

**THE MAKING OF A
JEWISH SERGEANT:**

**KEEPING
THE FAITH
IN IRAQ**

BY BAYLA SHEVA BRENNER

Adam Campbell readily admits: “I’m not your average Jewish guy.”

At twenty-two, Campbell served in the United States Army’s Special Operations Unit in Afghanistan as a force multiplier, a squad leader, a sniper and a demolition expert. Subsequently, he was sent to Iraq, where while on a mission, he was hit by two improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in less than three minutes and suffered traumatic spinal injuries that left him a paraplegic for six and a half months. Twenty-seven spinal taps, seventeen brain drainages and thirty-six medals (including two Purple Hearts) later, Campbell is grateful to be alive, and he lets God know it—three times a day.

Although born and raised in the Coventry Square section of Lakewood, New Jersey, a short distance from America’s largest concentration of Torah learning, Campbell had limited exposure to observant Judaism. Yet he felt an insistent tug toward *Yiddishkeit*, a feeling that would stick with him.

Campbell got involved in NCSY (National Conference of Synagogue Youth), the OU’s youth group, as a sixth grader at Shalom Torah Academy, a day school in East Windsor, New Jersey. “A rabbi came in and started talking to some of the kids,” recalls Campbell. “He was handing out candy. I was interested.” Campbell asked a friend what was going on; she told him about NCSY and “got him connected.” Campbell received scholarships so that he could participate in regional events. “It got me out of a pretty bad neighborhood into a good Jewish environment,” he says.

Coming from the other side of the Lakewood tracks, Campbell wasn’t sure he would fit in. “I thought I was the outcast,” says Campbell. “But in the end, I was just like everyone else. I went

to every NCSY event I could get to, including the national Yarchei Kallah each year. They made me feel like I belonged.”

Rabbi David (“Rabbi Dave”) Felsenthal, then-New Jersey NCSY’s director of recruitment (and currently director of NCSY alumni), recalls Campbell’s first *Shabbaton*. “He was so happy to be there, he was doing somersaults down the street from my house to the shul,” says Rabbi Dave.

In 1999, Campbell went on NCSY’s TJJ (The Jerusalem Journey), a co-ed trip to Israel geared for public school kids. “I saw tremendous leadership potential in Adam,” says Rabbi Steven Burg, currently the national director of NCSY, who ran the trip.

Early on, Campbell faced the kind of demanding challenges ordinarily posed to someone way beyond his years. Due to their mother’s health problems, he and his older brother, Bruce, went to work as young teenagers to pay the household bills. “We did any job we could find,” says Campbell. “The [jobs] ranged from construction to dry walling to roofing.” (Their parents were divorced.) While most boys his age had to bring home good grades, take out the garbage and keep out of trouble, Campbell had to juggle multiple jobs.

Campbell’s commitment to Judaism became more and more apparent with every phone call he spent learning with his NCSY advisor and with every inspiring NCSY event. “I loved being there,” says Campbell. “I loved the *rebbeim*. Whether at a *Shabbaton* or on the phone, they went above and beyond [being] a rabbi and friend, they helped me out when I was very down.”

Campbell started spending nearly every Shabbat with NCSY. “I loved the unity at NCSY, knowing that I’m sitting there with all these guys and girls and they had the same feelings toward Torah and God that I do,” he says. Campbell would take a city bus to the closest stop

to an NCSY event and walk the rest of the way, which at times was several miles.

While strengthening his spiritual connection through NCSY, Campbell cultivated his leadership abilities with the Army Junior Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (AJROTC). “I knew myself,” says Campbell. “I needed focus in my life. Major Snyder, the head of AJROTC at Lakewood High School, sees kids’ potentials and doesn’t let them forget it. He never let up. And that’s what I needed.” Apparently it worked. While maintaining his grades, he went from drill team commander to executive officer to commander by the end of his junior year.

His group conducted special flag-bearing ceremonies at the town hall and at municipal meetings. “Our group did military precision marching and did it well,” says Campbell. One problem: The performances took place on Friday afternoons. “I knew I would have to get to a *Shabbaton*,” says Campbell. “I’d sprint from the municipal building all the way back to Coventry. Juggling ROTC and NCSY took a lot out of me, but it was worth it.”

During Campbell’s senior year, Rabbi Dave presented him with a full scholarship to attend Ohr Somayach’s Derech Institute for Torah Studies in Jerusalem, which also included a stipend for living expenses. At the same time, the army offered him a sign-on bonus of thousands of dollars, plus a full scholarship to college when he returned to the States. “It was a very difficult decision for him,” says Yechiel Schaffer, a close friend of Campbell’s and Teen Torah Center coordinator at New Jersey NCSY. “In the end, he chose the army.”

Shortly after exchanging bitter-sweet goodbyes with NCSY friends and mentors, the war in Iraq broke out. Following the summer of 2003, Campbell entered basic combat training, in Fort Benning, Georgia, for a nine-week period that the army calls

“the journey from civilian to soldier.”

Although Campbell wasn't the lone Jew in his group, he definitely was the most conspicuous one. As soon as he got to basic training, he designated his religion on his dog tags and alerted the army chaplain that he would need kosher meals. He got up in the early hours of the morning to *daven*.

“Everybody else would be waking up, but I had already been up for an hour with my tefillin on,” Campbell says. “They would look at me wondering what was going on.”

After graduating from advanced training, Campbell flew to Germany, where he was appointed team leader over five soldiers. His group took part in weapons training sessions on base. He then moved on to a more advanced training course. His commander noted Campbell's outstanding shooting ability and sent him to sniper school. His honed marksmanship skills were soon put into use.

In January 2004, Campbell was sent to Afghanistan as squad leader in charge of fourteen soldiers. “Everybody joked around about what was going to happen the first time we got shot at,” he says. “You just don't know. You could crawl up into a ball; you could freeze; start crying. Me? I got *really* mad.”

One day, as his unit walked through the town alongside their Humvees, conducting an ordinary security check, foreign insurgents began firing at them from rooftops. “Thank God Afghanis are bad shots,” says Campbell. “I froze, looked at them and thought: ‘Oh no, you are *not* shooting at me.’ I walked [to] the middle of the street and took them out.” This brought him to the stark realization of where he was and what could happen. “[I acknowledged that] these were my occupational hazards, and I had to live with them.”

KEEPING JEWISH IDENTITY IN CHECK

Throughout his army service, Campbell held tight to his Jewish identity. “I always kept a hat on,” he says, “and wore my *tzitzit*. I was asked what

they were plenty of times.” He welcomed e-mails from one of his NCSY friends that informed him of online learning groups. “[Reading the *divrei Torah*] helped me connect to being a Jew,” he says. “When one is in those situations, in those kinds of conditions, one not only forgets that one is Jewish, he forgets he's human. I strove for anything that would remind me of [that] reality.” Schaffer and another longtime friend of Campbell's sent him a package of “the things he loved in high school,” including a CD of the Miami Boys Choir with his favorite Jewish song, “*Acheinu*,”* which, he told Schaffer, he would sing before going into battle. He maintained contact with Rabbi Dave and his other NCSY friends via e-mail and regular mail. “He wrote about how difficult it was to lead and how every decision had to be thought out,” says Schaffer. “The letters stopped when he was sent to Iraq.”

While stationed in the Iraqi town of Samarra, Campbell needed to find somewhere to go for the Sedarim on Pesach. He contacted the US army chaplain in Baghdad to explore the possibility of joining other Jews stationed in Iraq for Pesach. He requested the two days of *yom tov* off and got them, under one condition: If he intended to travel the very dangerous, nearly two-hour trip to Baghdad (77.5 miles south of Samarra), he would have to be accompanied by a minimum of three Humvees (holding between five and seven soldiers each). “I told the guys, this really means something to me,” says Campbell. “I really want to go, but I can't go without you.” He made it clear that it was not a mission and they didn't have to go. They all agreed to join him.

Campbell sold his *chametz* to the

soldiers in his group, helped the chaplain retell the Pesach story and refrained from eating leavened bread for the week. “It was very meaningful to sit down to a Seder in the middle of the desert,” he says. “We made the best with what we had. But it still wasn't home.”

He managed to observe the Yamim Noraim as well. “I did Rosh Hashanah on my own,” says Campbell. “I *davened* a lot and kept both days.” Campbell approached his commander about attending services for Yom Kippur in Baghdad. “My commander found out about a mission that needed to take place about twenty minutes outside of Baghdad and put me on the list to go. It was amazing, being able to take



A former squad leader in the US Army, Adam Campbell was temporarily paralyzed. It was his belief in God that helped him pull through. Above, Adam at a recent NCSY Motzei Shabbat carnival.

my time to thank God for everything I'd been through.”

WOUNDED IN ACTION

On June 11, 2004, Campbell's group received a mission to clear an area of the town so that the main force of the basic infantry could safely travel through. As his men took their positions, shots rang out. In the midst of a firefight, Campbell attempted to move his soldiers to better positions. En route, an insurgent manually pushed an IED

that exploded in the middle of the road, twenty-five feet from where Campbell stood. The explosion threw him twenty feet, slamming his head into a wall and dislocating his spinal column. When he fell to the ground, his spinal column snapped back into place, but his legs went numb. "I could move them through muscle memory," recalls Campbell. "But I couldn't feel anything. I got up and gave my guys their fields of fire. I told them where to point their weapons." He then moved quickly to his chosen position. Just then, from atop a towering mosque, an insurgent shot a rocket-propelled grenade that landed less than fifteen feet behind Campbell. It shattered two discs in his spinal column and sent shrapnel searing into the backs of his legs. "I thought: 'Game over; you got me,'" Campbell recalls. "I couldn't get up, couldn't feel or move any of my limbs. I don't remember a lot after that."

Campbell's men rushed him to the medevac. A chopper brought him to Baghdad until he was stable enough to be flown to a US military hospital in Landshtul, Germany. The traumatic injuries Campbell sustained caused a persistent buildup of spinal fluid in his system, requiring numerous spinal taps and cranial drainages. After five and a half months in Germany, he was transferred to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, DC, in November 2004.

"They brought me back from death twice," says Campbell. His doctors told him that he would never walk again. "I didn't want to [accept their prognosis] and was stubborn about it," he says. "I was determined to get better." His belief in God's omnipotence never wavered, and he continued to hope. One morning, six and a half months later, Campbell lifted his leg off the hospital bed.

"He always had an inner strength, which was apparent to anyone who knew him," says Howie Beigelman, deputy director of public policy at the OU's Institute for Public Affairs, who knows Campbell from NCSY. "I was

planning to be in DC while Adam was in Walter Reed. I asked him if I could visit, and he responded: 'I'm just warning you; I'm in a wheelchair.' I went to the hospital a week later and some guy with a baseball cap is walking into the lobby ahead of me. It was Adam, and he said: 'The doctors don't know how I'm walking.'"

COMING HOME

On December 8, 2005, Campbell returned to Lakewood, gratified that his squad had made it back home safely. As a wounded veteran, he got busy attending to the necessary paperwork that would eventually lead to VA benefits, including a monthly remuneration. For now, he's focusing on adjusting to civilian life, searching for purposeful employment and navigating the rest of his life, as he puts it, "one day at a time."

As much as Campbell has gained from NCSY, he continues to return that inspiration to his friends and mentors. Toward the end of his year-long stay at

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Walter Reed, Campbell knew that he wouldn't be able to make it to Connecticut for the 2004 New Jersey Winter Regional Convention and sent a moving letter in his stead, to be read aloud at the Motzei Shabbat *kumzits*. He was informed that the convention's theme would be the concept of time.

The following message from a sage NCSY alumnus was read to a roomful of rapt NCSYers:

... My name is Adam Campbell.... I am a Jewish American soldier.... I have seen death in the face. I am in a wheelchair with no feeling from my waist down, not permanent; we all have hope. I pray every morning, and I follow my reli-

gion to the best of my ability... The beginning of my NCSY days, it took close to a cattle prod to get me into davening and sessions.... If there's one thing I have learned, it is not to regret things but to learn from all my misunderstandings, all of my misguided thoughts and misunderstood actions. I thought I had all the time in the world ... I found out I was wrong. To work for your future ... [is] very important, but your heart and your neshamah, those should have [your] time, no matter what your appointment book says. If I was able to make the time, so can you. I did not do it alone ... some of the same people that are here tonight called me at 11:00 p.m. to learn for a half hour. I had a rabbi take his lunch break to talk with me and reassure me that life gets better ... every day is a chance; a chance for growth and a chance for life.

According to Schaffer, life has never been simple for Campbell. "He's had his fair share of challenges," Schaffer says. "A few years ago, when [Campbell] came back [to the US] because his father had passed away, he mentioned to Rabbi Dave that he would like to spend some time discovering himself, maybe learning in Israel. Now the army is giving him a full scholarship to college. Exactly where he'll end up, I don't know. [But], he's going to make it. When he puts his mind to something, he does it and does it well. I believe that's why he made such a good soldier and why he's such a good person. He comes through, whether it's possible or [seemingly] impossible."

**The words of the song are as follows: "Our brothers, the entire family of Israel, who are delivered into distress and captivity, whether they are on sea or dry land, may the Omnipresent One have mercy on them and remove them from distress to relief, from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom, now, speedily and soon, and let us say amen."* 

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