



The Center of Jewish Life in the Sonoma Valley

2023/2024

ANNUAL REPORT  
TO THE COMMUNITY

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# ANNUAL REPORT

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### FROM OUR PRESIDENT



Now, more than ever, we need Congregation Shir Shalom and the community that has been developed, in our lives. These times have been challenging for all of us but the ongoing strength and dedication of Rabbi Steve Finley along with his wife Yaffa, has allowed us to thrive. We continue to emphasize our role as not only a religious institution but as the home of Jewish Life in Sonoma Valley. Our small Congregation has an incredible impact in the community.

The Congregation Shir Shalom Board continues their incredible service to the community. This year, greater levels of confidence and creativity were exhibited. The result has been a year packed with programs every month. When I started as President I could easily remember all of our activities for the Shabbat announcements. Those days are over with a calendar that has some program for all members each month. The ability of the board to include volunteers in their efforts has been amazing to me. In the last year, as an example, we have added both TOT Shabbat and a Jewish cooking class. Additionally, I just have to say that the warmth and collegiality of the board is truly rewarding.

The group gathering for worship at Shir Shalom has been steadily increasing in the last year. Our High Holy Days services this year, not only packed the Sanctuary but also were incredibly moving. Rabbi Steve deftly integrated numerous participants and leaders into the service. Friday evening services preceded by our potluck dinners are a joy to attend. Saturday morning services which in the past were sparsely attended, have become a substantial and meaningful part of our religious and social activity. Rabbi Steve has been able to include many members of the Congregation in significant roles in the service.

The Bat Mitzvah of Noa Weiswasser was certainly a highlight of our Saturday morning Shabbat services. Now, we all look forward to the B'not Mitzvah of among seven of the most cherished women from the Congregation on June 8. This will be an event that should not be missed.

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We also danced in front of the Synagogue and closed down the street for the lighting of the Menorah. This was a memorable event with more than a hundred attending. We really must appreciate the City of Sonoma for making this possible. Our Shir Shalom fundraiser this year was simply unbelievable. The Fund Raising Committee worked for nearly a year in the development and presentation and it showed in every respect. The incredible generosity of our members was on full display. The sense of family was ever present and showed itself in the fantastic results. All I can say is thank you for caring about our community. You will soon see a portion of the results in the Community Room which is being renovated. More upgrades are in the works.

Certainly, one of the highlights of the last year was our Interfaith Passover Seder. The evening managed to be both moving, impactful, and fun as we welcome both community leaders and members of clergy throughout Sonoma Valley. Our impact and strength were on full display. Rabbi Steve's outreach and planning combined with the massive volunteer of our Sisterhood made the Seder truly memorable.

Once again, I simply have to emphasize that we could not do any of this without the incredible efforts of our volunteers. The volunteer core of participants has increased, and it shows. The volunteers at Shir Shalom allow us to have a large number of weekly activities and continue to produce meaningful events. I would also like to especially, thank the women of Shir Shalom. This is not a negative comment on the men, who are also active but honestly, I am not sure how we could function without the core of dynamic women in our congregation.

As we consider the future of Shir Shalom, I would once again like to emphasize our legacy program. Gifts to the legacy program will allow Shir Shalom to grow and flourish well into the future. There are now fifteen members of the Legacy Program and we would like to strongly encourage others to participate. There are many ways to include Shir Shalom in your estate plans and we have experts in the Congregation that can guide you in these efforts. Please consider joining those of us who have included Shir Shalom as beneficiary in our wills.

I would also like to honor our departing board member, Gayle Stanford, whose term has expired. Tireless in her efforts and always supportive, she was a great board member. We expect her continued efforts in the membership committee and other areas of interest.

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We are tremendously excited to welcome new board member, Richard Preiss, to our board, of course subject to your confirmation. Richard has been extremely active since his arrival in Sonoma not only with Shir Shalom but also with the Mentoring Alliance. He is a valued contributor to our Hebrew School by contributing his time as a tutor. Many of us appreciate his efforts in organizing our Pickle-ball group on Monday mornings. We are sure he will be a great addition to the board.

The last two years as board President have been intensely gratifying. I have been lucky to work with a fantastic board and wonderful Congregation members. I have been pleased to build a deep and cooperative relationship with the Rabbi. The stability and dynamism has yielded results both in our growth and the quality of all Shir Shalom activities. We will need your continued support, both with finances and volunteering to make our institution successful. However, I don't think it is a stretch to say, this is our golden age.

Jan Chernoff

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### FROM OUR RABBI



Dear Congregation Shir Shalom Members,

Many of us are familiar with the famous quote by Dr. Martin Luther King, “The quality, not the longevity of one’s life is what is important.” I have been blessed with both quality and longevity as I now close a full decade with Congregation Shir Shalom.

One thing for certain that can be said about an employee who remains at their job for as long as I have is that together with all the growth and development we’ve experienced over the years, I have had to face a few battles along the way. At times, to be completely forthcoming, my loyalty wavered, but in the end, many of you helped me rebound and reboot my devotion to Congregation Shir Shalom. I can even say that it was the way we pooled together in tough times that helped me seal my confidence that I was with the right community. I of course, speak on behalf of Yaffa as well.

Over this last decade, we have faced major fires, the pandemic, various waves of antisemitism and much more. We have mourned together often, but we have rejoiced together more often. This last year though has truly been the year in which we began to not only taste the fruits of our labor but to continue to plant new seeds.

I thank dearly every past president, board member and committee head who has kept our community moving forward to help us reach these days of unprecedented success. Instead of facing a potential burnout the longer I stayed, I have been cheered on by today’s board of directors and my community which has led me to thrive more and more. A few years ago, even my sense of self-care took a tremendous leap forward, and I believe this has ultimately been the most crucial component for my personal success and as your rabbi. I am beyond grateful to those who helped escort me into this transformative chapter of my life.

Rabbi Hillel teaches, in Pirkei Avot 2:4, "Do not separate yourself from the congregation". Biblical commentator Rashi explains that it is both in the sorrows and joys of community where we will find true meaning and purpose.

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With our Jewish sages comments in mind, I'll bring my message to a close by stating that our true success rests within our collective work habits of communal camaraderie, reliability and flexibility. This, combined with how we endeavor to work together with integrity as we face each task and how we respond to each challenge, has been the cornerstone of establishing ourselves as the vibrant Jewish community in Sonoma Valley.

Rabbi Steve Finley

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### MISSION AND VALUES

Congregation Shir Shalom's mission is to be a stable, growing and valued home of Jewish life in the Sonoma Valley.

Our vision is to provide Sonoma County individuals and families the opportunity to celebrate, practice and learn from our Jewish cultural and religious heritage in a socially fulfilling, welcoming and inclusive environment.

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONGREGATION SHIR SHALOM

#### *About Sonoma Valley*

Sonoma Valley stretches along 17 miles from Carneros and the San Pablo Bay in the south through Valley of the Moon, Bennett Valley, and Sonoma Mountain, a series of neighborhood districts that have been collectively nicknamed The Springs — Agua Caliente, Boyes Hot Springs, El Verano, and Fetters Hot Springs — to the towns of Glen Ellen and Kenwood, over an area of 144 square miles. The valley is anchored by the City of Sonoma, which is 21 miles from Santa Rosa, the county seat of Sonoma County, and 14 miles from the city of Napa, California. Nearly 44,000 people live in Sonoma Valley, 25% of whom are seniors.

Sonoma County is home to an about 500,000 individuals. The 2014 Jewish Community Study conducted by the Jewish Federation of San Francisco, Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties estimated a total of 47,000 Jewish individuals in 21,000 households in the three county North Bay region of Napa, Sonoma and Marin counties. While the total Jewish population in the Bay Area was found to be stable, it appears that the North Bay Jewish population has declined by about 20%, when compared to the findings of 2004 Jewish Community Study. Migration patterns noted in the study (from Marin to Sonoma Counties) suggest a total Sonoma County Jewish population of about 20,000, 1,600-1,800 of whom reside in Sonoma Valley.

#### *Founding of Congregation Shir Shalom*

Sonoma has long had a small but influential Jewish presence. City pioneers remembered in the local landscape include Schocken (Hill), Nathanson (Creek) and Shainsky (Road), among the several Jewish families who arrived in the late 19th Century.

Shir Shalom began with a small ad placed in the Sonoma Index-Tribune in August 1995, asking, in effect, "Am I the only Jew around here?" Some 63 people answered the invitation to meet at the Sonoma Community Center. The Sonoma Valley Jewish Community, as this congregation was then called, was officially formed on August 30th, 1995. In December of that year, we chose the name Congregation Shir Shalom (CSS), "Song of Peace," to acknowledge our love of music which brings spirituality to our worship.



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In 1996, First Congregational Church generously offered to share its home on West Spain Street, still our home. That same year we were blessed with our first rabbi, as the community officially allied itself with the Reform movement. Seventy-eight households became founding members. Shir Shalom's first Annual Membership Meeting approved our bylaws in June of that year. The congregation's formal incorporation and non-profit status were approved by the State of California and the U.S. Internal Revenue Service in October 1996.

In that same year, CSS held its first High Holy Day services, at Sonoma's St. Andrew Presbyterian Church. Shir Shalom opened its religious school in September 1997, with 28 students. Our first Bar Mitzvah was celebrated in December 1997, one of five that school year.

After five years of using Torahs borrowed from other Jewish organizations, we celebrated Shemini Atzeret 5761 (2000) by welcoming our own Sefer Torah. In 2017 we dedicated a new prayer banner in the sanctuary, further adding our congregation's distinctive style to our shared premises with First Congregational Church.

### OUR CONGREGATION

Membership in Congregation Shir Shalom supports more than one's own participation; it supports and enriches a Jewish presence in Sonoma Valley. Members of all ages are encouraged to participate, not as guests in a stranger's house, but as a family in Shir Shalom's comfortable, familiar and loving community.

Congregation Shir Shalom is an inclusive interfaith community, that, from the beginning, has welcomed singles and families, both traditional and non-traditional. Congregation Shir Shalom prizes its diversity - economically, culturally, socially and religiously - from young families raising and educating small children to many single adults to retirees on fixed incomes. Shir Shalom actively welcomes people of all faiths to our community. Together we worship, learn, celebrate and play.

### OUR RABBI

Rabbi Steve Finley joined us in 2014 and we hope he will remain with us long into the future. Rabbi Finley is the first of our rabbis to fully commit himself to the Sonoma Valley community, not only living here full-time, but fully available to the congregation for both crisis and celebration. Our members and friends, and the wider Sonoma Valley faith community, have come to rely on his compassionate and discreet pastoral support. As the only rabbi within the Sonoma Valley community, Rabbi Finley regularly provides pastoral care to many unaffiliated Jewish individuals in the Sonoma Valley Community, in nursing homes or otherwise in need of support.

As President of the Sonoma Valley Interfaith Ministerial Association, which includes most of the faith communities in this valley, he has presided over services at many of those congregations, introducing them to Jewish practice and values, creating

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the Association's weekly radio show and, throughout the year, teaching about Judaism in local schools.

Rabbi Finley's active involvement has also helped grow congregation engagement in Shir Shalom, with a the Social Action Committee, and a more active Chesed (caring) Committee that supports congregants in distress. Rabbi Finley has led safety and security planning for Shir Shalom since the Pittsburgh events. The Rabbi leads the revitalized Shir Shalom Religious School, now with 12 students, lead teachers, and volunteer member tutors and more engaged families.

Rabbi Finley grew up in Southern California. Soon after graduating from high school he emigrated to Israel, obtaining Israeli citizenship at age 20 and settled into kibbutz life in the beautiful Jezreel Valley. There, after army service, he earned a B.A. Ed in Linguistics and English Literature and spent the next decade teaching English on a kibbutz and in Arab Christian and Arab Muslim towns and villages. Returning to Southern California in 1999, he began work in the Los Angeles Jewish community while earning a master's degree in education at the American Jewish University. Rabbi Finley was ordained in 2009 at the Academy for Jewish Religion in Los Angeles, CA.

Rabbi Finley and his wife Yaffa have a daughter and two sons, the younger of whom graduated high school in Sonoma in 2017.

### OUR LEADERSHIP

#### *Board of Directors*

Congregation Shir Shalom (CSS) has a nine-member Board of Directors, elected by the members of the Congregation at the Annual Meeting, held in June of each year. Board members serve up to two three-year terms.

The 2023-2024 President is Jan Chernoff, supported by Linda Goldman-VP, Judy Miller-Secretary, and Amy Rassen-Treasurer. Additional 2023-2024 board members are:

- Mark Hummel
- Matt Nydell
- Sydney Randazzo
- Gayle Stanford
- Ken Wornick

#### *Staff*

Congregation Shir Shalom has long depended on its members to conduct its work, under the guidance of the Board and the Rabbi. We are fortunate that many of our members continue to volunteer to step up to assume these responsibilities.

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Along with our rabbi we currently have seven additional paid staff members on Shir Shalom's payroll.

Our part-time administrative coordinator, **Tricia Ladouceur**, who has been running our office for 6 years now, is at the hub of keeping our rabbi, members, guests, committees, and all things Shir Shalom connected and running smoothly.

Our talented Communications Coordinator, **Michelle Flores**, is an important member to the Communications Committee. She organizes social media, the newsletter and the website to help keep members and guests in touch with our services and events.

Our very talented and versatile **Yaffa Finley** is mainly supporting worship services and teaching in our Hebrew School but she takes on a helpful role in many areas of Shir Shalom.

**Ari Moshe Wolfe** is our enthusiastic and musically talented teacher in the Hebrew School as well as our worship services Cantor.

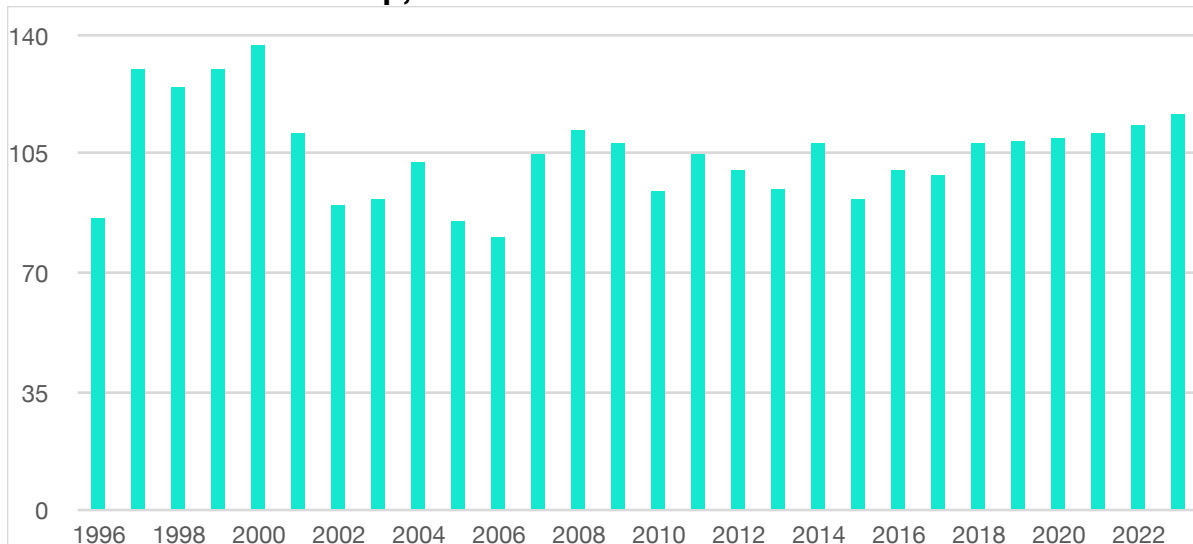
**Sophia Metzner** is our cheerful Hebrew School Assistant helping to keep school day communications active between the staff and parents as well as providing classroom activity support.

**Veronica Fontana-Coleman** has been an asset as a detail oriented assistant to Rabbi Steve for things such as the Young Professionals group and other outreach programs.

And our newest hire as Property Support, **Eladio Olvera**, is a big help with set-up and clean-up for our monthly services and numerous special events.

## MEMBERSHIP

**Chart 1: CSS Membership, 1996-2023**



Membership was quite high in the Shir Shalom's first years, when dues were nominal and the start-up synagogue received a great deal of publicity. As dues became more realistic, Shir Shalom's membership numbers have been closely linked to the presence of a Rabbi and the quality of the Rabbi's personal

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connection and leadership. As shown in Chart 1 above, membership has grown steadily during Rabbi Finley's tenure.

### CONGREGATION IN ACTION

Congregation Shir Shalom may be a still young community, with a fairly small staff, but it has extraordinarily active programs for its size.

#### *Religious Services*

CSS holds Friday evening Shabbat services on the fourth Friday of each month. Shabbat morning services are held the second Saturday of each month.

Vibrant High Holiday Programs, attended by a large group of guests as well as members, are held each fall.

#### *Youth Programs*

- Religious School: The Religious School meets Wednesday afternoons each week, September to May, with supplemental tutoring for B'nai Mitzvah candidates. There are currently 12 students enrolled, ranging in age from 6 years to 13.

#### *Adult Education*

- Torah Study is held each Shabbat Morning.
- Muriel Robbins Event: In honor of a beloved founding member, Muriel Robbins, Congregation Shir Shalom hosts a special event each year for the congregation and the community.
- Programs: Shir Shalom fosters life-long learning and spiritual growth through classes led by Rabbi Steve, speakers, potluck/movie nights, authors' book presentations, and more. These gatherings offer the Shir Shalom community and guests enrichment opportunities for learning, sharing our knowledge, and socializing with one another.
- Adult B'nai Mitzvah: In just the last five years, 18 members of the Congregation have now celebrated their B'nai Mitzvah as adults at Shir Shalom, working with Rabbi Finley to prepare for this major life event. We will again be offering a Hebrew Refresher Course this Summer for Adults and youth, temple membership is not a requirement. The next B'nai Mitzvah course will begin in September 2025 as we will follow an "every other year" schedule.

#### *Interfaith Outreach*

Research suggests that the majority of Sonoma's Jewish residents are either Interfaith or secular. Sharing the home of Sonoma's First Congregational Church for 25 years, Interfaith Outreach is built into Congregation Shir Shalom's DNA. Among the many programs Shir Shalom conducts to connect with this community are:

- Programs with the Sonoma Valley interfaith community:

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- CSS and FCC jointly celebrate the community lighting of the Chanukah candles, where the CSS Menorah is lit in the front of our joint home with all of Sonoma welcomed.
- Sonoma Valley faith leaders often attend CSS High Holy Day services and also attend the CSS Community Seder.
- The Rabbi also leads services periodically at the various churches here in Sonoma.
- Recognizing that Jewish people are a tiny minority in Sonoma Valley and in its school, with many unfamiliar with Judaism, Rabbi Finley has visited Sonoma Valley schools and senior/retirement homes and has participated in various community events to introduce Jewish holidays, music and even traditional Jewish foods.
- CSS has long participated in the Annual Sonoma Valley Interfaith Thanksgiving Day Community Service that rotates among congregations. This annual service is presented by the Sonoma Valley Interfaith group of which Rabbi Finley is currently president.

### *Celebrations and Community Events*

- Congregation Shir Shalom builds its own Sukkah on the First Congregational Church's grounds and members, including students in the Religious School, enjoy meals and snacks in the space throughout the holiday.
- Congregation Shir Shalom holds an annual Menorah lighting open to the community.
- Congregation Shir Shalom hosts a very popular, well-attended annual Community Seder on the second night of Passover. The Religious School also conducts a model Seder, to help the students learn about Passover traditions.
- Purim, Simchat Torah and Shavuot are celebrated in Shabbat services and with families in the Religious School.

## SHIR SHALOM ORGANIZATIONS

### *Sisterhood*

Our very active Sisterhood, with more than 40 members, hosts regular programs including Women in Conversation, pop-up excursions, movie tours, museum tours and dinners.

### *Men's Club*

Our Men's Club has more than 40 members and has discussion groups, along with guest speakers at monthly brunches. The club also provides wine for the Congregation's major events.

### *Committees*

- *Adult Lifelong Learning:* This committee hosts the Annual Muriel Robbins Event as well as Adult Education classes and author events.

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- *Chesed*: The Chesed (Caring) community meets regularly to identify and reach out to members in distress and arranges support (meals, transport, personal visits, morale support and encouragement.)
- *Social Action*: This committee, formed in 2018, explores ways to work with the Sonoma community, to resolve key social issues in the Sonoma Valley region.
- *Membership*: This committee is focused on both building the numbers of Shir Shalom member households and strengthening the engagement of existing CSS members. Welcome brunches are held each year for new and prospective members, along with various small group activities to engage new members.
- *Development/Fundraising*: This committee, recently reconstituted, is focused on building out CSS's fundraising infrastructure, while supporting the CSS Annual Fund, developing a planned giving program and foundation outreach, along with major donor campaigns.
- *Worship*: This committee works with the Rabbi in the planning and execution of Shir Shalom's worship services.
- *Communications*: The Communications committee is responsible for developing a communications and marketing strategy to engage members and non-members and for recommending to the Board of Directors communications policies. The committee's charge is also to implement methods for CSS to communicate with its members and other interested parties.
- *Security*: The Security Committee endeavors to plan for security improvements to facilities used by CSS at the West Spain Street campus, and to recommend relevant security training for officers and members of the Congregation
- *Legacy*: the legacy committee helps to build economic sustainability through large scale contributions and financial gifts from members and supporters. This can take the form of any contribution greater than \$20,000 and planned giving of financial assets.