

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front



Full Episode Transcript

Presented by

Hebrew College

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

Welcome to *Speaking Torah*. I'm your host Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Director of the Innovation Lab at Hebrew College. In this podcast, leaders from Jewish communities around the country read essays by Hebrew College Rabbis and leaders. These essays tackle the pressing issues of our world that's so in need to healing and hope, and they do so with Hebrew College's signature compassion, creativity, and relevancy.

In this week's episode of *Speaking Torah*, we continue sharing stories from the College's Centennial volume. But these stories come in the form of remarkable letters from soldiers who were Hebrew College students serving on the front during World War Two.

They were sent from London, from Germany, from the Fiji Islands to the Hebrew College Registrar, Jeanette. The letters are read by Susan Shevitz, Associate Professor Emerita at Brandeis University. Susan's research and teaching focuses on organizational culture and change, leadership in nonprofit organizations, and pluralism in Jewish life. She holds Undergraduate Degrees from the Jewish Theological Seminary and Columbia University, a Doctorate from Harvard University, and serves on the Hebrew College Board of Trustees.

These moving letters were uncovered by Hebrew College Dean and Chief Academic Officer, Rabbi Dan Judson, who found them while writing a chapter on the College's history for Hiddushim. Dan, tell us the story of these letters.

Rabbi Dan Sullivan: The letters that you're going to hear excerpts from are letters that were found in the Hebrew College archives. They're letters written from soldiers stationed all over the world to the Hebrew College Registrar. The Hebrew College Registrar would then collect the letters and was printing a newsletter, which was in turn sent out to all of these soldiers.

So, the soldiers were, in this way, enabled to catch up with old friends. They would report seeing other Hebrew College soldiers in London or in Europe and various places.

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

Hebrew College itself really had a great degree of pride in their soldiers. In various places, they said, “Their children who were fighting in the war.” And there was a lot of respect and homage paid to them. Every newsletter would include some snippets of the time or include some snippets of what folks were up to.

So, these are letter sent – all men. It’s all soldiers who were fighting. Not all of them are in the theatre of combat. Some are in America. But some are in the theatre of combat. And as you’ll hear, they’re writing back to the Registrar for Hebrew College, who was writing and keeping in touch with soldiers all over the world.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Now, here’s Susan Shevitz reading a selection of these letters.

Susan Shevitz: The Fiji Islands, May 15th, 1944: Dear Jeanette, Shalom. Today, I experienced a double surprise, and an even welcome letter from you and the issue of the Hebrew Teachers College publication. You know, Jeanette, it’s going to be kind of tough to express the sincere feelings which I experienced when I just read that paper.

There are many organizations and groups which send me their publications which are dedicated to soldiers, but none of them reach the category which I place yours in. I only wish that I could be capable of writing to each and every person who participated in this highly successful project to tell him or her individually how much I appreciate their issue.

All I can say is that I shall always look forward to these papers as a precious gift and pray that you will never neglect sending me them. They will never come too often so far as I am concerned.

I must admit that the reason why I was so pleasantly influenced by the paper is purely from personal causes. It was very grand of you to include me and my work in the paper – it is swell to know that everyone still thinks of me.

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

Maybe my ego was flattered, but my opinions are still as sincere. I believe that the format of the paper is as it should be. I want to send my sincerest regards to everyone at the College, faculty and students, and claim that when we all reunite and have our reunion affair, no one needs fear how successful it will turn out.

In answer to the questions you brought up concerning the Seder, we did have a fellow, recite the 4 questions in three languages. The excerpts from the Haggadah which we need were chosen so that they could relate the answers to the questions in brief. They were read as chanted in Hebrew and then always reread in English, by different persons. It was a very mixed group.

My religious activities continue to keep me pleasantly occupied. It is the sole source for my Jewish contacts and I surely take advantage of it. I do derive so much pleasure from organization work of any type. A recent project of mine has been to arrange with Shapiro's Book Store to send the boys who request them – and many do – some golden Mogen Davids which they can attach to their Dog Tag chains.

The fellows pay for them as they arrive. I have some idea of suggesting to the Jewish War Veterans, who always seems so willing to help, to back this project financially. The boys do crave all types of religious items, be it tokens or anything else.

I had another instance of this same thing recently, also my first test as a religious lay leader. A fellow who had just received notification of his mother's death came to the office looking for some religious consolation.

There was nothing in the way of verbal sympathy we could adequately express, for he had already witnessed much death during his army period. What he wanted was some religious method of expressing his sentiments.

What we did might appear superfluous, but they were utilized to serve this end. Firstly, at the following large service, we arranged for the memorial prayer to be chanted. We organized as many daily services as we could. I

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

showed him the portions he should read as often as he could, and we had a memorial, a Yahrzeit candle lit in his mother's honor.

Thank you once more, and I ask you to convey my sincere regards to your mother and my dear friends at H.T.C. I always think of them. Sincerely,
Lammie.

--

Ft Belvoir, VA, 25th August, 1944: Dear Jeannette, For seven weeks already I am no longer at my old address in the field training center. I am at the Engineer School, Communications Section, taking a 3-month course in signal communication. This is the first signal communication school for radio operators, communication chiefs in the corps of Engineers. Consequently, the school is brand new and the equipment is of the latest on the whole, I like it here pretty well.

I doubt very much whether I can be home for the holidays. I think what most Jewish fellows mean when they say they are lonesome is that they sorely miss the religious or semi-religious atmosphere in which they used to move. Perhaps when we come back, we will make up for our lack by increased participation in real Zionist work and by assuming a larger share in the revitalizing of dormant Jewish culture. With best regards, Harvey Schrier.

--

19th Fighter Squadron c/o SF, CA, December 6th, 1944: Dear Jeannette, I am deeply proud and honored that so many of my dear friends at the Hebrew Teachers College have enjoyed my humble letters to you.

I am grateful that you are kind enough to pass them on, for I am thinking of them all constantly and am happy to know that they hear from me, as indirect a means as it is. My sole regret is that I can't write more interesting or worthy letters. I am further honored by your quoting me in your publication, but can't understand how I warrant such consideration.

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

No, I haven't received the fourth bulletin yet, but am anxiously awaiting it now that I know it's on its way. You people do a remarkably good job, and I for one want to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Our life around here has been uneventful of late. I have learnt the secret to happiness out here, though. That is work and being occupied for it gives little time for worry and introspective thinking. In addition to my radio work and squadron duties, I enjoy my active participation in religious activities, my studying – I am almost through with my correspondence Economics and Radio courses and ready for new ones. I write letters, read and work in my garden. All in all, I am happily busy.

On the Jewish front, we were kind of busy this month. We have resumed a morning Service. The Torah Reading is the specialty here and a new job for me. And we are preparing for Chanukah. Our monthly Oneg Shabbat promises to be a big success.

Our services are gaining popularity and attendance these days. We have reached a fairly good medium for our program, considering that we have no chaplain here.

The services are recited at half and half Hebrew and English with a good amount of congregational participation. I relate a few Talmudic or other folk tales and present a reading. Then after the service, there is an informal discussion, always successful, led by us or a guest chaplain or doctor. Our subject matter varies with the events of the day and the speaker's specialty. Occasionally, often enough, I conduct one on Zionism, Jewish literature, etc. Of course, our singing is as important as ever and very popular.

My fondest regards to my dean friends at Hebrew Teachers College. regards to your mother. Affectionately, Lammie.

--

London, Thursday December 22nd, 1944: Dear Jeanette, this evening I received your letter of November 20th. Honestly it was one of the nicest

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

letters anyone could ever conceivably hope to receive. By now you know that your fears about my personal safety have been unwarranted, unless London traffic, with fog and left-sided drive can be classified at military peril. For the moment anyway it is unwarranted. The way the German attack is shaping up we might have found ourselves in one of the many hot spots but for the decree of the fates.

The letter continues on Monday December 26th, 1944: You'll have to excuse the break in this letter. I began to write it sometimes around midnight Thursday and must confess that the landman proved stronger than my own desire. Friday found me out on pass, and Saturday night I left for the farm at which Eddie's staying. I just returned about an hour ago.

The Hachshara group, on Kibbutz Habibim in Kent, is one of 10 in all England. At present 30 chaverim are living there. About half of that number works on the farm and the remainder bring in outside financial assistance by working on various farms as decided by Government agencies.

This particular weekend, the Kibbutz had close to 20 members of London groups as guests while many of the Kibbutzniks themselves were away. So, what I saw of the life and spirit can't be classified as a true cross-sectional standard. But one can detect a keeping of chavershaft, of friendship, hope, and cooperation such as can rarely be found elsewhere.

As compared to our farm – or even the cottages at Gloucester – conditions are almost primitive in some respects. There is no electricity. Very few of the rooms have stoves or fireplaces and the furnishings are rough. The library isn't bad but it doesn't seem to have been kept up to date. Still, with the war, and with conditions as they are, a 1000 pounds debt has been all but erased during the last 5 years. They deserve a lot of credit for the wonderful work they've been doing and continue to do.

Eddie's the same old Eddie. He's doing a tremendous amount of work, such as caring for the horses, working in the fields, organizing Hebrew classes, and spearheading all the singing and dancing. I felt completely at

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

home. I don't mind the affectionate terms in the least. In fact, I'm secretly pleased and flattered. Regards to all. Love, Saul Cohen

--

January 14th, 1945: Dear Jeanette, at last I have found time in which to drop you folks a few lines and, believe me, have started many a letter but was unable to complete them. My faithful buddy, Eddy Kane has mentioned your desire to hear from me. So, alas your wish is being fulfilled.

Since I last saw you, way back in early September, many interesting and exciting events have taken place in my life as a Marine. After a month's additional training on the East Coast, I was shipped cross country to the West Coast.

From then on, there was little doubt in my mind of the task, which I had to do week after week. Nothing but the rolling, spacious, blue Pacific, met my hungry eyes. Then there was a stop, but where? I'm helpless to say due to censorship. Again, we were on our way, and finally after 49 days of sailing, reached our destination.

As the ship pulled into the harbor, silence prevailed over all, for each and every one of us knew that, for some time, this here island will be our home. If you ever have heard of any Pacific Island, you always recall the beauty which they are known for.

This rock is covered with an abundance of tropical vegetation, and also has many lofty hills. It is inhabited by English speaking natives, who are quite friendly. At one time, this place was held by the Japanese, but after a brief skirmish, they took to their heels.

I'm now attached to the third Marine Division which has quite a record. My home consists of a canvas tent and odd bits of furniture which we have made out of wooden boxes. There are five other fellows living with me in the tent. At night, light is obtained by means of a homemade candle, constructed from an empty tin can full of Kerosene with a piece of rope as a wick. Three of such lamps supply plenty of illumination.

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

The routine so far is two days of combat training, and the remainder of the week, devoted to helping the engineers construct bridges and to build roads. Wednesday and Saturday afternoon is off, and Sunday is free as usual.

Last Friday night I attended services, which are held regularly at the Division Chapel. The chaplain is a Navy Captain and is quite an interesting character. He has taken part in many campaigns and knows what the score is. Believe it or not we even had something like Challahs at the services. Also, the chaplain has plans for the Passover Seder, but God only knows if I'll be here by then.

Well that about winds up this letter for I'm running out of both words, and fuel for my lamp. Give my regards to Mr. Hurwich and the teachers, and especially Dr. Shevach. Shalom for the time being, and I'll be expecting an answer soon. Sincerely, Shalom, Sidney Harbletd

--

June 20th, 1945, a few weeks after Germany had surrendered: Hello Jennie, this letter from me probably arrives as a surprise to you after a half a year of no word from me.

It's not because I didn't want to write. But somehow while I was in England, Germany, and now France, I didn't find the time or opportunity to write to close friends, let alone old acquaintances or organizations and institutions.

I missed the Hebrew Teachers College Bulletin very much, and the first 4 months of my stay in Europe I wonder how come I wasn't sent a copy.

I left Boston harbor December 2 and reached Southampton England, 11 days later. I had been seasick only one bad day. But the trip was not too pleasant because of only two poor meals a day, crowded sleeping quarters, lack of fresh or hot water showers et cetera.

Entertainment consisted of one movie every other day, a band jam session daily, and boxing matches. Recreation was found in much reading, card

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

playing, checkers, chess, and writing letters. The PX on the ship sold boxes of candy bars, cookies, fruit juice, peanuts, et cetera for between-meal consumption.

Our first camp in England was the worst we've ever been in. The small huts were cold and dreary. We had wooden double beds and the freezing weather didn't help any to brighten the picture. Three passes, one to Bath, one to Bristol, and two days in big, fun-filled London picked up my morale considerably.

I met Saul Cohen in London and another Habonim member, Mel Serfer. It was a grand reunion enjoyed by all. They were very lucky to be stationed in London where you could go to a different stage play, movie, musical, or concert every night and still not cover them all.

When we moved to near Oxford and Reading, we were in a swell camp in a swell location. I began to go to dances regularly and in Oxford I saw several good stage plays and, of course, I toured the University grounds with Mel, before we all left in April for Germany.

Life in Germany was very busy for me. My postal duties took up all my daylight hours so I could write only to my family. I was tired every night and wondered how long I'd remain in the devastated, desolate, Deutschland. The army took pity on me, though, and now I'm in sunny Southern France in a sort of vacation camp.

I still get the boys their mail but others do nothing but lie on their cots, play ball, go swimming, write letters, read, et cetera. There are U.S.O shows here daily and disappointing attempts at showing smooth working movies every night. Bobby Breen and Mickey Rooney were here this week. How long I'll be here I don't know, but life is grand.

That's about it, Jennie, I hope this letter reaches you before school lets out. Please give my regards to all my friends and professors and congratulate the prize winners for me. Write if you wish when you can. Sincerely, Eddie.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: What do you think about these letters?

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

Susan Shevitz: Several points really emerged for me. And the first – and it's most relevant to Hebrew College and Hebrew Teachers College before it – is the power of the connections that were forged at the college.

And if we remember that this was a time before most Jewish kids were going away for college, and these kids had gone to what they used to call The Maximalist programs. They went to religious school, Hebrew school, whatever else they called it for 10 or 12 hours a week.

And most of them went then to Vavneh, Camp Yavneh. And Camp Yavneh, if you read the material from its very origins and why it was founded, was to provide summer school. So, they were getting this intensive Jewish education. But even in that kind of environment, it's the chevre, it's the friends.

And the obvious, through several of these letters, the Zionist message, which was part of the basis of Hebrew College, the Zionist Hebraic orientation. And coming through, when we hear about people there in England, finding a group Kibbutzniks already who were raising up more generations of Kibbutznik and connecting to them on their day off, it's mind-boggling. It's the shrinking of the Jewish community in so far as they're all over the world fighting, and yet, there they are in England doing this.

And I think that's been the power of good education all along. And Hebrew College really is a prime example, it excelled at that. It actually surprised me – though I do understand it – that there's little reflection about the type of danger they were in and the world. You could barely tell from these letters that anything was really going on.

And I could understand that, that you write to divert yourself from these other issues. But it leaves me wondering how these guys were processing it all, what it felt like, and what it was like. I'm not criticizing them. I understand it. But I'm just so curious about that other part. I wish we could go in now and interview them.

When I would say to people in general, "I have a son who's in the military," they always ask me if he's a Chayal Boded, if he's an American who's gone

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

over without family in Israel to be in the Israeli Army. That is the assumption.

We come from an engaged Jewish family, and I say, “No, he actually is in the American Army.” And it’s always like, “Really?” Now, it was a very, very smart and good choice for this son. And I wonder how many other Jewish kids are hidden away. In the minyan belong to, we added a phrase in the prayer for America that we say, just as we say the prayer of the State of Israel, “All those who are put in danger to maintain the safety and integrity of this country, may they all come home, *b’shlemut* whole in their *nefesh*, in their soul, and *baguf* and in their bodies.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Dan, what was your reaction when you found these letters?

Rabbi Dan Judson: I love these letters. They were sitting in plain sight in our archives. I had been working in our archives, trying to write this history of Hebrew College, and they were in a box there, a cache of letters that as soon as I’d read the first one, I knew that there was something special about these letters and was delighted to discover that there was a whole series of letters that had been kept.

The previous generations of archive owners had not indicated in any way that these were special, so they were literally just lying at the bottom of a box waiting to be discovered and ready by future generations. And I was lucky enough to find them.

One of the things I love about these letters is that they are a particular vantage point on the lives of Jewish soldiers during the war. The letters don’t deal with battles. They don’t deal with troop movements. They don’t deal actually at all with the experience of war itself.

But there’s a particular way in which you get a real sense of what it means to be – a little insight into Jewish life, what it meant to be a Jewish soldier during World War Two because they’re writing to Hebrew College, their home in Boston.

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

These are people – now in Hebrew College, our high school students spend a few hours a week here. But during the World War Two era, previously, these are people who might have been at Hebrew College for 15, 20 hours a week, coming four days a week, three to five hours a day. So, these are people who spent extensive time in Hebrew College. And it really was their kind of home away from home.

And so, when they were writing to Hebrew College, what's clear is they wanted to connect. They wanted to check in with old friends. And the expressions of gratitude for being connected to Hebrew College is just amazing.

So, we've got letters all over the world, from both the Pacific theatre as well folks stationed in Europe, as well as folks stationed around America in various army bases. And one of the things about it being Hebrew College letters, I think, is that they're writing back to Jeanette and they're reflecting explicitly on their Jewish identity. And that's what makes these letters more than anything, I think, a unique slice of Jewish life.

You hear about services. You hear about Talmud study. You hear about people who, because of their Hebrew College background, enable them to act as chaplains and their experience of helping other people grieve and make their way through the world.

There's a brief excerpt of somebody who's buying Magen Davids from a store in Boston and selling them to his fellow Jewish soldiers. You hear all these little snippets about what Jewish life is like in this very particular way, which makes the letters really an outstanding addition to addition to we have about the Jewish experience during World War Two, the American-Jewish experience.

I have my own connection to letters from soldiers home. I am the child of a World War Two veteran. My father served in an army tank division and fought his way across Europe. And he passed away when I was a young teenager. And after he died, I found a bunch of letters he'd written when he was in Berlin after the war was over.

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

And when I was a child around the dinner table, he would tell sometimes war stories about his experience in battle. Now, as a child, you just take it all in as this interesting thing. But now, when I think about it, I'm just kind of shook with the bravery actually of what it meant to be sort of trapped behind enemy lines as a Jewish soldier in World War Two.

It's sort of unbelievable. But after he passed away, I found a particular letter that he had written to his parents that had nothing to do with battles or anything like this. He was asking his father for money because he – my father – was dealing in – there was a huge black market for goods after the war in Berlin. And my father was looking for more money to buy some more goods that he was then turning around.

So, that may be an odd thing to really enjoy, but it was a very particular moment and a very particular insight into this history of what Berlin was after the war. And my father was a kind of mover and shaker businesswise and a kind of “handler.” He liked to give and sell.

And so, to have this little insight of him as a 21-year-old soldier and after the war in Berlin, it was so remarkable to find these letters for myself after he'd passed away and him writing home to his father just gave me this insight into who he was as a young man that I otherwise wouldn't have had.

So, to discover this cache of letters from Hebrew College with a kind of similar story, not about the war, not about the battles, but about what it was like for them to lead a Torah service in the Philippines, or what it was like to talk to somebody whose mother had passed away. Or we have a letter from somebody who writes into Hebrew College saying they want to recommit their lives to Judaism in a deep way after the war.

To get these kinds of really personal and particular experiences was also a tremendous part of this project.

Rabbi Jeffrey Summit: Thank you for joining us for this episode of *Speaking Torah*. We want to thank Emily Hoadley for our logo, and Hebrew College Rabbinical student and composer Jackson Mercer for our theme music *Esa Einai*. To learn more about Hebrew College, please visit

Ep #12: Hiddushim: Letters From the Front

hebrewcollege.edu/podcast. And remember to subscribe, like, and rate *Speaking Torah* on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

We'll leave you this week with L'Cha Ki L'Cha, performed by members of Hebrew College's Kol Arev Chamber Choir, Cantor Rachel Slusky and Wendy Linden. I'm your host Rabbi Jeffrey Summit. See you next time on *Speaking Torah*.