

# For This Rabbi, a Journey of 35 Miles Begins With a Single Bike Trip

LOCAL

JON MARKS | JE STAFF

SOMEDAY, SOME WAY, Jeff Sultar says he'll get to Alaska. Not because he has any particularly strong feeling for Eskimos, glaciers or Sarah Palin. His desire is of a decidedly more elemental nature.

It's the only state where the new rabbi at Congregation B'nai Jacob in Phoenixville — to which he commutes daily from his Mount Airy home — has never set foot. The only concession he'll reluctantly make is he probably won't bike there.

That sets the land of the midnight sun apart from almost all the rest, which Sultar visited after getting his degree in English from Williams College, during a 27-month, 16,000-mile bicycle trek that took him through 46 states from 1984 to 1986. Each pedal of that epic journey came unplanned. He literally just went where the wind — and the weather — took him.

"Every intersection, I didn't know which way I would turn," said Sultar, who's only been in his position at B'nai Jacob for less than two months, upon finishing up his four-year stint at Congregation B'nai Israel in Rumson, N.J. "I'd come to the intersection and figure out which way to go. I'd spent my whole life before that learning how to have goals and work toward them. Now I was trying to look at life from a different way — not looking outside for goals, but inside. I got to listen to my inner voice a little more clearly, not to make things happen but to see how they happened on their own."

The most significant develop-

ment was discovering, to his utter surprise, a desire to be more firmly connected to Judaism. "One of my experiences was living and working on an Amish farm, which indirectly led to me becoming a rabbi," revealed Sultar, who wrote a yet-to-be-published book about the entire expedition and has subsequently made it to Delaware, Utah and Hawaii — leaving only Alaska out in the cold.

"I was nominally connected to Judaism at that point. I thought a lot of what I was being told about religion was total bunk and I didn't think the people teaching me actually believed what they were saying, either. I rebelled against organized religion at least as strong as anybody, but I know my time on the road led to me reconnecting

state champion in squash, ranked No. 9 nationally. "Basic human needs stay the same, the life cycle each person and family is going through. But every congregation has its own unique feel and needs. We're in the process of figuring that out here."

To that end, Sultar is in the midst of holding 11 "parlor meetings" in congregants' homes to determine what drives the local Jewish community. While the evaluation process is ongoing, he's already figured some things out.

"Being a smaller town where there are less Jews in general, the community tends to stick together," said Sultar, who's worked with congregations and denominations of all shapes and sizes over a 25-year career. "I think the stereotype is, the further out, the less committed peo-

ple are. In fact, when there's a community in a small town people tend to feel more connected.

got into the rabbinate, Sultar has seen just about everything. After graduating from Reconstructionist Rabbinical College in Wyncote, he started off by being the first full-time campus rabbi at a prep school, Choate Rosemary Hall, in Wallingford, Conn., then became the campus rabbi at Cornell.

He then assumed his first pulpit at Reconstructionist Congregation Beth Shalom in Naperville, Ill., for three years, before arriving in Philadelphia in 2004.

He hasn't moved from the area since, beginning as senior rabbi at Mishkan Shalom for three years, followed by teaching religion at Temple. Then came a yearlong stint as interim rabbi at Beth Am Israel before taking over Conservative B'nai Israel, where he commuted from home, often staying in North Jersey a few days each week.

While Phoenixville is a good 35 miles from town, Sultar's just happy to be able sleep in his own bed and spend time with his wife, Julia, and daughter, Maya, a sophomore at Ithaca. He also has two grown stepchildren.

Despite such a diverse career, though, Sultar remains very much the young man who used to get kicked out of class in Hebrew school for not paying attention. He may be a rabbi, but that hardly means he has all the answers.

"That was clearly a very transformative time of my life," he said of his bike odyssey. "I always had a Jewish identity, but by the time I finished my time on the road, I knew Judaism was at the center of my life. I had no idea what that meant, so it took a while before I knew I wanted to be a formal



▲ RABBI JEFF SULTAR

part of the Jewish community.

"I think most people are searchers so it's helpful to have your spiritual leader seeing himself being on a spiritual journey as well. So, we search together."

In Phoenixville, a small town nestled outside the big city, no less. "There are people who've been here for years — the children of founders," pointed out Sultar, whose name comes from a mix of Russian, English and other European cultures. "So there are multigenerational families and younger families. The Jewish community is at its best when you have both. We have that here."

For the moment, then, Jeff Sultar is content to stay in one place, rather than being the young man on the bicycle seeing the land, often bartering work for a meal and a place to sleep. For now he's willing to leave that one unfinished piece of business behind.

But somewhere down the road you know he'll need a little "Northern exposure" to complete his journey. ●

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with Judaism. Because I've had such a long spiritual journey that had a great effect on me, I don't take other people's journeys for granted."

Fast forward nearly 30 years and Sultar has established himself as a man who's not only willing to listen to his congregants, but to constantly re-examine his own life. That, in turn, allows them to better connect with him.

"Every congregation is the same and yet different," said Sultar, whose extensive resume has a bit of everything, including the time he was the Connecticut

ple are. In fact, when there's a community in a small town people tend to feel more connected.

"Being in a small town sometimes has its advantages. It's the only address for Jewish life in the area, so the synagogue becomes the Jewish community center as well. It becomes more critical that people become affiliated if they want to be part of the Jewish community. We're more of a big tent, where people need to figure out how to live together with their differences rather than dividing themselves."

Since he got off the bike and

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