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How This Reform Jew Became A ‘Deplorable’ Pro–Trump Militia Leader

By [Sam Kestenbaum](#)

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Joshua Ruben Braff loaded his AR-15 rifle, took aim at a target on the other side of the hill and fired a magazine. Shots rang over the wooded hills and shells fell to the muddy ground around his boots. Braff turned around, signaled with his hand and another man took his place.

Around 30 members of the Ohio Irregulars, an armed militia of a few hundred, had gathered deep in the woods of southern Ohio in the early spring of 2017 to train for what they believe is the imminent collapse of society.

Braff is heavysset and wears glasses; his arms are covered with tattoos, including a Star of David on his left wrist. Another blue Jewish star is taped to the side of his camouflaged helmet.

He is a regional head in the Irregulars — the only Jew to hold such a position.

Like others, Braff joined the group in the fraught months leading up to the presidential election. Many feared that if Hillary Clinton were to win, she would take away their cherished right to bear arms, and when she condemned some Donald Trump supporters as “deplorable,” the term became a rallying cry.

“That’s me,” Braff said. “I’m a proud deplorable Jew.”

He’s not alone. Fully a quarter of American Jews, most of them Orthodox, supported Trump. And a small, vocal group aligned themselves with the white nationalist “alt-right.”

Joshua Ruben Braff

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Trump spoke often of how, unlike his rivals, he would not ignore the “forgotten men and women” of the country.

And while major communal and religious Jewish groups, like the Anti-Defamation League and the Conservative and Reform Movements, have been critical of Trump, other Jews, like Braff, were persuaded by Trump and his promises of attention to them.

Indeed, there are Jews who are affected by the same economic and political forces that helped Trump get elected, and who defy the stereotypes. Jews are not monolithic — not just coastal, urban, liberal or Democratic. There is not one way to be an American Jew.

‘Your head is still ringing’

Among his militia, Braff joins others who admire the president and share conspiratorial views of the world, imagining the prospect of a shadowy takeover of the country. A deep anxiety undergirds their work. And it is here that Braff, a Jew from rural Ohio raised in a small Reform synagogue, has become an unlikely leader.

In his militia, there is one other Jew and a Messianic, Jews for Jesus-type Jew. But Braff happily assumes the position of Jewish ambassador. During Hanukkah, he was the only militiaman sharing photos of his lit menorah on their Facebook page.

“The militia feels like home,” Braff said.

Braff was born in 1985 in Cleveland and raised in the suburbs of Madison, a city to the east. His father and grandfather worked together making mobile homes and running trailer parks. His mother, who converted to Judaism, stayed at home. The family attended Temple Am Shalom, the only synagogue in all of Lake County, a mostly white and Christian area just a 40-minute drive from Cleveland.

Braff’s parents divorced in 1993, and as a sort of consolation his grandfather took him on his first trip to Israel. His favorite moment of the trip was standing on top of Masada, the site where an armed Jewish faction fought to death against Roman legions. “That’s when I fell in love with my religion,” he said.

But if Braff felt connected to Judaism, in other areas of his life, such connections were lacking. He couldn’t find the right job after high school. He stayed in his hometown and apprenticed at a tattoo parlor, where he nurtured a creative streak by coming up with his own designs and inking his own arms.

The shop shuttered eventually, and he found himself working a dissatisfying stint at a plastic factory. He was encouraged by a friend to enroll in the army and found the idea appealing. It felt like a way to focus his life and honor his Jewish grandfather, who had regaled him with stories of his own service in World War II. In 2005, when the death toll in Iraq had just hit 1,500, Braff signed up and was sent for training at Fort Benning on the Alabama-Georgia border.

Braff in military uniform during his in service in the Army.

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Braff in military uniform during his in service in the Army.

The army was thrilling — but also challenging.

He spent a year stationed in Egypt and described his encounters with locals as unpleasant. As a guest in an Egyptian home, he almost came to blows with his hosts when they learned he was a Jew. Another time, he watched in horror as a man beat his wife in public. To him, Egyptian culture and Islam were little more than an ugly mix of intolerance and oppression.

After emotional ups and downs, he left the army and came back the United States.

Back in Ohio, Braff spent time in the National Guard, but dropped out of the armed services for good in 2012. He said he didn't want to serve under President Barack Obama, whom he perceived as being antagonistic to the military. "It looked like him and his cronies really hated us," Braff said.

Braff worked a number of menial jobs at Target, Toys R Us, Best Buy and Verizon, but nothing clicked. Out of the armed services and missing the discipline it provided, Braff floundered.

"It was like being in a really loud rock concert, then going outside," he said. "Your head is still ringing."

In 2015, he hit rock bottom.

He had gone into business for himself. He decided once again to tap into his creative side and started a haunted house business — creating macabre, interactive horror-themed events for children and adults.

But even this passion project fell apart.

He had a falling out with coworkers and felt like he was losing it, like he might do something violent. He rummaged through his closet and found his old army clothes, put them on and looked in the mirror. He had gained weight and nothing fit. "I was disgusted by what I saw," he said.

Some months later, he joined the Irregulars.

'I don't know anything else'

Braff's childhood synagogue is a squat building that sits on Route 90, a main artery in Lake County. In 1986, a group of Jews bought the space that had been a church, removing the baptismal font on the pulpit to make space for their Torah ark.

While 45 families call the synagogue home, on a recent Friday, only 10 men and women came for service, sitting together on cushioned pews. Some men wore yarmulkes, or head coverings, as they entered the sanctuary, but others did not. Few could remember Braff or his family, who once attended regularly. They described their community as having dwindled over the years.

Renee Blau, one of two spiritual leaders, described Jewish life in the area as isolated. "We're on our own out here," she said.

While Ohio is home to robust and celebrated Jewish hubs in Cleveland, Columbus and Cincinnati, non-metropolitan areas like Lake County have seen organized Jewish life diminished over the years.

Temple Am Shalom, which Braff attended as a child.

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At the turn of the 19th century, smaller Jewish communities dotted the country, as immigrants from Europe sought work opportunities outside of East Coast hubs. As the country urbanized, these communities shrank or disappeared entirely.

"Small towns in Ohio are losing their Jewish populations," said Toby Brief, curator and former president of the Columbus Jewish Historical Society. "Outside of our metropolitan areas, there are few synagogues left."

The shift is not confined to Ohio. In keeping with wider national trends, Jews are now highly concentrated in urban centers. The Pew Research Center found that 49 percent of the American Jewish population lives in urban areas, 47 percent live in suburban areas and 4 percent reside in rural locations.

And rural areas lean more conservative. It's a political gap that caused much soul-searching — at least for liberals — in the days after Trump's upset victory.

"Small towns may have some of the infrastructure of Jewish communities, like a synagogue or cemetery, but few young people," said William Daroff, senior vice president for public policy at the Jewish Federations of America. "What's left is a shadow."

Congregants moved briskly through prayers as Blau lit the Sabbath candles and read aloud while standing at the podium. She wanted to share an encouraging story from a local newspaper about a nearby Ohio synagogue that had been defaced with a swastika. Other Ohioans had rallied around the Jewish community and she thought this was inspiring. The crowd nodded along. “The congregation was supported and I’m proud,” Blau said. “They’re in the same position that we are.”

The synagogue has not been targeted. But Blau pointed to a cracked window where a neighborhood boy had fired a bb gun a few years ago and said her congregants can still sometimes feel unsafe.

“We’re living in an area where we don’t have a big Jewish population,” Ron Rose, a retired high school teacher, said.

Sidney Rosen, a tall man in his 70s, has lived in the area his entire life and was less nervous. “I don’t know anything else,” he said.

‘We are really putting something together here’

Braff lives in a two-story building in the town of Conneaut on the shore of Lake Erie. On a spring afternoon, he sat smoking cigarettes in his living room with his wife, Samantha, and another militia member. Hanging at the center of the living room was a large banner promoting their militia, with an assault rifle crudely painted on the fabric. Block letters read “Come and get it.”

Samantha said that her husband’s mood had lifted in the months since he’d joined the militia. He got back in shape. He took pleasure in the discipline and feeling of purpose.

Samantha is Braff’s third wife, and they married in 2016. Her father once had ties to local white supremacist groups. Though he renounced some of those views, he still wasn’t happy to see his daughter marry a Jew. She offered this information nervously, taking a drag on her cigarette.

Braff’s tattoos include a Star of David.

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Samantha is also a member of the militia and has attended half a dozen militia trainings. “It’s more like a family than a militia,” she said, passing her cigarette to her husband.

The modern militia movement dates back to the 1990s, but has surged in the last decade, propelled by opposition to President Obama. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which tracks extremism, estimates there are more than 250 militia groups nationwide.

Leaders of Braff's militia imagine themselves as a sort of "support team" for official forces like the state police or firefighters — and see their training, in part, as preparation for societal collapse. The state is divided into a number of geographical chapters, each overseen by a regional leader.

Most are also deeply critical of what they see as hostile forces in the government.

Militia leaders have sought to portray the movement as more diverse and tolerant than it gets credit for. Though overwhelmingly white and Christian, its ranks do include ethnic and racial minorities. We're all equally imperiled by looming disaster, the thinking goes, so all are welcome. Braff believes this is true.

The militia's top leader, a grey-haired army veteran named Jim Cochran, said he is preparing for anything. "Financial collapse, nuclear war, civil unrest," he said. To Cochran, all three could be imminent. When Braff officially joined in October, he updated his Facebook page with the good news.

"A big new Step In My Life," he wrote. "I have joined a group called The Ohio Irregulars and was given command of 3rd Battalion the Reapers ... we are really putting something together here and I am proud to call myself an Ohio Irregular."

'The election stirred something in me'

Indoors, Braff paced and smoked cigarettes nervously. But days later, standing in the woods — armed and camouflaged — Braff looked relaxed and authoritative.

His 9-year-old son Alexander came along and tried his hand at firing a rifle. Braff offered encouraging words: "Do it again, just like that. Outstanding, excellent."

Al Roden, large man in his 50s, drove a minivan to the campgrounds where the militia gathered, a "Jesus is the Lord" sticker slapped on his bumper. An automatic rifle sat in the back of his van on top of blankets and sleeping bags. "I joined the militia because of the election," he said.

The question of diversity in the militia's ranks came up between drills.

"The militia is way more accepting than the army was," Braff said. "I used to hear anti-Semitic things in the army, but nothing from these guys."

Someone raised the question of whether a militia like this might have a Muslim member. They have Jews, so why not Muslims? A few members nodded enthusiastically.

“If they’re the kind of Muslim who will come and have a beer with us, sure,” said Ryan Gueli. A bearded man in loose camouflage objected to the idea. He’d heard Muslims were out for world dominance and it said so in their holy book.

”I knew Muslims who were standup guys,” Braff offered. “But the bad ones outweigh the good.”

They leave the discussion for later and go back to combat routines, firing their weapons at metal targets, falling back a few paces, dropping to their knees, firing their weapons again and repeating. One man said he needed to take a bathroom break.

“No time,” the bearded man shouted. “ISIS won’t care if you got to take a piss!”

Hours later, the Irregulars gathered at their campsite. Drills had finished for the weekend and members would leave soon.

Trucks cluttered the dirt road. Someone passed around energy drinks and Gatorade as members gathered in a circle for a sort of closing ceremony. Members were asked simply to say their names, but the moment became something more cathartic as members spontaneously shared the fears that brought them here.

“I want to be able to protect my family,” a hooded man said, smoking a sweet-smelling cigar. “In my hometown, people call me the crazy lady with dogs and guns,” one woman said and laughed. “They’re right.”

The sky had clouded over again and a few drops spattered on the dirt. Some militiamen peeled off to pack up their trucks.

Braff said coming here made him nostalgic for his time in the military. “It helps me remember the soldiers who died over there,” he said.

”The election stirred something in me,” said a dusty-haired man named Tom Turnbull.”There is a storm brewing,” Turnbull said, but left it unclear whether he was talking about weather or something else.

Email Sam Kestenbaum at kestenbaum@forward.com and follow him on Twitter at [@skestenbaum](https://twitter.com/skestenbaum)

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Author



Sam Kestenbaum

Sam Kestenbaum is a staff writer for the Forward. Before this, he worked for The New York Times and newsrooms in Sana, Ramallah and Beijing. Contact him at kestenbaum@forward.com and follow him on Twitter at [@skestenbaum](https://twitter.com/skestenbaum) and on Instagram at [@skestenbaum](https://www.instagram.com/skestenbaum).

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