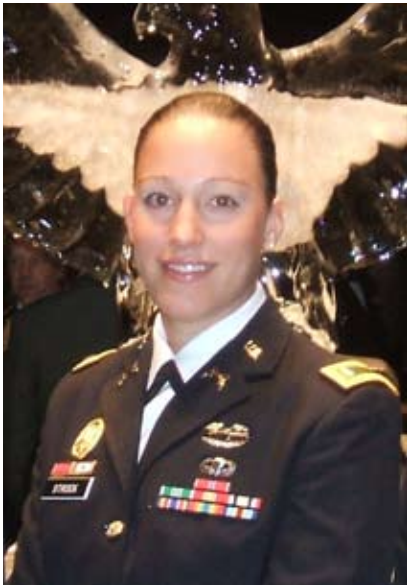


BY CAPTAIN REBEKAH L. STROCK '01

Jewish in Iraq

I initially saw my deployment to Iraq as a great opportunity to enact change. What I failed to realize is that a war zone is not a place to lightly gamble one's life, even in service of high-minded ideals.



Captain Rebekah L. Strock '01, Eighth Army
Provost Marshal Operations Officer.

What I realized about myself is that I am not the good person I thought I was, and that when pushed to extremes, the ugly truth rears its head: survival rules. The animal instinct of survival, from which I fancied myself so far removed, is really only a breath away.

During the high holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Jews around the world read about exalted heroes who sacrificed themselves rather than disavow God. The story of Masada resonates with similar powerful emotion, a story in which hundreds of Jews killed themselves when trapped defending a plateau during an uprising against a Roman decree to kill and enslave the rebellious Jews, rather than become slaves and grant the Roman army victory. Even the Hanukkah story of the Macabees defending their right to live and practice freely as Jews is one of defending God and religion with one's life, despite dire odds.

Yet, Judaism values life above all else. According to our scholars and sages, saving a life is the one thing that can justify breaking almost any law or prohibition. But what about protecting your own life? It certainly does not have the luster of selflessness, sacrifice, or honor, yet without your own life you cannot serve any further change in the world, be it selfless or self-serving. And at what point will God forgive disavowing a Jewish identity in exchange for protection of that very life, bestowed by the same power?

In Iraq, the enemies of America hate Americans. These extremists particularly hate American troops who embody America in person, and I am certain that many were affronted by the necessity to follow the direction of Americans in roles of power, particularly women. Those factors alone made me an excellent target for potential attack as a leader of Military Police troops training Iraqi policemen in Baghdad.

Before arriving in Iraq, I would have liked to think that I would take heroic chances against any odds, but when it came down to it, I found that I was not willing to risk becoming an even greater target by advertising my Judaism. This

was a great source of internal conflict for me. I wanted to see myself as an emissary of peace; I wanted to feel that I could bridge some small part of the misunderstanding and the hatred—even if it was only individual-to-individual—during my personal interactions with the local populace.

I was living with my life in daily jeopardy, unable to share my beliefs, my religion with enemies or friends. Even to my interpreters, with whom I had many discussions of philosophy and religion, I could not reveal my true identity though I am certain many of them must have guessed it. When it came up in conversation in an unsecure location with local nationals of uncertain loyalties present, I determined that I could not mention it again to anyone outside of my unit, and that I must further cover my identity.

Because of this decision, I felt personally and spiritually incomplete; I felt unable to make even a small contribution to fight the stereotypes that even today hold sway in many Iraqi communities.

Worst yet, while the easiest way to avoid unmasking my identity was to avoid the topic of religion, many of the locals were bound to ask questions. I often tried to change the subject or answer in a very general fashion, but on one occasion I was directly asked and pressed to answer, and I felt forced to answer a lie—that I was a Christian like all of the other soldiers they knew.

It was a simple, easy lie to tell. Although I am sure it was not a convincing one due to my hesitation and stammering, it did accomplish the goal of ending the conversation.

It is easy to attribute my intentional misinformation to forming a simplified and therefore understandable answer, since most of them spoke little English and may only have recognized the distinction between Muslim

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and anything else, rather than Catholic, Protestant, Christian, Jewish, etc. It could also be attributed to a necessary safety precaution to protect my life, constantly at risk of becoming a greater target. But the hardest attribution to acknowledge, and the deepest truth, is that my response was driven by a fear that I could not conquer.

This Passover, I am blessed to be living in Seoul, South Korea—a country of relative (if not complete) peace. Here, we are lucky to have a congregation, a Rabbi, and a traditional celebration with all the trappings. I can buy matzoh and macarons on the military installation, and am able to celebrate the holiday more or less as I would in the States. I can even share my celebration with locals and Americans, which gives me peace of mind.

But far from home is still not quite the same as sharing a holiday with family and friends and with Mom's home cooking. While most Jews traditionally declare, "Next Year in Jerusalem!" in hopes of celebrating in the Holy Land, for me that phrase has evolved to "Next Year at home!" where I can openly celebrate, in peace, the holiday of freedom and new beginnings. **e**

These views are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the US Army or affiliated organizations.