

A sweet year—more to come

Morgan Hill's Congregation Emeth celebrates many milestones, new year

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by [Debra Eskinazi](#)

SACRED SPACE This new year Congregation Emeth in Morgan Hill will hold High Holiday services at their newly constructed bimah. The evening of Oct. 2 marks 5777 year in the Hebrew calendar and the start of the Jewish holy day of Rosh Hashanah.

Like the biblical tale of their wandering, the local Jewish community searched for a permanent place to call home. Eight years ago they found it on Monterey Street in Morgan Hill.

This year is particularly special because Congregation Emeth also celebrates their 40th anniversary as a community. From their beginnings as South Santa Clara County Jewish Community in 1976, they have experienced many changes. Only a decade ago did the congregation hire a full-time spiritual leader, Rabbi Debbie Israel.



Being the only Jewish congregation in southern Santa Clara County, Congregation Emeth serves a diverse Jewish population. Its members practice varying degrees of ritual observance, ranging from modern Orthodox to secular Judaism.

A community of 85 families, Congregation Emeth is relatively small, particularly in the Reform movement, but their member participation rate is exceptionally high at 80 percent.

Rabbi Israel came from an Orthodox background and has introduced more spirituality and traditional practices and customs into the congregation's liberal mode.

Today, the congregation offers a spiritual home to a diverse group of interfaith families, which according to a 2013 Pew report, now comprise 61 percent of Jewish marriages.

The congregation also just had their first-ever capital campaign. Under the guidance of campaign chair Susan Meyers, the congregation raised more than \$160,000 in as little as three months, funds which will go toward the construction of a playground, a meditation garden, sanctuary beautification, debt reduction and a sukkah, a ritual that has both historical and agricultural significance.



Elizabeth Mandel, Emeth's director of communications, says it's an impressive feat, "This is not a wealthy congregation by any means."

"For the first 32 years, we rented in schools and churches and met in people's homes," says Grant Gordon, Emeth's director of ways and means.

"We were the wandering Jews. Wherever we could rent a space, for Friday or a classroom," says Mel Weisblatt, former ritual chair.

“It’s pretty overwhelming to me to even imagine how far the congregation has come in the past 10 years. When I first came we had 50 members [family units] and now we have 85,” says Rabbi Israel.

Mandel says that at the time the rabbi arrived and they looked at purchasing the building, they had serious questions about what would be sustainable for their congregation. “We’re going, ‘can we afford a rabbi and a building?’”

“It’s very unusual for a congregation of this size to have either. Much less both and a school,” says Israel.

Gordon says that the biggest area of membership growth has been with young families.

Rabbi Israel says this is unusual in the community, but that “people are affiliating and realizing the importance of a Jewish education for their children—a Jewish life for their children.”

Since her arrival 10 years ago, Israel has worked to develop the congregation.

Where most congregations struggle with seeing people through just their life cycle celebrations, after which the families walk out the door, the active involvement of youth in their congregation is the real indicator, she says.

“This summer, I had a lot of college students returning to study with me or to talk about what's been going on—the congregation remains their home. They come back us when they come home.”

As their community grows and changes, Gordon says they are now looking to a new generation of leaders to step forward.

Emeth has an active leadership development program, says Israel. “We really give people lots of opportunities for engagements.”

Indeed, education is one of the main three points she attributes to their high level of participation. The other two are providing a feeling of family and inclusion, where they have a range of levels of observance among their congregants, which includes interfaith and/or LGBT families.

But central to all, Israel says is “the opportunity to infuse our lives with spirituality and with gratitude and with an appreciation for all the blessings that we’re given. We’re not a Jewish community center. The essence of who we are also is this opportunity for a spiritual life—and to see the bigger meaning, to see really how the world functions in this spiritual way.”

On the evening of Oct. 2, Congregation Emeth, along with Jewish communities around the world, will gather to observe the new year, Rosh Hashanah, year 5777 in the Hebrew calendar. It’s a time for renewal and introspection, both personal and collective. The community has a bright future ahead, providing a spiritual center for Jews of all affiliations in southern Santa Clara county.

People interested in learning more about about Congregation Emeth can go to emeth.net. All are welcome.