



**CONGREGATION NER SHALOM
COTATI, CALIFORNIA
ANNUAL REPORT 2023-2024**

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Welcome.

President's Report

Amy Gray



Today will be the last time I'll be talking with you as President of Ner Shalom. It's been a wild ride these last four years. When I started my term, the pandemic had just dug in and we were completely virtual – a situation that as far as I know had never happened. We were still in the lockdown that began in March of 2020 where we were advised to stay home and only leave the house to get groceries and walk the dog. There was no vaccine, and no one knew exactly how the virus spread. Should we wipe down our groceries? Mail? It was a strange time, especially for a congregation where community means a lot and that means hanging in the same room with each other. Our future was completely unscripted. So we went on zoom and hung in there as best as we could.

Given this landscape, I was perplexed as to what vision I could offer Ner Shalom in this new virtual world. It occurred to me to look at an item that was already virtual: the Ner Shalom Mission Statement. I convened a group of members, and we happily spent several months meeting weekly on zoom. I know this sounds like a snooze fest, but in reality it was very inspiring to dig deep into what Ner Shalom meant to us. That led us to a project of creating Ner Shalom values statements. Again, not a snooze fest, but a wonderful opportunity to get the long view on who we are and what is important to our community. Both of those documents are on the Ner Shalom website (click on "About"). Finally, a logo committee was convened, and our beautiful new logo was designed, modeled on the grandmother oak tree that we see out of our sanctuary window.

In a rare, early COVID-time visit to the Ner Shalom building, I wandered around and thought, "This place is 90% empty 90% of the time." That seemed like a waste to me. I imagined what a perfect tenant would be – one that would use the building in our off hours and support our mission and values. The answer was a

preschool. Things fell into alignment very quickly after that. Mixed Greens Preschool became our wonderful, continuing tenant. They also created a beautiful outdoor space in what used to be a neglected back parking lot of the shul. I personally am very grateful they had the vision to do this as it made it possible for us to meet in person during the early years of the pandemic. Plus, people really love the space!

Another area of concern was fundraising. Prior to the pandemic, we often held concerts to support the congregation. Looking back, I am amazed at how many concerts we would put on in a single year. We had scheduled Holly Near and the Raphael Trio to perform during the spring of 2020, and both of those events had to be cancelled. Now the question became, how will we raise money? Annual dues cover only about 50% of our costs. Having a steady tenant was certainly helpful, but there is always a gap between what we need to run the shul and what monies are available on hand.

Additionally, there was a momentous occasion occurring in January 2021: our spiritual leader, Reb Irwin, having studied long and hard for his rabbinate, was about to be ordained. For the first time in 15 years, Ner Shalom would have an ordained rabbi with all the benefits and the costs of that. How would we afford a rabbi? How could we raise money in a pandemic?

So we leaned into 2 major fundraising initiatives: The Season of Giving and the new Rebbe-to-Rabbi campaign. I'm happy to report that both initiatives were successful. The Season of Giving has generated over \$195,000 dollars in the past 4 years. The Rebbe-to-Rabbi campaign raised \$180,000 to help support the rabbinical position over its first several years. Both fundraising efforts were generously supported by this community, even as we looked into an unknown future.

I won't go into the dozens of hours that we spent discussing and arguing about when and how to open the shul. Just take it from me, it was hard making decisions of this nature during a pandemic with an older and potentially medically fragile congregation. Would we put people at risk? What were the benefits of being together in person versus staying on zoom? How would we do High Holy Day services, especially with a rabbi who came down with Covid on Erev Rosh Hashanah? It was like a carnival fun house with strange twists and turns as we navigated ourselves out of the intense times of the pandemic into a more familiar way of being together. I'm happy to say we emerged from the pandemic a stronger community, more aware of each other, and more cognizant of congregants' strengths and talents.

I'm now more confident that Ner Shalom will continue to be a leader in Jewish thought, worship, and learning due to the Nitzanim program serving families with children. Nitzanim has brought in many new people and the talents and energy that come with them. It's very inspiring to go to a family service and see children running around the shul, doing art projects, and singing along with Reb Irwin. In our annual

Board Retreats, a shul-based school was a dream that we'd held for many years. It finally started coming together right before the pandemic under the leadership of Reb Irwin and Janet Rae Jorgensen. After the constraints of zoom learning, Nitzanim was finally able to spread its wings with outdoor based experiential learning under the leadership of our Family Educator, Mia Zimman. And it keeps growing not only in participation but also in vision. This is a very good thing for all of us, no matter what the age.

Looking back on the last four years, I am filled with gratitude for our wonderful board of directors. They hung in there, in meeting after meeting, working diligently to create a shul that reflects our values, is fiscally sound, and is a welcoming and nuanced place of learning. Additionally, magnificent volunteers are all around us, providing meals for the sick, driving people to doctor's appointments, assigning reading parts for services, greeting people at the door, making beautiful music, putting on day-long Women's Retreats, offering classes, and many other activities. We have evolved to be a full-service shul, meeting our life cycle needs from birth to death, accompanied by the good will of our Rabbi and dedicated volunteers.

I am very happy to acknowledge Susan Levine, a Ner Shalom board member and a member of the national Reconstructing Judaism Board of Governors, who is stepping up to the presidency of Ner Shalom. I know she will provide leadership and vision with support from you, our Ner Shalom community. Even though I know these are very stressful times for the Jewish people, I am confident that Susan will rise to the challenge of leading Ner Shalom.

In my four years as President, I've learned a lot about Ner Shalom, about Judaism, and the Jewish world. Personally, my listening skills are better and I'm less inclined to jump in with my opinion about everything. I'm not disappearing entirely and will continue as a Board member. I am excited to see where this community will go in the future, and what distinct and beautiful paths we will walk on together. If anything the last four years have taught us is that the future is uncertain and hard to predict – but it will be here before we know it. I know that Ner Shalom has what it takes to thrive in times of both adversity and peace. I look forward to being part of that.

Amy

Amy Gray

President

Greetings Beloved Ner Shalom Community,

You hear from me a lot, on a regular basis. But this Annual Report gives me an opportunity to look back and take stock. What has changed? How have I changed?

First of all, I continue to love being the spiritual leader of this community. I love that we are all down for doing Jewish in creative ways – with our poetry and music; with a bent toward the mystical; with the way we pray and celebrate and grieve together. This was a year of some celebration and lots of grief, and I'll get to that.

It was a growthful year for the young families of our synagogue community. For me that meant lots of teaching – Hebrew, Torah, Jewish values, deep discussion with parents. I even started teaching Torah chanting to some of our adept students. It is an honor to serve our Nitzanim families as they explore their connection to Judaism. (And always a treat to work with my friend, Ner Shalom Family and Youth Educator, **Mia Zimman**, and our amazing Nitzanim faculty.)

Over this year I've had the chance to see many of you in my office. Sometimes with a question or dilemma, sometimes to do end-of-life planning, sometimes just to get to know each other better. If you'd like to come by, email the office and Stephanie will let you know how to set up an appointment.

Responding to the Gaza War

The hardest challenge this year was and continues to be the war in Gaza. The events of October 7 shocked us. Events of that week are engraved in my memory. About how we lost little Nia that week, and how all the grief of that and the war melded together and continue to be linked. And about how the next day we gathered to somehow celebrate Simchat Torah, chanting together and unrolling a Torah scroll around the room, drawing our attention to the place where Jacob and Esau, after decades of feud, see each other and fall into

Rabbi's Report

Reb Irwin Keller



Photo: Adam Shemper

an embrace, kissing and weeping. Torah marks this moment by placing a dot above each letter of the word *vayishakehu*, “and they kissed each other,” as if reminding us that reconciliation is possible.

But reconciliation has not happened yet. It has been an ugly war, a challenging time to be a Jew, and a challenging time to believe in the possibility of a better future in the land we often call *holy*.

I have done my best to respond rather than react. I have done my best to share thoughtful ideas through my *drashot* and my blog and through the materials I’ve gathered for you at nershalom.org/peace. I have looked at the destruction happening in Gaza over the months, and the starvation happening now, and the hostages still held, and have tried to imagine what, looking back, I would like to remember having done. It is for this reason that I spoke in favor of a ceasefire resolution in Cotati in January. It is for this reason that I have continued to press us to keep our eyes open, to support peacemakers, and to hold Palestinian suffering with grief and care even as we hold the trauma of our Israeli kin with grief and care.

It is a hugely challenging time on many levels. I have tried to lead with calm. I am committed to never leading with soundbytes. I don’t always get it quite right, but please know that I will always do my best, and will speak from my heart. And know that I am here for you to discuss the war or the very difficult emotions that go along with being a Jew right now.

Other Matters

A couple other important things while I’m here. I must offer so much gratitude to **Vicki Allen**, our Ner Shalom administrator of fifteen years. When Vicki and I started, this community was tiny. The growth since has not been constant; it’s been more of an acceleration curve – we have picked up momentum as we go, until Vicki was managing a congregation quadruple the size of when we started!

I will miss our across-the-hall conversations and behind-the-scenes antics. I’m so glad Vicki continues on as a member of Ner Shalom, and that in just a few months we will celebrate her B.Mitzvah together!

In other news, a collection of my written work, titled *Shechinah at the Art Institute*, comes out in a month or so, after a long, slow gestation. I look forward to celebrating the release with you at Ner Shalom!

And finally – I’m taking a sabbatical. My contract says I have to, and frankly it’s a good idea. I will be gone July 1 through August 18. Most of that time I will be in Germany, living in Worms, a city on the Rhine that was a great center of Jewish learning and mysticism 1000 years ago. I will be working on my next book, since I seem to be in a groove. I will be back before High Holy Days and look forward to welcoming 5785 with you. **May it be in a time of peace.**

Rabbi (Reb) Irwin

What We Do.

Spiritual Life



Over this last year, Ner Shalom has shown up to tend to the communal needs of our spiritual lives. We **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, Geshet Calmenson, Shari Brenner, Stephanie Brown, Lia Goldman Miller, and Susan Levine. Rita Rowan did a wonderful job lining up readers for all our services.

Our **High Holy Days** explored the theme "Masking and Unmasking" – what are the masks we wear and how can we achieve greater authenticity in our life? The holy days included many beautiful offerings from our congregational leaders, singers, poets, liturgists, Torah chanters, teachers, instrumentalists, and readers.

We gathered in the *sukkah* for **Sukkot** and we gathered to unroll the scroll for **Simchat Torah**, the day after the Hamas attack on Southern Israel. A day that would have been celebratory was instead solemn, memorable, and meaningful. We held each other well that day.



Since then, Ner Shalom has responded to the unfolding war in numerous ways: with a listening circle, many messages and *drashot* from Reb Irwin; a conversation called “Time for Tea” with a Reb Irwin, Reb Mia, and a local Palestinian-American friend and activist; and the establishment of a “Peace” page on the website where videos, essays, and other resources can be gathered. Reb Irwin and Ner Shalom leadership continue to seek ways to engage meaningfully and productively around the conflict.



Through all the difficult emotions of the year, we continued to mark Jewish ritual time. We celebrated **Chanukah** with celebration and *latkes*. We marked **Purim** with our brand new *Megillah*. Numerous Ner Shalomers, all taught by Rachel Friedman, stepped up to chant.

At **Pesach** time we held the paradox of living with both liberation and grief at our “Half-Cup Seder” led by Reb Irwin. And next week we will gather for our annual night of learning for **Shavuot**, to discover the ways that Torah continues to move in us, even in such times as we are living in now. Don’t miss it!

We continued to offer Family Shabbat every month. What a treat to sing and dance and tell stories and read Torah with all ages present and accounted for! If you haven’t attended one, please do! They are ridiculously fun, and a chance for us really to hold the growing intergenerational quality of this community. Just check your eBlast to find when the next one is coming.



This was also a year with plenty of celebration. A plethora of B.Mitzvahs!

- Mopani Daly, son of Elaine and Aaron Daly
- Samantha Glasgow-Shulman, daughter of Julie Shulman and Josh Glasgow
- Rebecca Norwick, spouse of Geoff Ingram and mother of Laura Ingram
- Aya and Zev Brown, children of Kamala and Scott Brown
- Ursa and Isla Mitchell, children of Sue Davis and Mitch Mitchell
- Ben Bowne, son of Lauren and Jon Bowne
- Finn Seward-Katzmiller, son of Wowlvenn and Sean Seward-Katzmiller
- And later this month: Elaine Leeder's *Bas* Mitzvah!

Mazeltov to all of these fine people on achieving such an impressive rite of passage!

And while we are still in the *simcha* department, mazeltov to Laura Blatt and Norm Brewer on their marriage, and to Dan and Bonnie Kaufman-Foster and their family on the birth of baby Nico!

It was also a year of sorrow. We continue to mourn the loss of a Ner Shalom elder, Abigail Grafton, and a beloved younger, Nia Rose Shemper. (See the *In Memoriam* page toward the end of this report.)

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

Much gratitude to our rabbi, our educator, our musicians, our gifted spiritual leadership team, and our busy Kavanah Committee for making our spiritual life at Ner Shalom vibrant, dense, lyrical, meaningful, and fun. If you haven't had the chance to share your gifts with this community, contact Rabbi Irwin or Rita Rowan, so that your voice can be part of the soundscape of Ner Shalom ritual life.





Kids & Families

Educator Mia Zimman

Hello everyone. I am delighted to be reporting to you at the end of my second school year as Ner Shalom’s Family and Youth Educator.

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. 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.”



Year in Review

Once again Nitzanim has sparked an interest beyond our imaginings. We have promoted an “open tent” model for participation, and we are now more than 40 families strong! During the 2023-2024 school year Nitzanim offered three distinct but integrated educational components:

- Family Experiential Learning
- B. Mitzvah Academy
- Midweek Hebrew

Family Experiential Learning met monthly at parks and farms throughout the county. These included Ragle Ranch in Sebastopol, Bayer Farm in Santa Rosa, Open Field Farm in Petaluma, Preston Farm and Winery in Healdsburg, South Salmon Creek Beach, and Helen Putnam Regional Park – and at Ner Shalom also!



Typically, 45-65 people gathered for each of the Family Experiential Learning programs, where we explored Jewish wisdom through specific from Pirkei Avot. Families explored Jewish values while experiencing nature-inspired activities to illustrate them. The young people were delighted and so were their grownups.

After opening each session with communal prayer and song, core faculty Lauren Broersma-Grossman, Alice Pennes, and Bucky Brynjegard Bialik met with their own groups of preschool and elementary aged learners for hands-on, nature based Jewish learning. The parents stayed back for a parent circle, usually facilitated by Reb Irwin. We quickly learned that parents still showed up for their own sake, even if their children were unable to attend!



Our **B.Mitzvah Academy** had 12 learners this year, and we graduated 11 of them in early May at Open Sky Retreat Center. These graduates had completed the 2-year program. The remaining student will move into his 2nd year of the program, joined by an influx of new students. It was an incredible two years of growth and learning. The group studied Torah stories, prayer, social justice, and environmental stewardship. They studied text with me, and nature connection with educator Carey Averbrook.

Over these two years we witnessed our tweens become teens and take on the mantle of Jewish adulthood. A few highlights from this year were a field trip to the Ner Shalom cemetery when the students learned about death, burial, and mourning rituals in the Jewish tradition. Each student had at least one of their parents with them and it was a beautiful, thoughtful, and very meaningful day. Another highlight was going to the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco for a “Neon, Judaism and Light” exhibit and having lunch together at Wise Sons Deli following the tour.



Midweek Hebrew met at Ner Shalom and shifted from a one-room schoolhouse model of learning to three different cohort groups, allowing for individualized attention to meet the needs of an array of levels and learning styles. Our newest students learned to Hebrew reading and simple conversation. Our continuing learners did conversation, numbers, and began approaching Torah chanting. Our teachers were Reb Irwin and Raja Abastado.

During the 2022-2023 school year, with the help of Adam Shemper and Kamala Brown, we formed a Parent Advisory Council. This council continued into its second year during the 2023-2024 school year with council members Rachel Friedman, Lauren Broersma Grossman, Eliz McKoy, Amy Ricafrente, Lauren Bowne, Kamala Brown, providing all sorts of support to Reb Irwin and me.

Lauren Broersma-Grossman continued this year in her expanded role beyond educator, bringing her magic, kindness, and wisdom to support our communications and outreach efforts, and family shabbat and holiday experiences.

Nitzanim as a Ner Shalom Growth Pipeline

The Nitzanim community continues to grow. In addition to our 40 enrolled families in 2023-24, new families appear at every Family Shabbat and holiday celebration. Our High Holy Day family services each had around 70 people attending! While some of the Nitzanim families are new to our community, some have been members for a long time, including veteran Ner Shalomers now attending Family Experiential Learning with their grandchildren! While we do not require Ner Shalom membership for participation,

many Nitzanim families have joined – in fact, 9 of our 12 B.Mitzvah Academy families did so. We see Nitzanim, and especially the B.Mitzvah Academy, as a pipeline to longterm Ner Shalom membership and commitment.

Fundraising

We charge substantial tuition for the Nitzanim programs. However, tuitions alone do not cover the cost of a well-considered, thoroughly staffed program. So we turned to you, the membership of Ner Shalom, for your support. And wow!!! Thanks to so many of you we exceeded our fundraising goal of \$15,000 and brought in over \$21,000. We are bedazzled by your generosity and beyond grateful for your believing in our Nitzanim families! We can't thank you enough for helping our dreams become a reality!

What's Ahead in the Coming Year

We will continue to support Ner Shalom's Family Shabbat services and community holiday celebrations. Veteran educator America Worden and I have been working together on the curriculum for the next two years of B. Mitzvah Academy. I am overjoyed to report that America will be partnering with Reb Irwin and me as a co-teacher and nature educator for B.Mitzvah Academy in the coming year. We will also be adding two new program components. One, "Make, Create, Celebrate," is a monthly arts program for 3rd-5th graders to learn about Jewish holidays. It is offered in collaboration with Eliz McCoy and Artaluma. The other, "Torah Lishmah," is a monthly class for post-B.Mitzvah students to study the Jewish topics that interest them, over coffee, with Reb Irwin.

That is our happy and proud report. Our most important ask of you right now is that you join us at Family Shabbat and beyond, to welcome these wonderful new families into the Ner Shalom family. 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 Learning

It was a stunning year of learning for Beit Midrash. Since our last report, we have held 35 sessions of 15 distinct classes. Beit Midrash was coordinated by our Dean, **Barbara Lesch McCaffry**, with support from our inspiring **Steering Committee (Shari Brenner, Shoshana Fershtman, Geshar Calmenson, and Basha Hirschfeld)**. We are also grateful to Ari Hilton, Cyndi Norwitz, Rinat Abastado, and Shari Brenner for their tech support for the classes. And special thanks to Susan Levine who facilitated two sessions offered by exceptional Reconstructing Judaism teachers.

Deep gratitude to this year's inspiring teachers:

Leiah Bowden
Sally Churgel
Sheridan Gold
Shoshana Fershtman
Reb Judith Goleman
Basha Hirschfeld
Barbara Lesch McCaffry
Reb Irwin Keller

And our guest teachers:

Rabbi Tirzah Firestone
AdirChai Haberman-Browns
Lizbeth Hamlin
Rabbi Maurice Harris
and the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and Reconstructing Judaism for creating the recording of **Holding On To Hope**.

Beit Midrash total attendance for the past year was 912, representing many individuals attending multiple classes. Nearly half of the attendees were non-members. Since classes were held on Zoom, attendees came from Alaska to Florida and almost everywhere in between, as well as Canada, Germany, Poland, the Netherlands, and South Africa.

Some highlights of our Beit Midrash offerings since spring of 2023:

- Shoshana Fershtman taught a 4-part class on her important book, *The Mystical Exodus in Jungian Perspective: Transforming Trauma and the Wellsprings of Renewal*. Shoshana also just led a series of classes on the **The Kabbalistic Tree of Life: A Guide to Healing Through the Omer**.
- Leah Bowden, Sally Churgel, Sheridan Gold, and Reb Judith Goleman offered a **3-part Elul series** on the masks we wear.
- Reb Irwin taught a 3-part class unpacking the medieval prayer-poems of the High Holy Day *machzor*. He also taught a 2-part class on the history of streams of Judaism. And he taught a class on Jewish practices of dying, death, and mourning, which in turn gave rise to a gathering led by Lizbeth Hamlin on **Rebuilding Our Lives** for those who have lost long-term partners.
- Rabbi Tirzah Firestone spoke about her book *Wounds into Wisdom: Healing Intergenerational Jewish Trauma*.
- Since the war in Gaza began, we have availed ourselves of meaningful offerings from Reconstructing Judaism including a class offered by Rabbi Maurice Harris on **Crisis and Opportunity in Israel Now** and a panel discussion of Israeli and Palestinian peace activists called **Holding On to Hope**.
- Reb Judith Goleman and Basha Hirschfeld offered a very moving series of **Conversations on Buddhism and Judaism**.
- And Reb Irwin continued to offer **Yiddish Tish** every month, reading and translating Yiddish poetry and other short writings, with participants coming from here and around the globe.



Educators of the Year

This year we are pleased to honor **Reb Judith Goleman and Basha Hirschfeld** as the Beit Midrash Educators of the Year for their ever-evolving series of conversations on Buddhism and Judaism, for the

depth of their personal explorations of spirituality, and for the joyous way their explorations invite us into more varied connections to the Divine. We are so thrilled to learn from them!

Tikkun Leyl Shavuot 2023 and 2024

In May, 2023, our ***Tikkun Leyl Shavuot: A Traditional Night of Untraditional Learning*** was offered on Zoom in collaboration with Congregation Shomrei Torah. Our theme was **The Slow Reveal** and offered a dazzling night of learning from Gesher Calmenson, Rabbi Shalom Bochner, Basha Hirschfeld, Rabbi Diane Elliot, David Sussman, Reb Judith Goleman, Kohenet Ruach D'vorah Grenn, Aftab Omer, Shoshana Fershtman, Dr. Suegee Tamar-Mattis, Rabbi George Gittleman, and Reb Irwin. Our topics ranged from Jewish food to geology to mysticism to philosophy to psychedelics. The following day Reb Irwin and Barbara Lesch McCaffry facilitated an in-person **Shavuot Tish** in the courtyard where we gathered to explore prophecy and poetry and enjoy cheesecake.

Please mark your calendars for Tuesday evening, June 11th, for this year's Tikkun Leyl Shavuot. The evening will be on Zoom from 6 pm to midnight, with a live session at Ner Shalom the next day from 2-4 pm. Look for experiential and deep learning with a fabulous group of teachers!

Steering Committee Update

The insights of our Steering Committee have played a large role in setting our learning agenda at Ner Shalom. We are grateful to our committee members: **Shari Brenner, Shoshana Fershtman, Gesher Calmenson, and Basha Hirschfeld**. We also hold a yearly brainstorming session in January. If you would like to participate or if you have an idea for a class you would like to see or offer, email Barbara Lesch McCaffry at learning@nershalom.org.

We hold learning as a great *mitzvah* and human need. Come learn with us!

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: when I learn that one of our members is in need, I send an email to the group asking who can help with the situation, and whoever can catch the ball does so and lets us know that the soup is in the pot (or whatever).

Last year we served nine people needing help in challenging 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

Now completing its 17th year, Celebrations is a warm and welcoming space for Jewish older teens and adults with disabilities and their families. Together we enjoy eight Jewish holiday event each year and get much needed support. We continue to meet in Ner Shalom's beautiful outdoor courtyard (weather permitting) to minimize the covid/flu season impact on our medically fragile participants. Approximately 12 families attend regularly with another 5-7 who come as often as they can.

Celebrations provides opportunities for our families to share common challenges and successes and to socialize with others who "just get it." Families enjoy each other in person along with great music, Torah stories, and delicious food associated with each holiday (including edible dreidels!).

We are grateful to our participating families; our teachers – Leslie, John, and Reb Irwin; and our dedicated volunteers, including Noah Brown, Amelia Brown, and Julie Chasen, who help make our program run so smoothly each time. We are also grateful to RTI International for a grant that helped support our programming this year.

If you haven't visited us at Celebrations, we'll let the words of our families describe the impact of this program:

"What does it mean to be included? It means your presence is not merely tolerated but welcomed. Celebrations makes inclusion seem natural, in a world that often seeks to segregate, isolate, and even castigate people for their disabilities."

"Every person has their struggles in this life. Celebrations reminds us that the struggle is part of everyone's story, but it is not the whole story. There is food to be shared, songs to be sung, and connections to be made. Celebrations shines in its gentle way of affirming everyone."

Celebrations Program For Young People with Disabilities and their Families

Mary Ann Malinak



Photo: John Maas

“Thank you for making my child realize their value to the community, after a lifetime of their just asking to be included. Now, they are not just present, they are also celebrated.”

“Celebrations has been a time and place for my granddaughter to be with friends and learn about our Jewish heritage. The music and stories are wonderful, and the traditions are carried on in a way that even with a short attention span, my granddaughter can enjoy and learn from them. It also gives us parents time to be with our community (Jewish *and* special needs) which is so valuable, to have that support and understanding.”

“Our family has participated in the Celebrations program from the very beginning. We drive to Cotati from Oakland for each program as it provides benefits that are not available to us in the East Bay. This includes friendship with peers, being able to celebrate the Jewish holidays and reinforce our strong Jewish identity, friendship and support with other families dealing with similar challenges and joys in parenting kids like ours, benefitting from the wisdom and joy of Rabbi Irwin, being welcomed and embraced by the Ner Shalom congregation in a way that is not being done in any way at any Jewish institution in the Bay area. We really appreciate your support!”

“We have attended Celebrations at Ner Shalom since its inception. This special group has been a very important and crucial part of our lives as a place we can feel loved and supported in a safe way to access our Jewish community.”

Thank you, dear Ner Shalom, for your ongoing support!

From our Celebrations leadership: Mary Ann Malinak, Leslie Gattmann and Jennifer Lorvick; and from our amazing Celebrations Families.



Tzedek
Social Justice Action

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

Tzedek (the Social Justice Arm of Ner Shalom) accomplished several significant things this year, despite some medical challenges among our leadership. We hosted an online Social Justice Cafe elucidating the current plight of the unsheltered in Santa Rosa. Over 3000 unsheltered live on the streets of town, according to the two advocates and an attorney for the unsheltered who spoke. There are far too limited programs in place to provide permanent housing for the displaced. Forty people participated online resulting in sign-ups to aid Adrienne Lauby's housing organization SAVS. This presentation led to an important dialogue among the Ner Shalom community.

Tzedek has also worked hard to fight voter suppression. Through May 1, 2024, Tzedek has placed approximately 2,810 postcards in the hands of writers, which were then sent to unregistered voters in voter suppression states. We held a successful in-person postcard writing café where some sat to write postcards and others picked them up to write at home. Most of these cards went to increase voter turnout in Fulton County, GA. We will shortly be writing cards for Prince Edward County, VA. Future focus areas include Florida, Arizona, and Georgia.

Tzedek will sponsor a Reproductive Rights Forum on Sunday June 9, 2024, from 2-4pm at Ner Shalom and on Zoom. Presenting will be Dr. Shelley Sela, an OB-GYN who was the first woman to openly provide third trimester abortion care in the U.S; Dr. Ashley Weinert, an OB-GYN in Santa Rosa; attorney Karen Thompson; and Northern California Planned Parenthood board chair Nicole Barnett. Our hope is to open a meaningful dialogue and provide opportunities for future action.

In September Tzedek will host a Book Banning Cafe in person and online. Although Governor Newsom signed AB 1078 which prohibits book bans, California is still seeing more books challenged and removed from library shelves. Our participants will read excerpts from banned books and address these issues. We will have sign ups for library webinars that fight book banning and offer opportunities for action.

Please reach out to any of our members if you have questions.





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 29, 2024** 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.



How We Do It.

Membership Report

Stephanie Brown



Wow! We've had a banner year in membership, with a total of 164 households, up from 134 last year! This net gain of 30 member families in one year is a new record for Ner Shalom! An exciting group of new families have joined as they want to enhance the education for their children through our Nitzanim program, and several are in the B-Mitzvah program anticipating their Jewish rite of passage. Welcome to all the new members (or newly rejoined members) of 2023-2024!

Ilene English-Paul and Don Paul
Steve and Joan Levin
Wowlvenn and Sean Seward-KatzMiller and Family
Eliz McKoy and Tim Choate and Family
Sandy Andreson
Lauren and Jon Bowne and Family
Stephanie Deignan
Misted Kesselman-Forrest and Chava
Jessica Mozes and Brad Maestas
Steven Kessler and Angela Bausch and Family
Julie Shulman along with Joshua Glasgow and Family
Dan Foster and Bonnie Kaufman and Family
Shoshana Rosenfeld
Desmond and Margaret Shapiro
Susan Shloss
Shoshana Dembitz and Abigail Grafton z”l
Claire Drucker
Sharon Siegler and Daniel Swid, and Family
Charlie and Margo Klipp
Nancy and Andy Fleming
Eileen Hammer
Jennifer and JC Chance and Family
Robert Markowitz and Christine Berardo
Brian Kabaker
Ellen Solomon
Lia Goldman Miller and Casey Miller and Family
Nada Rothbart
Beverly Voloshin
Gary Weiner
Jim Brundy

Keeping it All Together

Administration and
Communications



This last year has seen a big change in the Ner Shalom office. Our beloved administrator, **Vicki Allen**, who for the last fifteen years juggled the many competing needs of our congregation has moved on, leaving large shoes to fill.

Our Interim Operations Manager, **Stephanie Deignan**, has stepped up to the challenge of carrying on the day-to-day business of our synagogue including the detailed work of our financial systems. Stephanie had previously done some temporary work in the office, so she comes to us with some familiarity with our ways. Stephanie has a rich background in events coordination which has already served us well with our Passover Seder.



Long-term member and volunteer, **Shari Brenner**, continues to send out the weekly, monthly, and special event eBlasts; maintain the website; and manage yahrzeit tracking systems. She has also been supporting Stephanie in the office, focusing on creating sustainable systems, guidelines, and procedures.



As you've walked into the building recently, you've likely seen the friendly face of **Manny Amador** at the door. While he is, indeed, quite friendly, he is also a well-trained security guard. Manny keeps a watchful eye on everything while events are happening in the shul. He does many other things behind the scenes, including sanctuary set-up before events, kitchen clean-up upon request, and other facilities tasks.

This Old House

Mark Miller



Wow, this place looks great!

The Hiddur Mitzvah Committee (see the next report), under Stephanie Brown's leadership, has been busy. Much of the building's interior was painted and a big cleanup happened. Operations Manager Stephanie Deignan and Ner Shalom Shari Brenner have continued to winnow their way through years of accumulated objects.

Over this year we made improvements to our automatic Oneg room door, so that someone who needs to enter that way will not need someone else to come activate the door. Instead, they can enter a code to unlock the door and activate it.

In the coming year we will be making more security improvements, including enhanced parking lot lighting, thanks to a security grant we applied for and received from the State of California.

Over the next year we will also, after many decades, replace the roof of the building. This effort is going to require support from all of us. So, keep your eyes peeled for emails about a roof campaign.

We are very fortunate to be the owners of this historic building from 1910, and we remain committed to keeping it beautiful and in good repair, so it can be a home for our community for generations to come.

I am grateful to my fellow members of our Building Committee: Lorenzo Valensi, Suzanne Shanbaum, and Alan Ziff; and for the support of our past Administrator, Vicki Allen, and our current Operations Manager, Stephanie Deignan.



Music

Music is at the heart of Ner Shalom, bringing joy and depth to our services. This year Good Shabbos Band members Sheridan Gold and Suzanne Shanbaum joined Reb Irwin in providing soulful music for our in-person and hybrid services, with guest appearances by Reb Mia Zimman, GZ3, Chantleader Atzilah Solot, violinist Susan Schloss, and singer/composer Jessalynn Levine. Our zoom services also sing, beginning with a flowing settling in music offered by Sheridan Gold, through to the rousing closing song played by Reb Irwin. You will often find guest musicians joining our zoom services as well. Tune in for a great treat.

Tech

The Zoom Team has kicked the Ner Shalom zoom experience up a notch, providing our remote congregants and guests with a way to fully participate in services, events, and classes. Whether leading a service remotely, reading a poem, sharing a song, or teaching or attending a class, the team works their magic to join us all together. This year's team members are Roey Abastado, Ellyn Lazar, Barbara Lesch McCaffry, Ari Hilton, Cody Cammbell, Shari Brenner, and Eszter Freeman – all expertly led by Cyndi Norwitz.

Roey Abastado does a great job handling the A/V tasks. He has been sharpening his skills by taking audio classes at SRJC. Say congratulations when you see him for his promotion to Audio Engineer !!

Tech Director Suzanne Shanbaum is always working on ways to build out our tech capabilities by adding skills and equipment and this year is no different. We have recently embarked on an AV wiring and camera upgrade program with our Building Committee Head Mark Miller and video consultant and member Doron Hovav to make our hybrid events run more smoothly. We also added equipment that will allow us to provide improved audio and hybrid remote and graveside services, all to keep our community connected.

Music & Technology

Suzanne Shanbaum



Last year we inaugurated *Hiddur Mitzvah*—Beautification of Mitzvah – a committee with the intention of making our praying, learning and connecting spaces more beautiful. Our goal is to render the outward appearance to more closely match the inner beauty that our experiences at Ner Shalom provide.

The committee (Stephanie Brown, Rita Rowan, Rhonda Goodman and Anna Belle Kaufman) started high impact and low cost: gently used furniture purchased to replace not-so-gently used items in our sanctuary; painting the foyer with highly motivated if inexperienced volunteer painters; general cleaning and tidying; and hanging new or refreshed artwork. All of it was a vast improvement on our inner spaces which had been crying out for some TLC for years.

We had dreams of having the whole sanctuary painted but knew that we did not have it in our budget. Then, the answer to our dream appeared. A very generous anonymous donor appeared from the ether, and gifted *Hiddur Mitzvah* with enough money to have the walls of our entire first floor repainted! (See the before and after pictures.).

The foyer, front classroom, sanctuary, stage area, hallway and oneg room were all painted a lovely warm white, called “dove white,” by expert painters. We chose this simple color to provide that “freshly showered after a full day of gardening” feeling.

We purchased new drapes and hung them. The beautiful stained-glass picture of our building was moved (thanks to Mark Miller) from the foyer where it was underappreciated to a focal spot in the sanctuary. Lorenzo Valensi created a lovely mounting for the printed *kiddush* that hangs in the oneg room. Still to come: shades to cover the office mezzanine windows that open onto the sanctuary to hide the *kishkes* of our innerworkings.

Future plans include painting the upstairs office areas, reflooring and recarpeting the sanctuary, and further beautification with more artwork. Stay tuned...



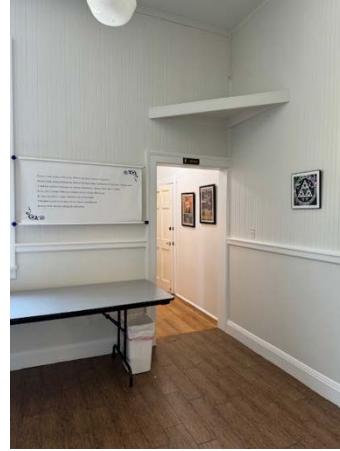
Hiddur Mitzvah
Synagogue Beautification

Stephanie Brown

“Before” Pictures:



“After” Pictures:



These are exciting times! Congregation Ner Shalom is experiencing unprecedented growth, and energy is high. Thanks to the efforts of our entire community, we're going through this growth spurt without experiencing very much financial pain. We are indeed blessed!

The Financials

Alison Marks, Treasurer



As you'll hear in other reports, our membership is growing, the school is finishing its 4th year and has been incredibly successful on many fronts, and we have received a number of bequests and other large donations.

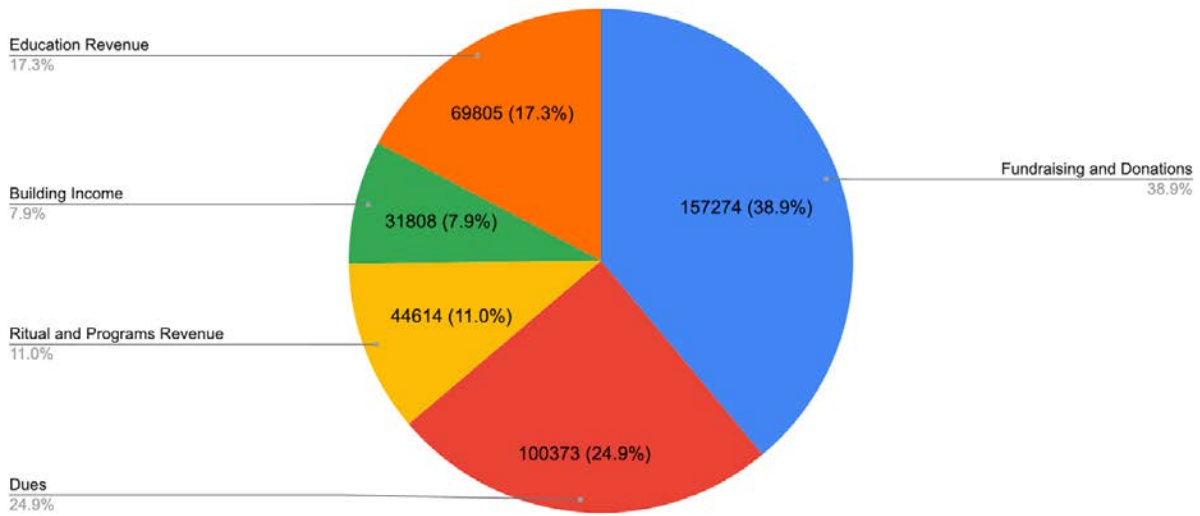
Of course, all this growth means that our expenses are also increasing – not just in number, but in type and complexity. As we've grown and the community has shifted, we've had to hire professionals for several functions that were previously filled by volunteers. Our technology continues to become more sophisticated. We have security needs that were unimaginable two years ago. We're significantly upgrading our administrative systems to be able to meet the needs of our community today. We, gratefully, have need for children's programming at most services. These are just a few of many factors that have increased the expenses that allow us to keep doing what we do.

Overall, we're incredibly grateful that together we are rising to the occasion. We see signs that the community is confident in the Board's ability to steward funds responsibly, and we thank you for the trust you've placed in us.

Unfortunately, I'm unable to be present at this year's annual meeting. If you have any specific questions, please reach out to me. And if you have a financial background or are interested in learning, we could use another good person or two on the Finance Committee... please be in touch! You can find me at amarks7676@aol.com.

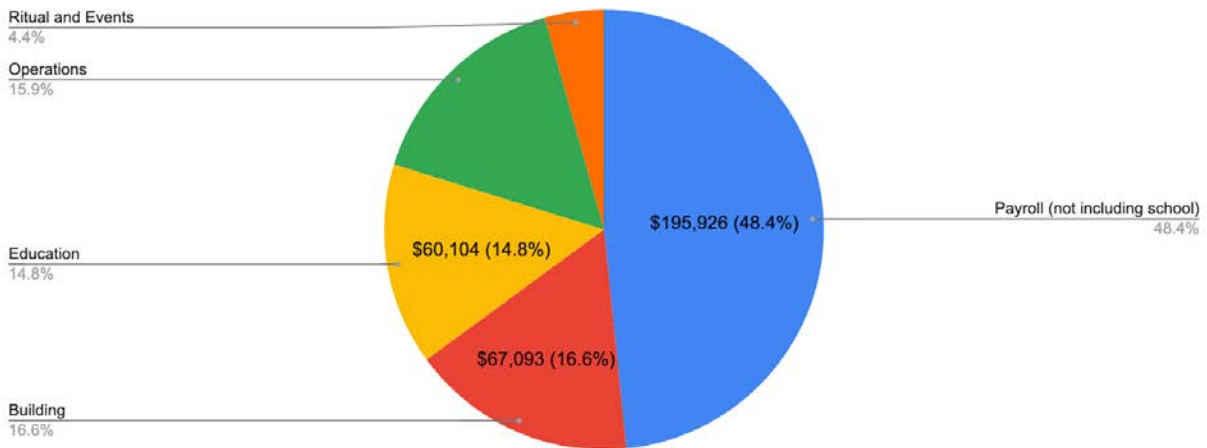
2023-24 Income Overview (as of 3/31/24)

Total Income: \$403,874



2023-24 Expense Overview (as of 3/31/24)

Total Expense: \$405,010



As you can see, every dollar you invest in Ner Shalom is put to good use! If you're inspired to donate, go right now to nershlom.org and click on "Donate."

Fundraising

Amy Gray



Susan



Holly



Zoë

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. Other synagogues have a designated amount that people must pledge to be members. Our approach is different. We have a sliding scale so we can accommodate as many folks as possible. This means that our fundraising efforts must make up for any budgetary gaps in our membership dues.

For this reason, Ner Shalom has developed a robust fundraising program. Our main fundraising campaign is the “Season of Giving,” which runs from Rosh Hashanah through December 31. This year saw a splendid response, with you donating over \$68,000.

Additionally, we had a sold-out concert with Holly Near – an amazing evening of friendship and love with our dear Holly. We had another marvelous evening with singer-songwriter-juggler Zoë Lewis. And we had a unique concert presented by Susan Salm, a world-famous cellist and co-founder of the Raphael Trio. She created an exclusive solo recital for us because she feels such a close connection with the Ner Shalom community. We are blessed by these musical relationships.

In addition to the Season of Giving and concerts, we rely on your support and that of our larger community in these ways:

- Sponsoring a Shabbat service. Honor a loved one or celebrate a *simchah*. Just contact the office!
- Honoring a loved one’s *yahrzeit* with a donation. It’s easy to follow this old tradition – just follow the links in the *yahrzeit* notice.
- Attending a class! Although it’s not actually a fundraising event, all proceeds from classes support the general operating budget.
- Donating to the annual Nitzanim fundraiser. Our family learning program is healthy and growing and inspiring a new generation of Jewish families. Please support this wonderful program.

If you’d like to get more involved in Ner Shalom fundraising, please send an email to me at president@nershalom.org. We welcome new ideas and fresh energy!

In deep appreciation of your generosity,

Amy Gray

President and Fundraising Chair

Ner Shalom's Legacy Giving Committee, made up of Elaine Leeder, Amy Gray, Sally Churgel, Tanya Robertson, Art Magnus, Mary Ann Malinak, and Vicki Allen, want to acknowledge and thank our Ner Shalom Congregation. We are grateful for this community and how it touches and supports everyone. The only way we can continue to accomplish this is with the help and considerations of our members.

You may not be aware of the valuable and key role of our **Legacy Circle**. It consists of members and friends of Ner Shalom who have generously agreed to remember Ner Shalom in their wills and estate plans. Beloved members such as Berrine De Carmo and Ariana Elster, who remembered us with generous donations from their estates, exemplify the dedication and love that we know you share. Please understand, this is simple to do and can be done for estates of any size and for various types of assets, including life insurance policies.

Right now, helping to secure the future of our congregation is critical. If Ner Shalom has made a difference in your life, please consider joining the Legacy Circle. We are proud Ner Shalom will continue to be a spiritual home and emotional support for your family, friends, and future generations.

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 legal documents:
Our Legal Name: Sonoma County Synagogue Center
Our Tax ID Number (EIN): 94-2832498



Legacy Giving

Elaine Leeder

In Closing.



IN MEMORIAM

Since our last congregational meeting, we have lost these beloved Ner Shalom members:



Virginia Rose “Nia” Shemper (d. October 4, 2023), the daughter of Adam Shemper and America Worden and little sister of Avi. Nia was a great light in our community. She was friends with every kind of creature, flying or creeping. She loved to sing and to fill journals with drawings. If you listen closely, you can still hear her. We hold Nia in our hearts and Adam, America, and Avi in our love and care.

Abigail Grafton (d. March 15, 2024), wife of Shoshana Dembitz, was new to Ner Shalom after many decades as a stalwart of the Aquarian Minyan in Berkeley. Abigail was a psychologist and a pioneer in feminist-informed therapy. We hold Shoshana in our care during this first year of mourning.

In addition, numerous Ner Shalom members lost dear beloveds over the past year:

Matana Abastado, mother of Rinat Abastado, grandmother of Roey and Raja

Shlomo Abastado, father of Rinat Abastado, grandfather of Roey and Raja

Suzanne Gray, sister of Jim Gray and sister-in-law of Amy

Bruno Kaiser, father of Cynthia Calmenson

Matt Karpman, son of Val Ansel

Joan Levinson, mother of Amy Gray

Monsignor John (Jay) Rowan, brother of Terry Rowan and brother-in-law of Rita

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

May all who are mourning find comfort among all their loved ones who have trodden this path.

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

Beit Midrash Lifelong Learning

Barbara Lesch McCaffry

Building Committee

Mark Miller

Celebrations Program

Mary Ann Malinak

Cemetery Committee

Gesher Calmenson

Finance Committee

Alison Marks

Fundraising Events

Amy Gray

Greeting Team

Jane Lawhon

Hiddur Mitzvah / Beautification Committee

Stephanie Brown

Kavanah / Spiritual Life

Rabbi Irwin Keller

Library

Nancy Rapp

Marketing

Shari Brenner

Membership & Engagement

Stephanie Brown

Nitzanim Parent Committee

Mia Zimman

Office and Tech Support

Stephanie Deignan,
Operations Manager
info@nershalom.org

Ritual Participation

Rita Rowan

Tzedek – Social Justice

Elaine Leeder

Rita Rowan

Visual & Audio Production

Suzanne Shanbaum

Youth and Family Learning

Reb Mia Zimman

Zoom Tech Team

Cyndi Norwitz

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!

To reach any of these committee heads, email the office: info@nershalom.org.

YOUR NER SHALOM BOARD OF DIRECTORS AND STAFF

2023-2024

Amy Gray, President
Stephanie Brown, Vice President
Alison Marks, Treasurer
Tanya Robertson, Personnel Chair
Kamala Brown
Noah Brown, Youth Delegate
Elaine Leeder
Susan Levine
Art Magnus
Mark Miller
Amy Rlcafrete

Reb Irwin Keller, Rabbi
Reb Mia Zimman, Youth and Family Educator
Stephanie Deignan, Operations Manager