



The Center of Jewish Life in the Sonoma Valley

2022/2023

ANNUAL REPORT  
TO THE COMMUNITY

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# ANNUAL REPORT

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### FROM OUR PRESIDENT



Serving this last year as President of Shir Shalom has been a complete honor and privilege. The Synagogue is lucky to have not only a fantastic board and staff, but Congregants eager to pitch in and make everything work. This is not to be taken for granted and the result is a small Congregation that accomplishes a great deal. As we frequently note, we are not only Congregation Shir Shalom but we are the organization that is the representative of Jewish Life in Sonoma Valley. We have been extremely lucky to have a dedicated Rabbi in Steve Finley, who along with his wife, Yaffa, have created a truly loving environment. Steve is now entering his tenth year as our Rabbi and the stability and dynamism shows. He is well respected throughout Sonoma Valley and beyond.

Congregation Shir Shalom's Board is simply a group of powerhouse volunteers. All of the members are active and contribute a great deal to the operations of Shir Shalom. While they all play different rolls, we need all of them to keep things running smoothly. The cooperation and sense of all working for similar goals is truly rewarding. Clearly, my job has been made much easier by my colleagues. I truly treasure their efforts.

The last year has been one of emergence for Shir Shalom. After three years of Covid induced isolation, we are back to being a real community with both in-person worship and social activities. We started in earnest with the High Holy Day Services, which were incredibly successful. Held in the Sanctuary and Zoomed with our new streaming system, the services were both forceful and touching. We received communication for months after the services acknowledging how moving the services were. This was followed by reintroducing in person Shabbat Services and our traditional potluck. The attendance keeps building as does the sense of community.

Our February Gala was just fantastic. Not only was it a great fundraiser but everyone who attended had a lot of fun. The pleasure that all of the attendees took in each other's company was obvious. Our efforts at rekindling the sense of family at Shir Shalom has been a total success.

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Our “emergence” this last year has allowed us to achieve some major accomplishments, including:

- Audio Visual Room Developed
- Launching of New Web Site
- Receiving a \$200,000 Security Grant
- Security at all In Person Events
- Launching of New Newsletter
- Launching of Shir Shalom Book Club
- Continual growth in membership
- Creation of Legacy Circle

It is important to note that none of the above items could have occurred without a significant effort on the part of our volunteers. They are committed and tireless. I, personally, remain continually impressed by the level of dedication. Many of the efforts are ongoing and require at least a weekly commitment. If you are not involved in any volunteer activity at Shir Shalom, I would urge you to become more involved. Not only will the Synagogue benefit but I believe you will find it incredibly rewarding.

As you have no doubt heard many times, our Synagogue dues accounts for less than 30% of the total cost of operations. We have been very lucky to have a generous base of membership, who provides the funds necessary for our continued operations. However, every year, it is a struggle to meet the budget requirements. The creation of a Legacy Program is meant to provide future generations at Shir Shalom with a base of income, so the struggle is not as pronounced. Many of us are already participating and we hope many more will join us. There are several ways to include Shir Shalom in your estate plans and we have congregants who can provide guidance.

We are all also aware of the new challenges faced by the resurgence of Anti-Semitism. This was a primary issue for the board and has been addressed in earnest. Our first decision was to engage private security for all of our live events. We, subsequently, decided to make a concerted effort to win a security grant which will improve things greatly at Shir Shalom. Thanks to the strong efforts by Mark Hummel and Amy Rassen, we were successful. You should be able to see the

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results in the next six to eight months. This will not be our last effort and we shall remain vigilant.

This is also the time to honor two of our departing board members, Ken Gertz and Michele Samson. Ken has been instrumental in the development of the new website and the reinvigoration of the newsletter. He has been a valuable board member, pushing for clear analysis of all Synagogue activities and on understanding the budget. Michele is the heart of the Congregation. She has led with love and compassion. Everyone who interacts with Michele has felt her warmth. She led the Congregation through the treacherous Covid period, with great success.

We will not be losing the leadership of either one of these individuals. Michele will become head of a newly created membership liaison division. You will be able to direct any question to her and if she does not have the answer, she will either obtain the answer or direct you to the right party. Ken is going to continue to head the Communications Committee. We know that both will provide the same verve and commitment that has been their hallmark.

We are excited to welcome our two new board members, Ken Wornick and Matt Nydell to the board, of course subject to your confirmation. Both bring extensive experience and commitment to Shir Shalom.

The last year has been both productive and exciting. I have been honored to work with such a cohesive and productive board. Their commitment to being the best caretakers possible for Shir Shalom is clear from what has been accomplished in the last year. I, believe, that the Synagogue has also benefitted from the strong and open relationship that I have with our Rabbi. It is built not only on respect but also a deep friendship. We both look forward to greater accomplishments in the future.

Jan Chernoff

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### FROM OUR RABBI



Dear Congregation Shir Shalom Members,

The leadership “gavel” that was passed from former president Michèle Samson to our current president Jan Chernoff was a very healthy one. Jan and our current board of directors have been doing an amazing job of keeping things “running and rolling” forward.

President Jan Chernoff has shared a very in-depth and comprehensive annual report so I will try not to be too repetitive. What is worth echoing is we truly have had an amazing year, full of fresh successes and achievements for Congregation Shir Shalom. Both Yaffa and I are privileged to be part of this exciting community and we also feel continuously fulfilled to see the fruits of our labor meshing so well with the core values and goals of our community. As we enter our tenth year in Sonoma, we truly feel the need to celebrate, as this is both a milestone for us and our vibrant Jewish community.

Our Friday night Potluck Shabbats and Shabbat morning services are great examples of our growing excitement. They have been increasingly well attended, and I have a sense of an emerging community, appreciating the joy and depth many feel of spending a few Sabbath hours together in worship, meditation and prayer. Our two recent B’nai Mitzvot, in April and May, were clear evidence of a robust sanctuary in celebration. Additionally, our Hebrew School kids have been making their mark at our Friday night Shabbats, bringing an adorability that can’t be matched.

I could not be more proud of our Chesed – Caring Community. Together, we try to meet the needs of our members in their times of spiritual and health challenges. “For this we have community” we often say, but it does take a village and we continue to be dependent on you, our members, to keep us informed of our membership and friends who could use a helping hand. We are ready to go grocery shopping, take members to appointments and, of course, make home visits for comfort and care.

Our Adult Education programs move from strength to strength. We have the Wednesday morning rabbinic text study, which has been active since March of 2020. Yep, one of the positive residuals of Covid-19. The continuing Shabbat morning Torah study has been steadily well attended, offering in-depth probing into Torah and the many other facets of text study that come into discussion. I am truly

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indebted to members of our worship and holiday ritual team who pick up the slack in leading these study groups when I am not able to attend.

The “pop up”, adult education programs we have had throughout the year have been a group effort by various temple members who have consistently brought us excellent programming of great interest to our membership. Much of the scholarly and social highlights for our community come through the hard work of both our Sisterhood and Men’s Club. These folks are both behind the scenes doing the nitty gritty that often goes unnoticed, and at the helm, leading great programming and bringing to our community exciting opportunities for enriching the heart and soul of our membership. These two groups, together with our Membership and Life-Long Learning committees are what takes the word “vibrant” to the next level. I am personally and truly grateful for all they do.

Life in the larger community of Sonoma continues to be an enriching one. I take great pleasure in extending our Shir Shalom values by reaching out to the various churches in town and spending occasional Sunday mornings both in their pews and at their podiums. I have cultivated great friendships with the various ministers and, together, we have created a Sonoma Valley Interfaith group that is thriving. While I continue to hold the title of president, it is in reality a group effort that keeps our clergy team together for the greater good of our town. We continue to keep our hand on the pulse of our major non-profits and invite our city leaders to speak at our monthly meetings. Needless to say, on our own campus is our most precious interfaith friendship, that of First CongregationalChurch.

A quick word on our Hebrew School would be “wow”. These kids continue to enrich our hearts from week to week as we attempt to enrich their minds. With various topics of Jewish studies, holidays, traditions and the soulful discussions of everything in between, Wednesday afternoons remain one of the highlights of my week, and for many of the staff as well. With the parents, staff and students, we have a small community within our larger community and this year has been as sweet as ever. We do need a boost in our student population so please spread the word.

At our monthly board meetings we always begin with a blessing of gratitude towards G0d, who brings us closer to holiness with the instruction to occupy ourselves with the needs of our beloved community. I am truly honored to be heading into year ten with Congregation Shir Shalom and feel very blessed to continue to put forth heart and soul towards the well-being of our community.

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 2022-2023 President is Jan Chernoff, supported by Linda Goldman-VP, Judy Miller-Secretary, and Amy Rassen-Treasurer. Additional 2022-2023 board members are:

- Michele Samson
- Ken Gertz
- Mark Hummel
- Sydney Randazzo
- Gayle Stanford

#### *Staff*

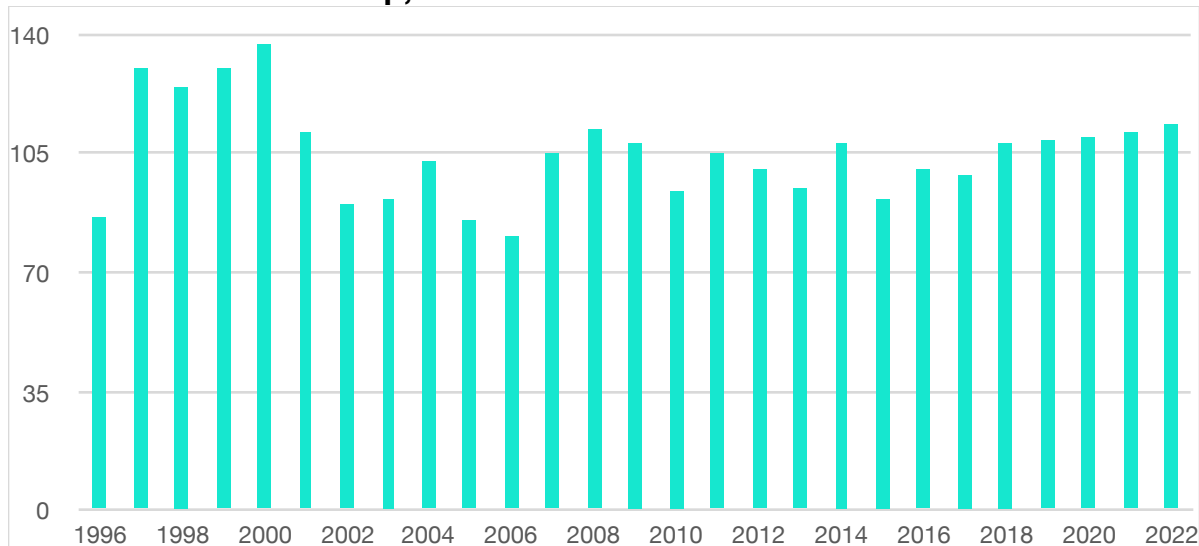
Congregation Shir Shalom has long depended on its members to conduct its work, under the guidance of the Board and the Rabbi. We are fortunate that many of our members continue to volunteer to step up to assume these responsibilities.

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Along with our rabbi we currently have three additional paid staff members on Shir Shalom's payroll. Our part-time administrative coordinator, Tricia Ladouceur, has significantly increased Shir Shalom's effectiveness over the past 5 years. 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. And Ari Moshe Wolfe is our enthusiastic and musically talented teacher in the Hebrew School.

### MEMBERSHIP

**Chart 1: CSS Membership, 1996-2022**



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 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 very 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.

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### *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 9 students enrolled, ranging in age from 7 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, 10 members of the Congregation have celebrated their B'nai Mitzvah as adults at Shir Shalom, working with Rabbi Finley to prepare for this major life event. We will be offering a Hebrew Refresher Course this Summer for Adults and youth, temple membership is not a requirement.

### *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:
  - CSS and FCC jointly celebrate the lighting of the first Chanukah candles, where the CSS Menorah is lit in the front of our joint home.
  - 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.

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### *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.
- *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

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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.