

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

SCENE

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Rabbi Jeff Sultar

LIGHTING THE WORLD ONE CANDLE AT A TIME

WHEN THE SECOND candle of the Menorah on the front lawn of B'nai Israel congregation at Hance and Ridge roads is lit Wednesday, Dec. 17, Rabbi Jeff Sultar will be right there celebrating and remembering along with his congregation members, visitors of all religions, and municipal leaders.

And when, an hour later, Red Bank celebrates the lighting of the Menorah at the Red Bank railroad station, Sultar will be there as well. But he will be back with his own congregation shortly afterwards, allowing plenty of time to enjoy the Hanukkah celebrations that follow the candle lighting.

The schedule and active participation in two separate ceremonies in two separate communities in such a short time would be daunting to most, but it appears to be a way of life for the Connecticut-born rabbi who didn't even realize he wanted to be so deeply involved in his own religion until he spent some time in an Amish household many years ago.

The soft-spoken, quick-smiling rabbi is a study in contrasts: he loves his private time and meditation, yet thrives on being in the midst of activity and helping others. He served as a campus rabbi in both Choate, a private prep academy and Cornell University, yet today opens the doors of his synagogue to all, eager to explain, in his quiet but firm and decisive way, the basic tenets of his religion. His study is lined with philosophical, religious books, some stacked close to his desk, ready to be picked up in an instant, yet candidly he admits he loves to read Harry Potter books, particularly sharing the joy of fiction with his daughter, now a teenager. In fact, a statue of Hogwart sits on his desk ... but Moses is prominent on the wall by the door. Secure in a glass box, the sign below Moses reads: "In case of emergency, break glass."

The rabbi has led this congregation of approximately 300 families drawn from a wide surrounding area for four years or so, coming here first as an interim rabbi, then staying on when the congregation gave their assent he was the rabbi they felt comfortable in leading their synagogue.

It's easy to see why Jeff Sultar is so admired and loved both within and outside his own congregation. He preaches, without any appearance of preaching; he teaches, without the student realizing he is being taught; he mixes humor and mirth with knowledge and down right practicality. He's honest and outgoing, willing to share his own embrace of Judaism without an apology or a regret for how long it took him to learn or the paths he had to take to reach the plateau where he stands today. That he can handle broad spectrums of interest and attention at the same time is an understatement ... he and his wife married on a Friday night and he was ordained a rabbi on Sunday morning of the same weekend.

Raised as a Jew in a loving family, Sultar easily admits that although Jewish, he rebelled against his religion as a teen and would have laughed at the idea of himself attending rabbinical school or seminary. After graduating from Connecticut schools, he earned his degrees in English and environmental studies at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass. He had begun work in college on a new Institute, and later continued to work strenuously and ambitiously on the project he and others had started during their student years, forming the Peace Research and Education Institute. It was an exhaustive undertaking for several months, with Sultar giving talks, producing classes and writing programs in starting up the Institute.

There was a time of transition for the young college grad, a time when he felt he needed to explore other avenues of education, other



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means of soaking up still more knowledge. So Jeff Sultar, armed with a college degree and riding a bicycle, took off on a 27-month solo tour around the United States. In a little more than two years, he covered 16,000 miles, visited each of the continental United States except Utah and Delaware, and bartered his way through meals, camaraderie and sleeping accommodations.

During that 27-month stint, the traveler said he did whatever work had to be done wherever it had to be done in order to continue his journey. He washed windows in a nursing home in exchange for a bed overnight; he cleaned garbage areas, made house repairs and joined building teams. And he worked on farms.

It was the experience with an Amish family in Lancaster, Pa., that finally let Sultar know what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. It was while working besides Amish family members on tobacco, corn and soybean farms that he realized what they had which was absent in so many places ... the

Amish had a feeling and sense of community. And Jeff Sultar liked that. He liked being part of a community.

"Living with the Amish was my first experience in a community," he explains, "and I liked the feeling. Traveling around the country gave me an idea into how other people think, act and work. And it grew easier to understand people and see the things that were of value to them."

And so it was that the continental traveler went home and told his mom he was going to rabbinical school. To say the least, he laughs, it shocked her!

The rabbi has brought that feeling of community to his congregation in Rumson. Bookshelves in the halls are filled with pamphlets on every subject from dealing with personal trauma to how to express sympathy at a Shiva or plan an adoption; the walls have commemoratives to the military from the congregation who have served the nation; there are notices of the dinner party and Hanukkah celebration, a Tuesday morning discussion with

an author, a food drive to help others, even a program next Sunday so kids can learn how to craft hand-made gifts. A feeling of friendship and community permeates the rooms and is seen on the smiles of others in the large complex. Clearly, Sultar knows how to bring a community together.

It was the need to stay close to family, to embrace the family community that brought the rabbi, his wife, and their children back to the East Coast when they settled in the Philadelphia area while Sultar continued his environmental concerns work, looking at environmental issues from a Jewish point of view. "Why wouldn't we?" He asked rhetorically, "Don't we have an obligation to protect what has been given to us?"

It was an easy step from Philadelphia to Rumson when the congregation put out the call for an interim rabbi. And an even easier step when the interim rabbi became permanent.

BY MURIEL J. SMITH