

Attitude Towards What We Believe In

I recently came across an interesting article about a secular ceremony that is performed regularly in Washington, D.C. by the military honor guard that I would like to share with the readers. Although it is from a secular source and practice, I feel that it imparts a powerful and compelling lesson to us concerning our attitude towards mitzvos. The following are the criteria which the honor guard that salutes the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier must follow. In his walk across the tomb, the guard takes exactly twenty-one steps, which allude to the twenty-one gun salute which is the highest honor given any military or foreign dignitary. He then makes an about-face, hesitating for exactly twenty-one seconds before commencing his return walk. His gloves are moistened to prevent him from losing his grip on his rifle, which he carries on his shoulder. After his march across the path, he executes an about-face and transfers the rifle to the outside shoulder.

The guards are changed every thirty minutes, twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. For a person to apply for guard duty at the tomb, he must be between 5'10" and 6'2" tall, and his waist size may not exceed 30". He must commit two years of his life to guard the tomb and live in a barracks beneath the tomb. He may not drink any alcohol on or off-duty for the rest of his life. He may not publicly use foul language of any sort for the rest of his life and he may not disgrace the uniform he wears or the tomb that he guards in any way. After two years, the guard is given a wreath pin that is worn on his lapel, signifying that he has served as a guard. Presently, only 400 pins are worn. The guard must adhere to these rules or forfeit the pin.

The shoes he wears are made with thick soles to protect his feet from heat or cold. There are metal heel plates that extend to the top of the shoe, so that a loud click may be heard as he comes to a halt. His uniform may not have any wrinkles, folds or lint on it. Indeed, guards dress for duty in front of a full-length mirror.

During his first six months of duty, he may neither talk to anyone nor watch television. All of his off-duty time is spent studying the 175 notable people that are interred in Arlington National Cemetery. He must memorize who they are and where each one is buried. Every guard spends five hours each day preparing his uniform for guard duty.

An added vignette: In 2003, as Hurricane Isabelle was approaching Washington, D.C., the United States Congress and Senate took two days off in anticipation of the storm. Due to the apparent danger, the military members assigned the duty of guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier were given permission to suspend their assignment. They respectfully declined the offer, declaring, "No way, sir!" Soaked to the skin, marching in the pelting rain of a tropical storm, they asserted that guarding the Tomb was not simply an assignment, it was the highest honor that can be afforded to a serviceman. The Tomb has been patrolled continuously for the last seventy-six years.

The lesson for us is simple. If secular soldiers guarding a national shrine understand the significance of their role to the point that they consider their endeavor not to be an assignment, but rather, an honor and a privilege, what should be the attitude of a Jew who is given the opportunity and the mandate to serve the Almighty? Zeh Keli v'anveihu. "I will glorify Him." This is my honor and my privilege. That should be the prevalent attitude.