



# Lesson: Does It Matter That These Medal of Honor Recipients Were Jewish?

**Grade Level:** 11-12

**Era:** 20th Century

**How to use this lesson:** This lesson is designed to hone students' critical thinking skills as well as their skill to evaluate information and present an argument interpersonally. It can be expanded into a larger writing assignment, essay, or presentation using the attached worksheets as a guided notetaking tool. If expanded, it may also be an opportunity to encourage and practice outside research skills.

**Background:** When it was created during the American Civil War, the Medal of Honor was the only medal in existence. However, since World War I, The Medal of Honor is considered America's highest award for military valor, to be presented to those who have performed an act of such conspicuous gallantry as to rise "above and beyond the call of duty." Because the Medal of Honor requires so much sacrifice, recipients are not referred to as "winners." Did it matter that these Medal of Honor recipients were Jewish?

**Ometz:** Most rabbis believe that the Jewish value of courage, or *ometz* in Hebrew, does not imply the absence of fear. Instead, courage is feeling afraid but doing the brave thing anyway. *Military/Army Value: Personal Courage.* "Face fear, danger or adversity."

**Kehilla:** One of the most prominent rabbis from ancient times, Rabbi Hillel gives the advice in Pirkei Avot 2:4 "Do not separate yourself from the community." Rabbi Hillel is also known for saying "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" which is often interpreted as a call for community. *Military/Army value: Loyalty.* "A loyal Soldier... stands up for fellow Soldiers."

## **Recommended Reading and Resources:**

Soldier's Creed and Army Values, available at [army.mil](http://army.mil)

"Is Courage a Jewish Value?" by Rabbi Yitzchak Blau, available at [TraditionOnline.org](http://TraditionOnline.org)

"Cultivating Jewish Courage" by Rabbi Marc Margolius, available at [MyJewishLearning.com](http://MyJewishLearning.com)

"The Importance of the Community (Kehilla) in Judaism" by Rabbi Jill Jacobs, available at [MyJewishLearning.com](http://MyJewishLearning.com)

*Jewish Medal of Honor Recipients* organized by West Point Jewish Chapel Fund, available from National Museum of American Jewish Military History book store.

"Hall of Heroes: American Jewish Recipients of the Medal of Honor" exhibit at the National Museum of American Jewish Military History, also available digitally at [nmajmh.org](http://nmajmh.org)  
Congressional Military of Honor Society, [cmohs.org](http://cmohs.org)

Interview with Tibor Rubin for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, available at [memory.loc.gov](http://memory.loc.gov)



### Lesson:

- Briefly discuss the meaning and history of the Medal of Honor, as well as the Jewish values *ometz* (courage) and *kehilla* (community). *Note that courage and community are also military values.*
- Distribute one information sheet and one worksheet to each student.
- Give students 10-15 minutes to fill out the worksheet for the Medal of Honor recipient on their information sheet.
- Place students in groups of 3-4, ensuring no two students in one group have the same information sheet.
- Give students 5-10 minutes each to talk to their group about their Medal of Honor recipient and whether or not it mattered that he is Jewish. Allow 15-25 minutes total for this part of group discussion.
- After all the information has been presented, have students compare the information from their peers. Allow 20-30 minutes for this part of group discussion. Have them ask themselves and each other some or all of the following questions:
  - How are these Medal of Honor recipients similar? How are they different?
  - Did hearing about other Jewish Medal of Honor recipients make you reconsider your position on whether or not it mattered that your recipient was Jewish? If so, how?
  - Do you agree with your peers' assessments about their recipients? Why or why not?
- Optional: have students present their findings and assessments (including outside research) to the class and/or compile them into an essay (recommended 250-500 words).

### Alternate Lesson:

- Briefly discuss the meaning and history of the Medal of Honor, as well as the Jewish values *ometz* (courage) and *kehilla* (community). Note that courage and community are also military values.
- Distribute two different information sheets and two worksheets to each student.
- Give students 15-20 minutes to fill out one worksheet for each Medal of Honor recipient on their information sheets.
- On a separate piece of paper (or the back of the worksheets), have students compare and contrast the two recipients on their sheets.
  - How are their experiences similar? How are they different?
  - How did being Jewish impact them differently?
- Optional: have students present their findings and assessments (including outside research) to the class and/or compile them into an essay (recommended 300-500 words).

**Note:** The question "Does it matter that this Medal of Honor recipient is Jewish?" is intentionally vague. Allow students to further interpret specifics, especially who it might have mattered to (e.g. the recipient himself, his superiors, the people who nominated him for the medal, etc.).

## Information Sheet: William Shemin



**Rank at time of Action:** Sergeant

**Service:** U.S. Army

**Conflict:** World War I

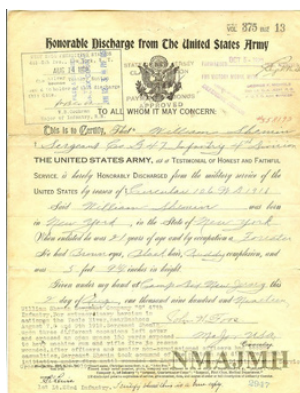
**Battle/Place of Action:** Vesle River, South East of Bazoches, France

**Date of Action:** August 7-9, 1918

**Date Medal Received:** June 2, 2015 (posthumous, died 1973)

**Citation:** Sergeant Shemin distinguished himself by acts of gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a Rifleman with G Company, 2d Battalion, 47th Infantry Regiment, 4th Division, American Expeditionary Forces, in connection with combat operations against an armed enemy on the Vesle River, near Bazoches, France from August 7 to August 9, 1918. Sergeant Shemin left cover and crossed open space, repeatedly exposing himself to heavy machine-gun and rifle fire, to rescue wounded. After Officers and Senior Noncommissioned Officers had become casualties, Sergeant Shemin took command of the platoon and displayed great initiative under fire until wounded on August 9. Sergeant Shemin's extraordinary heroism and selflessness, above and beyond the call of duty, are in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

**Background:** William Shemin was born to Russian-Jewish immigrants in 1899. As a teenager, Shemin played semi-professional baseball for the Bayonne Sea Lions and later became a forester in New York, New Jersey, and the Adirondacks. Shemin lied about his age and enlisted in the Army as a rifleman in 1917, before his 18th birthday. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for the above Act of Valor and honorably discharged. William Shemin's daughter, Elsie Shemin-Roth, remembers his friend, Jim Pritchard, saying "The only reason your dad wasn't awarded the Medal of Honor was because he was Jewish." After discovering a law that called for the review of cases of Jewish American soldiers being systematically overlooked for medals during World War II, Shemin-Roth campaigned for a parallel law for Jewish soldiers who fought in World War I. The William Shemin Jewish World War I Veterans Act was introduced in 2011. In 2015, President Obama awarded Shemin the Medal of Honor. Elsie Shemin-Roth and her sister, Ina Shemin-Bass accepted the award on his behalf.



Left: Honorable Discharge for William Shemin, Sergeant, Co. G, 47 Infantry, 4th Division. Includes typed citation for Distinguished Service Cross.  
NMAJMH Collection

Right: Photograph of 4 soldiers with two children sitting on steps. William Shemin seated in front row left.  
NMAJMH Collection



## Information Sheet: Sydney Gumpertz



**Rank at time of Action:** First Sergeant

**Service:** U.S. Army

**Conflict:** World War I

**Battle/Place of Action:** Bois-de-Forges, France

**Date of Action:** September 29, 1918

**Date Medal Received:** February 9, 1919

**Citation:** When the advancing line was held up by machinegun fire, 1st Sgt. Gumpertz left the platoon of which he was in command and started with 2 other soldiers through a heavy barrage toward the machinegun nest. His 2 companions soon became casualties from bursting shells, but 1st Sgt. Gumpertz continued on alone in the face of direct fire from the machinegun, jumped into the nest and silenced the gun, capturing 9 of the crew.

**Background:** Sydney Gumpertz was born October 29, 1879 in California, where his grandparents had settled after fleeing Germany during the 1848 revolution. He moved to Chicago and got married in 1915. Two years later, after the United States had been at war for months, Gumpertz heard a man in uniform speak and decided that he wanted to enlist. Unfortunately, doctors found a hernia and Gumpertz could not go until it was repaired. He was sworn into service while recovering in bed. Gumpertz was very proud to have received the Medal of Honor, writing to his family "You cannot realize what a wonderful thing it is to receive the Medal of Honor. No matter where you go you are a marked man and everyone is mighty proud to shake hands with you whether he is a General or a buck private." After the war, he and his family moved to New York, where in 1921 he was named commander of the Jewish Valor Legion, a group whose mission was to counter Henry Ford's narrative that American Jews were not patriotic. In 1934, he wrote *The Jewish Legion of Valor*, a compilation of stories of individual American Jewish soldiers since the Revolutionary War.



Mounted black and white photo of Sydney Gumpertz shaking hands with President John F. Kennedy outside of the White House. The mounting is signed "To my good friend Joseph Rosenberg - Capt. Sydney G. Gumpertz Medal of Honor."

*NMAJMH Collection*



## Information Sheet: Benjamin Kaufman



**Rank at time of Action:** First Sergeant

**Service:** U.S. Army

**Conflict:** World War I

**Battle/Place of Action:** Argonne Forest, France

**Date of Action:** October 4, 1918

**Date Medal Received:** April 8, 1919

**Citation:** First Sergeant Kaufman took out a patrol for the purpose of attacking an enemy machinegun which had checked the advance of his company. Before reaching the gun he became separated from his patrol and a machinegun bullet shattered his right arm. Without hesitation he advanced on the gun alone, throwing grenades with his left hand and charging with an empty pistol, taking one prisoner and scattering the crew, bringing the gun and prisoner back to the first-aid station.

**Background:** Benjamin Kaufman was born in Buffalo, New York on March 10, 1894 but spent much of his adolescence in Brooklyn. He played football, baseball, and basketball and had earned a reputation as a street fighter by the time he entered high school. He earned a scholarship to Syracuse University, but put his academic career on hold to enlist in the Army. He rose quickly through the ranks to First Sergeant as a result of his personality and ability. After the war, Kaufman returned to the United States and became the director of the New Jersey Employment Service. During World War II, he moved to Washington, D.C. and served as executive director of the Jewish War Veterans of the United States from 1945 to 1959 before retiring to Trenton, New Jersey.



Photograph of PNC Ben Kaufman (left) with VA Administrator Hines (center) and Civil War veteran and JWV member Daniel Harris (right).  
*NMAJMH Collection*



## Information Sheet: Isadore Jachman



**Rank at time of Action:** Staff Sergeant

**Service:** U.S. Army

**Conflict:** World War II

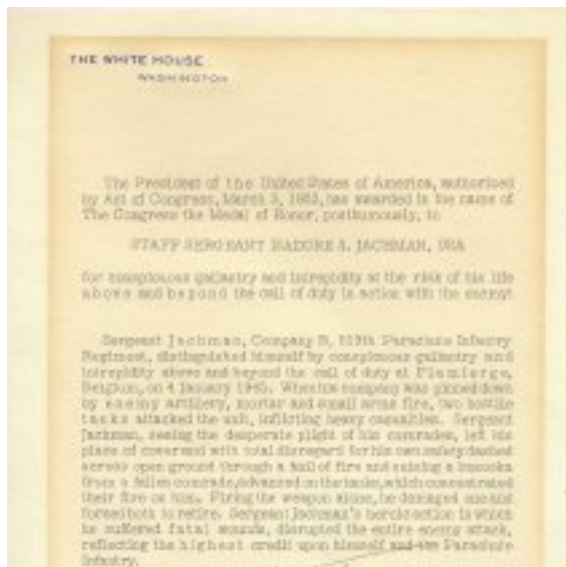
**Battle/Place of Action:** Flamierge, Belgium

**Date of Action:** January 4, 1945

**Date Medal Received:** June 1950 (posthumous, died in action)

**Citation:** On 4 January 1945, his company was pinned down by enemy artillery, mortar, and small arms fire, two hostile tanks attacked the unit, inflicting heavy casualties. Staff Sergeant Jachman, seeing the desperate plight of his comrades, left his place of cover and with total disregard for his own safety dashed across open ground through a hail of fire and seizing a bazooka from a fallen comrade advanced on the tanks, which concentrated their fire on him. Firing the weapon alone, he damaged one and forced both to retire. Staff Sergeant Jachman's heroic action, in which he suffered fatal wounds, disrupted the entire enemy attack, reflecting the highest credit upon himself and the parachute infantry.

**Background:** Isadore Jachman was born in Berlin, Germany and immigrated with his parents to Baltimore at the age of 2. In 1942, Jachman enlisted in the U.S. Military and was originally stationed in the United States as a calisthenics instructor, but volunteered as a paratrooper specifically to fight the Nazis in Germany. Records indicate that at least six members of Jachman's extended family were killed in the Holocaust. A statue of an "unknown" soldier was erected in Flamierge, Belgium, but Army records verified that the soldier was Jachman and the statue was updated to include his name.



Left: Medal of Honor Citation for Isadore Jachman

Center: Isadore Jachman's Medal of Honor

Right: Certificate of Medal of Honor for Isadore Jachman

NMAJMH Collection

## Information Sheet: Raymond Zussman



**Rank at time of Action:** Second Lieutenant

**Service:** U.S. Army

**Conflict:** World War II

**Battle/Place of Action:** Noroy le Bourg, France

**Date of Action:** September 12, 1944

**Date Medal Received:** May 24, 1945 (posthumous, died in action)

**Citation:** On 12 September 1944, Second Lieutenant Zussman was in command of two tanks operating with an infantry company in the attack on enemy forces occupying the town of Noroy le Bourg, France. At 7 p.m., his command tank bogged down. Throughout the ensuing action, armed only with a carbine, he reconnoitered alone on foot far in advance of his remaining tank and the infantry. Returning only from time to time to designate targets, he directed the action of the tank and turned over to the infantry the numerous German soldiers he had caused to surrender. He located a road block and directed his tanks to destroy it. Fully exposed to fire from enemy positions only 50 yards distant, he stood by his tank directing its fire. Three Germans were killed and eight surrendered. Again he walked before his tank, leading it against an enemy-held group of houses, machinegun and small arms fire kicking up dust at his feet. The tank fire broke the resistance and 20 enemy surrendered. Going forward again alone he passed an enemy-occupied house from which Germans fired on him and threw grenades in his path. After a brief fire fight, he signaled his tank to come up and fire on the house. Eleven German soldiers were killed and 15 surrendered. Going on alone, he disappeared around a street corner. The fire of his carbine could be heard and in a few minutes he reappeared driving 30 prisoners before him. Under Second Lieutenant Zussman's heroic and inspiring leadership, 18 enemy soldiers were killed and 92 captured.

**Background:** Raymond Zussman was the youngest of eight children of Lithuanian immigrants. He sang in his synagogue's choir and played basketball, tennis, and ran track in high school. When he enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1941, he believed the war would be over shortly. After being wounded during the Allies' invasion of North Africa in 1943, he was offered a headquarters position but opted to return to the front lines. Although Zussman survived his Act of Valor, he was killed in action nine days later.

Nathan Zussman, Raymond Zussman's father, holding poster with picture of Raymond Zussman used to sell war bonds.

*NMAJMH Collection*





## Information Sheet: Tibor Rubin



**Rank at time of Action:** Corporal

**Service:** U.S. Army

**Conflict:** Korean War

**Battle/Place of Action:** Republic of Korea

**Date of Action:** July 23, 1950-April 20, 1953

**Date Medal Received:** September 25, 2005

**Citation:** While his unit was retreating to the Pusan Perimeter, Corporal Rubin was assigned to stay behind to keep open the vital Taegu-Pusan Road link used by his withdrawing unit. During the ensuing battle, overwhelming numbers of North Korean troops assaulted a hill defended solely by Corporal Rubin. He inflicted a staggering number of casualties on the attacking force during his personal 24-hour battle, single-handedly slowing the enemy advance and allowing the 8th Cavalry Regiment to complete its withdrawal successfully. Following the breakout from the Pusan Perimeter, the 8th Cavalry Regiment proceeded northward and advanced into North Korea. During the advance, he helped capture several hundred North Korean soldiers. On 30 October 1950, Chinese forces attacked his unit at Unsan, North Korea, during a massive nighttime assault. That night and throughout the next day, he manned a .30 caliber machine gun at the south end of the unit's line after three previous gunners became casualties. He continued to man his machine gun until his ammunition was exhausted. His determined stand slowed the pace of the enemy advance in his sector, permitting the remnants of his unit to retreat southward. As the battle raged, Corporal Rubin was severely wounded and captured by the Chinese. Choosing to remain in the prison camp despite offers from the Chinese to return him to his native Hungary, Corporal Rubin disregarded his own personal safety and immediately began sneaking out of the camp at night in search of food for his comrades. Breaking into enemy food storehouses and gardens, he risked certain torture or death if caught. Corporal Rubin provided not only food to the starving Soldiers, but also desperately needed medical care and moral support for the sick and wounded of the POW camp. His brave, selfless efforts were directly attributed to saving the lives of as many as forty of his fellow prisoners. Corporal Rubin's gallant actions in close contact with the enemy and unyielding courage and bravery while a prisoner of war are in the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself and the United States Army.

**Background:** Tibor Rubin was born in Hungary in 1929. At the age of 14, he was sent to Mauthausen concentration camp while trying to escape to the safety of neutral Switzerland. 14 months later, Mauthausen was liberated by American troops. Rubin later recalled, "I promised myself if the Lord helped me go to America I'd join the Army and become a G.I. Joe and repay the U.S. for what they did for me." He arrived in America in 1948 and enlisted in the Army in 1950. One of Rubin's fellow prisoners in the Chinese POW camp later said of Rubin, "He took care of us, nursed us, carried us to the latrine... he did many good deeds, which he told us were mitzvahs [*sic.*] in the Jewish tradition... he was a very religious Jew and helping his fellow men was the most important thing to him." Rubin was recommended for the Medal of Honor three times, but the paperwork was intentionally revoked by the antisemitic First Sergeant.





## Information Sheet: Jack Jacobs



**Rank at time of Action:** First Lieutenant

**Service:** U.S. Military Assistance Command, Army Element

**Conflict:** Vietnam War

**Battle/Place of Action:** Kien Phong Province, Republic of Vietnam

**Date of Action:** March 9, 1968

**Date Medal Received:** October 9, 1969

**Citation:** The 2nd Battalion was advancing to contact when it came under intense heavy machinegun and mortar fire from a Viet Cong battalion positioned in well fortified bunkers. As the 2d Battalion deployed into attack formation its advance was halted by devastating fire. Captain Jacobs, with the command element of the lead company, called for and directed air strikes on the enemy positions to facilitate a renewed attack. Due to the intensity of the enemy fire and heavy casualties to the command group, including the company commander, the attack stopped and the friendly troops became disorganized. Although wounded by mortar fragments, Captain Jacobs assumed command of the allied company, ordered a withdrawal from the exposed position and established a defensive perimeter. Despite profuse bleeding from head wounds which impaired his vision, Captain Jacobs, with complete disregard for his safety, returned under intense fire to evacuate a seriously wounded advisor to the safety of a wooded area where he administered lifesaving first aid. He then returned through heavy automatic weapons fire to evacuate the wounded company commander. Captain Jacobs made repeated trips across the fire-swept open rice paddies evacuating wounded and their weapons. On three separate occasions, Captain Jacobs contacted and drove off Viet Cong squads who were searching for allied wounded and weapons, single-handedly killing three and wounding several others. His gallant actions and extraordinary heroism saved the lives of one U.S. advisor and 13 allied soldiers. Through his effort the allied company was restored to an effective fighting unit and prevented defeat of the friendly forces by a strong and determined enemy. Captain Jacobs, by his gallantry and bravery in action in the highest traditions of the military service, has reflected great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.

**Background:** Jack Jacobs entered the Army in 1966 with the intention to fulfill his requirements and return home for law school. When recalling the Act of Valor that earned him the Medal of Honor, he said "Inside my head was this one Hillel precept: If not you, who? If not now, when? I thought of what would happen if I didn't do what Hillel had implied is always a Jew's duty: to act when no one else will, and to act now. The decision was an easy one." Jacobs also titled his memoir after Rabbi Hillel's idea; *If Not Now, When?: Duty and Sacrifice In America's Time of Need*. Although Jacobs originally intended to only serve the three required years, he returned to Vietnam in 1972. Today, he is a retired Colonel and a military analyst for NBC/MSNBC.

