosher food. He said, "Don't worry about it. We'll have MREs. I'll deliver them to the Drill Sergeants, and they will have them on the first day." But on the first day, the Drill Sergeants had no idea what I'm talking about. But they're so busy yelling at you, you don't even realize what's going on; so days went by. That whole week, the only protein source that I had was at the dining hall - I'm having a bowl of cottage cheese and peanut butter with some fruit and nuts on it for every meal to get protein. I asked them, "What kind of fish do you have every two days?" Turns out it was catfish, and I'm glad I didn't eat it. Even the mashed potatoes had porky gravy; even the green beans had bacon bits in it. So there was not much I could eat in the dining hall.

Once everyone started getting MREs, they still didn't have the kosher MREs, so I was trying to eat little snack pieces from every other MRE. Finally after two or three weeks, they tell me, "We got your special MREs..." And they handed me a halal MRE. I said, "Thanks for this option, drill sergeant, but I can't eat this!" They yelled at me, made me do push-ups. They said I was being too demanding and I wasn't being grateful - which I totally was, but I couldn't eat that food. What didn't make it better was that there was a Muslim soldier in my platoon and he could eat kosher and non-kosher food. That confused them even more.

However, when the kosher MREs finally showed up, I had another problem. They came in two separate packages: the snack pack and the main meal. They only gave me the snack packs, which have maybe 400 calories. That is not enough to sustain you in the summer in Fort Knox, Kentucky in full combat gear running 8 to 15 miles a day through the woods, carrying your weapons and ammunition and all of the physical stress you're going under. I completed the course having never even tasted the entree meal! I lost a significant amount of weight, and came back anemic.

I think the Jewish Chaplain tried to take care of me; he eventually got me the MREs. But I think the Drill Sergeants just were not trained; they weren't knowledgeable. I don't think they ever met a Jewish person before in their life."

A Space Force Lieutenant Colonel writes: "I faced some hurdles obtaining kosher MREs during a deployment in 2024. When I went to the base chapel to get some, I was subjected to extensive questioning from the chaplain's office about why I needed them, whether I had an 'official requirement,' and disbelief when I explained that I had picked them up from that same chapel only the year prior. Chaplain Estrin's outreach ultimately resolved the issue."

A National Guardsman reports: "When I enlisted, my recruiter assured me that I will have kosher food available at Basic. I was naive, so I didn't ask questions. I guess I just assumed he made arrangements. When I got to basic, none of the Drill Sergeants knew what I was talking about. For the first day I just ate fruit, but then I just gave up and ate non-kosher food. We went all the way up to the Sergeant Major during basic training reception and he basically was willing to try to figure something out. A few months later, during the time I was a holdover at basic training, the kosher MREs came. But it became annoying because we would be lined up ready to go to whatever it was we were tasked with, and I needed a battle buddy to come with me to ask the Drill Sergeant for the kosher MRE by each meal. Everyone was pretty annoyed with me and got fed up dealing with it. When I got to AIT they had kosher MREs available, but I declined, because I didn't want to deal with all that."

A soldier reports: "In Basic Training, when they gave me my first MRE, I told him that I wasn't able to eat pork. They told me that my religion was not Judaism any more; my religion was the army, and that I would eat what I was given... In the end I ate it; I took a bite, and it was not good - everything about it was awful. I actually threw up. The same thing actually happened to a Jewish soldier after me. But he had connections in the Army, and IG ended removing the Drill Sergeant from her position."

In September 2025, a soldier requested kosher MREs prior to enlisting. For his first few days at Basic, he was not given them. He called Aleph for help; we contacted a senior chaplain at that installation, who intervened. The soldier was then given one kosher MRE per day for the next several days, until Aleph advocated on his behalf once again. His pained question was: "Rabbi, did I make the wrong decision by joining the Army?!"

An Air Force Lieutenant Colonel reports: "I was purposefully denied kosher food during a two-week field exercise - twice. (The chaplain told the coordinator it was required before the second one, but they didn't order it.) I was also denied kosher food during Officer Training School (OTS) until it became a medical issue. Both during field exercises and OTS the food was only "found" when it became a medical issue, with me passing out. For the second field exercise, I didn't trust them when they said they'd provide, so I rucked with all my food instead of some of the gear I should have brought."

A Marine put in a request for kosher MREs several months prior to a training scheduled for November, 2025. Despite continuous assurances from her Supply Sergeant and Chaplain that the MREs will be there, including in the days immediately prior to the training, the MREs were not ordered. She managed to scrounge a few MREs from friends to take with her for the training.

When discussing religious accommodations, specifically Separate Rations (BAS/BAH) for dietary restrictions and Shabbat/holidays and religious holiday leave requests, a Soldier was told that religious accommodations are “earned”.

Aleph was even contacted once by the Chaplain School to ask if WE could provide them with kosher MREs!

A soldier reports: “I was supposed to have kosher food the entire time in basic. I did not. In fact the Drill Sergeant put it into the bag room and the other soldiers stole it. They taunted me and I never received it. Later, on deployment at Guantánamo Bay, there was no kosher food. I reached out to Aleph and Kosher Troops and they both tried to get me kosher food. They were not successful due to things out of all of our control — mail didn’t get to us until a month and a half after deliveries were sent, so the food was not edible. Then Rabbi Estrin coordinated with the Chaplain on base in Guantánamo to get a kosher package sent on one of the daily flights that left from Florida to Cuba. The chaplain gave me a call on base telling me that the food made it. But the next day, I got called into the colonel’s office telling me that I was rude and disgusting to the Chaplain. I was subjected to an investigation, isolated, and punished. After a month and a half, the commander of my unit, my Team Leader, my sergeant and I all met with the chaplain on base. He asked me if I was OK. I told him I don’t know what’s going on. The Chaplain said to me, ‘Were you angry when I got you the food?’ I said, ‘No! I was in the middle of working out and I was out of breath when you called me on the phone and I was very appreciative...’ The Chaplain said, ‘Great, I’m happy. How was the food?’ I told him I wasn’t able to eat it because I was punished for receiving it...”

In 2024, a Navy Corpsman is informed that “he will not receive kosher MREs until the Muslims who request halal have their accommodations processed as well.” Senior Jewish Navy chaplain successfully advocated on his behalf. However, in a later case in 2025, Marine in training is told that a request for Kosher MREs will take 2 weeks to process, while Halal would be processed the same day.

A soldier currently deployed to Poland told us last week: “It’s been a bit difficult to get a sustained meal. Most of my calories are stuff like chips/hunnybuns/chocolates. (Any kid’s dream!) The main issue is it seems Kosher MREs are very difficult for them to get. So I was told to save the few I have for when we go to the field...”

The Coast Guard does not have any system in place to order kosher MREs, as they are under DHS, not DoW. This must be corrected. A similar assessment should be done for their ships.

A Navy Ensign told Aleph, “It is impossible to keep kosher aboard ships in the Navy.” This led us on a two and a half year effort to assess the situation, culminating with tours of three ships: the USS Ford, the USS Bataan, and the USS Cole. We prepared a report for the Navy instructing how keeping a kosher diet aboard ships is possible, but this report has not been disseminated or applied. It also only applies to the Atlantic Fleet. We would like to do a similar report on the Pacific Fleet ships, as well as submarines.

Building Strong and Ready Teams (BSRT) is a program by the Office of the Chief of Chaplains. The Military spends millions of dollars annually to provide support for any service members and their families on this program and others like it. Yet, the program cannot accommodate Kosher dietary requirements on the single day or overnight events across most military installations - even though the Kosher option exists on the sign-up form.

JEWISH CHAPLAINS

A Jewish Active Duty Army chaplain reports: “In 2025, despite my pre-approved special passes for Jewish holidays under the annual Command Religious Plan, the brigade commander, who remained upset that I prioritized the base Passover Seder over the brigade ball, directed an investigation into the pass I had received for the holiday of Shavuot as to the ‘legality of a mid-week holiday’, demanded its revocation, and threatened disciplinary action unless I took chargeable leave or reported for duty. JAG confirmed that the pass was fully authorized per AR 600-20 and DoDI 1300.17, and I was exonerated with no action taken.”

A Jewish Air Force Reserve chaplain was told by a squadron commander, “You reminded me of the Taliban,” due to attempting to keep to a religious stricture. Despite his attempt to explain his actions and the religious requirements, the squadron commander made a big deal about it, accusing the chaplain of being anti-female.

A Jewish Army Reserve chaplain applied for an AGR (Active Guard/Reserve) position. Multiple options were available, including some near cities with access to Jewish infrastructure. He applied, noting that he would like to be assigned to one of those positions. His request for accommodation led to being denied the position entirely.

When no Reserve chaplains were available for a High Holiday deployment mission to the Middle East, an Active Duty chaplain volunteered for the deployment. There was another Jewish chaplain on his base who agreed to take care of the High Holidays in his absence. The deploying Chaplain says: “Our unit had soldiers there already that I planned on visiting, and we had service members requesting Jewish support while out there. We’re given a thumbs up initially by my Battalion Commander and Commanding Officer (XO). But the day I was supposed to fly out, the XO told me to cancel the travel reservations and not go anywhere. He then gave me a written counseling for ‘taking things into your own hands’, saying ‘you received no official tasking,’ even though he and the Battalion Commander signed off on it, and this had been an official request from ARCENT (US Army Central Command).” This all came from the Brigade Commander, who didn’t wish to support his Jewish personnel or the Jewish Service Members in the Area of Operations. (ARCENT was paying for all travel and lodging.)

SHABBAT AND HOLIDAYS

In March 2025, 2nd Battalion 1st Marines deployed to Darwin, Australia as part of Marine Rotational Force-Darwin. When the Jewish Chaplain found out that all flights going to Australia would be violating Shabbos one way or another, he brought it to the attention of his chain of command, presenting several courses of action, including paying his own way on a civilian flight. After extensive discussions with chaplains at the Division level, the command determined that rather than granting the accommodation and executing one of the multiple COAs the chaplain recommended, they preferred to dismiss the chaplain and request a new chaplain be provided. It wasn't until Aleph reached out to the Chief of Chaplains office that issue was resolved.

A Staff Sergeant enrolled in an ROTC reports: The yearly four-day field event (JLDX) overlaps with Passover. Despite giving several months' notice, the schedule didn't change. The cadet submitted an excusal request through the formal channels and was informally told by other cadets that it had been approved, yet never received any written confirmation. Later, he was pulled aside by the Master Sergeant (MSG) and told the request had actually been denied. The conversation quickly turned hostile—the MSG called the soldier a “shi*bag,” asked who he thought he was to submit such a “bullsh*t reason,” and then threatened counseling for things like shaving and uniform issues that hadn't come up before. During the same interaction, the soldier learned that another cadet was excused for a friend's wedding, and others have been given time off for track meets or personal matters without issue. He writes: “It's been made clear to me—implicitly and explicitly—that asking for time off to observe Jewish holidays is seen differently. This isn't new. Since my earliest attempts to observe holidays like Passover or Purim while in the program, I've been treated like I'm not a real part of the unit. I've been labeled a burden or someone looking for special treatment when, in reality, I'm just trying to balance my faith with my service.”

A soldier's 1st Sergeant claimed that her “leave request for Passover” - a Jewish holiday with extra dietary restrictions and complex practices - “made 2 months in advance is equivalent to a newbie demanding 30 days off right when they get to their unit.” Later, after she was told by a Lieutenant her request was denied, she found out that the request was never put in.

A JAG (military lawyer) going through a Medical Board as she was being processed to be separated from the Army had an approved accommodation to observe the first two days of Passover from the commander of her unit. Her name randomly came up on a routine company Unit Assembly. She was called numerous times on Passover and asked to come in and, when she questioned this, several hours later, was told she could stay home this time, but that she would have to take leave to observe in the future. A month later, when she informed the unit about her need to observe the following holiday of Shavuot, she was given another runaround, with the supposed reason that “equal policies for everyone” were being pursued. An Equal Opportunity (EO) complaint was filed; however, those who it had been filed against were not flagged, and no investigation followed. She was once again harassed prior to the High Holidays, when important meetings were scheduled directly on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. She called Aleph, and in tears, said, “I've been advocating for myself for all this time, but no one is listening...” Aleph briefed the Commanding General of Fort Cavazos - a Lieutenant General - of the potential issues of religious discrimination and harassment, and he asked his staff to intervene, solving the issue.

A National Guardsman reports: “Four years ago, I volunteered and was selected for a spot on a deployment to Kosovo, renting out my house and taking leave from grad school in order to go. I was about to head up, but when the brigade commander heard about my request to have my off-day be Shabbat (everyone on staff got one non-duty day), have minor accommodations for holidays, and have accommodations for kashrut (having a mini fridge, working with the mess hall to get sealed products and uncooked produce), he kicked me off the deployment, saying I was too complicated. This included a call with the Headquarters Detachment commander where he aggressively attacked my requests. When higher echelons found out, they offered me back the slot, but I chose not to go with people who didn't want me. Not having someone in that slot ended up really hurting the unit.

A soldier reports: “Last year, I was in Korea for a rotational deployment and was scheduled to fly out of Korea to come home at the conclusion of the deployment the day after Rosh Hashanah ended. Since I was at Camp Hovey and Rosh Hashanah services were only at Camp Humphreys (approximately 2 hours away), I had arranged via a memorandum from my brigade chaplain (a Major) and a signature from my brigade commander (a Colonel) to get a pass to be allowed to go to Camp Humphreys for the duration of the holiday and return so that I could leave for the flight out of Korea. My battery commander and battalion commander were tracking the situation. For context, when units leave Korea the soldiers are placed in a holding/outprocessing unit to complete bag-weighing and other redeployment tasks. This unit is run by the battalion S1 (Human Resources personnel). When I reported to that unit, I informed my S1 Officer In Charge (1st Lieutenant) that I had a pass for a religious holiday but that I would be willing to complete any necessary tasks before or after Rosh Hashanah services so as to not interfere with redeployment. She accused me of lying about my pass and convinced my brigade commander to revoke my pass once she discovered that I was not lying. I ended up missing Rosh Hashanah services because I was not allowed to leave.”

A Marine at Officer Candidate School requested to receive liberty to attend services on Yom Kippur. He was told to find a liberty buddy from a different platoon, which he did. Ten minutes before he was due to leave for services, his liberty was canceled, and he was denied permission to attend services.

An Airman reports: "I was forced to work on the Passover holiday while at a schoolhouse because they refused to just move me to the next class. I was also almost forced to break regs by not shaving on that holiday because of an arbitrary base policy. (This was reconsidered after consultation with a Jewish Chaplain, but my Passover was still uprooted.); Across 3 exercises and 2 Commanders I was required to either a) Work on a Sabbath or holiday for no operational reason ("I want to see how far you'll go"), b) Given the Sabbath off but required to make up double the hours that I was missing. Even after that I was required to report to duty ~10 min. before the Sabbath ended, so I had to walk in civvies and could not shave, which I was written up for. There was no operational reason I couldn't have come 20 minutes later. This was all despite my colleagues freely volunteering to switch shifts with me, which the Commander refused."

For the High Holidays in 2024, Marines in Parris Island, NC were told by the training unit chaplain hours before the onset of the holiday that permission to blow the shofar on Rosh Hashana - a 2-3 minute observance - had been denied, because "prayers are only on Sundays". After intervention by the senior Jewish chaplain in the Navy and the Aleph Institute, they were permitted to blow the shofar. However, the same chaplain informed other Jewish Marine recruits in advance of Passover 2025 that they would not be allowed to have a seder, as they "gave up their rights to religious accommodation when they joined the Marine Corps." When trying to resolve these issues, the Contract Rabbi at Parris Island was threatened to "stay out of religious accommodation issues. You are only contracted for Sundays, and not holidays." The cadets were eventually given permission to host the seder prior to nightfall on the evening of Passover, not during the required observance time at all. The room they are given for the seder in the chapel has a large crucifix attached to the wall. It should be noted that the seder supplies were provided entirely by the Aleph Institute.

Another soldier reports: "My unit was going to the National Training Center (NTC) and the entirety of the rotation cycle was going to be encompassing the high holidays. That was just the way the timeline fell. I didn't ask for Rosh Hashanah off, because I knew we would still be in the box and I knew they weren't going to approve that, so I only asked for Yom Kippur off. We were out of the box and we were in the Recovery days, but we were still at Irwin. The first time I asked for it off, I was told no, because NTC was a higher priority. For the second time I tried to request it off, I explained that we were out of the box [wargaming area], so there would be no significant impact to mission, and then I had a Rabbi Chaplain assist me in making different course of action (COA) to provide, to help show it will not impact mission and that I would be able to make up any missed work. My unit denied the request once more, again stating mission. I was not authorized to get Yom Kippur off."

In 2023, Chanukah displays were removed from two bases (Joint Base Pearl Harbor, HI and Al Udeid AB, Qatar) due to "political concerns". At Al Udeid, it went to the Inspector General, who responded that nothing went against policy. At Pearl Harbor, the DoD civilian who reported it was retaliated against. An EO complaint was filed, with no result.

An enlisted Marine was in a geographically separated unit on an Army installation. When asked to go to the nearby synagogue for Rosh Hashana, leave was denied. Aleph intervened, yet he was still not permitted to leave; ostensibly because he had no liberty buddy to go with. The reality was that the Jewish Lay Leader, an Army civilian, had offered to do so, but because he was not a Marine, it was denied. When the Marine asked to go to Yom Kippur, his non-commissioned officer (NCO) denied him leave, saying, "My girlfriend is Jewish and she doesn't keep that holiday; you don't need to either." Aleph intervened again, but it only resulted in the Marine being confined to barracks for the 24 hours of Yom Kippur. It was only when Aleph threatened to go to the Chief of Chaplains that the Marine was finally given permission to go to Yom Kippur services.

A Jewish Security Force Airman at Cape Cod SFB, NH was refused leave for 2024 Jewish holidays, under the explanation "It would not be fair," even though they had enough manning. He ended up paying a fellow Military Policeman \$1000 to take his shift so he could go to synagogue.

A sailor ordered Passover food and supplies well in advance of the holiday. With the holiday approaching and his ship at sea, he was told the packages had been lost. He contacted Aleph, and we inquired with the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). They were able to track the package; it was abandoned in the back of a storehouse. Thankfully, due to DLA's urgent efforts, the packages were delivered to the ship the day before Passover.

A Jewish Lay Leader stationed at Andersen Air Base, Guam, requested chaplain support for the High Holidays for her community. The Wing Chaplain was willing and eager to fill the request, an Air Force Reserve chaplain was found who was willing to staff the request, but no funding method was found to take care of it.

An Airman at Basic was denied permission to light the Menorah for Chanukah, even after several COAs were presented which would have mitigated fire risks. The Chaplain actively told the cadre that his requests "weren't necessary". The same Chaplain told the cadre that there wasn't a significant need to accommodate his Kosher diet, or to allow him to make Kiddush on Shabbat using grape juice.

An Air Force Lieutenant Colonel recalls being "purposefully scheduled to be on call during the High Holidays, despite volunteering for Xmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter, so they get the dual benefit of me working their holidays and not getting my own. On another occasion, I was denied leave for High Holidays due to a Unit Effectiveness Inspection." (As a rule, Aleph encourages volunteering for Christian and secular holidays, with the understanding that Jewish holidays will be covered by others in a similar manner.)



Jewish Religious Practice in a Military Environment

1. **References.** Title 10, United States Code § 1789(c). Title 42, United States Code § 2000bb- 1 (Religious Freedom Restoration Act). Attorney General Memorandum on Religious Liberty, 6 OCT 2017. and Department of Defense Instruction 1300.17 (Religious Liberty in the Military Services), 1 SEP 2020. Army Regulation 600-8-10, Leaves and Passes, 15 February 2006. Army Regulation 165-1, Army Chaplain Corps Activities, 23 June 2015. Army Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy, 24 July 2020. Department of the Air Force Instruction (DAFI) 52-201.6, Religious Freedom in the Department of the Air Force, 23 June 2021. Navy Military Personnel Manual (MILPERSMAN) article 1731-010, Religious Observance, 1 August 2006. BUPERS Instruction (BUPERSINST) 1730.11A CH-1, Standards and Procedures Governing the Accommodation of Religious Practices, 11 March 2022.

2. **Purpose:** To provide an overview of basic Jewish religious practices to help recruiters and units better accommodate Jewish service members who desire to observe Jewish faith practices in training, while on Active Duty or in austere environments, making such practices more challenging.

3. Introduction:

The DoD's latest instructions regarding religious accommodation instruct the military to grant religious accommodation in the least restrictive manner, unless it directly interferes with military needs. Pre-accession religious accommodation waivers need to be worked on by the recruiter, following the guidelines of his or her branch. When the Service Member has arrived at his or her unit, unit chaplains become responsible for facilitating their religious accommodation based on the individual's accommodation request. Chaplains advise commanders regarding religious accommodations for their Service Members.

4. The following are standard elements of Jewish observance that are commonly observed, some of which may potentially interfere with military training or operations, and therefore will need possible command accommodation. A certain amount of flexibility on behalf of both the individual service member as well as command will allow the individual to serve both G-d and country with a full heart and soul. It is appropriate that the Command Chaplain, with the advice of a Jewish Chaplain, help both the Command and the service member find an appropriate accommodation that meets both military and personal religious needs.

This document has been reviewed by and meets the approval of both major Jewish Endorsers, Rabbi Irv Elson (CAPT, USN CHC Ret.) of the Jewish Welfare Board, and the Aleph Institute's own Rabbi Sanford Dresin (CH COL, USA Ret.).

1. Religious attire:

Some Jewish service members hold the tradition to wear a head covering called a "yarmulka" or "kipah" and an undergarment called "tzitzit". Some members will wear these all of the time, others will only wear them during worship. When worn properly, neither will interfere with proper uniform wear or equipment function.

- a. The yarmulka must remain neat, conservative, and discreet. When worn outdoors, it should not be visible protruding outside of the uniform headgear or any safety equipment. We recommend that one refers to the individual branch's specific religious accommodation directive to see whether or not it requires a waiver.
- b. Tzitzit are worn completely concealed and therefore do not require any exception to policy, but may need to be allowed in the basic training environment as a "personal item."

2. Grooming:

- a. There are several approaches taken to the Biblical mandate against "cutting the corners of one's beard" (Lev. 19:27). Some Jews hold the tradition to not shave at all. Others trim their beard, while many shave with an electric shaver, but avoid using a razor.
- b. Many Jews avoid shaving their heads entirely, and leave a minute amount of hair on their head; particularly on the sides of the head.
- c. Here again, the Command Chaplain with the advisement of a Jewish Chaplain will provide guidance on requesting a religious accommodation.

3. Daily prayers:

- a. Jewish Law mandates that Jewish personnel pray three times daily: morning, afternoon, and evening. Additional prayers are added to the morning prayers on certain holidays. Prayer during the morning is longer than during the afternoon and evening, and may ideally require 15-20 minutes.
- b. Some Jewish individuals have religious articles such as phylacteries ("tefillin") and/or a prayer shawl ("tallit"). These are important items, and are used ritually during the morning prayers. Accommodation should be made to allow these items to be kept with the Trainee's belongings and brought on overnight excursions.

4. Worship:

- a. Jewish service members should be able to attend worship services on Friday evenings, Saturdays, and other Jewish Holy Days as indicated. In the absence of a Jewish Chaplain on the base, a service member could be certified to serve as a Lay-Leader and lead worship.

5. Dietary Restrictions:

An important part of Jewish religious observance is the dietary practice known as “Kosher.” The word “Kosher” means fitting or proper, and it refers to the types of foods permitted and the method of their preparation according to Jewish law. While the rules of Kosher are complicated and beyond the scope of this publication, the following is some basic guidance how to best handle an accommodation request for Kosher dietary restrictions:

- a. When a recruit, cadet or midshipman asks for Kosher food, it should be ascertained what kind of observance is being requested. Rarely will two requestors have the exact same practice, as practice varies widely. For example, some may not consume anything whatsoever that is not prepared completely under rabbinical supervision, while others may only be avoiding pork related products; and much in between. Regardless, the accommodation request for food should be accommodated.
- b. In some instances, it may be appropriate for the trainee to be provided with kosher MREs for the duration of his or her training. Unit personnel should contact the DLA in advance of the trainee arriving to order sufficient kosher MREs in a timely fashion. The religious affairs element of DLA can be reached at:
[REDACTED]
 1. Kosher MREs provide essential nutrition needed for the service member. Additionally, it is recommended the trainee be allowed to receive high-protein supplemental foods to maintain optimal nutrition during training.
- c. Many packaged kosher foods may be found in Dining Facilities as well as Commissaries, such as peanut butter, tuna fish, granola bars, cereals, and more. It is recommended that the Command consult with a Jewish Chaplain to confirm kosher status if needed.
- d. BAS:
 1. There are three instances when service members are not authorized Basic Subsistence Allowance (BAS): While in basic training, technical training and while living in dorms/barracks (DoDFMR, Volume 7A, Chapter 25).
 2. In all of these cases, BAS may be reinstituted due to religious observance (such as Kosher). The specific process for issuing separate rations differs in each service.
- e. Special Kosher for Passover MREs must be ordered for the holiday of Passover, as regular Kosher MREs are actually not kosher for consumption during Passover. These special MREs must be ordered from DLA **well in advance** of Passover, as DLA typically wants to finalize their Kosher for Passover orders by December, and limited options are available afterwards. DLA order deadline INCONUS for seder kit/Passover MRE's/wine should be no later than 01 February.

6. The Jewish calendar:

- a. Judaism uses a solar-lunar calendar. Therefore, the dates of Jewish Holy Days change each year in accordance with the Jewish calendar.

- b. Weekly Sabbath and all holidays begin at sunset on a preceding day and conclude at nightfall on the next day.
- c. In the training environment, full Shabbat and holiday observances are complicated. When possible, it is advisable that the Command deconflict training evolutions with religious holidays. A Jewish chaplain should be consulted on how to maximize accommodation, as well as how to prioritize specific observances.

7. Jewish Holy Days:

- a. Jewish Holy Days are days of the highest religious obligation, including worship services and fellowship for all Jewish personnel. Each holiday has worship services that are unique, obligatory, and one is not substituted for another.
- b. On most holidays and on the Sabbath, grape juice and kosher bread rolls or Matzah are needed for a required ritual for dinner (even when chapel services are unavailable).
- c. It is traditional for Jews to light two candles on the eve of the Sabbath and most Jewish holidays. Where a live flame is not permitted (i.e. in hospitals), an electric candle can be supplied.

1. Sabbath:

- a. The Sabbath is the most important regular observance in Judaism. During the 25 hours of Sabbath observance - as well as many of the holidays mentioned below - Jews will engage in worship and refrain from activities traditionally defined as “labor”. There are many different interpretations as to what is defined as labor; including operating electronic devices, writing, using the phone, driving, and firing weapons, among other activities.
- b. Any and all activities that are essential/urgent to ensuring national security or preserving life are permitted on the Sabbath and holidays.
- c. Certain activities are always permitted on the Sabbath, such as participating in a class without taking notes, studying, drill practice, and more.
- d. In order to ascertain exact parameters of what is permitted and what is forbidden, a Jewish Chaplain proficient in the observance standard of the trainee should be consulted.

2. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah:

- a. The two days of the holiday are days of obligation including work and travel restrictions.
- b. Traditional observance of the holiday includes communal worship and sounding a ram’s horn, known as a “shofar.”

3. The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur:

- a. This holiday is the most holy day of the Jewish year. This is a day of obligation involving work and travel restrictions.
- b. Traditional observance of the holiday includes communal prayer, as well as fasting from food and water for 25 hours.

4. The Festival of Booths, Sukkot:

- a. Sukkot is a seven-day holiday commemorating the Jewish People's sojourn in the desert. The first two days of the holiday are days of obligation involving work and travel restrictions.
- b. Traditional observance of the holiday includes eating meals in a temporary booth covered by a roof of vegetation, known as a "Sukkah", as well as the ritual shaking of the "Four Species" - palm branch, citron ("Etrog"), myrtle and willow.

5. Shmini Atzeret/Simchat Torah:

- a. This is a holiday celebrating the conclusion of the annual cycle of reading the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. The two days of this holiday are days of obligation involving work and travel restrictions.
- b. Traditional observance of the holiday includes communal praying, reading from the Torah, and eating festive meals.

6. Chanukah:

- a. Chanukah is an eight-day festival commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple and the military victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian-Greek empire. There are no travel or work restrictions on this holiday.
- b. Observance of the holiday incorporates the lighting of a "Menorah" candelabrum on each evening of the holiday.

7. Purim:

- a. Purim is a one-day festival commemorating the Jewish people's salvation from Persian genocide, as recounted in the biblical Book of Esther. There are no travel or work restrictions on this holiday.
- b. The holiday incorporates several requirements, including reading the Book of Esther, eating a festive meal, and distributing food gifts and charity.

8. Passover:

- a. Passover is an eight-day festival commemorating the Jewish People's escape from slavery from Egypt, as recounted in the biblical Book of Exodus. The first two days and last two days of Passover are days of obligation involving work and travel restriction.
- b. Passover dietary laws restrict consumption of leavened food, known as "Chametz," such as bread, crackers, cakes etc. throughout all eight days of the holiday. Kosher-for-Passover Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs) are available and can be requested through unit supply channels. As noted above, in order to receive them in time, they must be ordered from DLA **well in advance** of the holiday.
- c. Traditional observance of the Passover holiday includes a ritual Seder meal on the holiday's first two nights. Seder kits must be ordered **in advance**

from the Aleph Institute by emailing military@aleph-institute.org. It is worth noting that the annual Passover Seder is the most universally observed Jewish practice in American Jewry.

9. Shavuot:

- a. Shavuot is a two-day holiday commemorating the revelation of G-d to the Jewish People on Mount Sinai. The two days of the holiday are days of obligation involving work and travel restrictions.
- b. Traditional observance of the holiday includes communal prayer, reading from the Torah and eating festive meals.

10. Fast days:

- a. The Jewish calendar contains several fast days commemorating various historical events. All fasts begin at sunrise and conclude at sundown, except for Tisha B'Av and the aforementioned Yom Kippur, which begin before sundown the day prior and last for 25 hours. There are no work and travel restrictions on the five fasts listed below. Dates of observance vary each year; therefore, consult a Jewish calendar for the exact observance. The fasts are:
 1. **Fast of Gedaliah:** Occurs the day following Rosh Hashanah (September/October).
 2. **10th of Tevet:** Occurs in December/January.
 3. **Fast of Esther:** Occurs the day before Purim.
 4. **17th of Tammuz:** Occurs in June/July.
 5. **Tisha B'Av (9th of Av):** Occurs in July/August.

For any questions, please contact:

Jewish Endorsers:

Aleph Institute Endorser, Rabbi Sanford L. Dresin (CH COL, USA Ret): [REDACTED]

Jewish Welfare Board Endorser, Rabbi Irv Elson (CAPT USN, CHC Ret): [REDACTED]

Senior military Jewish chaplains:

CH (COL) Shmuel Felzenberg, USA: [REDACTED]

CDR Aaron Kleinman, USN CHC: [REDACTED]

Ch, Lt Col Michael Bram, USAF: [REDACTED]



Joseph and Sterna Gutnick
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Operation: Enduring Traditions
Military Programs
Spark of Light Prison Program
F.E.E.L.S Family Program

7 July, 2025

MEMORANDUM FOR: JEWISH SERVICE MEMBERS AND THEIR LEADERSHIP

FROM: Rabbi Sanford L. Dresin, Chaplain (COL) USA Ret, Endorser

SUBJECT: Fiscal Year (FY) 2026 Jewish Religious Holiday Observances and Obligations

1. References:

- a. Title 42, United States Code § 2000bb-1 (Religious Freedom Restoration Act)
- b. Attorney General Memorandum on Religious Liberty, 6 October 2017
- c. Department of Defense Instruction 1300.17 (Accommodation of Religious Practices Within the Military Services), 1 September 2020
- d. Army Regulation 600-8-10, Leaves and Passes, 3 June 2020
- e. Army Regulation 600-20, Army Command Policy, 6 February 2025
- f. Department of the Air Force Instruction (DAFI) 52-201.6, Religious Freedom in the Department of the Air Force, 23 June 2021
- g. Navy Military Personnel Manual (MILPERSMAN) article 1731-010 Religious Observance, 1 August 2006
- h. BUPERS Instruction (BUPERSINST) 1730.11A CH-1, Standards and Procedures Governing the Accommodation of Religious Practices, 11 March 2022
- i. SECNAVINST 1730.8B, Accommodation of Religious Practices
- j. MCO 1730.9 ACCOMMODATION OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES IN THE MARINE CORPS

2. Purpose: To provide an overview of the Jewish Holidays in 2025-26, the granting of excused absences and travel time for participation in religious activities, and ensure units accommodate Service Members and civilians who desire to observe these holidays.

3. Background: Pursuant to the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, Service members have the right to observe the tenets of their religion. In accordance with Section 533(a)(1) of Public Law 112-239, the DoD Components will accommodate individual expressions of sincerely held beliefs which do not have an adverse impact on military readiness, unit cohesion, good order and discipline, or health and safety.

- a. In accordance with RFRA and the guidance in DoDI 1300.17, DoD Components will normally accommodate practices of a Service member based on sincerely held religious belief. Accommodation includes excusing a Service member from an otherwise applicable military policy, practice, or duty. In accordance with RFRA, if such a military policy, practice or duty



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substantially burdens a Service member's exercise of religion, accommodation can only be denied if:

(1) The military policy, practice, or duty is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest.

(2) It is the least restrictive means of furthering compelling governmental interest. In applying the standard in Paragraphs 1.2.e.(1) and 1.2.e.(2) of DoDI 1300.17, the burden of proof is placed upon the DoD Component, not the individual requesting the exemption.

- b. Requests for the accommodation of religious practices will be reviewed and acted on as soon as possible, in accordance with this issuance and any DoD Component implementing guidance.
- c. In accordance with provisions in Paragraphs 1.2.e and 1.2.f of DoDI 1300.17, immediate commanders may resolve requests for accommodation of religious practices that do not require a waiver of DoD Component policies.
- d. Judaism uses a lunar-solar calendar. The weekly Sabbath and all holidays begin at *sunset on the preceding day* and conclude *at nightfall on the day of the holiday*. Each worship service is unique, obligatory, and one is not substituted for another.

4. The following Jewish holidays are observed during FY 2025-26:

Evening of 22-24 September 2025: Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year)

Evening of 1-2 October 2025: Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement)

Evening of 6-13 October 2025: Sukkot (Festival of Booths)

Evening of 13-15 October 2025: Shmini Atzeret and Simchat Torah

Evening of 14-22 December 2025: Chanukah

Evening of 2-3 March 2026: Purim

Evening of 1-9 April 2026: Passover

Evening of 21-23 May 2026: Shavuot (Festival of Weeks)

Evening of 23 July 2026: Fast of 9 Av

Evening of 11-13 September 2026: Rosh Hashanah

Evening of 20-21 September 2026: Yom Kippur

Evening of 25 September–1 October 2026: Sukkot

5. Holy Days: The Jewish Holy Days are days of religious obligation including worship services and fellowship for all Jewish personnel.

a. The Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah: evening of 22-24 September 2025

- 1. The two days of the holiday are days of obligation involving work and travel restriction.
- 2. Traditional observance of the holiday includes communal worship and sounding a ram's horn.

b. The Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur: evening of 1-2 October 2025

- 1. The holiday is the most solemn day of the Jewish year. This is a day of obligation involving work and travel restriction.
- 2. Traditional observance of the holiday includes fasting and refraining from luxury, including bathing.

c. The Festival of Booths, Sukkot: evening of 6-13 October 2025

- 1. The first two days of the holiday are days of obligation involving work and travel restriction.
- 2. Traditional observance of the holiday includes shaking the Four Species (palm branch, citron,



willow and myrtle) together, and eating all meals in a temporary booth - known as a Sukkah.

d. Shmini Atzeret/Simchat Torah: Evening of 13-15 October 2025

1. The two days of the holiday are days of obligation involving work and travel restriction.
2. Traditional observance of the holiday includes praying, reading from the Torah, and eating a festive meal.

e. Chanukah: Chanukah is an eight-day festival commemorating the victory of the Hasmonean Jews over the Syrian-Greek empire and the subsequent rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem 2300 years ago.

1. Chanukah: Evening of 14-22 December 2025
2. While there are no travel restrictions on this holiday, the holiday incorporates the traditional requirements to light a Menorah candelabra, adding one flame each evening of the holiday.

f. Purim: Purim is a one-day festival commemorating the salvation of the Jewish people from Persian genocide, as recounted in the Biblical Book of Esther.

1. Purim: Evening of 2-3 March 2025
2. While there are no travel restrictions on this holiday, the holiday incorporates several traditional requirements, including the reading of the Book of Esther, a festive meal, and the distribution of food gifts and charity.

g. Passover: Passover is a week-long religious observance commemorating the Israelite Exodus from Egypt.

1. Passover: Evening of 1-9 April 2026
2. The first two days and last two days of Passover are days of obligation involving work and travel restriction.
3. Passover dietary laws, which restrict both consumption and possession of leavened food, "Chametz", apply throughout all eight days. Kosher-for- Passover Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs) are available and can be requested through unit supply channels. The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) ordering dates are 1 October 2025 – 16 December 2025 for Kosher for Passover MREs. Traditional observance of the Passover holiday includes a ritual Seder meal on each of the first two nights of the holiday. The DLA ordering dates are 1 October 2025 – 6 January 2026 for Seder Kits and Kosher Wine.

h. Shavuot: Shavuot is a two-day holiday commemorating the receiving of the Torah on Mount Sinai.

1. Shavuot (Festival of Weeks): Evening of 21-23 May 2026. In the rare case in which a service member crossed over the International Dateline during the 49 day period from the second evening of Passover until Shavuot, these dates will be shifted forward or backward one day.
2. The two days of the holiday are days of obligation involving work and travel restriction.
3. Traditional observance of the holiday includes communal prayer, the reading of the Torah, and eating festive meals.

i. Judaism also mandates several fast days, including Yom Kippur, mentioned earlier. During these times, food and drink are prohibited, unless in clearly life-endangering circumstances. There is no work restriction on the following five days.



1. The Fast of Gedalya: daytime hours only, 25 September 2025
2. 10 Tevet: daytime hours only, 30 December 2025
3. The Fast of Esther: daytime hours only, 2 March 2026
4. 17 Tamuz: daytime hours only, 2 July 2026
5. 9 Av: Evening of 23 - 24 July 2026. This, along with Yom Kippur, is the strictest of all fasts. It is a 24 hour fast. In ideal circumstances, one may not wear leather shoes. One may also not bathe during this 24-hour period.
6. Excused Absences: Passes, leave or excused absences may be authorized. Incorporate adequate travel time so that personnel may arrive before the holiday commences and travel and work should not resume until after the holiday concludes, which is one hour after sunset on the day of the holiday.
7. Any questions may be addressed to Rabbi Sanford Dresin, dresin@comcast.net.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sanford L. Dresin".

Rabbi Sanford L. Dresin
Chaplain (COL) USA Ret
Director of Military Programs - Endorser

RABBI ELI ELEFF

*Rabbinic Coordinator
Managing Director, Community Relations*

-CONFIDENTIAL-

Kosher at Sea: A Kosher Review of US Naval Vessels

Norfolk Naval Base, Virginia - 18 January 2023

Present during visit: Rabbi [REDACTED] OU Kosher; Rabbi [REDACTED] OU Kosher; Chaplain CDR Rabbi [REDACTED] CHC; Chaplain CPT [REDACTED] CHC (Atlantic Fleet Force Command); Chaplain MAJ Rabbi [REDACTED] USAFR, Aleph Institute

Joined at parts by: CDR [REDACTED] Fleet Forces Supply Corp; Chaplain CDR [REDACTED] CHC.

Introduction

The purpose of the visit was to gain insight into naval culinary to ascertain the feasibility of sailors keeping kosher at sea. This visit was initiated by Chaplain CDR Rabbi Aaron Kleinman in conjunction with the Aleph Institute, after receiving reports that sailors who wish to keep kosher are unable to. Important note: This report is by no means exhaustive and is meant as a preliminary reference for an evolving discussion.

Three ships were toured: the USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN -78, Aircraft Carrier), USS Bataan (LHD-5, Amphibious Assault Vessel), and the USS Cole (DDG-67, Destroyer). In terms of generalized culinary operations, the fleets maintain uniform policies of inventory supply and availability (which is ordered from the universal catalog). In fact, even when these ships are deployed overseas, all food is transported from the US to supply depots around the globe, with limited supplementation of local markets (e.g., dates in the middle east). Due to this, foods that have short shelf-lives are avoided, which includes most leafy greens and herbs, circumventing the need for vegetable checking (any herbs that were found on board were dried and have kosher certification). The fresh produce onboard are cucumbers, tomatoes, apples, etc. which are sturdier and last longer.

Every ship has an inventory of disposable cutlery such as forks, knives, and spoons but is only for use in case of emergency where the normal silverware on board cannot be used or cleaned, thus not really offering a solution for kosher sailors. Additionally, disposables create additional waste, and their disposal is extremely complex (turning them into hockey pucks).

An inventory of food is ideally kept lasting 90 to 100 days onboard ships. In actuality it is often around 45 days, with the expectation of a resupply every two weeks. At a minimum ships are required to maintain 30 days inventory of frozen goods and 40 days inventory of shelf-stable goods. Resupply frequency is subject to supply chain issues, conflict zones, and even COVID (it was mentioned that COVID provided a great training opportunity).

Another constraint that ships contend with is the budget that is allotted to feed each sailor every day. Currently, BDFA (Basic daily food allowance) per sailor is allocated at \$10.85 per day. This affects the kosher meals as even one kosher MRE can potentially exceed the budget. Every sailor is mandated to

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Managing Director, Community Relations*

have (and by extension the kitchen staff needs to prepare) three square meals a day. There is a 28-day rotation of the menu where every week, day, and meal is preplanned beforehand (Taco Tuesdays).

Important to note is that the galleys do not use any pots or pans, so there is no opportunity for a kosher sailor to have his own dedicated pot. (Even if available, there would be other issues such as *בִּישׁוּל עֶכּוֹם* and *בִּשְׁר שְׁנִתְעֵלָה מִן הָעֵין*). Everything is either cooked in kettles, convection ovens, tilt skillets, or flat-top grills. In general, personal appliances are not permitted onboard ships unless specifically authorized by command with SOPs established (such as whose responsibility is it to clean so no one gets sick, who is to monitor it so as to avoid any fire risk, etc.).

USS Ford (CVN-78) – Aircraft Carrier

We were met on this ship by the Chaplain – CH [REDACTED], LCDR [REDACTED] and LCDR [REDACTED]. This was the largest ship toured, with crew compliments of 4,200 sailors.

Galley: There are two main galleys and one smaller galley (for the officers). It should be noted that this new class is different than Nimitz-class aircraft carriers that have 7 galleys onboard. Each of the two main galleys are essentially carbon copies of one another, where each kitchen has the following all stainless-steel equipment:

- 6 large steam jacketed kettles
- 8 Grills
- 2 Tilt skillets (they use steam to clean from a hose, which was interesting)
- 8 Convection ovens
 - The ovens on this ship are self-cleaning ovens, but only a topical cleanse is regularly performed, followed by a brief visual inspection.
- 2 dishwashers
- 1 large sink where additional washing takes place such as for the numerous sheet pans.
- Numerous microwaves

Steam is shared amongst all the kitchens for the steam jackets that heat all the kettles. Additionally, everything remains a *לומ' ב* as they need to have three cooked meals every single day for various shifts. Everything that involves heat for food prep is not kosher. However, the vegetables prep, such as slicing cucumbers, peppers, etc. has a dedicated area and cutting boards (color coordinated). The knives do make their way around different areas of the kitchen, and in theory one day it can be used to cut hot meat and vegetables the next. It appears that due to numerous leniencies in the *פוסקים* that a kosher sailor could consume the fresh cut produce (that are not known to be heavily infested such as cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes).

Hot food is then served from the buffet area, with everything loaded into chafing-type dishes that are placed into the electrically controlled buffet. It can either be chilled underneath or heated at this point. While many of the vegetables come canned with kosher certification, they are reheated, rendering them non-kosher.

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When touring the self-serve breakfast area, we were pleasantly surprised to see that essentially everything was kosher certified such as all the cereals, juices and sodas, bagels, cream cheese, tuna, various granola bars and other pre-packed snacks. A kosher sailor can avail themselves of a legitimate continental breakfast and potentially some bagels with tuna with sliced vegetables. A benefit (besides having readily available kosher food) is reducing the overall cost. There is also a commissary onboard where sailors can purchase a select number of items like candy, chips, and other junk food.

Storage: There are 6 large dry storage rooms. In terms of dry goods, it appears that the vast majority of was kosher certified (80% or so), of canned goods (tuna, beans, condiments). The dairy fridge contained many items as well, (approx. 40%) where various soft cheeses and yogurts were kosher certified. The meat freezer essentially had no kosher products.

Observation: It is important to note that on such a large ship, the kitchen staff is extremely regimented and frankly there is no time to deal with special requests from sailors, (in contrast to the smaller ships). However, the USS Ford “affords” the ability to store large amounts of goods. Supply personnel noted that it would be easier for them to store kosher frozen meals, than shelf stable MREs, and would have no problem stocking them and incorporating kosher into their SOPs.

USS Bataan (LHD-5); Amphibious Assault Vessel:

We were met on the USS Bataan by CH LCDR [REDACTED]. The USS Bataan has crew compliments of approximately 1,000 sailors and transports up to 2,500 Marines along with their equipment and vehicles. Many of the internal decks are essentially parking garages for such equipment, along with a flood gate entrance to the well deck where hovercraft can easily deploy. Additionally, the LHD has a flight deck for helicopters. It can also function as a floating hospital as it has a very large medical bay. Being that this is also a large ship, it has many similarities to the USS Ford.

Galleys: There are 4 galleys: the primary galley, chiefs’ mess, bakery, and officers’ galley.

1) Main Galley:

- 4 flat top grills
- 6 steam jacketed kettles
- 16 convection ovens
- 4 warming boxes (operate at about 150F).

2) Chiefs’ Mess:

- Smaller kitchen area with 1 grill, 1 tilt skillet and 2 convection ovens.

3) Officers’ Galley:

- 3 steam-jacketed kettles

Unique to the LHD is that they have a separate, dedicated bakery on board. The bakery consists of the following equipment:

- One Mixer
- 2 kettles

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- 2 large ovens
- When perusing the various ingredients in the bakery, no non-kosher was apparent. It is plausible that the Bakery that is on board is kosher! It is conceivable that in the previous 28-day rotations that non-kosher marshmallows or shortening could have been used. However, at the time of the visit, there were no marshmallows on the menu, and staff didn't recall ever using marshmallows. The main concern would be shortenings and oils but in theory this could be verified by the universal catalog. *Note: After reviewing the universal catalog, it cannot be relied upon to verify kosher status of items.*

Storage: There are numerous storerooms including a dairy fridge, a dry-storage room, 2 freezers, and a separate walk-in cooler. Again, most of the shelf-stable provisions are kosher. Additionally, they had kosher Neufchatel cheese, OU-certified European Bakery Bread, as well as Nature's Own Bread (more on this later).

Observation: We had a very frank and productive discussion with the SUPPO on the USS Bataan and her staff. She explained several parameters which will be discussed later and pushed back against providing kosher provisions. However, eventually she did come around to understanding the need for a kosher sailor. Of all the ships, this was the most inflexible and they were very concerned with meeting NAVSUP/nutrition requirements and were reluctant to deviate from them. They are very taxed for performance, and it is harder to train and provide food tailored for only one or two sailors.

USS Cole (DDG-67); Destroyer Class

The last and smallest ship toured was the famed USS Cole (DDG-67) Destroyer. We were met by squadron command CH LCDR [REDACTED], and ship CH LT [REDACTED]. We were then escorted to the wardroom where we met with the CO, CDR [REDACTED] and XO, CDR [REDACTED]. The Cole has a crew of approximately 300 sailors and has a more "heimish" (or close-knit family) feel to it. So much so, that the CO and XO both said that they would try to help any shipmate if possible. If a sailor needed a cooking appliance (such as a crockpot or instapot), if it would pass safety inspection, they would theoretically allow it.

Galleys: The USS [REDACTED] has one main galley, with a tiny galley off to the side of the wardroom. The main galley consists of:

- 3 steam-jacketed kettles
- 4 convection ovens
- 1 tilt skillet
- 1 steamer
- 1 flat-top grill
- 1 bread slicer – it should be noted that they often bake their own bread and slice it. Most items on this ship (due to storage constraints) are created from scratch.
- There is no dishwasher here, all scrubbed manually.

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Storage: They also have a large walk-in refrigerator, freezer, and dry good storage on a lower level.

Observation: While providing the most limited ability for storage of kosher provisions, the USS Cole is definitely the most accommodating.

Submarine Comparison

While we did not tour an active submarine, we were able to make some comparisons to the ships we visited and by watching the following YouTube video entitled "How to Make Pizza on a Submarine – Smarter Every Day 26" (accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bPJUVKizh90>). Due to the extreme lack of storage space – everything is made from scratch and raw materials. As such it would not be feasible for a kosher sailor to deploy on a submarine long-term.

Overall Findings

- ❖ We found everyone to be respectful about kosher and genuinely curious. In each section that we visited, we ended up giving mini lectures on kosher food production.
- ❖ More education is required on all fronts.
- ❖ While this is only the beginning a lot was learned from these visits, and a lot more still needed to be understood.
- ❖ Size matters. There is a difference between ships – operationally, supply-wise, and flexibility. As such, chaplains need a separate reference document noting the distinct operating parameters and flexibility with regards to kosher offerings.
- ❖ As the galleys use steam-jacketed kettles with a shared steam loop – should the need ever arise to kasher one, bitrix or other bittering agents must be added to the steam loop. Otherwise, from a halachic perspective, all the kettles are considered connected, and the non-kosher status would impact the other kettles.
- ❖ Generally, one cannot count on the food coming from the galleys to be kosher. However, the LHD bakery may be the one exception if it can be monitored.
- ❖ CH LT Levi Ceitlin provided an example of a grill-top insert that could be placed upon the flat top grills. Per OU policy -If the grill is not clean it is אסור, even if it is clean, it is still not לכתחילה כל' אצל כלי בלי רוטב מותר בדיעבד if no other choice (as may be the case). However, as noted before, בישול עכום remains a problem.
- ❖ Resupply (even abroad) comes from the US, with certain regional supplements or limitations.
- ❖ Most shelf stable foods are kosher.
- ❖ A sailor could even enjoy a hot breakfast, as the oatmeal and cereal bowls are all kosher-certified.
- ❖ A majority of the snacks are kosher certified – (Kind bars, Miss Vickie's chips, fresh fruit)
- ❖ All of the soft drinks would be acceptable as they are Coke products. Most of the juices observed were kosher as well.
- ❖ Even the soft-serve ice cream is kosher, as we only saw the Frostline brand (OU-D) in stock.
- ❖ Of note, there was no kosher certification on the Nature's Own bread that was seen in-stock on all of the ships. The next day Rabbi Eleff was conducting a review of a bakery in Norfolk and



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noticed that the breads were produced there. Subsequently, the company is looking to add the OU symbol to these bread products.

- ❖ There was much hope that the universal catalog that NAVSUP utilizes (ultimately coming from the DLA) would help to identify which products are kosher. Unfortunately, it is a byzantine catalog that does not convey much information other than the basic product name, brand, and supply code.
- ❖ Any change to food requirements or needs would have to go through a nutritionist at NAVSUP in Mechanicsburg, PA.
- ❖ After meeting Jewish sailors, many were not aware that kosher MREs are available at all or year round. One officer on board the USS Bataan thought that Kosher MREs were only available for Passover.
- ❖ These findings are only for the Atlantic Fleet, as we were informed that Pacific Fleet (and possibly NAVCENT and NAVEUR-NAF) have different food catalogs. UPDATE: As per CH LT Rabbi [REDACTED]'s SUPPO – NAVCENT has the same catalog.
- ❖ Rabbi [REDACTED] has met with the Chaplains office (SFC [REDACTED], Religious Affairs NCO) of the DLA and has started to find ways to streamline the ordering of kosher food and MREs.

Preliminary Recommendations

1. It is not feasible to have kosher-cooked food on these ships.
2. However, only 1 kosher entrée a day would be necessary, as kosher breakfast and snacks are available, lunch could conceivably be taken care of as well (especially if bread and tuna are available), leaving just a kosher entrée for supper.
3. Look into the possibility of using frozen kosher meals. These are often cheaper.
4. Schedule a review of [REDACTED] ships to see if their catalog and offerings mirror the Atlantic Fleet. Similarly, with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].
5. Create reference document for Chaplains (both Jewish and non-Jewish)
6. Craft a one-page document to guide sailors in navigating kosher offerings.
7. Create easy to comprehend kosher education materials for culinary specialists.
8. Create the ability to issue 2 sets of cutlery (meat and dairy) to a kosher sailor so that they don't need to keep finding and using disposables (especially as refuse recycling gets tricky). If army-issued and owned, טבילת כלים is mitigated.
9. Find ways to easily streamline ordering of kosher frozen or shelf-stable entrees.
10. Continue dialog with DLA Chaplains office to increase kosher availability and offerings.
11. Continued research and education of all parties.
12. Advocacy, advocacy, advocacy. By explaining and advocating at the highest levels anything is possible. As an example: due to successful lobbying over the last few years by many groups, Florida state now offers \$8,000 scholarships to any private school student regardless of income. The same would be true of this project as well.

Thank you for affording us this opportunity.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

U.S. Military Kosher Meals, Ready-to-Eat Parity

The committee is concerned about the quality of, and access to, Kosher Meals, Ready-to-Eat (MREs) provided to members of the U.S. Armed Forces who have a religious obligation to follow a strict Kosher diet. The committee emphasizes that policy recommendations should ensure functional parity and equitable treatment across Kosher, Halal, and Standard ration offerings.

Therefore, the committee directs the Secretary of Defense, in coordination with the Jewish and Muslim chaplains of the Armed

Forces, to submit a report to the Senate Committee on Armed Services and the House Committee on Armed Services not later than

June 1, 2026, analyzing any disparities between Kosher, Halal, and Standard MREs and potential solutions to address any disparities.

The report should include:

- (1) the caloric and micro- and macro-nutritional and proportional discrepancies between Kosher, Halal, and Standard MRE entrees and accessories, and military dietary standards;
- (2) the variety and sufficiency of Kosher MRE accessories, including, but without limitation, the repetitive inclusion of variants of sides, the lack of a variety of protein, energy dense spreads and snacks, bread, pastries, energy bars (such as a “First Strike” equivalent), condiments, electrolyte and coffee mixes, a drink mixing bag, standardized packaging, and the quality of cutlery relative to other MRE types;
- (3) how to establish parity between Kosher, Halal, and Standard MREs in terms of variety and quality of included items, such as the feasibility of adding commercial, Kosher items to Kosher MREs, and Kosher certification of some Halal and Standard MRE components;
- (4) progress on the 11th Airborne Division’s Statement of Need for religious Cold Weather Meals to the Combat Feeding Research and Engineering Board (CFREB), and feasibility of Kosher and Halal dehydrated entrees;
- (5) the feasibility of establishing a consumer feedback mechanism for those receiving Kosher and Halal rations;
- (6) the feasibility of stocking religious MREs in commissaries;
- (7) how information on Kosher and Halal MREs is disseminated to relevant personnel at recruitment, training, and deployed locations;
- (8) any barriers such as bureaucracy, supply chain gaps, and administrative confusion that can hinder access to these MREs; and
- (9) any potential solutions or policy changes the Department recommends.



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ENDORSER, THE ALEPH INSTITUTE

Rabbi Dresin currently serves as Aleph's Director of Military programs, and stands as Chaplain Endorser for all branches of the US military, in addition to the VA and the Secret Service. Prior to coming to Aleph, he served for over 26 years as an active duty Army Chaplain, retiring with the rank of Colonel.

Among his military assignments were: Assistant Corps Chaplain, Vietnam; the faculty, US Army Chaplain School and Center; Chief of Personnel Actions, Office Chief of Chaplains, Pentagon; Division Chaplain 2d Infantry Division, Korea; Chief of Chaplains, 7th Medical Command, Europe; and Chief of the Department of Ministry, Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

Rabbi Dresin was selected by the Army for a graduate

program in Clinical Pastoral Education and Psychotherapy at Yale University and is a graduate of the National Defense University (Industrial College of the Armed Forces - ICAF), Washington, DC. He holds four earned graduate degrees.

Among his military awards and decorations are: the Legion of Merit, two awards; the Bronze Star, two awards; and the Meritorious Service Medal, four awards; Army Commendation Medal, two awards. He currently serves on the Executive Committee of the National Conference on Ministry to the Armed Forces (NCMAF).

Rabbi Dresin is married to the former Paula Rappoport, a math teacher. They have 5 children, 20 grandchildren, and 5 great-grandchildren.

ABOUT ALEPH MILITARY

The Aleph Institute's military branch supports the unique needs of Jewish service members in the United States Armed Forces, along with their families. We provide religious and educational resources, holiday supplies, and personal advocacy to thousands of service members stationed around the world. We are committed to building and strengthening the Jewish military community. Aleph is also a Department of War-recognized endorsing agency for Jewish military chaplains.



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