

Phoenixville's Congregation B'nai Jacob names Rabbi Jeff Sultar as new leader



Rabbi Jeff Sultar has been appointed to lead Congregation B'nai Jacob as its next spiritual leader.

Barry Tagleber — For Digital First Media

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POSTED: 01/06/16, 4:52 PM EST

UPDATED: 1 WEEK, 4 DAYS AGO

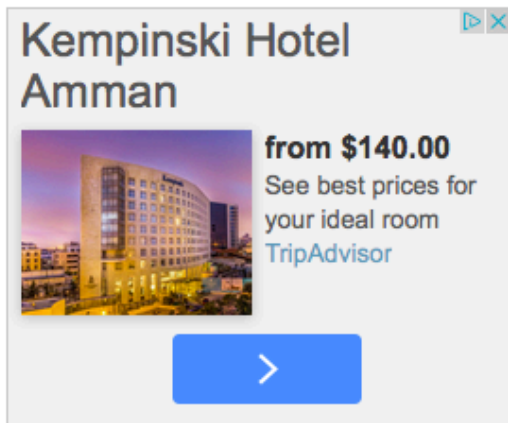
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Phoenixville >> When he was fresh out of college, a 22-year-old Rabbi Jeff Sultar climbed on his bike and pedaled across the country for 27 months, visiting 46 states and spending a year living and working on an Amish farm. Without a specific destination in mind, he rode over 16,000 miles, crossing the length of the country twice and its width four times. During that journey, he stopped in a number of different communities, bartering work for room and board. What he learned along the way has helped guide him spiritually ever since.

“That’s an important part of my own spiritual journey,” he said. “It also changes the way I relate to other people, because I don’t make assumptions about their own journeys ... I meet people where they are and see where that connects with Judaism.”

With that mindset in place, and over 30 years of experience later, the 54-year-old has set his focus on the borough, having become the new face of Congregation B’Nai Jacob. For the past two months he’s begun reaching out to the synagogue’s community of about 130 households, talking with congregants and learning about his new home. And he’s been welcomed into the tight knit group with open arms.

“It’s a very warm, welcoming, inviting community,” he said. “People feel very closely connected with each other. It’s a very caring community.”



It was a long road to get to Phoenixville, but one that weaves its way through our area.

Born in Berlin, Conn. and raised in the Philadelphia area, Sultar is a graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College where he received the Berger Prize in Practical Rabbis and the Socolow Prize for Outstanding Essay, according to a press release. His undergraduate education was at

Williams College in Williamstown, Mass.; he completed a major in English and a program in Environmental Studies. Sultar also participated in the Institute for Jewish Spirituality for Rabbis, a two-year program of retreats, meditation practice and weekly text study.

Sultar served a number of congregations, both conservative and reconstructionist, in New

Jersey, Philadelphia and in the Midwest. He taught at Temple University and Williams College, as well as in a number of less formal settings. He served as Campus Rabbi at both Cornell University and Choate Rosemary Hall (a college preparatory boarding school in Connecticut). Sultar taught about and worked extensively on environmental concerns from a Jewish perspective. He contributed an essay to Ecology & the Jewish Spirit: Where Nature and the Sacred Meet. Sultar is married to Julia Bell, and has three children, the release states.

During his time with the Amish, Sultar said he began to understand the power of faith and spirituality.

“I rebelled against religion growing up,” he said. “In the Amish, I did see people acting on religious faith in a way that seemed to have great integrity. Growing up I thought religion was stereotypically hokum and superstition. For me to see people actually living meaningful lives inspired by their religion inspired me.”

He comes to Phoenixville ready to listen. With just one synagogue in the community, Sultar has the challenge of bridging the different generations of congregants together. So far though, the community has embraced his leadership.

Mark Snow, congregation president, speaking about the congregation's new spiritual leader reflected in a press release saying, "Rabbi Sultar brings to Congregation B'nai Jacob a profound sense of spirituality, deep scholarly knowledge, and his own unique experiences in building community. We are fortunate, particularly at this juncture for (Congregation B'nai Jacob), to have Rabbi Sultar with his energy and enthusiasm to lead us forward."

Sultar will be the first to admit he has a lot more to learn about his community, calling it premature to say what direction he thinks Congregation B'Nai Jacob should go. Yet he said he'll continue to reach out to those in the community and apply some of the lessons from his time on the road to help guide him.

"I think in the world we live in today, there's a breakdown of community. People feel disconnected from each other and not part of something bigger than themselves," he said. "So the importance of religion has only grown in recent years. It's a place where people do come together and create bonds and build community. The importance of the synagogue to the community is more important than ever."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Eric Devlin is a general assignment reporter covering the Phoenixville, Limerick and Spring-Ford areas, in addition to writing feature stories and spot news. A graduate of the La Salle University, Devlin is a Bucks County native and has worked at The Mercury since January, 2015. Reach the author at edevlin@pottsmmerc.com or follow him on Twitter: [@Eric_Devlin](https://twitter.com/Eric_Devlin). Reach the author at edevlin@pottsmmerc.com.

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