

Earlier this week, at a hotel in downtown Memphis, I davened Shacharith with a minyan of military men and women. This was not my first time praying with members of the armed forces -- last year on our BHBE Family Trip to Israel I had the great privilege of offering the Mi Sheberach for Soldiers to a group of young men defending our Northern border with Syria -- but what made this experience unique for me is that the individuals in this minyan were all rabbis, men and women working as U.S. military chaplains both here and abroad. As the chaplains explained it to me, their role is to serve Jews who serve - as we do at a rate roughly proportional to our composition in the general population (if not a little bit higher). They cannot think of a higher purpose for their life's work and, having been with them for two days, neither can I!

I was sent to Memphis as a representative of the Rabbinical Assembly (RA), my professional organization as a Conservative Rabbi, to explore how the RA can better support our colleagues in the armed forces, and at another time I would be happy to share with you some of what I learned. But what struck me most about this particular prayer experience was the issue of dress, as I sat a lone civilian in street clothes amongst my khaki, navy, and white clad friends. Along with the crisp pants, shirts, and skirts of their military uniforms, I was also treated to a dazzling array of pins and buttons and badges -- the elegant tablets of the 10 Commandments signifying sponsorship by one of the Jewish endorsement agencies; the striped, multi-colored tags indicating various honors an individual has accumulated over the course of his/her career; the heavy, metal clasps representing a particular area of chaplaincy as, for example, to the Joint Chiefs of Staff where one RA rabbi is currently doing her service. Alongside these military signifiers, my colleagues were donned in all the traditional trappings of Jewish prayer - colorful kippot, heavy wool tallises, worn t'fillin straps wrapped around their fingers. The uniform of Jewish service atop the uniform of military service moved me strongly. What an amazing blessing it is to be so thoroughly Jewish and so thoroughly American both at the very same time!

Uniforms serve a great many purposes -- they're a marker of rank and identity, of participation in a certain group and allegiance to a certain community. Uniforms help remind their wearers of the essential purpose to which they're committed; they also signal to others where a wearer's loyalties lie. When we, as Jews, put on kippah, tallit, and t'fillin - or for that matter wear a Jewish star necklace or a hamsa or a mezuzah around our neck - we are making an important statement to ourselves and to others about where our values, beliefs, and commitments lie. We wear these items as proudly as a soldier's stripes!

I imagine that it will be some time until I again have the blessing of praying with a military minyan; for now, at least, it's back to civilian life for me! But when I wrap myself in tallit tomorrow morning as usual, the act will feel just a little bit different. It will remind me more deeply of the Divine service to which each of us is conscripted.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Annie Tucker