

TEN TIPS

Toward Creating a Jewish Community on Your Military Base



by Alison Buckholtz, author of *Standing By: The Making of an American Military Family in a Time of War*

1 CONSIDER THE SORT OF COMMUNITY YOU WOULD BE WILLING TO LEAD.

This is the most important step in the entire process. You don't need to have a rigorous religious education, but you do need to have the willingness and know-how to dig out resources and people that can meet the community's needs. In some cases, all you'll need to provide is your house—or a rented common room on base—and your organizational abilities. In some cases, members of your community might ask for your help seeking out a Bar Mitzvah tutor, online educational options, or kosher food. Others might simply be looking for someone to spend a holiday with. You don't need all the answers, but you need to be willing to help track them down.

2 CONNECT AND WORK WITH LOCAL RESOURCES.

An internet search can show you if there are JCCs, synagogues, university Hillels, or Chabad Houses within reasonable driving distance. Although the groups might have goals different from yours, you may be able to take advantage of their expertise or knowledge of the area, or partner with them on activities while your group is still young. (Cosponsoring an event is a great way to bring awareness of your group to a wider audience.) If these institutions are too far away for your group to participate in programming, ask if they would be willing to send speakers or religious leaders to your base.

They can also help by referring you to Jewish military personnel who have already contacted them—so you can reach out to those who have been looking for a group like yours.

3 PURSUE INSTITUTIONAL LEADS; DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL.

The JWB Jewish Chaplains Council assigns rabbis to U.S. military units and installations and certifies service members as Jewish lay leaders in the military. The Aleph Institute provides support and assistance to Jewish service members in the U.S. Armed Forces with Jewish books, materials, and moral and spiritual support. You can also request Jewish religious texts and objects for holiday observances, and kosher meals for deployed service members. Both groups provide networking opportunities and host an annual conference.

4 MEET WITH THE BASE CHAPLAIN AND OFFICE PERSONNEL.

This meeting can help you get a sense of how the base's leadership might respond to your requests for space on base, and what the procedures are for using the chapel or common rooms. It's also helpful to get to know the office personnel and volunteers, who can help you with follow up and scheduling. You should also ask to be introduced to Jewish officers or civilians on base and in town.

5 CALL OR MEET COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO ASSESS WIDER INTEREST.

Let people know that you're exploring what it might take to put together a group of Jews on base who are interested in getting to know each other. You can ask what they would be interested in doing as an introductory social activity. Some ideas: a Sunday potluck brunch; Shabbat dinner or service; kids' Hanukkah or Purim party. Gather email addresses and consider using online invitations to keep track of participants, re-use group lists, and facilitate communication among members.

6 BE REALISTIC ABOUT THE COMMUNITY YOUR GROUP NEEDS, RATHER THAN PURSUING THE MODEL THAT YOU WANT.

It's natural to visualize putting together the sort of group that would meet your own needs. For example, you might have envisioned a chavurah-type model that meets one Friday night per month for a service in someone's home. But others may simply be seeking a social outlet during Jewish holidays, or to get to know other Jewish families for their children's sake. Listen carefully and be aware of the distinctions between what you hoped for and what others are hoping for. Don't push too hard on a model that doesn't generate enthusiasm.

7 "SAVE THE DATE" NOTICES SAVE TIME IN THE LONG RUN, SO PLAN AHEAD.

Send "save the date" notices before holidays and events so your members know they have somewhere to go locally. Otherwise, they may make plans to travel home to family because they think there is nothing else for them to do on base or in town to mark a Jewish festival.

8 BE SENSITIVE TO PRECONCEPTIONS AND LEVELS OF OBSERVANCE.

Living a Jewish life in a remote or under-served location encourages you to make alliances that wouldn't be obvious or necessary

in a larger city. For secular Jews, for example, working with a local Chabad could open up possibilities that might not otherwise present themselves, if the personalities are in sync and mutually beneficial goals are understood. You may need to let your group members know that you can gain certain specific outcomes from seeking out help from other Jewish groups.

9 TAKE CARE OF DEPLOYED SERVICE MEMBERS AS WELL AS FAMILY LEFT BEHIND.

One of the certainties of living on or near a military base is that people will come and go. Looking after group members who are deployed might include sending care packages and/or holiday and religious items; writing letters; providing meals for the family left behind; and generally keeping in touch to let them know you care. If the service member is deployed, you may need to make an extra effort to let the family members at home know they are still welcome.

10 BE OPEN TO MEMBERS—AND MAKE SURE YOU'RE COMFORTABLE, TOO.

The military attracts people with diverse and compelling backgrounds, and those who contact you might have come to Judaism through marriage, or simply be seekers and students of spirituality. It's important to be open to members while being smart about what makes you comfortable. Be prepared to get calls and inquiries from religious Christians who want to explore Judaism with your group, and know in advance how to handle these requests. For example, you may want to consider having an agreement with the base chaplain that you can refer these inquires back to his/her office.



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