

## Sarai Kashnow:

# CONFESSIONS OF AN ARMY WIFE

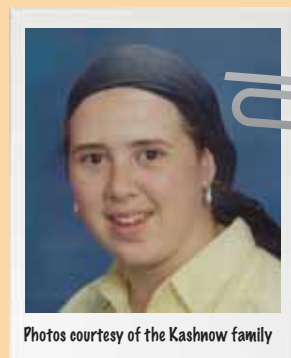
Writer Mindy Salazar speaks with Sarai Kashnow about the challenges of being a military spouse, the “toughest job in the military.”

Sergeant Joseph Kashnow and his wife, Sarai, both in their twenties, did not have a typical “shanah rishonah” (first year of marriage). Only three months after getting married in January 2003, Joe was deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Far from family and her new husband, Sarai lived near the Fort Carson Army base, one of the few Orthodox military wives in the US Army.

The Kashnows have faced many challenges, yet they are proud of being able to serve their country without compromising their religious devotion. (An estimated 4,000 Jewish soldiers serve in the US Army, which has nearly 500,000 active members. That’s 4,000 who identify as Jews; there are, of course, those who choose not to identify as such.) When I sit down to talk with Sarai in her cozy apartment, she lovingly flips through the scrapbooks she made of Joe’s time spent in the Army, from

basic training through his return from Iraq. The scrapbook is filled with photos of different Army bases, letters sent to each other, Joe’s order papers and newspaper articles about him and his injury.

On September 17, 2003, an explosion sent shrapnel through the floor of Joe’s Humvee, shattering his leg. Joe subsequently returned to the US and underwent a series of surgeries; unfortunately, he eventually lost his leg. Joe was awarded a Purple Heart for his heroism and, together with Sarai, established a special foundation to assist Jewish soldiers. The couple, who currently live in Baltimore, Maryland, have been blessed with a son.



Photos courtesy of the Kashnow family

### **Jewish Action:** How did you meet Joe?

**Sarai Kashnow:** I knew Joe’s parents before I met him. I was living in Baltimore and I got to know the Kashnows, who were members of the community. They used to invite for me for Shabbos. I had seen pictures of Joe

on the wall but I never expected to meet him. The Kashnows told me that Joe had signed up for the US Army and would be leaving for Kentucky for basic training. They asked me to write to him, and I said, “Great, I love the military; I’ll write letters to a soldier. Why not?” We sent three or four letters to each other. He came home and we decided to go out. After three weeks of dating, I knew I was going to marry him.

### **JA:** When did you and Joe marry?

**SK:** Joe was living at Fort Carson Army base in Colorado Springs, Colorado. We had been dating and I made plans to visit him at the base for ten days in December 2002. Shortly after my arrival, Joe proposed. Two weeks later, I returned to Colorado. We got married January 12, in a kosher restaurant in Denver, surrounded by family and friends. We lived in Colorado Springs,

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about a quarter of a mile from the base. [There is never enough housing on military bases, not even for single soldiers.] Joe got orders to leave for Iraq on January 19, a week after we got married. He left three months later.

**JA:** *It must have been difficult moving from the Orthodox world to a military environment.*

**SK:** I've always been spirited and adventurous.

Also, I didn't feel so "different." Nowadays the army is much more representative of the diversity of America. I don't think there's one group that's not represented. You get all kinds in the military—Muslims, Rastafarians . . . They are mostly there because of a sense of duty.

**JA:** *What did you think about Joe being in the Army?*

**SK:** I was actually very proud. I thought that joining the Army was a

very responsible thing to do. Most Jews don't take freedom seriously. They take for granted the freedom they have. They complain when it's lacking, but they do nothing about securing it. Everybody asks Joe, "Why did you join the American and not the Israeli Army? Israel is where your heart lies." But Joe is an American. He's a third-generation American on his father's side. His grandfather joined the US Army in World War II and his father volunteered to fight in Vietnam. His dream, ever since he was a young child, was to join the US military.

We were hoping to spend twenty or so years in the military. Had it not been for the accident, we would have. The military was a long-term interest of Joe's.



**Sergeant Joseph Kashnow at the end of basic training in 2002. The photo is signed by President George W. Bush.**

**JA:** *What was being married to a soldier like?*

**SK:** During the first two months of our marriage, Joe would get phone

calls at midnight telling him to pack up his bags and get ready to leave, only to be told later to unpack. Many times I thought, “Will you be here tomorrow?” For weeks, the Army kept telling the soldiers to “say goodbye to your wives; this is your last weekend home.” One weekend they happened not to say it, and ironically that was his last weekend home.

**JA: Can you describe the day he left?**

**SK:** Joe had been packing for weeks.



Joe and Sarai in Walter Reed Army Medical Center with President and Mrs. Laura Bush.

The Army would come up with packing lists and rules of what to pack and how much the luggage should weigh. And each week there would be a different packing list contradicting the previous one. At one point Joe just stopped packing. One Thursday morning they sent a final packing list. There was actually a flight number, so we knew that this was for real. They told us that we would be allowed to stay with our spouses for the first two hours, until the soldiers were issued their weapons.

Once a soldier is issued his weapon, it's *his* weapon. It's his gun, his rifle—he cannot lose it, he cannot trade it, and he is responsible for the bullets in it. If a soldier fires his buddy's gun and

accidentally kills someone, the owner of the gun is also held responsible.

I ended up staying with Joe until he boarded the bus. He was off to Iraq for the year.

**JA: How did you manage during the time that Joe was in Iraq?**

**SK:** The first few days were difficult since my family lived so far away [Toronto] and I didn't know the other military wives. But because I had been married for such a short time, it wasn't that hard. I felt as if I was single again. Some of the other wives who had been married for years or who had kids had it much harder.

Did I miss Joe?

Absolutely. But to spend my year worrying whether he was going to get hurt would have been meaningless. You have to live your life. You go shopping, you sleep and you eat. I was lucky. The Army was paying my rent so I was able to go back to school; almost all army wives work, because you can't stop your life because your husband is not there. You can pine away for him, but that's not going to accomplish anything. The bills have to get paid, the laundry has to get done.

**JA: How did you get kosher food?**

**SK:** Kosher food was a bit of a problem. The commissary on the base had a selection of kosher food, although it didn't have kosher meat or cheese. My father-in-law works in the kosher food industry in Baltimore, so he would send me kosher meat. Kosher cheese was incredibly expensive. I had to travel to Denver to get it. It's a two-and-a-half hour drive up north, so I'd make the trip once a month. Living on a base was like living in the middle of Oklahoma, or any other place with a weak Jewish community. You manage. You eat a lot of vegetarian foods. Meat becomes a Shabbos treat.

**JA: Living a frum life without the support a community must have been difficult.**

**SK:** It was strange, very strange. Things that I took for granted just weren't there. You take for granted that there's going to be Jewish activities on Purim. And that you're going to give *mishloach manos*. You take for granted all of the little things in life, like shul. You go to shul, you see your friends, you don't think about it. Or that you can go to your friend's house on Shabbos and share a piece of cake. You don't have to think, “Is it kosher?” “What did she bake it in?”

A wonderful couple lived about twenty minutes away from me; the husband was a captain in the Air Force. This couple and the Chabad rabbi and his wife were the only *frum* families nearby. I would spend every Shabbos with the captain and his family. Since I spent a lot of time alone on Shabbos, it became a time to study. I would read; I would *daven*; I would take a nap.

I went to the Chabad House for holiday programs, such as Megillah reading on Purim or candle lighting on Chanukah.

**JA: Were you able to relate to the other Army wives? How do you think they viewed you as an Orthodox Jewish woman?**

**SK:** I grew up in a very *frum* community in Toronto. So moving into a military environment and seeing all these secular military women was just a culture shock. Many of the women had a very different value system. I couldn't relate to them.

Some of the women were devout Christians; their moral system was more similar to mine so I had an easier time connecting to them.

I did make a few good friends. We'd go shopping, or to the park or hang out at my house.

Most of the Army wives had never been around Jews. The friends I made were very eager to learn about Judaism. In fact, when one of them was hosting a party, she actually went out and bought

“kosher” hot dogs. She didn’t realize they weren’t really kosher. But she made every effort and even bought a separate mini barbeque grill.

**JA:** *What was Joe’s position in the Army?*

**SK:** Joe was in a battalion of about 900 men. He was a cavalry scout, which means he was in a group that would plan where the front lines should be; they would find out where the enemy was hiding. Out of the entire battalion, there were only seven injuries and two fatalities.

**JA:** *How did you communicate with your husband when he was in Iraq?*

**SK:** Since Joe was in a scout battalion, he was always traveling. Mail personnel are civilian, so they aren’t allowed into a war zone. When the mail would get to the American post office in Kuwait, the mail person would have to find out where the battalion was at that particular time and leave the mail at the closest base. The soldiers in the battalion would occasionally return to the main base and get the mail there, but most of the time they were on the move.

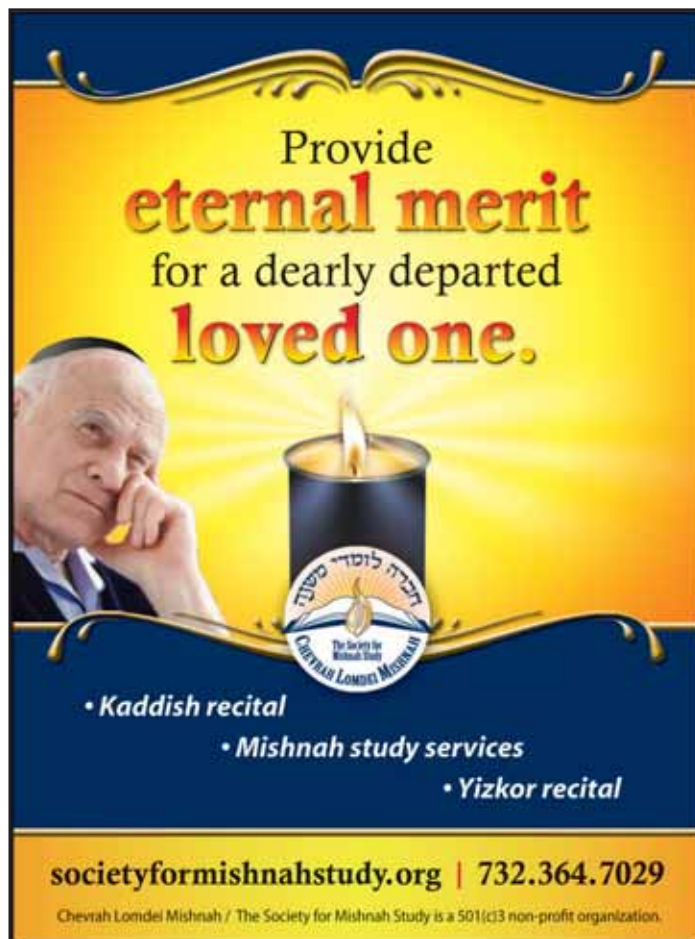
I wrote Joe a letter every day. I wanted to make sure he got at least one letter every time there was mail call. It got to the point where the soldiers in the battalion knew mail call hadn’t arrived because Joe hadn’t received a letter.

Once a month we were able to talk on the phone. Phone lines were constantly going down. Joe had to stand in line for twelve to fourteen hours at a time, waiting for the lines to be repaired, and then for a connection. If soldiers were called out on a mission while they were waiting to make a phone call, they would remember their place in line and resume standing when they returned.

**JA:** *What was your reaction when you heard Joe had been injured?*

**SK:** It was a beautiful day in September 2003. Joe called my cell phone while I was in class. I so was excited I started screaming. Joe said, “You’re going to see on the news that a soldier was hurt. I wanted to make sure to call you and tell you that he’s going to be fine; he’s going to come home. He had a few surgeries; he’s going to be fine. The doctors are quite sure he’s going to keep his leg. He’s going to go to a base in Germany, and will be coming home for Rosh Hashanah. Are you okay with all of this?”

“Why shouldn’t I be okay with it?” I asked. Then he said, “The soldier was me.” I was shocked, but thankfully, I knew that he was going to be all right. He was talking to me. He didn’t sound drugged, he was coherent, he didn’t sound like he had suffered any traumatic brain injury. His leg was a little hurt, I could live with that! It wasn’t until much later that I realized how *badly* his leg had been injured. I was so thankful that I heard about the injury from him [rather] than from a chaplain at my door, which is what usually happens.



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**JA:** *What happened after his injury?*

**SK:** Joe went from Iraq to Kuwait to Germany. From Germany, he was flown directly to Walter Reed Army Medical Center [in Washington, DC]. He spent six months at Walter Reed. In all, he had at least nineteen surgeries [some were performed overseas]. Eighteen months after his injury, he decided to have the leg amputated since the surgeries were unsuccessful and he couldn’t put any pressure on the leg or do anything for himself. Now he has a prosthetic leg and can get around on his own, but he still has a lot of pain.

**JA:** *Whom did you turn to for chizuk [strength] during the trying times when Joe was recuperating?*

**SK:** During the six months that Joe was in Walter Reed, my friends were my support system. I had a few close friends that I called a lot, and they would visit.

Also, the Bikur Cholim of Greater Washington did a fantastic job preparing and sending meals since we didn’t have access to a kosher kitchen or to kosher food.

**JA:** *Do you think being in the Army strengthened Joe’s faith?*

**SK:** Joe always wore his *kippah* under his helmet, and *tzitzis*. He refused to do things on Shabbos unless it was absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, when he first got there, the Army

lost his kosher MREs [meals ready to eat]; I had to ship kosher food to him. He ate the food I sent along with fresh fruits and vegetables. He learned how to make grape juice for Kiddush by soaking raisins in water and then squeezing out the juice.

**JA:** *How did being a military wife affect your faith?*

**SK:** Certain mitzvos became that much more important. Like shul. It's easy to go to shul when it's six blocks away. The closest shul to me was five miles away, so I couldn't go. There was no kosher supermarket near Fort Carson so I learned which *hechsherim* were acceptable. My *davening* changed. Some *tefillos* became more relevant, and I *davened* with much more *kavanah*, asking Hashem to keep my husband safe.

**JA:** *Tell me about the Jewish Soldier Foundation.*

**SK:** The Foundation was set up to help individual Jewish soldiers and families of Jewish soldiers, Orthodox and not. Most soldiers don't know their rights. For instance, they're allowed

to wear a *kippah*. There's an article in the United States Military Justice Code that states that a *kippah* is allowed to be worn. It actually says the word "*kippah*." You are also allowed time for prayer.

We provide information and send packages to soldiers.

**JA:** *What are your plans for the future?*

**SK:** Joe is taking an early retirement from the military and will receive a pension. We're hoping he'll be able to get a job with the federal government. Joe is still involved with the military; he's working with the Wounded Warrior Project, a non-profit organization that provides jobs and assistance to injured service men. It tries to help the wounded find productive things to do, such as getting a job or taking trips so they're not sitting at home wasting away. Joe still loves soldiers and loves the military. **JA**

*To find out more about the Jewish Soldier Foundation, visit [www.jewishsoldier.org](http://www.jewishsoldier.org).*

## Is There a Rabbi on the Base? The Life of a Jewish Army Chaplain

By Bayla Sheva Brenner

In 1967, at the height of the Vietnam War, Chaplain (Colonel) Sanford Dresin, having just received *semichah* from Yeshivas Chasam Sofer in Brooklyn, New York, became an Army chaplain. After serving two years on a United States Army base in Fort Meade, Maryland, he knew that if he remained on active duty, the next stop would be Vietnam. He chose active duty.

In Vietnam, the self-described "traveling rabbi" went from base to base, from Saigon to the Central Highlands, flying helicopters in and out

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*Photo courtesy of the Dresin family*

of hostile areas in order to offer Jewish soldiers moral support and *divrei chizuk*, words of inspiration. They eagerly welcomed his visits. "Some would actually risk driving down a road amid [enemy] fire to come to a class," says Rabbi Dresin. "One night, down in the Mekong Delta, in the middle of singing *Lechah Dodi* during Kabbalat Shabbat, we started getting rocketed. Everyone just continued singing. I told them this was a case of *pikuach nefesh* and we better head for the bunkers."

Rabbi Dresin, sixty-five, calls the chaplaincy a "ministry of presence." "Just by being there, you're helping," he explains. Rabbi Dresin reports that many of the soldiers he worked with