

Bar Mitzvah is first for family from Ukraine

By DIANA GERSHMAN
Jewish Press

Benjamin Sheikhet is the first member of his immediate family to ever have a Bar Mitzvah. A son of refugees from the Former Soviet Union, the Tampa teen celebrated his rite of passage on March 14 at Tampa's Congregation Rodeph Sholom.

"He was the first one to have a Bar Mitzvah. It meant a lot. He did it so well. You cannot do it any better," said Yana Sheikhet, Benjamin's mother.

Some 30 years ago, Benjamin's parents, Simon and Yana Sheikhet, were teenagers like their son, but Communism forbid them from studying or practicing Judaism in their native Aorenstoon in the then Soviet state of Ukraine. The ban on religion forced Jews to practice their religion in secret, if at all.

"Everything from what my parents did, even baking matzo, had to be done at night. I didn't even know that [Bar Mitzvahs] existed. All the holidays, bar mitzvah, this is only understood here [in America]," Simon Sheikhet said.

Both Simon and Yana Sheikhet's families had always struggled to survive under the Soviet regime and both sought to leave for the West when immigration laws were finally loosened during the limited years of détente in the late 1970s.

One event in particular convinced Simon's parents that it was time to leave. Simon's brother was killed while serving in the Soviet Army. When it became clear that the government intended to draft Simon as a replacement, the family decided to leave.

In 1978, Esther and Gidalya Sheikhet and their family including son Simon were granted permission to emigrate to the United States. They were resettled in Tampa with the assistance of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and the Tampa JCC and thanks to a relative, Victor Dobrov (Dobrovitsky), already living here who was willing to sponsor them.

Benjamin's mother, then Yana Fix, and her relatives also wanted to go to the U.S., but didn't have sponsors. So instead they immigrated to Israel where Benjamin's maternal grandparents continue to live. Some years after the Fix family immigrated to Israel, Benjamin's father met Fix by chance during a visit there. The two had not known each other in the Ukraine. After spending time together in Israel, they married, and the couple returned to Tampa to start their family.

Now, 31 years after the family first arrived, Benjamin says his family are Conservative Jews and although they do not keep kosher, but they do not mix dairy with meat or eat pork in their house. They do not cook or wash at home on Shabbat, he said, and on some Shabbats, the family does not turn off household lights.



Benjamin Sheikhet

Photo by DAVID BERGER

"I was the first one in my family to ever be B'nai Mitzvahed," said Benjamin. "My cantor (Moshe Friedler) and rabbi (Marc Sack) told me to practice between 15 and 20 minutes a day — so I studied like everyday for half an hour. It was a great feeling. I worked hard for it."

About 40 guests attended Benjamin's Bar Mitzvah, including his grandmother Esther Skeikhet, who has always lived with the Sheikhets "and has played a vital role in Benjamin's life;" and his maternal grandparents, Bzonia and Joseph Fix, from Israel. Afterwards, family and friends celebrated at a Tampa restaurant.

For his mitzvah project, Benjamin taught children between the ages of 7 and 8 his favorite sport: basketball. For nearly three weeks, he volunteered at the Hillsborough YMCA two days a week.



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