

### 'A spiritual call to duty'

**AS A STUDENT CHAPLAIN** with the New York City Fire Department, he counseled first responders in the wake of 9/11. Then he became the first chaplain of the Northbrook Fire Department. Now, Rabbi Aaron Melman will be deployed by the U.S. Army to Iraq as an official chaplain, to lead Chanukah services for the troops there.

Melman—Head Rabbi of Congregation Beth Shalom in Northbrook—was commissioned in 2021, and currently serves as the only Jewish Chaplain in the Illinois Army National Guard. He holds the rank of Captain.

Both serving as a pulpit rabbi and as a chaplain have always been central to Melman's rabbinical identity. "I went to rabbinical school to become a congregational rabbi, and I have been one for 20 years, and I love every minute of it," he said. "But serving in the Army was something I always thought I would do, and chaplaincy was always part of my rabbinical calling."

Melman's efforts on 9/11 only stoked his passion to serve. "As a student rabbi, I was able to provide a sense of comfort to the first responders," he said, in an article published by the Illinois National Guard in 2021. "That ability to comfort them pushed that piece of me that wanted to serve. It ultimately propelled me to this day."

Melman, a Toronto native, is often the first Jewish person the soldiers he works with have ever met. "It's a lot of responsibility, and I take that seriously. It's an opportunity for Jewish service, but I serve all soldiers."

In 2021, two decades after 9/11, Melman became an Illinois Army National Guard chaplain. And in November, he left to serve U.S. soldiers in Iraq. He said he's grateful to his family and congregation for supporting him on this journey.

"It's a wonderful opportunity," Melman said. "And then I get to bring the skills I develop back to my congregation. This is a spiritual call to duty." ★

Pictured: Rabbi (Capt.) Aaron Melman lighting a menorah during his presentation about Chanukah to his fellow Chaplain Basic Officer Leader Course students on the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School campus in Fort Jackson, S.C. in 2021. (Credit: Mel Slater)

**BY PAUL WIEDER** | *Associate Editor*

