



**CONGREGATION NER SHALOM
COTATI, CALIFORNIA
ANNUAL REPORT 2022-2023**

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Welcome.

President's Report

Amy Gray



As I write this, spring has arrived in Sonoma County and along with it are bulbs coming up out of the ground in my garden. The problem is, I have no recollection of what I planted there a year or more ago. But apparently the bulbs don't have this identity problem. They will just be what they will be.

In the same way, I see Ner Shalom back in bloom, as surely as spring follows winter. It has been a hard several years, dealing with a pandemic that was unknown in human history and yet trying to make sense of covid protocols in a rapidly mutating disease. But if there is a gift from the pandemic, it's that we not only survived but thrived! We are offering more learning and more services than we ever have before. We are back to offering the frequency of in-person services as we did before the pandemic and now we have the additional option of Zoom services most Fridays each month. This is all remarkable. It isn't just recovery, it's rebirth!

And yet, it has been a hard year for our congregation. We lost beloved friends and stalwarts of the community, including Ariana Elster, Michael "Mac" McCaffry, and our resident Jewish mother, Berrine DeCarmo. Our hearts are heavy with these losses.

Under the leadership of our Youth and Family Director, Reb Mia Zimman, it's been an amazing year for the young families of Ner Shalom. Nitzanim, our experiential learning program, grew by leaps and bounds. It's been wonderful to see so many children as part of our congregation again.

Beit Midrash, our adult education program, has not let grass grow under their feet. So many programs! The list of offerings is too numerous to reference here but look at the Ner Shalom calendar. You'll be amazed at the depth and breadth of classes.

This year I eagerly started a Ner Shalom Book Club, where we read books, both fiction and non-fiction connected with Jewish culture and spirituality. It's been a fun group – come join us! We meet the

first Thursday of each month at 3pm and the books are listed on the website. The Women's Retreat is also gearing up for a wonderful day of community and learning on June 24.

I'm happy to welcome back concerts to our shul. Beginning last December with the Kinsey Sicks, continuing with last month's Music of the Shoah concert and most recently this month with SonoMusette, we have welcomed music back into the legendary Cotati Cabaret, aka our sanctuary. Holly Near has signed on for a concert in September and the Rafael Trio will return in 2024. The bulbs we planted years ago, when we cultivated relationships with all these artists, are now sprouting up.

Personally, I am so grateful for the dedication and commitment of our staff, Board, and the extended family of Ner Shalom volunteers. Everything we do rests on the shoulders of this stellar group of people. Thank you, thank you, thank you for making Ner Shalom a place of participation and joy.

I urge you to attend a Ner Shalom service or event, in person if you are able, to sample the richness and experiential Judaism we are known for. This coming year is promising to be a wonderful one!

L'shalom,

Amy

Greetings Ner Shalomers,

As your president said on the previous pages, this has been a year of some remarkable rebirth at Ner Shalom. You will read about much of it in this Annual Report. I will focus mostly on my own role at Ner Shalom and how I fit in with all that is happening.

First and foremost, I have been honored and overjoyed to be the spiritual leader of this community. I love Jewish prayer, I love how we do it, I love making music with the Good Shabbos Band, I love sharing with you my thoughts about Torah, the world, and our lives. Whether it is a Shabbat service, Passover Seder, or the High Holy Days, if I looked blissed out on the *bimah*, it is because I am.

I have experienced endless excitement this year working with our old friend and now our Family and Youth Educator, Reb Mia Zimman, in dreaming up and implementing our Nitzanim Program. Besides struggling to learn and remember all the parents' names, I find myself busy telling stories to the young people, periodically teaching in our B.Mitzvah Academy, teaching every week in our Midweek Hebrew program, getting to teach and just talk to the parents when our whole program meets together in nature, and planning Family Shabbat which will be happening more frequently in the coming year.

Since our last annual meeting, I have officiated more funerals than I ever have in a year. The Ner Shalomers who died were all people I had relationships with; some of them I had true friendships with. I confess that I felt the weight of all this loss profoundly, along with gratitude for having a way to be of service in those moments.

Last year I invited you all to come in and have a conversation with me to do some end-of-life planning. At last, some of you have, and my doors remain open to you.

Rabbi's Report

Reb Irwin Keller



In this last year, I am proud to have spearheaded a new interfaith community initiative in Sonoma County: Interfaith Public Fast (interfaithpublicfast.org). Our idea is to use community fasting as a way to bear moral witness in response to the perils and tragedies of our time. We held a first fast in March in solidarity with the unhoused and unsheltered of Sonoma County. Our next one will likely be called spontaneously, in response to something happening in the nation or the world. I hope you'll join me when that time comes.

Besides what you see me doing at Ner Shalom, I am also involved in other activities, including the Taproot Community, which offers Jewish mystical teaching and spiritual practice to young Jewish change-makers (taprootcommunity.org). This summer I am also co-teaching a lifecycle practicum in the ALEPH Ordination Program – the seminary through which I received my rabbinic ordination.

And the rest of the time I am doing what you expect of me and I expect of myself: visiting congregants in the hospital, working with folks on the journey of conversion, working with adults and young people heading toward B.Mitzvah, working with our Dean on Beit Midrash offerings, teaching monthly Yiddish Tish and other classes, meeting with our Kavanah (Spiritual Life) Committee, providing rabbinic leadership at sessions of our Celebrations Program for young people with disabilities, and serving the Board however I can.

Our congregation is larger than it used to be. But I don't want you to ever hesitate to get in touch if you'd like to talk. I am best reached by email at rebirwinkeller@gmail.com. If you don't hear back from me in a day, ping me again; my inbox is so often spilling over.

It remains my great honor to serve this community.

Rabbi (Reb) Irwin

What We Do.

Spiritual Life



Over this last year, Ner Shalom has shown up to tend to so many of the communal needs of our spiritual lives. We have **welcomed Shabbat together** every week, always on Zoom and often in the Room. When Reb Irwin was away or resting, our team of skilled leaders stepped in and led us with beauty and wisdom. Much gratitude to Ner Shalom’s spiritual leadership team: Rinat Abastado, Reb Mia Zimman, Chantleader Atzilah Solot, Sheridan Gold, Suzanne Shanbaum, Kohenet Ruach D’vorah Grenn, Reb Judith Goleman, Basha Hirschfeld, Shoshana Fershtman, Leiah Bowden, Gesher Calmenson, Shari Brenner, Stephanie Brown, and Susan Levine. Rita Rowan did a wonderful job lining up readers for all our services. (If you’ve been on the fence, reach out to Rita now and give it a try!)

Our **High Holy Days** were themed “Tending the Sacred Every Day” and involved many beautiful offerings from our large High Holy Day planning team and many other singers, poets, liturgists, Torah chanters, teachers, instrumentalists, and readers. Together, in person and online, we read Torah, made music, and, under the leadership of Cyndi Norwitz, revived our tradition of using the mechanism of “Storahtelling” to bring Torah to life. We also witnessed the fancy footwork of our tech teams and spiritual leaders when Reb Irwin came down with COVID two days before Rosh Hashanah. Much gratitude to all who stepped in to cover the pieces that couldn’t be led remotely, and to Chief-of-Tech, Suzanne Shanbaum, for thinking through ramifications and creating a home studio for Reb Irwin.

Like every year, we gathered in the *sukkah* for **Sukkot** and Hoshana Rabbah. We partied at **Chanukah**. We staged a riotous act-your-own *megillah* for **Purim**. We came together in person and online for **Passover** Seder. Coming next week: our annual **Shavuot** night of learning. (See the Beit Midrash report.)

All ritual was supported by our **technology mavens**, including Suzanne Shanbaum and Roey Abastado producing the beautiful sound; and Cyndi Norwitz heading up the Zoom team.

The year had its share of celebration. We welcomed Jakob Monterrey-Seitchik and Noah Brown as **b'nei mitzvah** – adults held in the embrace of our Ner Shalom community.

It was also a year of sorrow. We lost many Ner Shalom members and spent more time in our beautiful Ner Shalom cemetery than we'd ever imagined. We held the mourners; we held each other. (See the *In Memoriam* on p. 34.) With these losses, Ner Shalom began to develop its own alternative ritual of a **Chanting Taharah** that continues to take shape.

In the Department of New Beginnings, we have launched an in-person **Family Shabbat** which we hope to make a monthly event in 5784. The Family Shabbat has included art projects, dinner, a short prayer service and, typically, a Chelm story delivered by Reb Irwin. Perfect for families with young children and all Ner Shalomers who enjoy being in multi-generational community.

Over this year, Rinat Abastado reinstated **Shabbat Torah Study** and we are so grateful.

Reb Irwin continues to be available for calls and visits to hear what is going on with you. He encourages everyone to meet with him to do some **end-of-life planning** – it sounds difficult, but it is always a rich conversation in which values are clarified and vision is established.

Last summer we welcomed Anne Tamar-Mattis into the Jewish community with the name *Chanah bat Rut v'Naomi*. Reb Irwin is currently working with four individuals on their **conversion journey**.

All of Ner Shalom spiritual life is overseen by the good people of the **Kavanah Committee**, who dream it up, weigh it out, and do their best to see it to completion. If you're interesting in joining the Kavanah Committee, contact Reb Irwin.

Last thing. This is Reb Irwin's 15th year as Ner Shalom's spiritual leader and, not coincidentally, the 15th year of his blog, **Itzik's Well**. If you've missed or want to revisit any of his sermons or essays, just go to irwinkeller.com and click on Itzik's Well, where you can subscribe to receive every *drash* the day after it is presented at Ner Shalom.

Greetings!

Hello everyone. I am delighted to be reporting to you at the end of my first school year as the Family and Youth Educator at Ner Shalom. I have been a friend of Ner Shalom for many years and a frequent collaborator with Reb Irwin. It has truly been an honor and a joy to be supporting and guiding Ner Shalom's youth and family programs and to be laying down roots here for my own family as well.

If we haven't met yet, let me tell you a little about myself. I have a long background in Jewish education and Jewish spiritual leadership, beginning in a garden cabin in the southern Appalachians, among a diverse Jewish and interfaith community. Over the past 20 years, I've led holiday celebrations, Shabbat services, and life cycle rituals out on the trails, mountaintops, in gardens and groves, backyards, and in synagogues of a variety of denominations.

I hold a certification in Jewish Spiritual Direction through ALEPH, a master's degree in Jewish Education from Hebrew Union College, and I am a curriculum specialist. I love to mine the gems inside of Jewish wisdom that help give meaning and purpose to our lives, and that result in our taking action to make the world a kinder and more equitable place.

Nitzanim Successes and Growth

Our Nitzanim Family Experiential Learning Program began in 2019, with the goal of responding to a growing need for innovative approaches to Jewish education and family engagement in Sonoma County.

Kids & Families

Reb Mia Zimman





Year by year we have developed, expanded, and refined our programs to meet the needs of the families who are drawn to us: mostly interfaith and unaffiliated, responding to a longing for meaningful Jewish connection and learning at a family-wide level. As one parent writes, “Nitzanim is a space in which my family can bring our whole selves and feel welcomed and treasured for who we are.”

Over this last year, Nitzanim has sparked an interest beyond our imaginings. We have promoted an “open tent” model for participation, and it has served to dramatically increase the size of our community of families. Our summer kickoff and our Rosh Hashanah Family Learning at Ragle Park each had over 100 participants!

During the 2022-2023 school year Nitzanim offered three distinct but integrated

educational components: Family Experiential Learning, B. Mitzvah Academy, and Midweek Hebrew.

Midweek Hebrew met at Ner Shalom and had 14 dedicated Hebrew learners divided into beginner and intermediate level groups, taught by Reb Irwin and Ilana Vinizky.

B.Mitzvah Academy, with its 13 learners and 1 teen *madrich*, met twice monthly: once at Ner Shalom, and once in nature in coordination with our Family Experiential Learning. Our B.Mitzvah Academy curriculum focused on Judaism and the environment, Jewish values, Shabbat prayers, and deeper meanings that lie within the Jewish holidays. I serve as the lead teacher for the B.Mitzvah academy, with the participation of Reb Irwin and a rotating nature specialist.



Our **Family Experiential Learning** met monthly at parks and farms throughout the county. These included Jack London State Park, Open Field Farm in Petaluma, Preston Farm and Winery in Healdsburg, the Grove of Old Trees in Occidental, Salmon Creek Beach, and Open Sky Retreat Center in Sebastopol – and at Ner Shalom also! Typically, 45-65 people gathered for each of these programs to explore Jewish holidays and associated Jewish values, while experiencing nature-inspired activities to illustrate them. The young people were delighted and so were their grownups.

With our significant growth this year we discovered we needed our curriculum to speak to more specific age clusters. So, while our Family Learning sessions begin and end together, the middle part takes place in 4

groups: preschool, elementary, B. Mitzvah, and parents. Leslie Gattmann and John Maas became inspiring leaders of parents while our B. Mitzvah learners go off with a Jewish nature educator to explore themes of rite of passage in Judaism and in nature. Joining me as core faculty are Lauren Broersma-Grossman, Alice Pennes, Bucky Brynjegard-Bialik, and Reb Irwin.

A few additional highlights of this year:

We formed a Parent Advisory Council. With the help of council chairs Adam Shemper and Kamala Brown, we recruited an amazing team! Rachel Friedman, Emily Cosin, Leslie Gattmann, Lauren Broersma-Grossman, Reb Irwin, and I met with Adam and Kamala monthly to review and refine our programs, discuss fundraising, and envision next steps and possibilities.

We also brought Lauren Broersma-Grossman onto the team beyond her role as an educator, to bring her magic, kindness, and wisdom to support our communications and outreach efforts, and help us grow the additional opportunities below.

What's Ahead

In the coming year, we will begin to facilitate opportunities for expanded family engagement, including *chavurot*, a foster grandparent program, and a steady stream of informal popup events to help families connect. We will continue to help support Ner Shalom's new series of Family Shabbat services. And in our formal learning programs, we are excited to pilot a pioneering "Pardes" pedagogy to teach critical inquiry into

both Torah text and terrain with our B. Mitzvah learners.

See You Soon

I've really appreciated the chance to meet some of you this year and am looking forward to the chance to meet more of you! You might have already seen my 3-year-old, Luna, who loves everything Nitzanim and Ner Shalom and despite being quite shy, will sing in the microphone any chance she can get. My husband Alejandro, who makes delicious wine, loves to participate in Nitzanim nature-based programs as well! I look forward to seeing you very soon.



Beit Midrash

*Love of Learning
at Ner Shalom*

Barbara Lesch McCaffry
Beit Midrash Dean



A Year of Successes

It was another amazing year of learning for *Beit Midrash*. We offered 32 class sessions, coordinated by our Dean, Barbara Lesch McCaffry, with support from our inspiring Steering Committee: Shari Brenner, Shoshana Fershtman, Gesher Calmenson, and Basha Hirschfeld. We are also grateful to Ellyn Lazar, Cyndi Norwitz, Ari Hilton, and Shari Brenner for their tech support as Zoom *shamashimot* for the classes.

Special thanks to this year's inspiring teachers:

Gesher Calmenson
Sally Churgel
Sheridan Gold
Shoshana Fershtman
Reb Judith Goleman
Sheridan Gold
Basha Hirschfeld
Doron Hovav
Reb Irwin Keller
Lisa R uth

Beit Midrash held a scholar-in-residence weekend featuring Rabbi Dr. Leila Gal Berner, teaching about the Jewish history of Medieval Spain and offering an experiential *lectio divina* Torah session.

We offered 8 distinct classes, most of them multi-session, with 510 student appearances. Our Tikkun Leyl Shavuot on Zoom brought 232 attendees. Thanks to our investment in Zoom accessibility, Beit Midrash attendees came from the Bay Area, Florida, Alaska, Canada, Germany, Poland, and Australia.

Our regular educational offerings from June 1, 2022, to April 15, 2023, included:

- **Seven Heavens: Removing Veils Between Us and God.**
Led by Reb Judith Goleman.
- **Elul: Seeds of Becoming**, a four-part series led by Basha Hirschfeld, Gesher Calmenson, Reb Judith Goleman and Shoshana Fershtman.
- **Collage Workshops** with two sessions: “Tending the Sacred of Our Soul” for the High Holidays and “Cleansing Spiritual *Chametz* for Passover” facilitated by Sally Churgel and Sheridan Gold.
- **Conversations on Buddhism and Judaism.** Three sessions which focused on “Suffering & Death,” “The Self and Impermanence,” and “What Does Life Require of Me?” taught by Reb Judith Goleman and Basha Hirschfeld. We hope this will become a bi-monthly offering.
- **Beloved Land: An Intro to Israel** a three-part series taught by Reb Irwin Keller and Doron Hovav in preparation for our congregational trip to Israel and the West Bank. It also included the recording of last year’s class, **How Did We Get Here and Where Could We Go from Here? Israel and Palestine Today**, taught by guest scholar, Rabbi Maurice Harris of Reconstructing Judaism.
- ***The Mystical Exodus in Jungian Perspective: Transforming Trauma and the Wellsprings of Renewal***, a four-part discussion of her groundbreaking study led by Shoshana Fershtman.
- **Yiddish Tish**, 11 sessions led by Reb Irwin Keller with a guest appearance by Lisa R uth from Germany.

Our Tikkun Leyl Shavuot 2022, with its theme “Learning from the Edges,” featured a range of topics taught by Rabbi Diane Elliot, Shoshana Fershtman, Yael Raff Peskin, Alissa Hirshfeld, Rabbi George Gittleman, and Reb Irwin. The next day Reb Irwin and Barbara Lesch McCaffry held an in-person “Shavuot Tish” learning session.

(Most all our classes and the Tikkun were captured on video. If there was a class or a session you missed that you would still like to see, contact learning@nershalom.org and we can get you the link.)

This year’s Tikkun, “The Slow Reveal,” takes place on Thursday, May 25th, and boasts 10 workshops. The details (including in-person learning the next day) can be found at nershalom.org.

Educator of the Year

This year we honor **Shoshana Fershtman** as the Beit Midrash Educator of the Year. By doing so we hope to express our gratitude for her many years of teaching at Ner Shalom, her role on our Beit Midrash Steering Committee, and her prior role as Dean of our Educational Programs. From classes that lean into the mystical to her groundbreaking study of the *Mystical Exodus*, Shoshana has inspired our exploration of our deepest Jewish roots and our understanding of the role of women and the Divine Feminine in that tradition. Her teaching always braids the academic with the spiritual and experiential. Thank you, Shoshana, for being our teacher.



Annual Brainstorming Session

The annual Beit Midrash brainstorming gathering will be held on June 5th at 6pm on Zoom. If you would like to be part of the joyous conversation and weigh in on what you'd like to learn, email Barbara at learning@nershalom.org.

Band of Angels

Leiah Bowden



Ner Shalom's Band of Angels is a loose group of volunteers who are willing, as needs arise and as they are able, to call or visit a sick or grieving community member, offer a ride to a medical appointment, or prepare and freeze a pot of soup that can be used by an individual or family in crisis.

Here's how it works: As coordinator, I periodically send an email to the group asking who can help meet a particular need. Whoever can catch the ball does so and lets us know that the soup is in the pot (or whatever).

Last year we reached out to people needing help in around 23 difficult situations. Some circumstances required recurring help. We try our best to serve not only our members in need but also non-Ner Shalomers who are frequent participants in our services or programs.

This is perhaps the most *mitzvah*-driven effort at Ner Shalom. We try to fulfill the *mitzvot* of *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick), *nichum avelim* (comforting mourners), and *g'milut chasadim* (acts of kindness). We welcome your participation. Just email me (lightspeak@gmail.com) and ask to be on the distribution. You don't have to say "yes" to any particular ask; but there will eventually come a request for which you are the right person, and we want you to have the holy opportunity to be of service.



Painting by Leiah Bowden

From an email dated September 10, 2007:

*Dear Board Members of Ner Shalom,
Leslie and I appreciate your consideration of this proposed
budget for the Special Needs Class.*

That was the introduction to what became the Celebrations Program. We are grateful to the leadership of Ner Shalom and to Rabbi Irwin for their commitment and support. We kick off our 17th year this summer!

Celebrations at Ner Shalom serves the needs of young people with significant disabilities and their families. Celebrations continues to be a pioneering program. Sessions focus on Jewish holidays and involve music, art, food, storytelling, games, and teachings about the holiday. Our May Lag Ba’Omer event featured an Israeli dance party and a trip to our local firehouse (we figured that was the closest we could get to having a bonfire to celebrate the holiday!).

During the 2022-2023 year, conscious of the medical fragility of some of our participants, we held most in-person gatherings in the welcoming East Courtyard at Ner Shalom. Participants came from Sonoma County, the East Bay, and San Francisco. We added Zoom components which enabled families to attend from as far as Vancouver, BC, as well as local families unable to travel for health reasons. We were happy to have recent B.Mitzvah student Noah Brown volunteering at Celebrations as his service project for the year.

Celebrations’ shoestring budget is funded primarily by the participating families. Last month, RTI International, a nonprofit research organization that is the employer of Jennifer Lorvick, one of Celebrations’ leaders, made a donation of \$4,500! Please help us identify additional institutional and philanthropic sources to keep the Celebrations Program thriving!

Thank you, Ner Shalom, from our Celebrations leadership: **Mary Ann Malinak, Leslie Gattmann and Jennifer Lorvick**, and from our wonderful Celebrations Families!

Celebrations Program For Young People with Disabilities and their Families

Mary Ann Malinak



Photo: John Maas

Tzedek

Social Justice Action

Elaine Leeder
Rita Rowan
Shoshana Fershtman
Roberta Teller
Eszter Freeman
Jane Lawhon
Abby Bogomolny



Collage by Janet Rae Jorgensen

Tzedek (the Social Justice Arm of Ner Shalom) was quieter this year because of medical issues in our leadership circle. Nonetheless, we accomplished quite a bit. In 2022 we spearheaded a partnership with Congregation Shomrei Torah to send over 3200 postcards to states around the country encouraging voter registration. We were thrilled with the response from both Congregations and proud of our accomplishment.

A year ago we hosted an online Social Justice Café called “Rethinking Justice” in which a number of formerly incarcerated speakers gave us insight into the mass incarceration that is taking place in our country. Over 40 people participated, giving rise to donations and support for their organizations coming from within our community. The program was co-sponsored with the Northern California chapter of the Workers Circle (formerly Workmen’s Circle/Arbeter Ring).

In the last year, two separate Ner Shalom cohorts studied “The Stolen Beam Series: A Study of Reparations for Descendants of Enslaved Africans in the US,” a curriculum distributed by Reconstructing Judaism, bringing Jewish text and thought to bear on the question of equity, harm, and reparations. The first cohort, held in the summer of 2022, included 8 people and was facilitated by Alison Marks and Shari Brenner. The second enrolled 12 Ner Shalom, Shomrei Torah and larger community members and was facilitated by Elaine Leeder and Barbara Goodman. These discussions are leading to a fruitful dialogue of what we can do next to move this agenda along.

In January Elaine Leeder presented her talk “What’s A Nice Jewish Girl Like You Doing in a Place Like This: Jews, Spirituality and Prison” in a Zoom format. Thirty people from around the country attended the event, co-sponsored by Ner Shalom and the Institute for Jewish Spirituality and Society.

And in March we supported the work of the brand new Interfaith Public Fast coalition, bringing spiritual technologies to political consciousness. In the March fast, participants stood witness to the situation of unhoused and unsheltered residents of Sonoma County.

We are currently planning next year’s agenda. Reach out to any of us to join us in being Ner Shalom’s voice for justice!

Ner Shalom Journey to Israel & Palestine

Sally Churgel



Israel literally means “The One who wrestles with God.” For ten days, the 24 participants on this once-in-a-lifetime journey found themselves wrestling with the dichotomy that is Israel. The holy spots were wholly packed with tourists and buses. The disparate voices that we heard from the two peoples who consider this land home made clear that no one is going anywhere, and that peace will have to come from within. Yet the bottom line we heard over and over was that all sides yearn for safety and home. We had a Jewish progressive guide named Yael and a Palestinian guide named Samer who demonstrated a possible Israel where agreement and agreement to disagree can live side by side.

Our itinerary was full to the brim. From the Dead Sea at an altitude of -431 to Tzfat at +3,074, we toured the land from the stark desert to the green hills of the Galilee. On the road from Tel Aviv to Tzfat we could see on one side the Separation Wall that snakes through the countryside with dirt and plants masking it in places. On the other side of the bus, we could see the coast only 6 miles away, revealing the small size of the country.

We tended our spirits through prayer at the Western Wall, welcoming Shabbat at a Reform synagogue in Jerusalem, Shabbat dinner at the home of kabbalist and chef Rabbi Josh, *havdalah* with Rabbi Elliot Ginsburg, learning about the *sefirot* at David Frishman’s Kosmic Kabbalah art studio in Tzfat, and visiting the exquisite Abohav Synagogue founded by the family of one of our Ner Shalom members.

Snapshots of the complexity that is Israel: crowded, incense-infused Church of the Holy Sepulcher; the Dome of the Rock mosque on the plaza above the Western Wall; a rabbi from a settlement in East Jerusalem thinking nothing of packing a gun while telling us he is all for safety; the “Walled-Off Hotel” and Museum displaying art from Banksy across the street from the Separation Wall in the West Bank, only miles from the town center in Jerusalem.

Art and history are everywhere, from the graffiti on the Separation Wall and the giant eyes painted on the houses in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan to the beauty of the Israel Museum, the awe of the Dead Sea scrolls, and the pain of the Holocaust on display at Yad Vashem.

Food is no small thing in Israel. We learned to roll stuffed cabbage in a Lebanese restaurant in Haifa, watched our Palestinian host in Silwan turn over a giant pot of *maklubah* – an upside-down dish with a mountain of rice and chicken and veggies, and enjoyed Israeli breakfasts of salads, bread, and cheeses.

The archaeology and the extensive history of Israel were best displayed at Massada and at the ancient City of David in Jerusalem and for some, the underground tunnel tour of the Old City of Jerusalem.

Politics is the subterranean aspect of Israeli life that was made clearer in our talks with Hadassah Froman, an Orthodox Jewish peacemaker in the West Bank settlement of Tekoah, and with professor Yofi Tirosh in Jerusalem.

We enjoyed physical movement through text study and yoga with Diane Bloomfield and Hebrew “Living Letters” exercises with Yehudit Goldfarb. We climbed more stairs than we could count which brought us together navigating with Jenny in her wheelchair.

Most moving of all were the cross-cultural moments: a group of Muslim women sharing their meal with us outside the Dome of the Rock; spontaneous singing of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* with a group of Korean Christians at the Church of the Shepherds’ Field in Bethlehem. We heard the gut-wrenching stories from Rami, a Jew, and Bassam, a Palestinian, from the Parents’ Circle, about losing their daughters through hate and how these fathers found healing through forgiveness.

We returned just days ago, and it will take time to assimilate the experience. But no matter the personal experiences of each person on the tour, everyone will agree that it was one unforgettable trip.





OUR NER SHALOM CEMETERY

Ner Shalom is proud to hold the only natural-style, green-ready, Jewish burial ground in Sonoma County. Our cemetery, along a creek in Sebastopol, is home to foxes, bobcats, gravenstein apples, wild radish, and red sorrel. The Ner Shalom section is open to Ner Shalom members of any faith, as well as non-members who wish to be buried in a progressive Jewish cemetery. We offer traditional burials as well as interment of ashes. We have also launched our Scattering Garden on the site.

Last fall we dedicated a welcome boulder etched with the name of our congregation. We will gather again on **Sunday, September 10, 2023** at 10am for our annual congregational visit. We will meet, sing, and visit our beloveds who are buried there.

For information on pre-purchasing burial or cremation plots, or to find out more about our Scattering Garden, contact Pleasant Hills Memorial Park at (707) 823-5042.



Photos by Reb Irwin and Lorenzo Valensi

How We Do It.

Membership Report

Stephanie Brown



As of this report, our membership stands at 134 households. I'd like to welcome our newest members who joined over this fiscal year and to welcome back returning members who found life was better with us than without us!

Alexandra Appel
Nina Carson & Marc Dellorco
Marsha Connell
Sue Davis
Susan Dubin & Lisa Moran
Eve Harris
Joel & Andrea Leland
Joan MacKenzie
Russ Messing
Roy Mitchell

Membership at Ner Shalom has its privileges. Among them are:

- Discounted tickets for High Holy Days, events, and concerts.
- One free Beit Midrash class and reduced fees for future classes (which are incredible by the way).
- Access to our wonderful rabbi for spiritual counseling and life cycle events, including baby naming, b.mitzvah, funeral, and *shivah* support.
- Invitation to attend member-only events, such as the Women's Retreat.
- The opportunity to serve on the Board or committees, or to take other leadership roles in ritual and at events.

Our Membership Committee will soon be meeting to map out our functions and activities for the coming year. If you are interested in helping us with the holy tasks of outreach, welcome, and engagement of new members, please reach out to me. We'd love to have your enthusiasm and ideas.

Keeping it All Together

Administration and
Communications



We make it look easy. At least we try to. But keeping an organization of our size humming takes a lot of behind-the-scenes work. Our Administrator, **Vicki Allen**, is the frontline person answering your phone calls and email inquiries, as well as those of new community members, clergy, businesses, vendors, and everyone else. You wouldn't believe the range of calls we get in a single day.

Vicki receives and tracks donations, issues payments, keeps the books, and provides financial reports for Board committees and program directors. She oversees payroll, staffs most Board committees, and manages the master calendar.

Vicki manages the facilities and liaises with renters, including the Mixed Greens Pre-School that has shared our space for two years. She manages logistics of Ner Shalom events and large rituals, handling ticketing and room setup and teardown. She is the primary keeper of the Membership Database and the Yahrzeit spreadsheets.



Meanwhile, the Ner Shalom community receives beautiful weekly, monthly, and special event eBlasts. These are chock full of information and links for upcoming events and services. Since fall of 2020, this function has been carried out by volunteer **Shari Brenner**. Shari watches the calendar, upcoming Yahrzeits and birthdays, and recent donors for inclusion in our eBlasts. She does the editing and layout and makes sure all the links work.

An additional piece of this coordination and promotion function is maintaining our beautiful website. Shari is typically the person who creates the web calendar events and Ticketleap signups. Shari also gathers the creative work of our lay spiritual leaders at Ner Shalom and makes them available on our website. She also makes the video recordings of all our Beit Midrash classes available on archive.org.

This Old House

Mark Miller



This has been an easy year with our building. No major work done, nothing big. Just a few simple repairs here and there (a leaky pipe replaced, a heater repaired, trees trimmed, and light bulbs: lots of lightbulbs), as well as a bit of spiffing up, both in process and planned, thanks to the Hiddur Mitzvah Committee headed by Stephanie Brown (see separate report).

We have been doing some forward planning and budgeting for needed updates and repairs coming up within the next couple of years. Overall, we are trying to be both relaxed and alert.

We are hosting hybrid services again. We are always on Zoom, but also physically in the room half the weeks. The building is very happy to have folks back in after our COVID-required pause. And let me say: Welcome.

We are grateful to the members of our Building Committee: Lorenzo Valensi, Suzanne Shanbaum, Alan Ziff, Vicki Allen, and Mark Miller.



A new committee formed this year with a self-proclaimed task: strive to make our physical space at Ner Shalom as beautiful as our services are! *Hiddur Mitzvah* – “Beautification of Mitzvah” – was formed with committee members Rita Rowan, Anna Belle Kaufman, Rhonda Goodman, and Stephanie Brown, with invaluable assistance from Mark Miller, Vicki Allen, and Rabbi Irwin.

The committee’s work of giving our space some badly needed TLC is ongoing. We began with the foyer, wanting it to be bright and inviting. To that end, we emptied it of books, old umbrellas, and miscellaneous clutter. Two teams of volunteers painted the space a bright white. Much thanks to Dianna Grayer, Sheridan Gold, Stephanie Brown, Mark Miller, Amy and Jim Gray, Kamala Brown and Sherey Smani (pictured to the right). Artwork is being added to the walls, still a work in process. Thanks to Sharon and Alan Ziff, Anna Belle Kaufman, and the estate of Dori Giller for art donations. If you haven’t noticed the result as you’ve walked in, stop and take a look! It feels lighter and brighter and much more welcoming.

We have removed some old furniture from the sanctuary and replaced it with specially chosen, gently used furniture. Vicki and Mark worked diligently to clean up, cull and straighten up the library, which had become a sort of catch-all room, and is now a nice, usable space. (Go sit there sometime when you come in!)

A new-to-us breakfront was added to the Oneg Shabbat Room, which is the next area we will turn our beautifying efforts towards. We are in process of envisioning how to make that space as lovely as possible, while keeping costs down.

In dreams and visions of the future, we see new carpet, flooring and inside painting on the horizon. A rotating art exhibit space on a wall in the sanctuary or Oneg Room is a possibility, which would be a great way to both beautify our space and give the artist-members of our community a venue to display and possibly sell their work. Interested in organizing and running the gallery endeavor? Reach out to Stephanie Brown.

And if you have visions you’d like to share or are willing to give some of your time for very soul-satisfying workdays caring for the sacred space, please let us know!

Hiddur Mitzvah Synagogue Beautification

Stephanie Brown



Energizing the Entry

The Financials

Alison Marks, Treasurer

Probably very few members agree that the financial report is as exciting as all the other things that go on in our community. But as your new treasurer, I assure you... this is where the rubber meets the road!

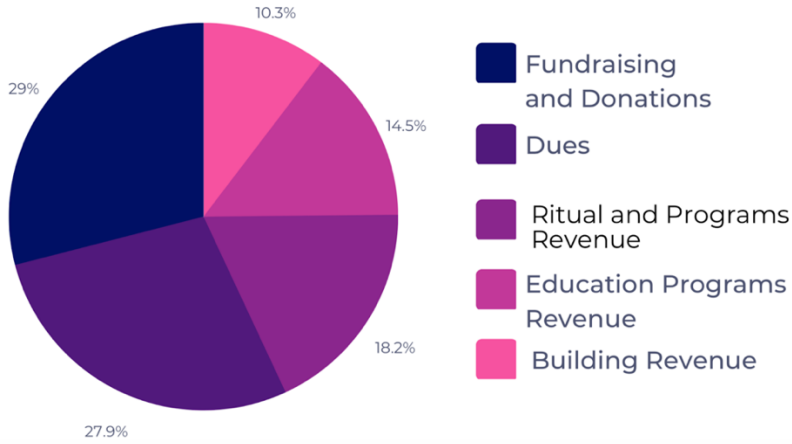
A good budgeting process serves as an opportunity for planning. It's a great tool for having meaningful conversations about what's really important to us at this point in time. This year we've upped that a notch. Not only is the Board setting priorities for the next fiscal year, but we've sought input from leaders of most of the groups that operate as part of our community, asking them to submit program budgets. This new avenue for communication has landed us with, we believe, a more informed and accurate budget for 2023-24 (not yet approved), and more understanding and buy-in among those involved.

Overall our financial health is stable and we're doing well. On the spreadsheet, what that looks like is your dues of \$86,183, and donations of \$89,430 (yay, us!), with other income from rituals, educational and other programs and building rentals. 47% of this (\$144,112) went to employing our dedicated and talented staff, and \$66,760 toward building expenses. (Even though we own our building outright – no small feat for a congregation of our size! – it still costs quite a bit to keep the doors open.) Other expenses included ritual expenses, educational and other program expenses, and operations.

We are pretty much on target for the year, as we've been diligent about staying within our budget, despite some unexpected expenses, like an \$8,000 plumbing bill. And we're building our reserves for the future so we can both continue to grow AND not have to scramble when those types of expenses come up in the future. (And one thing we know is that they WILL come up!)

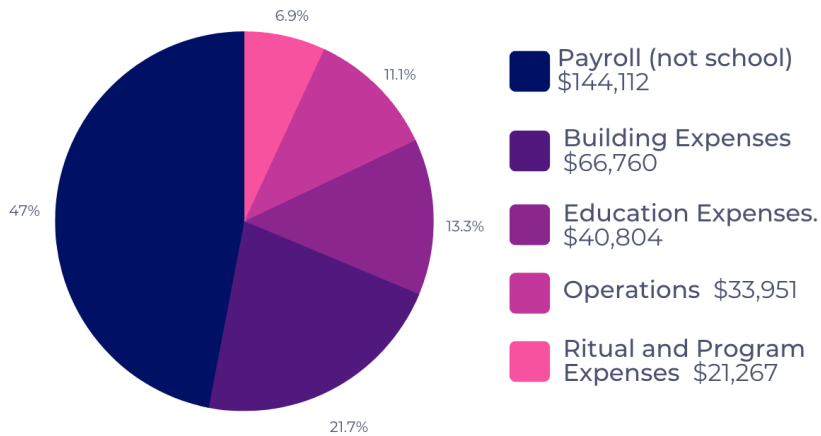
Let me underscore for you what a feat this is. In the past two years we've taken on two significant upgrades in our community. We brought Rabbi Irwin on as a full-fledged rabbi at 75% FTE, with a salary that matches, and we started a school. Both of these were major financial undertakings. AND, after such a short time, we can hardly imagine Ner Shalom without either one of them. Neither could have happened without the enthusiasm and support of YOU! We are actively, meaningfully, and wonderfully growing. THANK YOU!

2022-23 INCOME



As you can see, every dollar you invest in Ner Shalom is put to good use!

2022-23 EXPENSES



If you're inspired to donate, go right now to nershlo.org and click on "Donate."

Fundraising

Amy Gray



As you can see from the Treasurer's report, a good chunk of our income comes from our fundraising efforts. This year we started off with a joyous music and dance party called "L'Chaim," featuring the San Francisco Yiddish Combo and dance leader Bruce Bierman. It was a fun (and hot) way to kick off our new fiscal year and brought in some shekels as well.

Our main fundraising effort is the "Season of Giving," which runs from Rosh Hashanah through December 31. This year saw a splendid response, with you donating over \$48,500. Additionally, December brought the joyous return of the Kinsey Sicks, (dis)gracing both the room and zoom with their saucy antics.

For a non-profit such as Ner Shalom, fundraising is a necessary and important way to keep the doors open, pay the staff, and create wonderful, uplifting services and programs. Everything we raise, from \$1 to \$10,000 goes directly into the health and well-being of our beloved synagogue.

In addition to fundraising events and the Season of Giving, there are many ways you can support Ner Shalom:

- Sponsor a shabbat service. Honor a loved one or celebrate a *simchah*. Contact Vicki for more details.
- Help buy a *megillah*. This year we did a quick fundraiser to purchase our very own *Megillat Esther* so that future Purim services will be well represented by a beautiful scroll.
- Give to Nitzanim, our family program. This year Nitzanim asked the congregation to help fund the 20% of expenses not covered by tuition – and you responded generously by donating over \$4000.
- Honor a loved one's *yahrzeit*. It is a tradition to honor a loved one's memory in this way.
- Donate to the Rebbe-to-Rabbi fund. This campaign has raised over \$100,000 in three years to support our rabbinic position.
- Attend a concert! Enjoy a fun evening and support Ner Shalom at the same time.

The fundraising committee is always looking for new ways for our congregants to participate in the financial well-being of Ner Shalom. If you have an idea or would like to help, contact me at president@nershalom.org. In deep appreciation of your generosity and commitment!

Ner Shalom's Legacy Giving Committee, made up of Elaine Leeder, Amy Gray, Sally Churgel, Tanya Robertson, Vicki Allen, Art Magnus and Mary Ann Malinak, has reconvened after a pandemic-related hiatus.

Congregation Ner Shalom has touched all of us in so many different ways. We all want to make certain this incredibly special community will be here to serve our future generations. With that in mind, we ask you to consider joining our **Legacy Circle** by adding Ner Shalom to your estate planning efforts.

Our Legacy Circle consists of members and friends of Ner Shalom who have generously agreed to remember Ner Shalom in their wills and estate plans. This is simple to do and can be done for estates of any size and for various types of assets, including life insurance policies.

If Ner Shalom has made a difference in your life, please consider joining our Legacy Circle so that your family, friends, and future generations will continue to have Ner Shalom as their spiritual home.

For more information on becoming a Legacy Circle member and for other ways to support our community, contact Elaine Leeder (leeder@sonoma.edu).

Information you may need for your documents:

Our Legal Name: Sonoma County Synagogue Center

Our Tax ID Number ("EIN"): 94-2832498

Legacy Giving

In Closing.



IN MEMORIAM

Since our last congregational meeting, we have lost these irreplaceable members:

Dori Giller (d. Aug. 20, 2022) was a native Chicagoan, an activist, a painter, a musician, and a joyous spirit. She served on the Ner Shalom Board and spearheaded some of our early Social Justice campaigns.

Elaine Eliora Greenwood (d. Nov. 11, 2022) came to California as a hippie and a farmer. She became a respected marriage and family therapist and an accomplished painter with a studio in Santa Rosa. Elaine's mantra was "Art Heals" – whether you are making it or viewing it.

Ariana Elster (d. Nov. 22, 2022) was a gardener, a chef, a volunteer about town (including in our Celebrations Program), a Ner Shalom Board President, and a larger-than-life figure. In the 1970s she won a free speech case at the US Supreme Court. She will be remembered for her generosity, her edge, and her beautiful *challot*.

Michael Mac McCaffry (d. Dec. 2, 2022) was a beloved Ner Shalomer and husband of Barbara Lesch McCaffry. Our sanctuary still vibrates with his British-accented baritone, booming forth the Book of Jonah annually on Yom Kippur. Mac was a former Catholic seminarian and brought his deep and saturating love of the Divine to all the roles he played at Ner Shalom.

Michael Ferar (d. Jan. 1, 2023) was the husband of Barkat, the father of Sophia, and grandfather of Aria Claire. He was an artist, craftsman, sailor, and naturalist. He built Ner Shalom's beautiful Torah table.

Berrine Cohen DeCarmo (d. Mar. 18, 2023) was a longtime fixture at Ner Shalom, having served in every possible capacity, including Board Member, Kitchen Maven, Gift Shoppe Proprietor, Yahrzeit Keeper, Resident Jewish Mother, and friend. Many described Berrine as the beating heart of Ner Shalom. She valued service above all, was an eager and encouraging listener, and had a strong bond with the Divine, whom she nicknamed "Louie."

In addition to these fine humans, many Ner Shalom members lost beloveds over the past year:

Judge Beryl Levine, mother of Susan Levine

Jerry Connell, husband of Marsha Connell and frequent beloved presence at Ner Shalom

Stuart Mestelman, brother of Sharon Ziff

Renee "Ronnie" Genser, mother of Mitch Genser

Mark Bauman, beloved friend of many Ner Shalomers

Rose Sussman, mother of Marsha Connell and Yiddish Tish mainstay

Rabbi Joseph Levine, stepfather of Hannah Caratti

Barry Ponneck, brother of Karen Rotstein

Shirley Magnus, mother of Art Magnus

Karen Mihalovich, former Ner Shalomer

(If we didn't know about your loved one, please let us know.)

Photo by Lorenzo Valensi

Get Involved

There are many ways to be involved at Ner Shalom. Here are some of our standing committees and teams and functions that could use your head, heart, and hands:

Band of Angels

Leiah Bowden
lightspeak@gmail.com

Greeting Team

Jane Lawhon
janelawhon2@gmail.com

Office and Tech Support

Vicki Allen, Administrator
vicki@nershalom.org

Beit Midrash Lifelong Learning

Barbara Lesch McCaffry
learning@nershalom.org

Hiddur Mitzvah / Beautification Committee

Stephanie Brown
stephanieb1818@gmail.com

Ritual Participation

Rita Rowan
10ritaanne@gmail.com

Building Committee

Mark Miller
mark.ns@threeboysfarm.com

Kavanah / Spiritual Life

Rabbi Irwin Keller
rebirwinkeller@gmail.com

Service Setup/Strike

Vicki Allen, Administrator
vicki@nershalom.org

Celebrations Program

Mary Ann Malinak
mamalinak@comcast.net

Library

Nancy Rapp
nancyerappinsky@yahoo.com

Tzedek – Social Justice

Elaine Leeder
lonepine44@gmail.com

Rita Rowan
10ritaanne@gmail.com

Cemetery Committee

Gesher Calmenson
gesherc@sonic.net

Marketing

Vicki Allen, Administrator
vicki@nershalom.org

Visual & Audio Production

Suzanne Shanbaum
spshanbaum@gmail.com

Finance Committee

Alison Marks
amarks7676@aol.com

Membership & Engagement

Stephanie Brown
stephanieb1818@gmail.com

Youth and Family Learning

Reb Mia Zimman
nitzanim@nershalom.org

Fundraising Events

Amy Gray
president@nershalom.org

Nitzanim Parent Committee

Adam Shemper
adamshemper@gmail.com

Kamala Brown
kamalabrown@gmail.com

Zoom Tech Team

Cyndi Norwitz
cyndi@norwitz.net

Join a committee, volunteer at an event, come to every service or only once a year. Sponsor Oneg Shabbat refreshments or a Zoom service in honor of your anniversary or in memory of someone you love. If there's a way you want to be involved that you haven't seen yet, suggest it! Whatever your level of participation, we're glad you're here!

YOUR NER SHALOM BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND STAFF

2022-2023

Amy Gray, President
Stephanie Brown, Vice President
Alison Marks, Treasurer
Tanya Robertson, Personnel Chair
Kamala Brown
Stephanie Brown
Elaine Leeder
Art Magnus
Mark Miller
Jill Rose
Adam Shemper

Reb Irwin Keller, Rabbi
Reb Mia Zimman, Youth and Family Educator
Vicki Allen, Administrator