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Beth Shalom Rabbi Aaron Melman was a student chaplain with the FDNY on Sept. 11, 2001. By Sept. 12, he was at ground zero.



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Rabbi Aaron Melman wore these boots while ministering to firefighters at ground zero after the terrorist attacks in 2001. "When I am ready, I will bury the remains of those boots in a cemetery," he says.

'Looking back on that day, there's so many emotions'

BY DAVE OBERHELMAN
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One day, the rabbi will give them a fitting burial.

Aaron Melman has yet to reach

that point: to lay to rest the work boots he wore ministering to New York City firefighters at the devastated World Trade Center on Sept. 12, 2001.

"I haven't worn them since then,

mostly because they have the remains of human beings on them. So I've put them in a plastic bag, and when I am ready, I will bury the

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'We are honoring all tonight'

Northbrook American Legion pays tribute to final 13 troops killed in Afghanistan

BY DAVE OBERHELMAN
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Post Chaplain Tom Mahoney announced each of the 13 names, their rank and age.

Post Commander Jim Ossey, standing next to him, rang a brass bell after each individual was mentioned.

The others present in George W. Benjamin Post 791 of the American Legion stood at attention.

"We gather here tonight as military veterans to honor those 13 American heroes. They sacrificed their lives at the very end of the longest war in American history, 20 years," Mahoney said.

He noted nearly 2,500 United States service members have been killed in the war in Afghanistan and, surprisingly, more than 3,800 U.S. contractors.

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As each of the 13 names are read by Chaplain Tom Mahoney, center, Post Commander James Ossey, left, rings a bell during a memorial service Tuesday at the George W. Benjamin American Legion Post in Northbrook for U.S. service members killed Aug. 26 outside Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul Afghanistan.

remains of those boots in a cemetery," said Melman, now in his 18th year at Congregation Beth Shalom in Northbrook, the last six as head rabbi.

In September 2001, Aaron Melman was a 26-year-old student chaplain with the New York City Fire Department. He served under FDNY Chaplain Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, now the executive vice president of The New York Board of Rabbis.

Melman lived on the upper west side of Manhattan, 110th Street and Broadway. It was a great day to be alive in New York City the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

"Life was pretty normal. It was a gorgeous day in New York. I'll never forget how beautiful the weather was," he said.

It was the first thing he'll never forget about that day and its aftermath.

"Then the reports started to come in; you started to hear sirens constantly. No one really knew what was happening, and as the reports in the news said a plane had hit the towers, there still was the feeling that it was an accident.

"I don't know that anyone could fathom what was to unfold," he said.

Nearly 3,000 people died when al-Qaida terrorists piloted four planes into the World Trade Center's twin towers, the Pentagon, and into a Pennsylvania field, an attack thought to be directed at the United States Capitol but was thwarted by heroic passengers.

"Looking back on that day, there's so many emotions," Melman said. "It's nice to know the families of those who lost loved ones were able to move forward with their lives while maintaining the memories of their loved ones who died that day."

Yet the holes in those families and the ramifications of the attack, the security measures, the wars, have lingered well after the hours Melman, and the rest of us, "fixated on the TV" as details and horrid images came in.

For most of the day on Sept. 12, Melman joined Potasnik ministering to responders at ground zero.

"We made our way from group of firefighters to group of firefighters,



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Congregation Beth Shalom Rabbi Aaron Melman was a student chaplain for the FDNY in September 2001 and living on Manhattan's Upper West Side. "Life was pretty normal," he said, of how Sept. 11, 2001, started out. "It was a gorgeous day in New York. I'll never forget how beautiful the weather was."

Rabbi Aaron Melman, left, is sworn in to the Illinois National Guard by State Chaplain Col. Stephen Foster on March 17 in Springfield. He'll return to the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in October for two more months of training. His father served in the Army Reserve during the Vietnam War.



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checking in on them," said Melman, who still keeps in touch with Potasnik.

"At that moment they still were very much in rescue mode, and not recovery mode, so there was still a hope that they would find people alive who were buried."

He said he and Potasnik went to the responders as they took brief rests on the rubble of the collapsed buildings — "known as 'on top of the pile,'" Melman said — and in surrounding buildings that also were unsafe to enter.

"I think they were very much focused on the task at hand and wanting to get back to work as soon as they could to help rescue their brothers and civilians," Melman said.

"I would say we were ministering to them on a surface level, just checking in to make sure they were doing OK and if they needed anything from us."

Caked with dust and dirt, hours later Melman took the train home. His fellow New Yorkers had no doubt what he'd been up to.

"People were looking at me on the subway with the understanding of where I had been. A look of thanks, almost, I would say."

He returned to the site several times in the days that followed, and visited some of the fire stations near his Manhattan home.

Melman's experiences at ground zero locked in place a desire for greater service, which already had been inspired by family and friends.

His father, Neil, served in the United States Army Reserve during the Vietnam War. A cousin served in the Illinois National Guard. One of Melman's friends was a chaplain in the Massachusetts National Guard.

Melman serves as chaplain for the Northbrook Fire Department. And in Springfield on March 17, 2021, he was sworn in to the Illinois Army National Guard as a chaplain. He'll return to the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School in Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in October for two more months

9/11 memorial ceremonies

Glencoe

- 7:46 a.m. Saturday at the flagpole on Lincoln Avenue. The village and Am Shalom will recognize the heroes and victims of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. All are welcome; masks are required. villageofglencoe.org.

Glenview

- 9 a.m. Saturday in front of the village hall, 2500 E. Lake Ave. Village President Mike Jenny and Fire Chief Tony DeRose will speak, followed by a moment of silence and a solo by a singer from Glenbrook South. The public is invited. glenview.il.us.

Northbrook

- 7:45 a.m. Saturday at all three fire stations: Station 10, 650 Huehl Road; Station 11, 740 Dundee Road; and Station 12, 1840 Shermer Road. Fire and police department personnel will hold a remembrance at each station and a ceremonial wreath will be presented; people will be invited to speak if they wish. Northbrook Fire Chief Andy Carlson will be at Station 11 to deliver his comments. northbrook.il.us.

Northfield

- 8:30 a.m. Saturday at the Fire-Rescue Facility, 1800 Winnetka Road. Village Trustee Barnaby Dinges will speak briefly, followed by the tolling of the station bell to recognize when the World Trade Center's south tower fell and as a sign of honor and respect for the brave men and women who sacrificed their lives to save others. northfieldil.org.

of training.

With the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 disaster coming between the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Melman said he will include a memorial to that day in his Saturday service at Beth Shalom, around a theme of remembrance.

Some memories remain relevant.

"I think one of the things missing from our society today is the civility and kindness that was displayed after the terrorist act. I'm hoping that we can get back to that type of acceptance of one another one day soon. It brought us together, and we find ourselves more apart than ever today," Melman said.

Other memories should perhaps, like his work boots, remain locked away.

"I'm still, to this day, not sure how it has affected me," Melman said. "I don't think I will ever fully process what it is that I saw that day and what I did that day, because I don't think the human mind is still able to comprehend the magnitude of what happened."