

**Good Shabbos and Happy Chanukah Everyone.** The Sages tell us that the Shechina - Hashem's holy presence, does not rest within 10 handbreadths of the ground, presumably because the ground is a dirty place (Sukah 5a) However, we also know that it is mitzvah to place the Chanukah Menorah within 10 handbreadths of the ground. (Orach Chayim 671:6) Why is that? Because the Chanukah lights have a tremendous power to bring holiness where holiness is not found. The following is an interesting true story of how one Jew was inspired on Chanukah to return to his roots, even though he was in a spiritual desert:

"In the fall of 1990, things were heating up in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. I had been an Army Captain and a helicopter maintenance test pilot for a decade and received notice that I would be transferred to the First Cavalry Division which was on alert for the Persian Gulf War. Consequently, I also got wind of the Department of Defense "dog tag dilemma" regarding Jewish personnel. Then, as now, Jews were forbidden by Saudi law to enter the country. But our Secretary of Defense flat out told the King of Saudi Arabia, "We have Jews in our military. They've trained with their units and they're going. Blink and look the other way." With Kuwait occupied and the Iraqis at his border, King Faud did the practical thing.

We shipped out, but there was still the issue of classification. Normally the dog tags of Jewish servicemen are imprinted with the word "Jewish." But Defense, fearing that this would put Jewish soldiers at further risk should they be captured on Iraqi soil, substituted the classification, "Protestant B," on the tags.

I didn't like the whole idea of classifying Jews as Protestant anything and so I decided to leave my dog tag alone. I figured if I were captured, it was in Hashem's hands. Changing my tags was tantamount to denying my religion and I couldn't swallow that. In September, 1990 I went off to defend a country that I was prohibited from entering. The "Jewish" on my dog tag remained as clear and unmistakable as the American star on the hood of every Army truck.

A few days after my arrival, the Baptist chaplain approached me. "I just got a secret message through channels," he said. "There's going to be a Jewish gathering. A holiday? Simkatoro or something like that. You want to go? It's at 1800 hours at Dhahran Airbase." Simkatoro turned out to be Simchas Torah, a holiday that hadn't registered on my religious radar in eons. Services were held in absolute secrecy in a windowless room in a cinder block building. The chaplain led a swift and simple service.

We couldn't risk singing or dancing, but Rabbi Ben Romer had managed to smuggle in a bottle of Manischewitz. Normally, I can't stand the stuff, but that night, the wine tasted of Shabbat and family and Seders of long ago. My soul was warmed by the forbidden alcohol and by the memories swirling around me and my fellow soldiers. We were strangers to one another in a land stranger than any of us had ever experienced, but for that brief hour, we were home. Only Americans would have had the chutzpah to celebrate Simchas Torah under the noses of the Saudis. Irony and pride twisted together inside me like barbed wire. Celebrating my Judaism that evening made me even prouder to be an American, thankful once more for the freedoms we have. I had only been in Saudi Arabia a week, but I already had a keen understanding of how restrictive its society was.

Soon after, things began coming to a head. The next time I was able to do anything remotely Jewish was Chanukah. Maybe it was coincidence, or maybe it was Hashem's hand that placed a Jewish Colonel in charge of our unit. Colonel Lawrence Schneider relayed messages of Jewish gatherings to us immediately. Had a non-Jew been in that position, the information would likely have taken a back seat to a more pressing issue. Like war. But it didn't.

When notice of the Chanukah party was decoded, we knew about it at once. The first thing we saw when we entered the tent was food, tons of it. Care packages from the states -- cookies, latkes, sour cream and applesauce and cans and cans of gefilte fish. The wind was blowing dry across the tent, but inside there was an incredible feeling of celebration. As Rabbi Romer talked about the theme of Chanukah and the ragtag bunch of Maccabee soldiers fighting Jewry's oppressors thousands of years ago, it wasn't hard to make the connection to what lay ahead of us. There in the middle of the desert, inside an olive green tent, we felt like we were the Maccabees. If we had to go down, we were going to go down fighting, as they did.

We blessed the candles, acknowledging the King of the Universe who commanded us to kindle the Chanukah lights. We said the second prayer, praising Hashem for the miracles he performed, bayamim hahem bazman hazeh, in those days and now. And we sang the third blessing, the Shehecheyanu, thanking Hashem for keeping us in life and for enabling us to reach this season. We knew war was imminent. All week, we had received reports of mass destruction, projections of the chemical weapons that were likely to be unleashed. Intelligence estimates put the first rounds of casualties at 12,500 soldiers. I heard those numbers and thought, "That's my whole division!" I sat back in my chair, my gefilte fish cans at my feet. We were in the desert, about to go to war, singing songs of praise to Hashem who had saved our ancestors in battle once before. The feeling of unity was as pervasive as our apprehension, as real as the sand that found its way into everything from our socks to our toothbrushes. I felt more Jewish there on that lonely Saudi plain, our tanks and guns at the ready, than I had ever felt back home in shul.

That Chanukah in the desert solidified for me the urge to reconnect with my Judaism. I felt religion welling up inside me. Any soldier will tell you that there are no atheists in foxholes and I know that part of my feelings were tied to the looming war and my desire to get with Hashem before the unknown descended in the clouds of battle.

It sounds corny, but as we downed the latkes and cookies and wiped the last of the apple sauce from our plates, everyone grew quiet, keenly aware of the link with history, thinking of what we were about to do and what had been done by soldiers like us so long ago.

The soldier beside me stared ahead at nothing in particular, absent-mindedly handling his dog tag. "How did you classify?" I asked, nodding to my tag. Silently, he withdrew the metal rectangle and its beaded chain from beneath his shirt and held it out for me to read. Like mine, his read "Jewish." Somewhere in a military depot someplace, I am sure that there must be boxes and boxes of dog tags, still in their wrappers, all marked "Protestant B." **Good Shabbos and Happy Chanukah Everyone.**