

Congregation in Cooperation

Gilroy Dispatch

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The congregation that has drifted around the South County for nearly 30 years finally has an anchor - a new home on Monterey Road in Morgan Hill, just north of the downtown area.

"This is just monumental," said Rabbi Debbie Israel, who is in her third year with the congregation. "After 30 years, we suddenly have our own building. For so many years, people didn't even know we were here, people had to find out about us through word of mouth."

The building will be dedicated in a special ceremony on Sept. 12.

This will be our dedication weekend," Israel said. "It will be a very dramatic occasion."

On Sunday, the group hosted a brunch in its new home, inviting the community and members of other faiths to "discover Emeth."

Members gave out information about upcoming High Holy Days events, youth and adult education programs, social action, interfaith and community involvement, and social activities.

The building, a former restaurant located at 17835 Monterey Road, sat empty for approximately two years, the result of a bankruptcy. Congregation Emeth purchased it for \$825,000. Over the years, the congregation has looked at a number of locations and facilities.

Prior to purchasing their new home, the congregation had selected a lot on Vineyard Boulevard near the Morgan Hill Police Department.

"An existing building seemed better than having to start from scratch," Israel said. "And this building had several things that made it right for us. Because its origin was a church, though it went through several reincarnations as a restaurant, the flow of it was perfect, it already had the fundamentals of what we needed."

But, though the layout of the building was perfect for the congregation, there was still approximately \$200,000 in remodeling that had to be done before the new owners could move in.

And, congregation member Elizabeth Mandel said, the dirt and debris had to be cleared away before the sub-contractors could begin their work.

"We had several work days, one just to clean up the trash from the yard," said Mandel, who worked with Oshan and congregation treasurer Barry Freund to organize the entire project. "It was an incredible mess. The people who owned it just left everything, chairs, tablecloths, wine glasses, even food in the freezer that had been turned off, and it sat there for two years. It was dirty, moldy and smelly."

Not the freshly painted walls sparkle, and the building has a welcoming feel.

"This is probably the most rewarding project I've ever been involved with," Mandel said. "It has been challenging, but it has been great to see it come together piece by piece. It has reinforced a sense of community."

Israel agreed, saying one of the congregation members told her it gave her a sense of ownership, seeing the corner of the building she had painted.

"Everyone has been pitching in eagerly," she said. "This synagogue has truly been created with pieces of everyone."

Prior to taking up residence in its new home, the congregation has moved around from location to location, holding services at the Presbyterian and Methodist churches in Morgan Hill and Gilroy, having classes at Carden Academy and Oakwood School in Morgan Hill, and using the Morgan Hill Community and Cultural center and the Grange Hall.

"Because these locations were temporary, because other groups besides ourselves used them, we always had to bring in our ritual materials, set everything up each time, it was very difficult," Israel said.

Oshan agreed, saying each time the group set up, the location had to be consecrated again. Now, with their new home, that won't be necessary. It also means that they can keep the commercial-sized kitchen up to kosher standards.

"In so many ways, this is such a wonderful thing for us," Israel said.

In the process of renovating the building, the congregation learned a lot about the community, Mandel said, adding that local businesses including Benjamin Moore Paints, Johnson Lumber and The Colory were generous and very helpful.

Oshan, Israel and Mandel all pointed out that theirs is a welcoming congregation, that they hope to be more involved in many community events and hold religious, interfaith and non-religious community events in their new home.

"We're part of the community at large, and now that maybe we can be more visible, now that we have a location, we can increase our efforts to serve the community at large, Israel said.