

# Bar mitzvah follows 2 years of preparation

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## GROWING UP JEWISH

Philip's Hebrew name, Fele, means "wonder" or "miracle."

After Jeff and Judith struggled to conceive a child for several years, the birth of their son was nothing short of one, they said.

Philip lives in Elizabeth, Ill., and attends River Ridge Middle School in Hanover, Ill.

He loves science, especially astronomy.

Jeff, 62, works as a software engineer for AT&T, while Judith, 50, is an administrative assistant at Planetary Studies Foundation Earth and Space Science Museum in Elizabeth.

Prior to moving to Illinois in 2009, the family lived in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Howell, N.J.

Philip is an only child and the first of his immediate family to celebrate a bar mitzvah. Although Jeff was raised Jewish in his hometown of Milwaukee, he did not have one. Judith, who is from Manila, the capital of the Philippines, practices Catholicism.

Jeff held a stronger preference than Judith over the religious tradition in which Philip would be raised. Jeff wanted his son to grow up Jewish.

"We always were very active in going to the temple," Judith said. "Ever since we were in New Jersey and Cedar Rapids, every Saturday or Friday we always went there."

She occasionally brought Philip to Mass, and the family celebrates Christmas, but Philip prefers Judaism.

"I wanted to be a Jew," he said.

Jeff does not recall discussing with Philip whether the boy would have a bar mitzvah. Celebrating the event seemed a matter of course once his son began attending religious school several years ago, Jeff said.

Philip prepared for his bar mitzvah for two years at Temple Beth El.

Sagarin, who is from Wilmette, Ill., visits Dubuque monthly to lead services and conduct adult Hebrew class and family school for a handful of temple youths. Philip's classmate Gabriel Intriligator, of Dubuque, will celebrate his bar mitzvah later this year.

For both boys, the preparation was untroubling because they do not attend a temple where they can routinely observe bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies.

Sagarin requires that his pupils learn Hebrew, lead congregants in several prayers, read a passage from the Torah, craft a speech and undertake a community service project.

Emily Goldberg celebrated her bat mitzvah at Temple Beth El in May 2007 — the last youth to do so prior to Philip.

Now 24, Goldberg lives in St. Louis.

She said growing up in Dubuque as a religious minority posed a challenge.

The first time she attended Jewish summer camp in Oconomowoc, Wis., Goldberg said she experienced "culture shock" because she "had never been around that many Jews."

"It was sad leaving camp because I wasn't around those people who understood my identity, but also I think it frustrated me that the people I knew at camp I felt didn't appreciate what they had in their larger Jewish community, like Chicago," she said. "I didn't have a youth group to go back to when I got back home. I was the youth group."

As the temple lacked a full-time rabbi then, and



Rabbi Jim Sagarin talks to Philip Glenn, 13, of Elizabeth, Ill., before his bar mitzvah at Temple Beth El in Dubuque. EILEEN MESLAR - Telegraph Herald

still does, Goldberg taught herself to read Hebrew using computer software and studied prayers with her mother, Kate Scheinman, who is a temple board member and lay cantor.

"It definitely wasn't all handed to me like (in) some of the larger congregations, where they have all of the training and sessions," Goldberg said. "It made me stronger growing up in a smaller Jewish community. It made me appreciate my Jewish identity more."

Goldberg does not foresee herself returning to Dubuque.

"I like being in a bigger area right now," she said.

"There are a lot of young adult Jewish groups here that offer a lot of networking opportunities or opportunities for new friendships. That's something that I like to do. I like to meet new people."

## TEMPLE FAMILY

In March, Philip reported that he was excited about the upcoming service and the party that would follow, but in the ensuing weeks, his enthusiasm waned.

He peppered rehearsals with the groans of a teenager who is exhausted from school and extracurricular activities.

Jeff maintains a schedule of family activities on his cellphone. Philip's includes soccer, alto sax performances and Boy Scout meetings.

During a bar mitzvah practice early this month, Philip lay splayed across a pew in the Temple Beth El sanctuary. He suffered from a cold.

An entourage of temple board members flitted about the room, reviewing the choreography of the service.

Garfield crept behind Philip and blew a shofar — a Jewish trumpet made from a ram's horn — into his ear.

"Did I disturb you?" Garfield asked, with a smile.

Garfield requested Philip's presence on the bimah, a raised platform from which services are conducted.

He, Jeff, Judith, Scheinman and temple board member Ellie Landau outlined the steps in which a tallit, or prayer shawl, would be presented to Philip by his parents during the service.

The ritual is a symbol of generational continuity and is accompanied by a prayer.

"He has to kiss it first and say the prayer," Scheinman said.

"I think he'll say the prayer, and his parents will give him the tallit," Landau said.

"If you want to put it on, where would you put it on?" Garfield asked.



Philip waits for his bar mitzvah to start.



Philip and his friend Payton Van Lent, 9, of Scales Mound, Ill., joke around.

"You, Philip, hold the tallit," Scheinman said. "Does he know how to do any of this? He needs to be able to read it and kiss it."

Although stressed days before the bar mitzvah, Philip's parents and temple board members were his biggest cheerleaders.

Landau, who lives in Shullsburg, Wis., regularly tutored Philip. Some- times, they conversed over the computer using the video service Skype. On other occasions, they met at the temple and Shullsburg Townsend Center.

"I feel like a relative," she said. "It makes me feel good to do that."

Philip's weekly Hebrew practices lasted about 45 minutes, which the teen thought was excessive.

"Two times a day, maybe, for five minutes" would be sufficient, he said.

After he finished rehearsing at the temple, Philip retreated to the side of the bimah where he draped himself across a chair.

"All done," he sighed.

"Well, you might be done, but it's not done," Scheinman said, chuckling.

"Well, I know I'm not

done, but I think I'm done for today," the teen said.

Landau later observed, "This is our temple family."

## SHRINKING COMMUNITIES

When Jewish settlers immigrated to Iowa in the early 1800s, they came in search of economic opportunities.

The first generations to arrive often were merchants and peddlers, well-versed in city life.

Alexander Levi — recognized as the founder of Dubuque's Jewish community and Iowa's first recorded Jewish settler — immigrated to America from France.

After arriving in Dubuque in 1833, he helped develop the city's lead mines and later opened a grocery and retail store.

Other Jewish immigrants followed through the early 1900s.

They soon established Jewish institutions, including a Hebrew school, ladies aid society, political clubs and at least two congregations.

Tucked between homes and apartments at 475 W. Locust St., Temple Beth El — meaning "House of God" — was dedicated in 1939.

By the mid-20th century, the descendants of Jewish settlers struggled to find professional opportunities

in small towns, according to Lee Weissbach, professor emeritus at University of Louisville and author of "Jewish Life in Small Town America."

"You've got (the establishment of) big discount stores ... which will often kill the downtown area economically," he said. "That means the kinds of activities the Jews were involved with would dry up."

Children often left their home communities to attend college or professional schools out of state in large cities. Those who had fought in World War II utilized their GI Bill benefits to finance their education.

"They didn't necessarily want to come back and take over the family business," Weissbach said.

A 2013 Pew Research Center survey found that only 11 percent of Jews in America live in the Midwest, compared to 21 percent of the general public.

Forty-nine percent of Jews in the U.S. reside in urban areas and 47 percent in suburbs, according to the report. The remaining 4 percent live in rural areas, compared to 20 percent of all Americans.

The Jewish Community Legacy Project, an Atlanta-based nonprofit

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EMILY GOLDBERG, WHO CELEBRATED HER BAT MITZVAH AT TEMPLE BETH EL IN 2007

organization, helps small congregations with aging populations and dwindling leadership develop "living wills" for the disposition of assets and preservation of historic documents.

"We've estimated that there are, maybe, 150 congregations that meet this profile all over the country," said Noah Levine, senior vice president.

Garfield is confident Temple Beth El will not meet a similar fate.

"Based upon demographic trends, we'll be out and gone within a decade," he said. "But based upon those trends, that should have happened a decade ago."

The temple's members continue to celebrate important Jewish holidays, participate in interfaith programming, offer adult and youth religious school and host life-cycle events.

Goldberg will celebrate her wedding at the temple July 1, the first time the congregation has hosted one since 2001.

"My main concern is, quite simply, whatever Jews are there, let's have a good Jewish experience," Garfield said.

## LIFE CYCLE

Philip celebrated his 13th birthday on April 10, about four weeks before his bar mitzvah.

One day at Hebrew practices, he remarked that being 13 does not feel different than 12. Philip was unsure what the experience of preparing for his bar mitzvah taught him.

"I want to get it over with," he conceded.

His elders, however, have witnessed changes in the teen.

"I think he is more responsible and more focused," Judith said.

Landau said Philip can tell her that he learned a foreign language and spoke before a large audience.

"It gives a child confidence of things he can do," she said. "That means something for him to read the Torah."

Philip read from the Book of Leviticus — a passage in which God explains to Moses that every seventh year, farmers are to observe a "sabbath of the land."

"The one thing that interested me in this portion was that Moses spoke to God and God was speaking from a burning bush," Philip told the congregation. "It makes me think that if people are in danger, God takes charge."

... Being Jewish, I feel like God is always with me and is watching me and keeping me safe."

Philip's service also contained prayers that remind Jews of other obligations, ranging from the observance of the Sabbath, to care for the sick, to burial of the dead.

Sagarin noted such commandments are to be observed dutifully with the knowledge that one is doing God's work.

"But also knowing that you don't have a way of avoiding them. We have to do them," he said. "Philip has upon him the yoke of the commandments, which is a joyful yoke."

"What has come before is now on his shoulders."