

Jacob Frankel: US Army's First Jewish Military Chaplain  
Appointed by President Lincoln, September 18, 1862

*Compiled from articles by Bethanne Kelly Patrick, Jennifer Brody and David B. Green:*

President Abraham Lincoln made several bold decisions that transformed Jews from outsiders to insiders in American society. One year after Congress stipulated that Army chaplains be Christians, Abraham Lincoln appointed the Army's first Jewish chaplain. This was, Bertram W. Korn writes in *American Jewry and the Civil War*, the first federal victory for American Jews.

Nicknamed the "sweet singer of Israel," Rabbi Jacob Frankel (1808-1887) was the popular rabbi and cantor of Philadelphia's Congregation Rodeph Shalom. A native of Bavaria, Frankel came from a musical family and was already an accomplished cantor when he acceded to the Philadelphia post.

In 1861, Congress ordered each regiment to secure a military chaplain, who "must be a regular ordained minister of a Christian denomination." Ohio congressman Clement Vallandigham argued in the House of Representatives that, "There is a large body of men in this country, and one growing continually, of the Hebrew faith ... whose adherents are as good citizens and as true patriots as any in the country." But his proposed changes were shot down by his colleagues, and the law went into effect on July 22, 1861.

Several days before President Lincoln signed the new chaplaincy law, the 65th Regiment of the 5th Pennsylvania Cavalry appointed a Jewish businessman from Philadelphia, Michael Allen, to be its chaplain. Allen, who was not an ordained rabbi, spent several months tending in a non-denominational manner to the spiritual needs of both Jewish and non-Jewish soldiers. In September 1861, however, when the news of Allen's commission reached the adjutant general's office, the liquor salesman from Philadelphia was forced to resign, citing "poor health."

The 65th Regiment, whose commander was named Max Friedman, did not back down. He soon appointed Rabbi Dr. Arnold Fischel, the minister of New York's Shearith Israel congregation, to replace Allen. There was no question as to Fischel's credentials, but the War Department turned down the request for his commission. Fischel and the Board of Delegates of American Israelites decided to appeal directly to Lincoln.

Rabbi Fischel showed up at the White House on the morning of December 11, 1861, and requested to meet the president. He was told that was not likely to happen, but he decided to take his chances, and joined the line of several hundred, waiting as long as 3 days, in the hope of exchanging a word with Lincoln. When Lincoln learned of Fischel's presence, he had him admitted immediately, receiving him, noted Fischel, with "marked courtesy." The rabbi came armed with letters of recommendation from several Republican politicians (Lincoln's party) and also petitions from a variety of communities

around the country, signed by both non-Jews and Jews, arguing that the existing law was unconstitutional and unfair.

When it became clear that Lincoln was sympathetic to this cause, Protestant groups protested loudly. One evangelical newspaper warned that a change in the law might lead to “Mormon debauchees, Chinese priests and Indian conjurors” requesting recognition as chaplains. But Congress was convinced of the rightness of Fischel’s argument. On July 17, 1862, it sent Lincoln an amendment to the law, stipulating that chaplains needed to be ordained only by “some religious denomination.”

Lincoln himself signed Rabbi Frankel’s commission on September 18, 1862. Frankel was assigned to a hospital in Philadelphia, in response to a request from the Board of Ministers of the Hebrew Congregations of that city. The request followed the deaths of two Jewish soldiers there, without their being afforded the attentions of clergy of their faith.

Over the course of the Civil War, some 7,000 Jews served with the Northern forces against the Confederates, whose chaplaincy law, by the way, required only that one be a “minister of religion.” The total Jewish population of the North and South at the time was approximately 250,000. Frankel continued to serve Rodeph Shalom (today the oldest active Ashkenazi synagogue in the United States) as a cantor while he served the military in the Army of the Potomac.