

Finding Kosher Kimchi in Korea

A Jewish US Army Chaplain's Report



Menorah arriving on the base in time for Chanukah

I'm a US Army chaplain serving in Seoul for the past year-and-a-half and I'm assigned to the military police – MPs – who handle law enforcement duties on all the US military bases in Korea. I also cover a few other units that don't have a chaplain assigned to them, or at least not anywhere nearby. In addition, as the only Jewish chaplain on the peninsula, I am kept busy.

South Korea has been in the news a lot lately. It's hard to believe this ultra-modern, peaceful country, with spotless sidewalks and almost no street crime, was once on the front lines of the last battle of the Cold War.

On Friday nights, I hold Shabbat services at the base chapel. Typically we get about 25 people depending on what's for dinner afterward. When

my family is here with me, we savor my wife's Martha Stewart-modeled cuisine. Otherwise the typical fare is a bit more basic. My wife spoils us with all the staples, often from scratch: fresh challah, gefilte fish, matzah ball soup, potato kugel, chocolate brownies and other delectable desserts, all the things we crave from home. Nowadays, though, she and our children tend to spend a lot of time in Jerusalem leaving



Bris on the base performed by the baby's father

The crowd here includes soldiers with yeshiva backgrounds – men and women – soldiers just discovering their Judaism, English teachers, government employees and business executives, Israelis, and even a sizeable group of Korean civilians who've been attending Jewish services at the chapel for years.

Judaism is quite popular in Korea. About 30,000 Koreans visit Israel each year as tourists. In fact, Korean Airlines operates three direct flights to Tel Aviv each week, and they're often full. There are even obscure titles like Talmud Stories for Children translated into Korean. I've seen Korean-Hebrew editions of the Passover Haggadah as well as the Purim Megilla.

Jewish life is full here. The base commissary stocks Empire frozen chicken and turkey, jars of gefilte fish, grape juice and wine, frozen bread rolls and almost any kind of kosher food you would find in a big city supermarket in the United States.

The Army operates a hilltop retreat

center not far away, where we hold larger scale events, like Passover Seders and High Holiday services. There's a large chapel, kitchen and dining hall there, and plenty of guest rooms for those spending the night.

I've had some terrific Chabad yeshiva guys fly over to lead services, blow the shofar and read from the Torah scroll. They also kosher the kitchen and supervise the food preparation, although the local Korean staff is now fairly familiar with the laws of kashrus, having worked there for years.

Holidays like Purim, Simchas Torah and Tisha B'Av are usually celebrated along with the local Chabad House located down the road from the base. But this year for the High Holidays, we also merged congregations, so the crowd swelled to nearly 100 people. It was about as diverse a gathering of Jews that ever existed; from the rabbi himself, to the Israeli ambassador, staff from the Israeli and US embassies, American civilians working in Korea, senior US Army officers and their

families, and infantry soldiers stationed on the DMZ (the demilitarized zone at the border with North Korea, about 30 miles from Seoul).

While perhaps I'm not quite a wise rabbinic authority, for the Jews in the military in Korea, I'm all there is. I have managed to organize a bris, not an everyday occurrence on a US military base. I consulted with an Army pediatrician at the base hospital, who was Jewish and a regular at my Friday night chapel services. The father as it turned out is an Army doctor as well and performed the mitzvah himself, as intended but little practiced today.

Much of my military life and work takes place outside of the Jewish realm. My duties extend far beyond that. I spend most of my week working with my battalion helping soldiers with personal problems, from marital problems to issues with their commanders. Soldiers in my unit have asked me to "bless" their newborn babies and perform non-religious (non Jewish) weddings, among other things. Often I'm also

Feature

by Chaplain (CPT) Shlomo Shulman



Chanukah candle lighting in Seoul

asked to deliver a “non-denominational” invocation prayer at change-of-command ceremonies and memorial observances, “spiritual fitness events” and other occasions.

Before the Army, I didn’t have much of a background in what they call the “ministry”: counseling or attending to the psychological crises of strangers. I’ve become more proficient in the past four years. Knocks on the door and phone calls in the middle of the night have become familiar to me. I am an objective third party in marital squabbles. I sit with soldiers, listening for hours as they confide in me. I work through their dilemmas and have become a keeper of secrets of some of the most personal of details. Very often, it’s simply a listening ear that lessens most of the anxiety and worry on the base.

Sometimes though, my real strength is put to the test not necessarily as a soldier but as a man. I’ll never forget the call I got from a base hospital chaplain one afternoon. I was told that a seven week old baby girl with irreversible brain

damage was going to be taken off life support. While the Torah strictly forbids such things, there wasn’t anything I could do—I didn’t even know the parents’ names. The young mother and father were both MPs and wanted the chaplain there when they pulled the plug.

I shared a taxi from the base hospital with the head nurse and the case manager. We drove through rush-hour Seoul traffic late on Friday afternoon to Samsung Hospital, a massive, state-of-the art structure with futuristic giant-screen TV monitors in the lobby, hundreds of patients and visitors flowing down every corridor and stairway.

The case manager had been there before. She led us up to the newborn intensive care ward. We washed our hands with special soap and donned disposable plastic aprons, then walked in.

There were incubators everywhere, rows of them, some pushed up against the walls and hallways; many had premature babies in them. I wondered how they were able to live being so small.

I watched as these tiny babies squirmed around in their basinetts, hooked up to various tubes from all directions.

We found the couple, both 20-year-old soldiers. The mother had a large tattoo on her calf, a depiction of stuffed animals and the words “Good Night, Sweet Princesses – May 26, 2008” – a reference, I learned, to the twin girls she’d carried to term, both stillborn, barely more than a year ago.

She had ruptured her uterus during her previous pregnancy and didn’t realize it needed to heal completely before she attempted another pregnancy. She was pregnant just weeks after losing the twins. She went into labor still not understanding the high risk she faced. While the hospital on our base is modern, it is not equipped for that kind of delivery. By the time she was transferred to Samsung, the baby had suffered irreversible brain damage.

The hospital ethics committee had met several times already and determined the baby met all the criteria to be declared clinically brain-dead. Still, an EKG test picked up a weak flutter of brain stem activity, which left the infant “legally” very much alive. With no chance of the baby ever leaving the intensive care ward, the nurse described her to me as a “flower just getting watered each day.” The couple had already made their decision, one of the hardest they would ever face.

The traffic was brutal and we didn’t arrive until 4:00 p.m. Still unsure what lay ahead and trying to distract myself, I preoccupied myself worrying that we wouldn’t make it back to the base in time for Shabbat.

A dozen Korean nurses and doctors in

scrubs and white coats stood around a bassinet. The baby seemingly slept so peacefully. Her little fingers stuck out of the sleeves of the pink jumper her mother had dressed her in. She wanted a last photograph holding her baby girl. Her mother picked up her baby up and the father leaned in close; a macabre family portrait. Then she was laid back in the bassinet.

I knew I should say something to them, but I had no idea what. I stepped forward and put a hand on the father's shoulder and said, "I'm right here if you need me."

The nurse looked at her mother and her mother nodded. The nurse pushed a button on the machine. All the lights went off on the machine. The young father – who seemed barely out of high school – stroked his wife's back tenderly. She held onto the infant's foot, he held onto her tiny hand. Some of the nurses cried as the mother sobbed.

A few minutes later, one of the doctors checked a monitor, said something in Korean. The respirator tube was removed from her tiny mouth. One of the nurses handed the mother a pink blanket, which she used to wrap around the baby. She cradled the bundle in her arms. We all trailed along in silence, a ghoulis parade following a young couple holding a blanket with a dead baby inside. "They'd like you to say a prayer for their baby before the mortuary team arrives," a nurse explained.

Despite the obvious theological differences I had with the decision that had been made, I'd managed to scratch down a few thoughts on an index card. I took a deep breath and stepped inside the room. After some awkward condolences and apologies, I stood in front of the couple and read:



Chaplain Shlomo Shulman in the sukkah with his family in Seoul

Almighty God, this precious baby graced this world for just a few short weeks.

Master of the Universe, in Your infinite wisdom, You gave her to her mother and father with a tender little body that was broken inside. For this reason only, they return her holy soul to You today, as innocent and pure as it was when she entered the world. One day we will all meet again in the Garden of Heaven, where we will bask in the light of clarity and understanding and forget all the sadness we feel at this moment.

It is with heavy hearts that we act today. God Almighty, we beg You to forgive us for our arrogance, and look upon us with mercy. Amen.

I sat in silence in the taxi on the ride back to the base. What is there to say after you've just witnessed the Angel of Death pass through the room? I am a soldier, though I am a Jew and can't pretend to not be deeply touched by this experience. I am a father.

I tried to let my mind shift back to Shabbat, which was rapidly approaching. What's the theme of this week's Torah reading? Will there be enough challah for everyone if we get a big crowd tonight?

Something weighed heavily on me. What lesson did the Almighty want us to learn from what just happened? That life is fragile? That things don't always work out the way you plan? It seemed a harsh way to teach the point.

I step inside the room to make the Kiddush for Shabbat for a room filled with soldiers, travelers, backpackers and locals. I go to sleep that evening thankful for what I have and blessed to be able to hug my children. ✡

Shlomo Shulman grew up in Los Angeles. He and his family have been stationed in Korea since June 2009. Prior to his present assignment, he served in Iraq for 15 months, followed by almost a year in Savannah, Georgia. He can be reached at a.shulman@us.army.mil