

## Emeth's History 1976 - 2016

*Written by Patty Baggese for Emeth's 40th Anniversary Celebration*



First I want to thank Stuart Blumberg and Jack Shorr for their wonderful work on the scrapbooks. Without their incredible efforts, I would not be able to recall the many activities and milestones of congregation Emeth.

I have loosely grouped the history into four sections: organization, religious leaders, social justice, and programs and volunteers.

### **Organization:**

The Congregation Emeth idea was born in 1976 and was known as South County Jewish Community. The first gathering of people was for a havdalah service and discussion. That was followed by Shabbat service on August 20, 1976. That was the same year the first High Holy Day services were held and we have conducted High Holy Day services ever since. Shabbat services have continuously been held also. We started with services held in people's homes with lay leadership.

The first board was elected in 1977.

Also in 1977 we received our 501(C) status.

In 1981 we changed our name to Congregation Emeth. In 1983 we affiliated with the Conservative movement. In 1997 we changed and affiliated with the Reform movement because it better reflected how our members observed.

Congregation Emeth was known for a long time as "the wandering Jews" because we did not have a permanent home. We rented facilities from churches, community groups, and schools, and we held many functions and programs in our members' homes. We were always schlepping things, packing and unpacking.

In 2008 we purchased our first permanent home. I believe it has been a wonderful improvement and thoroughly enjoyed by our members. 2008 was not the first time we used this facility. In the 1980s one of our families held a bris for their new born son there. The bris was followed by a party which included belly dancing--a party our long standing members still talk about. We held one of our board installation dinners at the building and one of our Seders before it was our building. I guess owning this building was destiny.

It has been said that the first thing a Jewish community must do is dedicate a Jewish cemetery. In 1996 congregation Emeth dedicated its cemetery on First Street in Gilroy. In 2002 a Holocaust memorial was installed in our area of the cemetery.

Also in 1996 we purchased our first Torah. It was dedicated that year. The scribe delivered the Torah and anyone interested could work with the scribe to draw a letter for the last few words of the Torah. A memorable day for members of Congregation Emeth.

### **Religious Leaders:**

Congregation Emeth initially hired student or retired Rabbis to conduct High Holy Day services. In 1983 we became aware that Rabbi Jerry Levy had resigned his position at Shir Hadash, and we contacted him to see if he would conduct our High Holy Day services. He agreed and we then hired him on a contract basis to conduct High Holy Day services, Shabbat services, holiday and life cycle services. That relationship lasted eighteen years. Rabbi Levy also believed music was an important part of Jewish services, so for the first time we hired cantors to be involved in many of our services. We had many cantors over the years. Mark Levy remains one of our cantors as does Alisa Fineman. Fortunately we are able to steal Alisa from Carmel a couple of times a year. We are pleased to say we were her first "gig" as a cantor.

In 2000 Congregation Emeth hired Student Rabbi Yitzak Miller. Rabbi Miller was ordained in 2003.

In 2006 Student Rabbi Debbie Israel was hired. She too was ordained, in 2009, after being hired by us. Rabbi Israel has since become Congregation Emeth's first full-time Rabbi.

### **Social Justice:**

Since the early years of Congregation Emeth, the organization as well as individual members have taken public stands on social issues. This first occurred in 1988 when the Gilroy School Board was challenged by us because they started board meetings with a prayer that included a reference to G-d. There were presentations made before the board, letters written to the board, and letters to the editor of the newspaper. This became a hot issue for Gilroy and there were ugly comments and a swastika etched into the lawn of our President at the time. The board did stop the process, but there remained hard feelings by some.

As the years went on, members of Congregation Emeth continued to take positions when they saw something wrong, and they also took positive steps to solve community problems. Members of Congregation Emeth took on feeding the poor at the Lord's Table and continue feeding the poor on a monthly basis. We also continue to collect canned food and clothing year round and prepare and serve Christmas Day dinner. This includes bringing Santa and his helper to provide gifts to the children on Christmas Day.

Recently we have participated with the Muslim community in speaking out against injustices and in support of their existence in our broader community. This is not the first time members of

Congregation Emeth took a stand on this issue. In 2002 and again in 2012 members of Congregation Emeth joined the greater community in a Walk For Tolerance. Rabbi Israel has also been working with other religious leaders in the area to identify ways to promote tolerance. These meetings have now grown into lay members of the various communities coming together to identify ways to build stronger ties to all parts of the community.

### **Programs and Volunteers:**

From the beginning Congregation Emeth has had a dedicated and willing membership to make this organization flourish. We could not afford staff for many years so our members did the work necessary to have the programs and activities the members wanted. Though I will forget many things, some of the best examples are:

- All the fliers were hand drawn by Ruth Erickson from 1981 to 1992. This was well over 300 fliers.
- Our members led service -- probably everyone had a chance to help lead a service until Rabbi Levy was hired.
- Our school was administered by members and some of our teachers were members. We did hire qualified teachers, even for our first preschool, but parents had to volunteer to have their children in the preschool.
- Our fundraising was organized and carried out by volunteers. This included an annual Chanukah raffle, working at the Gilroy Garlic Festival, publishing two cookbooks, as well as the more recent art auction and wine tastings.
- We have had an adult education program that rivaled that of much larger congregations. Some of the programs included speakers, taking trips to museums and theaters, concerts, and the annual Scholar in Residence program. The first Scholar in Residence program was in 1983 at Big Sur.

The attendance and participation continued to grow with programs such as dancing, music, storytelling and folklore, Sisterhood, the gift shop, celebration events, leadership roles and Rachamim supported by volunteers of Congregation Emeth.

I have not listed all our meaningful programs as it is a very long list. I hope I have given you an idea of how Congregation Emeth has grown and changed from 1976 to 2016. Although I will not be here for the 80th anniversary of Congregation Emeth, I believe we have build a solid foundation for the next forty years.