

Jewish Chapel Celebrates 40 Years at West Point

By LTC (R) Robert D. Wolff '65, Ph.D., Guest Author

The number 40 appears numerous times in the Torah and in Jewish tradition: 40 days and 40 nights of rain in the Great Flood, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, and there are 40 days between the first day of Elul (when Jews blow the Shofar to prepare for Rosh Hashana) until Yom Kippur (the end of the annual teshuva, or repentance, period). According to Jewish scholars, the number 40 represents significant change and transformation. In 2024, the West Point Jewish Chapel, the only true synagogue on an Army installation, celebrates its 40th anniversary. It has seen and undergone many changes in those 40 years.

The recognition of Jewish cadets at West Point began in 1939. On April 7 of that year, the Academy issued a memorandum (coincidentally Memorandum No. 40) that stated that a 25-member “Jewish Chapel Squad” would be formed and that these Jewish cadets “will be assembled at 7:30am every Sunday and marched to the basement of the Cadet Chapel” for a religious service. Nearly 30 years later, in 1968, Colonel Mert Singer '38 and then-Superintendent Major General Donald Bennett '40 discussed the concept of a stand-alone Jewish Chapel at West Point. Later that year, on June 18, Singer met with Herb Lichtenberg '55 and Rabbi Avraham Soltes (the visiting West Point Jewish chaplain), and they founded the West Point Jewish Chapel Fund (WPJCF), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that would raise funds for the planning, design and construction of the West Point Jewish Chapel and provide continuing support to the chapel following its completion. It took a decade to raise the funds and secure all the necessary support, including that of Lieutenant General Andrew Goodpaster '39, the 51st USMA Superintendent, who reaffirmed West Point's support for a Jewish Chapel to be located between the Cadet Chapel and the Catholic Chapel.

“The Jewish Chapel will fill a long-standing need at West Point,” said Goodpaster in 1978. “In addition to providing a place of worship for our Jewish cadets, officers, and members of the community and their families, the Gallery and Museum will recognize the contribution of Jewish graduates of West Point have made to our nation's progress over the 176 years since Joseph Swift and Simon Levy formed the first graduating class of 1802.”

A groundbreaking ceremony for the Jewish Chapel was held on December 28, 1982. Superintendent Lieutenant General Willard Scott Jr. '48, several members of the WPJCF (including

its President Herbert Ames), and Rabbi Soltes were in attendance. “For years, Jewish cadets at West Point have had to use classrooms, an auditorium or a non-denominational chapel to hold religious services,” stated a December 29, 1982 *New York Times* article titled “Jewish Chapel at West Point to End ‘Wandering in Desert.’” “Soon, though,” the article noted, “[these] days of ‘wandering in the desert’ will be over.”

A cornerstone ceremony was held at the nearly completed Jewish Chapel on September 20, 1983. In addition to those who attended the groundbreaking, New York City Mayor Edward I. Koch came to the event. The chapel was designed by the firm Abramovitz, Harris & Kingsland. The general construction contractor was the Tishman Construction Corporation. The construction was completed and the first service in the chapel was held in 1984. The cost of the Jewish Chapel was \$7.5 million—all from donations.



The Jewish Chapel, which was completed in 1984 with funding by the West Point Jewish Chapel Fund, provides a place of worship for Jewish cadets and a home for other USMA activities.

In 1983, Chaplain (Major) Marc Abramowitz became the first Army Jewish chaplain assigned to West Point. The first wedding of Jewish graduates in the new Jewish Chapel was held in June 1984 when Christy Bishop '84 married Keith Samuels '83. In April 1985, 40 Jewish cadets celebrated the first Passover Seder at the new West Point Jewish Chapel, led by Chaplain Abramowitz. The Chapel and its chaplains have been major reasons for the consistent increase in the number of Jewish cadets participating in Jewish programs at West Point over the last 40 years.

In a letter dated July 1, 1986 to the Secretary of the Army, WPJCF President Herbert Ames noted that all costs of the Jewish Chapel project have been paid and offered the chapel free of all liens and encumbrances. He wrote, "The gift may be used as the Superintendent directs for the benefit of the cadets, staff and faculty and West Point Community, with the understanding that it was built primarily for the religious, moral and intellectual benefit of the West Point Jewish Community." On September 23, 1986 John O. Marsh Jr., then-Secretary of the Army, officially accepted the WPJCF's proffer, which transferred the responsibility for operation and maintenance of the Jewish Chapel to the government.

While the chapel began operations in 1984, a formal dedication ceremony was held on May 3, 1988. The event was hosted by Superintendent Lieutenant General Dave Palmer '56 and attended by more than 300 guests. Ambassador Max Kampelman delivered a keynote address and a letter from President Ronald Reagan was read.

Today, the West Point Jewish Chapel is a thriving place for USMA's more than 100 Jewish cadets, the Jewish faculty and staff, and the West Point Jewish community. "Few locations at West Point reflect better the deep cultural and religious diversity and history of our Academy than the West Point Jewish Chapel" recalls Lieutenant General Dan Christman '65, the 55th USMA Superintendent. The assignment of an



Plaques in the main hallway of the Jewish Chapel display the names of the more than 1,000 USMA Jewish graduates, beginning with the first Jewish graduate in 1802.

active-duty Army Jewish chaplain since 1983 demonstrates the importance of holding Jewish services at West Point as well as Army installations. While some of the Jewish Chapel's activities are funded by donations to the West Point Association of Graduates, as well as by government funds, the WPJCF remains dedicated to maintaining the chapel through the fund's endowment and through continuing donations from Jewish graduates, the American Jewish community, and others. For example, the WPJCF provides funding for Kosher meals following Friday night services and holidays, choir trips to various synagogues in the U.S., kosher meals at weekly Torah studies and displays recognizing Jewish cadets and Jewish graduates.

As stated by several past presidents of the United States, the chapel should also be a museum to recognize contributions of Jews in the military as well as Jewish graduates of West Point. To this end, the WPJCF has installed a Wall of Honor in the chapel to commemorate those Jewish graduates who died in a war zone, who received a valor award, or who rose to the rank of general officer. There is also a Medal of Honor display recognizing the 18 Jewish Medal of Honor recipients, including Colonel Jack Jacobs (Retired), the only living Jewish Medal of Honor recipient and a former Department of Social Sciences instructor and current adjunct faculty member. Finally, the chapel displays a cadet award and biography to honor Colonel Mickey Marcus (Retired), Class of 1924, for his military service and significant role in the Israeli War of Independence.

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For information on WPJCF, go to westpointjewishchapel.org.



The Jewish Chapel Choir sings at weekly Shabbat services and makes several trips to Jewish synagogues each year.