

History of Coastside Jewish Community, compiled by Lesli Sachs-Williams, Julie R. Batz, and others

In 1989, Lesli Sachs and her 4-year-old daughter moved from Berkeley to a small town just south of San Francisco. It had never occurred to her to ask about how many Jews were living there, how many shuls, where were the Bar/Bat Mitzvah rituals held? After all, this was the Bay Area. She was more than dismayed to find no obvious Jewish presence.

In 1991, Lesli planned a Chanukah party to be held at a local Methodist Church, and advertised in the local paper, the Half Moon Bay Review. 80 people showed up -- and each said, "I thought I was the only Jew in town!" A mailing list was born.

In 1992 another Chanukah party was held, and this time working from the mailing list and advertising, even more people showed up. After the party, Lesli was approached by two women -- Rachael Gershenson and Ann Polom (both still members) -- and others who offered to work with her in forming a steering committee. They did not yet quite understand what they would be "steering"!

They met, a few others joined them, and in 1993, after a year of brainstorming and soul searching, they held a small service in someone's home, led by one of the soon-to-be congregants.

At that point, Lesli was stuck as to how to proceed, so she wrote a letter to a few local rabbis and got a great response from Rabbi Berg of Peninsula Temple Beth El in San Mateo. He said the group should begin with regular services, and he offered to send a rabbi/service leader every other Friday for a year. He also offered administrative assistance for a year.

Lesli went searching for a place, and met the lovely Vicar of Holy Family Episcopal Church, who offered the use of her church, assistance on Friday evening set-ups -- they and even made a CJC banner which the congregation still uses. The word went out, people showed up, and CJC was born!

During that first year, the congregation found student-rabbi Serena Eisenberg who served as the congregation's first rabbi, leading two Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat services, and (to accommodate upcoming Bnei Mitzvah students) two Saturday morning services each month.

In 1995, a small bnei mitzvah class was started, taught by Lesli's friend Norman Fassler-Katz, who commuted weekly from Sacramento. The next year, five students were called to the Torah and became bar/bat mitzvah: Sam Tempko, Sasha Henkin, Adam Coopersmith, Joshua Waters, and Loryn Hicks, Lesli's daughter. Holy Family Church in Half Moon Bay was too small for bnei mitzvah rituals, so CJC entered into their second church arrangement with St. Edmunds Episcopal Church in Pacifica. Serena Eisenberg officiated the bnei mitzvah.

Along the way, CJC began holding community Seders, building a Sukkah and celebrating Sukkot, and offering High Holy Day services.

When student-rabbi Eisenberg had to leave CJC to complete a mandatory year of study in Israel. Serena helped the congregation find Jhos Singer, a musician and maggid-in-training from Berkeley. At the time, Jhos was an energetic, out-of-the-box Berkeley lesbian. It was love at first sight for some; others wondered how Jhos would be received in Half Moon Bay. In 2000, CJC did hire Jhos to be their new spiritual leader, and while a few members left, CJC gained many more and generally increased the diversity of its membership.

The congregation's next task was to procure a Torah. With very generous financial assistance from the father of member Laura Aster-Martin, they were able to find a sofer in LA who had obtained many of the rescued torot from the Holocaust, and restored them to their kosher status. CJC purchased their first Torah—the first to live in Half Moon Bay, ever!

In 2001, Jhos invited Julie Batz, a cantorial soloist, to co-lead High Holy Day services. Following the success of those services, a congregant set up monthly donation, so that the congregation could hire Julie once a month. That position grew over time, and now Julie and Jhos both work half-time as spiritual leaders of the congregation, leading Shabbat and holiday services; teaching in the religious school; facilitating bnei mitzvah rituals; and providing pastoral counseling and support to the community.

In 2007, the congregation experienced another important milestone as Maggid Singer came out as transgender and then transitioned from female to male. True to its loving, inclusive, and accepting culture, CJC fully supported Singer and, as a result, has become an even more welcoming place for LGBT Jews.

In 2011, CJC entered a new phase of growth, adding a significant number of members from the East Bay. Current membership reflects a geographically, economically, and demographically diverse group of 86 households (52% from Pescadero to Montara; 10% from the Peninsula; 15% from Pacifica; and 25% from the East Bay). Services are held at Holy Family Church in Half Moon Bay and St. Edmunds Church in Pacifica; as well as in members' homes in the East Bay, Pacifica, and the Peninsula.