

Bar-Lev on a Mission

By Helene Sobin

Benjy Bar-Lev came to UW-Parkside for its appealing small campus and direct access to professors. He left with an English major and a direction for how he wanted to spend the rest of his life. Armed with a strong liberal arts education, Bar-Lev, 25, chose to pursue a career as a Reform Jewish rabbi, and he is currently finishing his second year of rabbinical school at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

How did Bar-Lev decide to take this nontraditional career path? He was strongly influenced during his years at UW-Parkside. Bar-Lev hadn't even heard of the university before his guidance counselor at Nicolet High School in Glendale, Wis., suggested it. Although he had already been accepted at other UW System schools, he visited UW-Parkside and was immediately hooked. "I really liked the feel of the campus; the smaller size and the sense of community," Bar-Lev said. He wanted to be relatively close to home, and appreciated the proximity to Chicago.

Bar-Lev grew up surrounded by many Jewish friends in the Milwaukee suburb of Fox Point, and had attended a Jewish summer camp in northern Wisconsin for years. It wasn't until he came to UW-Parkside, however, that he felt like a minority. "When I got here I realized for the first time that I was different, and I missed the cultural practice of my religion," Bar-Lev said.

Despite being in the minority, Bar-Lev felt accepted by his campus peers. "I always found people here warm, accepting, and curious," he said. "I attribute this in part to the amount of diversity on campus – which is one of the beautiful things about Parkside. I found that I did more informal teaching about Judaism as a student at Parkside than I have since becoming a rabbinical student!"

Bar-Lev lived in Ranger Hall his freshman year, and loved the experience. "Our floor was particularly creative and started a decorating competition that turned into a dorm-wide challenge," he said. "My friends even made a giant menorah for

my door with paper candles that we proceeded to 'light' each night of Chanukah."

Shauna Hodges, assistant director of residence life, noticed Bar-Lev's creativity and leadership, and asked him to stay on as a resident adviser (RA). Bar-Lev spent two years as an RA, which gave him the opportunity to provide guidance and counseling to fellow students. He found it a perfect fit and learned a tremendous amount from his responsibilities dealing with homesickness and mental-health issues of residents to activity and program design. It was during this time that the idea of becoming a full-time "adviser" began to solidify in Bar-Lev's mind.

One-on-one relationships with his UW-Parkside professors also helped guide Bar-Lev toward a career in the rabbinate. His skills and interest in writing and philosophy were enhanced through access to the university's world-class faculty. "What was great about Parkside is that I really did get to know my professors. It's not just something they say in an ad, it's really true," Bar-Lev said.

Bar-Lev credits Patrick McGuire, senior lecturer in English, with developing his skills as a writer. "He really taught me how to write; how to 'show' rather than 'tell'. If not for him, I wouldn't be able to write all the sermons and articles for which I am responsible," Bar-Lev said. The wide range of alternative literature classes offered by English professor Carol Vopat proved to be very influential. Her Literature of the Holocaust class helped strengthen Bar-Lev's Jewish identity. Aaron Snyder, emeritus professor of philosophy, stimulated a deeper level of analytical and critical thinking. "I'd find myself wandering around campus for hours after his class, trying to sort things out in my brain," Bar-Lev recalled.

Equipped with strong academic skills, Bar-Lev feels well prepared for the rigorous curriculum at the Hebrew Union College. Students admitted to the rabbinical program are required to spend their first academic year at the college's campus in Jerusalem. Along with 64 other students, Bar-Lev spent last year studying, traveling, and growing to understand Judaism on a deeper level in Israel. Highlights of the year



included hiking in the Negev Desert, praying at the Western Wall, and simply interacting with fellow Israelis on a daily basis.

Despite ongoing conflicts, Bar-Lev found life in Jerusalem to be easier than he expected. "You have to be vigilant, but most people just go about their day-to-day lives," he said.

This year Bar-Lev is back at school in Cincinnati, where he'll spend the next four years working to become a rabbi. In addition to course work, he's expected to teach in the local community and maintain a student pulpit. He's currently the youth director at a temple in Cincinnati, and a student rabbi in Victoria, Texas, where he commutes by plane one weekend a month to lead a small congregation of 30 families.

After his five-year program, Bar-Lev will graduate with a master's degree in Hebrew letters and ordination as a Reform rabbi. He hopes to return to southeastern Wisconsin and preside over a congregation of his own. Bar-Lev enjoys congregational life, and loves leading a service and interacting with people of all ages.

For those who have seen the movie "Keeping the Faith," think of Ben Stiller's character and you'll get a sense of the kind of rabbi Bar-Lev may become. With his warm personality, creativity and ever-present guitar, he will surely be a charismatic and inspiring leader. He credits his experience at UW-Parkside with getting him to where he is today. "My life on campus, outstanding professors, great friends, and fellow students all helped shape me when I needed to be shaped," he said, "and helped me find my path."