



The Fighting Rabbis: Jewish Military Chaplains and American History

Albert I. Slomovitz

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Rabbi Elkan Voorsanger received the Purple Heart for his actions during the Battle of Argonne. Chaplain Edgar Siskin, serving with the Marines on Pelilu Island, conducted Yom Kippur services in the midst of a barrage of artillery fire. Rabbi Alexander Goode and three fellow chaplains gave their own lifejackets to panicked soldiers aboard a sinking transport torpedoed by a German submarine, and then went down with the ship.

American Jews are not usually associated with warfare. Nor, for that matter, are their rabbis. And yet, Jewish chaplains have played a significant and sometimes heroic role in our nation's defense.

The Fighting Rabbis presents the compelling history of Jewish military chaplains from their first service during the Civil War to the first female Jewish chaplain and the rabbinic role in Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm. Rabbi Slomovitz, himself a Navy chaplain, opens a window onto the fieldwork, religious services, counseling, and dramatic battlefield experiences of Jewish military chaplains throughout our nation's history.

From George Washington's early support for a religiously tolerant military to a Seder held in the desert sands of Kuwait, these rabbis have had a profound impact on Jewish life in America. Also striking are original documents which chronicle the ongoing care and concern by the Jewish community over the last 140 years for their fellow Jews, including many new immigrants who entered the armed forces. Slomovitz refutes the common belief that the U.S. military itself has been a hostile place for Jews, in the process providing a unique perspective on American religious history.

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