

Rabbi's life spent easing pain of police, firefighters

'I am more forthcoming in dealing with death'

By Jenny Diamond

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Everything Rabbi Aaron Gottesman has done in his life has prepared him for this.

For most of his life, the veteran chaplain for the San Diego police and fire departments has moved among the suffering. He has comforted them and their families, responded to their spiritual needs, memorized their last words and blessed their bodies.

Now it's time for others to care for Gottesman.

The chaplain is in ill health, fighting complications from diabetes. Both legs have been amputated above the knee. He can no longer console those at homicide scenes or fatal fires, though he still leads prayers at ceremonies and visits hospitals in his wheelchair.



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Police and firefighters will honor Gottesman tomorrow for his three decades of service. At a dinner sponsored by the San Diego Fire Department, the chaplain will be surrounded by the people to whom he has dedicated his life.

"He's an icon of the Fire Department," said Deputy Fire Chief Perry Peake, who worked with Gottesman on a rescue team. "I would classify him like a cop or a firefighter, someone who spends his entire life helping people."

Gottesman, 61, has responded to some of San Diego's worst disasters, ministering at the scene of the 1978 Pacific Southwest Airlines crash in North Park that killed 144 people and the 1984 San Ysidro massacre, in which 21 people were slain at a McDonald's restaurant.

He blessed the San Diego-based Urban Search and Rescue Team before it left for the rubble of the World Trade Center.

The rabbi grew so accustomed to tragedy that people would ask whether he could laugh at death. No, Gottesman would say, he would often cry. But he always found a way to work through the pain.

"I am more forthcoming in dealing with death. I'm more loving, more accepting," he said. "If I'm touching death in so many aspects of my life, I have to be ready for it in my own life."

Gottesman's primary role as a chaplain has been to provide support for the firefighters and police officers who deal with death.

"Officers see human pain that most people only see in the movies," said Sheriff Bill Kolender, who has known Gottesman since 1968. "He's given of himself to give spiritual strength to others."

Gottesman has buried members of Peake's family, and the deputy fire chief and his young son have spent time visiting the chaplain.

"If a firefighter loses a child or a wife, Gottesman would be there supporting him," Peake said. "He's a rare individual."

For a moment, Peake fell silent, then added, "You know, I think it's hard for people that are used to caring for others to receive that same care."

The firefighters try anyway. After the rabbi lost his legs 21/2 years ago, a group of firefighters spent their weekends building ramps and making his house wheelchair-accessible. They drop by frequently to check on him.

Gottesman believes he inherited his affinity for these men and women from his father, an Orthodox rabbi and volunteer chaplain with the New York City police and fire departments.

In 1967, Gottesman was ordained an Orthodox rabbi and moved to San Diego to lead Congregation Beth Tefilah. A year later, he and Kolender founded the San Diego Police Department Chaplaincy Program, which today has more than a dozen volunteers.

In 1971, Gottesman left for Greenville, S.C., where he served as a chaplain for seven years. Not long after he returned to San Diego, a small plane collided with a PSA flight above North Park. At the time, it was one of the deadliest aviation disasters in U.S. history.

But it was the McDonald's massacre six years later that had the greatest impact on him. Many of the dead were children.

It was one of many times in his career that Gottesman felt helpless.

"It was the most horrible thing I had ever seen," he said. "There were bodies in every corner. I saw children in grandparents' arms, both lying dead. It broke my heart."

For many people, his words of consolation gained meaning only with time.

Adelina Hernandez, whose 11-year-old son was gunned down at the restaurant, said there are no words to console a mother who outlives her child.

"It takes time, so much time to accept a tragedy like this," she said.

Gottesman said that one of his most important roles as a chaplain has been conveying a person's dying words to the family.

"I tell the family that I had the honor of talking to your mom or dad, that I had the chance to know him or her," Gottesman said. "With these words you're conveying something very precious, something the family might not have heard before."

Gottesman no longer leads a synagogue, but is the executive director of the Jewish Counseling and Fellowship Center, where he has served San Diego's unaffiliated Jewish population since 1983. As chaplain, Gottesman said he keeps his prayers neutral.

"I don't care what religion someone is," he said in an interview at his Tierrasanta home. "If a person is sharing his humanness with me, I'm not going to ask if they are Jewish or Catholic or Protestant. I will bless them to the greatest ability of my soul."

Gottesman's face suddenly became serious. He heard the faint whine of a firetruck. His black Labrador retriever, Tovah, remained asleep at the foot of his wheelchair.

"Judith," he called to his daughter, "please get me my fire radio."

She brought him the portable scanner, which he held in his lap. Turning the dial, he listened to the scratch of the dispatcher's voice.

An infant had been burned. A rescue unit was on its way.

"The whole idea is being there for someone, even if you aren't required to be there," Gottesman said. "I'm there at the drop of a hat, although it's sometimes hard these days."

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