



Serving Those Who Serve

How military families around the globe stay connected to their Jewishness.

BY RABBI TRACY KAPLOWITZ, PH.D.

The thought of moving to San Diego thrilled Sarah. Her husband, a service member in the Air Force, had been transferred to the sunny Southern California city, a common life change for a longtime military family. A community organizer with a Ph.D. in plant biology, Sarah looked forward to connecting with the Jewish community and its many synagogues, Jewish community centers, and early learning centers. Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020 and exploring their new city with children wasn't an option. The isolation Sarah experienced got her thinking about other Jewish military families throughout California, who, even in the best of times, often were isolated from the Jewish community.

According to the 2020 Blue Star Families' Military Family Lifestyle Survey, a robust survey of active-duty, National Guard, and Reserve service members, veterans, and

With the partnership between PJ Library and the JCC Association of North America, many military families, including these from Fort Irwin in California, are creating Jewish memories together.

COURTESY PHOTOS

their families, only 27% of active-duty family respondents felt a sense of belonging to their local civilian community. The staff at JWB Jewish Chaplains Council, a signature program of JCC Association of North America, saw an opportunity to boost that statistic. They applied for a PJ Library engagement grant to pilot an initiative that engaged five military parent ambassadors, a group which eventually included Sarah. The ambassadors helped to establish PJ Library communities at Army posts, on submarine and Air Force bases, and in areas with many military personnel.

This isn't the first time JWB has worked with PJ Library to reach military families. The relationship goes back to the beginning of PJ Library in 2005, when founder Harold Grinspoon, a Navy veteran, personally committed to fund subscriptions for children of service members for all the years the children are eligible — no matter where in

the world they lived. In the 17 years since, more than 5,300 children have received books through this initiative.

Military families' lack of connection and belonging to the local civilian community is not news to JWB, which has served Jews in uniform and their families for more than 100 years. So although there are many active PJ Library communities, it's not likely that Jewish military families connect with them. That's one reason JWB was thrilled when its PJ Library grant application was approved. It was able to create PJ Library communities that targeted military families. In California, Sarah got right to work.

Cherish and Alex live on Fort Irwin, a remote training area in California's Mojave Desert, midway between Las Vegas and Los Angeles. When Sarah connected with Alex, he was deployed, leaving Cherish to raise their Jewish family alone. Sarah quickly stepped in, sending mitzvah kits, holiday crafts, Shabbat treats, and even a homemade round challah for their Rosh Hashanah celebration.

Sarah's outreach empowered Cherish, who knew there were other Jews on Fort Irwin who felt as isolated as she did. Together, they could form a community. With help from Sarah, who sent craft materials and connected Cherish to other Fort Irwin families, the group built and decorated the base's first-ever *sukkah* (a temporary shelter) and hosted a PJ Library Sukkot celebration in 2021, creating a powerful story of connection in unexpected places. Perhaps best of all, the event marked the launch of something bigger. Cherish recently applied to serve as the Jewish community's lay leader so she can continue to organize events with support from the Fort Irwin Chapel.

Similar to Cherish and Alex and their family, Jason was a member of Sarah's military community. He'd been exploring his Jewish roots on his mother's side and wanted to pass Jewish traditions and values on to his four children. This made Sarah's holiday activity kits welcomed gifts for his family. It was an easy decision to enroll the kids in PJ Library, and now he enjoys reading the books together with them.

A year after Jason became involved in California's PJ Library community of military families, he received orders to move to Korea, where he knew connecting his family with Jewish life would require active



How was history made in 2021 on Fort Irwin? It got its first sukkah.


COURTESY PHOTO

engagement. In the fall of 2021, JWB launched an online Hebrew school program, which is funded by the US Army. Since the classes are reliant on parents as volunteer teachers, Jason stepped forward. Because of the PJ Library military community, Jason is an empowered parent, leading Jewish engagement for his own family and others in his community.

At Fort Riley in Kansas, the winds howl and secured items often end up in neighbors' yards. One morning, the JWB military parent ambassador, also named Sarah, discovered a bag under her car. On the installation's Facebook page, she posted a picture of the bag and noted that she would leave it near the big inflatable *hanukkiyah* (a Hanukkah menorah) in front of her house.

The bag was retrieved, but more importantly, another mom saw the post and incredulously asked, "Are you Jewish?! I thought I was the only one here." Now there's a brand-new PJ Library family in Fort Riley benefiting from the books and their connection to the small-yet-vibrant group of families in the community.

JWB is proud of the partnership with PJ Library and its effort to empower and connect military families in communities around the world. The hope is that Jewish military families will be able to say they feel

100% connected to their community when that Blue Stars Families' survey comes around again. 

DID YOU KNOW?

You can join the effort and support books and programming for our military families around the world. Make a gift today at pjlibrary.org/donate.

Rabbi Tracy Kaplowitz, Ph.D., is the former director of operations for JWB Jewish Chaplains Council, a signature program of JCC Association of North America.