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Bar Mitzvah on the Battle Green

In June 1958 we bought our first home on Sweetwater Avenue in Bedford, Massachusetts. We had come from Queens in New York City in early 1957 when I assumed my office at Acoustic Research in East Cambridge.

We knew of only one other Jewish family in town. This was a change from previous neighborhoods in New York and Watertown, where there were many other Jewish families. We were not observant and we lived among good neighbors who readily accepted our family of four. My wife was one of four women named Helen in adjacent homes, who sort of formed a club of Helens.

Our children Fred and Amy went to the Bedford public schools, which also included students from Hanscom Air Base, then still home to active air force units. In sixth grade Fred became aware that he was the only Jewish student in class. When his classmates talked about their religion and asked Fred about his, he could not respond, since he knew little about it.

I remember him coming home from school, feeling unhappy and left out about not being able to participate in such discussions. There was no Jewish temple in Bedford, but we knew there was a growing population of Jews in nearby Lexington. Already established was a Conservative Temple and a new Reform Organization, which as yet had no building of its own. We joined the Reform group and enrolled Fred in Hebrew School,

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after public school hours. We engaged Rabbi Bloom to tutor him for his Bar Mitzvah which would occur at age thirteen, a year and one half later.

During this period, Fred's zeal for learning Hebrew and studying the readings for the ceremony waned from time to time. This was all in addition to his regular school work. Fred ultimately responded to the Rabbi's urging and completed his preparations for the Big Day. A traditional Bar Mitzvah is performed on a Saturday morning as part of the Sabbath service. The highlight of the ceremony is the chanting of the reading from that week's portion of the Torah scroll.

Temple Isaiah was organized officially on June 5, 1959. Our family was among the 71 founding families. We did not yet have our own building, so we used space generously made available to us by the Hancock Congregational Church on the Lexington Battle Green. We used their space on Friday evenings for the Sabbath service, as well as classroom space for religious education on Saturday mornings. (Sunday mornings were not available, as the church held its own religious classes at that time.) Our temple building on Lincoln Street was officially opened in May, 1963.

The announcement of Fred's upcoming Bar Mitzvah was published on June 9, 1961 in the Bedford Minute Man, our local newspaper (copy attached). Fred's classmates were thereby made aware and bombarded him with questions about this "strange" ceremony. One classmate took him aside and asked in hushed tones "Fred, are you studying to be a priest?"

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Despite a bit of nervousness, Fred performed his reading without major mistakes. It was a happy occasion for the guests, including his immediate family, proud grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins as well as many gentile neighbors who were interested in the unfamiliar service. This was followed by a reception and collation with refreshments of food and drink.

We remained members of Temple Isaiah in Lexington for forty three years, until we moved from Bedford. During this time, our daughter Amy went to Hebrew school and was prepared for the Bas Mitzvah, the “female” Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

Fred’s initial experience in sixth grade had led to a significant change in our family’s lives and experience over the years.