An Invitation to Engage

Kehilla Committee News
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"Being a part of the Kehilla community brings us comfort and joy. It is a big part of our family’s life and identity and is helping us teach our kids and raise them with good values. We appreciate having a place to grow and learn together with other loving people."

**Why Did We Create This Newsletter?**

Without a dedicated in-depth news source, our growing congregation hasn’t had sufficient orientation to the many facets of Kehilla and how they are connected in promoting the congregation’s values around spiritual practice, communal care, social justice, and learning. Knowing about the activities that we co-create as a community is a first step to feeling that you belong to this community. This sense of belonging might inspire you to participate in one of these activities in the way that best works for you. We welcome your engagement!

This pilot newsletter was initiated by the Committee Leaders Communications Group, with the help of Karen Cohn and with the blessing of Kehilla leadership. We’ve had a newsletter in the past, *Kol Kehilla*, and it required substantial staff time to put together and share with the community. **This newsletter will be no different, so we are seeking a volunteer coordinator or team who wants to guide this project going forward. This is community service that would fulfill required Avodah hours.**

Want to coordinate or help produce this newsletter every month or two? We’d love to collaborate with you! And as an added bonus, this is a fantastic way to fulfill your Avodah hours!

Write newsletter@kehillasynagogue.org to get involved! We’re presently searching for all levels of volunteers. Whether you want to do a little volunteering to help get the word out about important committee work or you are someone who wants to take significant leadership in creating and designing this newsletter - we want to hear from you!

In this first issue, we’re going to introduce a community-wide initiative and two of our very active social justice committees: The Belonging and Allyship Racial Justice Initiative, the Economic Justice Committee, and the Immigration Committee.
Belonging & Allyship / Arc of Change - Kehilla’s Racial Justice Initiative

"At the Jews of Color convening that I attended several years ago, it was mind blowing to realize that I was in a room full of Jews of Color. I was not the only one! As my isolation lessened, Kehilla also took on the Belonging & Allyship project to make Kehilla a mecca for Folx of Color to feel welcome. I do this job so that Kehilla can be a bastion of joyousness for People of Color, and so that we can create the gold standard for Jewish congregations. I want people to show up where we can be fully ourselves, in our own agency." - Ruthie Levin, Kehilla's People of Color Organizer

“As a white Jew, I grew up observing and participating in perpetuating racism in Jewish spaces. As I learned more about the harms associated with white supremacy culture, I became increasingly alienated from Judaism. Finding Kehilla and having the opportunity to participate in the Belonging and Allyship project as part of the Youth Education working group has renewed my optimism that it is both essential and possible to build a Jewish community where BIMPOC (Black, Indigenous, Mixed-Heritage, and People of Color) youth and adults can experience belonging and a sense of home. I am honored to join with members of the community, both People of Color and white people, in working towards the vision articulated by many of the BIMPOC in our community: for Kehilla to become a magnet for People of Color with a relationship to Judaism, in Oakland and beyond." - Ann Finkelstein, Youth Education working group

Kehilla is pioneering a new way of being a Jewish community that promotes racial justice and challenges white supremacy, both in our hearts and actions. Individuals from many progressive Jewish communities across the country have attended our events to learn from our change process.
Initially it was just the closest synagogue, but it’s such a welcoming community that doesn’t shy away from adapting to intersectionality and talking about hard topics."

We all have the opportunity right now to participate and benefit from this incredibly enriching and ground-breaking experience.

- The ongoing Belonging & Allyship Initiative embraces the full participation of People of Color (POC) in our communal life, starting by centering whiteness and challenging white supremacy culture at Kehilla. The overall goals of the Belonging and Allyship project can be found here: [http://kehillasynagogue.org/the-belonging-allyship-project/](http://kehillasynagogue.org/the-belonging-allyship-project/) and include:
  - For Kehilla to be a place where Jews of Color (JOC) and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) experience belonging, and are able to bring their full selves into the community.
  - For Kehilla to be a place for white folk to do the work they need to do to recognize, understand, and actively decenter whiteness and challenge white supremacy, both within Kehilla and in U.S. culture.

- Under the Belonging & Allyship umbrella, 80 Kehilla leaders participated in the year-long Arc of Change racial justice training led by Dimensions Consulting founder, Yavilah McCoy. Yavilah is a Black Jewish national leader in creating change infrastructure and heart-led processes within white-dominant synagogues. Working groups that were created as part of the Arc of Change are now actively creating projects and policies which will help us to accomplish our Belonging & Allyship goals.

  One participant shared: “Years ago at Kehilla, I was keenly aware of my awkwardness as a white person in speaking with a Black attendee. I found myself mentally confused – I know Black Jews exist, but how are they Jewish? – I couldn’t find my way to say anything, so I said nothing. Participating in the Arc of Change process has erased these harmful separations in my mind. I found myself thinking deeply about the ways that I’m often organized around accomplishment, being perfect, and having a sense of urgency which can override making meaningful connections and fostering relationships. Learning about micro- and macro-aggressions that perpetuate the centering of whiteness, prevent Jews of Color from becoming leaders and being seen as individuals has
Supportive, inclusive community, creatively engaged with spiritual practice, social action and Jewish learning. Core values embraced which I support.

been profound for me. I’m excited by the vision of a new Kehilla and the work we’re all doing to unfold it together.

- Prior to leading the Arc of Change training workshops, Yavilah spoke at a powerful “We Rise” fundraiser for Kehilla in February 2021 – which began with several Kehilla adults and youth testifying to their needs and experiences as People of Color within Kehilla. Yavilah also led two experiential Kehilla-wide webinars focused on “Developing A Common Language for Dismantling Systemic Racism,” which invited us to ask ourselves, “How can we each do the work needed to imagine and transform our spaces beyond white supremacy?”

Read below to learn about ongoing Belonging & Allyship activities where you can join in, marked with a check box.

If you are a Person of Color at Kehilla, or have family members who are People of Color, you may be wondering how well Kehilla as a community “walks the walk” of centering whiteness within Kehilla.

And, you might already be involved or are welcome to become involved:

- Networking to create a community of support by attending Kehilla’s Jews of Color and People of Color Shabbat and holiday celebrations, held for POC only and organized by our People of Color Organizer, Ruthie Levin.

- Participating in the Black, Indigenous, People of Color affinity group (a BIPOC-only group) to create structures of support and offer education to the entire community.

The Jewish Renewal social justice focus keeps me engaged. I especially support the anti-racism FWWP
meetings (now called White Folx Decentering Whiteness), which I’ve attended many of and the Praying with Disabled Bodies meeting, which I’ve attended almost all of. I broadly support Kehilla’s racial justice initiative. And I love Kehilla’s online Passover Seder and High Holy Day services, and I especially appreciate the leadership from social justice-oriented people who are people of color, queer, and/or disabled.”

Providing spiritual leadership on the bimah during High Holy Days (including Victoria Alcoset, Fresh “Lev” White and others). One priority that emerged for BIPOC in our community from the Arc of Change was to see more People of Color consistently on our bimah and in spiritual leadership. This is the beginning of a long-term process to support and develop BIPOC spiritual leadership in our community. Any Folx of Color who are interested in learning skills, gaining experience or exploring spiritual leadership, please be in touch with Rabbi Dev or Hazzan Shulamit.

If you are a white-identified person at Kehilla, it may be challenging to perceive how your U.S. Jewish identity has been historically intertwined with whiteness, depending on your family history, your own experiences and identities, and more. For white-identified Folx who oppose racism on a personal and systemic level, it can be painful to understand how white supremacy behaviors and microaggressions have
“I love our community. I love how we live our values (or at least try). I love the music and spirit.”

“It’s a form of family.”

Penny Rosenwasser; Photo credit Brooke Anderson @movementphotographer

created a less than welcoming experience for Folx of Color who seek to participate fully in Kehilla’s community life. For many who are white, it may still be a learning path to understand how whiteness has operated as a cultural norm within Kehilla, blending into the wider culture’s underlying norms of white superiority and privilege (also referred to as white supremacy culture).

And, you might also already be involved or are welcome to become involved:

☐ Learning about and discussing these issues by participating in Kehilla’s affinity group for white-identified members, called *White Folx Decentering Whiteness*. The White Folx Decentering Whiteness affinity group holds monthly discussions via Zoom, including optional readings/videos, emotional sharing and experiential work about challenging white supremacy and decentering whiteness. We would love to have you – any white-identified person - join in as often as you desire. Our meetings are usually mid-month on Wednesday or Thursday evenings, 6:30-8:30pm; check the Kehilla calendar for specific dates. Penny Rosenwasser & Susan Schulman co-facilitate and lead this group. Contact Penny at penro@comcast.net or Susan at susanschulman60@gmail.com with any questions.

*Learn the history of Kehilla’s Racial Justice Initiative* here

**What’s happening now?**

A heartfelt thanks to those who are currently providing leadership of this initiative as part of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team, including Ruthie Levin, Lia Barrow, Victoria Alcoset, Avi Brooks, Dee Ward, Fresh Lev White, Penny Rosenwasser, Rabbi SAM Lucky, Michael Saxe-Taller, Aviva Wilcox, Ann Finkelstein, and Rabbi Dev Noily – as well as our great appreciation for the contribution of several previous members.

The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team is guiding our congregation’s learning and change process over time, offering a structure of accountability for Belonging & Allyship work, while being mindful of habits of white supremacy within Kehilla and this work. Priorities identified by the team are reflected in the action items listed in this article, including opening pathways for BIPOC participation and leadership in
What keeps you engaged?

“Kehilla’s emphasis on tikkun olam through economic & social justice work in our community and in the wider world, and through anti-racism education within our congregation.”

“The loving community, the radical politics, the radical services and Jewish education.”

One priority of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team is to center the needs of the Kehilla School, to provide a welcoming and nourishing learning environment for Children of Color. The greatest number of POC at Kehilla participate in Kehilla School, and this is where harm to Kids of Color has unintentionally been done in the past. Currently, the Youth Educators working group is focusing on revising the purpose and vision statements for the School as well as conducting listening circles for parents of Children of Color with connections to Kehilla to better understand their experiences around Jewish education and race. We are a group of parents and educators that came together to participate in the Arc of Change, and are working to transform the Kehilla School and B’nei Mitzvah Program to decenter whiteness and promote equity and belonging for all the children we serve. We are seeking new members, and if you are interested in joining our work, please contact Ann Finkelstein at akfinkel7@gmail.com.

The BIPOC working group invites Kehilla Jews of Color/People of Color and folx in the Adult B’Mitzvah and Conversion Programs to join us. Please contact Kehilla’s People of Color Organizer, Ruthie Levin, ruthie@kehillasynagogue.org, for more information.

Save the Date:

Join Kehilla’s Zoom event on Sunday Dec. 11, 2022, from 4:00-6:00 pm. The working title: “Contemporary and Historical Legacies of Jews of Color: A common understanding of the beauty, challenges, struggles and triumphs of our multicultural history as Jews!”

All are invited to attend this ‘learning journey’ led by Victoria Alcoset and Avi Brooks, a history session that is also conversational. Our goal is to center Jewish peoples' histories from ancient times to modern ones.
**Kehilla’s Economic Justice Committee**

*By challenging the inhumanity and cruelty of the criminal legal system, I feel that I am actually speaking truth to power directly from my heart as a Jew committed to repairing the world!* - Economic Justice Committee member Merle Lustig

Welcome to the Economic Justice Committee! We come together to act on the Jewish value of *Tikkun Olam* to repair some of what is morally broken around us. Our work has included moving, spiritual rallies to call attention to egregious conditions at the Santa Rita jail, advocating with governing entities such as the Alameda County Board of Supervisors, and doing intense electoral work in this and other areas of economic justice.

**Learn the history of the Economic Justice Committee’s activism.**

**What’s happening now?**

The Economic Justice Committee allies with the Interfaith Coalition for Justice in our Jails (ICJI) to bring transformative change to Alameda County’s Santa Rita jail and to end mass incarceration of our most vulnerable community members. Over the past eight years, there have been 64 confirmed deaths in Santa Rita, most as a result of suicide, homicide, or neglect of care. On August 6th, Kehilla’s solemn Tisha B’Av service mourned their deaths and the injustice of incarceration here in our local community.

Committee member Myrna Schwartz spoke about Maurice Monk, a 45 year old Black
man found dead in his Santa Rita jail cell in November, 2021. He’d been confined there for one month awaiting resolution of a misdemeanor charge likely stemming from his mental illness. He could have remained free during this time but the District Attorney refused to lower bail to a level that his family could afford. Throughout his incarceration, the family raised concerns about his dependence on medications for control of diabetes, hypertension, and long-standing schizophrenia. They blame his death on callous neglect by jail personnel in failing to provide needed treatment.

Myrna continued, “He posed no imminent threat, so why wasn’t he freed on bail? Because the District Attorney recommended bail at $2,500 and opposed lowering it when the family couldn’t pay. The D.A.’s racist and discriminatory policies around charging, bail, and sentencing are partly to blame for the suffering and death inside Santa Rita.”

Maurice Monk’s story is all too familiar. Santa Rita’s cells are filled with men and women arrested for low level offenses related to mental illness, substance use disorder, and homelessness. The vast majority are pre-sentencing and too poor to afford bail. Although African Americans comprise only 10% of the Alameda Co. population, they account for a shocking 49% of its jail population.

Reverend Derron Jenkins, member of ICJJ and the Bay Area Christian Connection, told of a family member who’d been confined in Santa Rita with mental illness and substance use disorder. “Unable to process mentally the situation unfolding before him, he was lost, by himself, in an unknown world of mental illness inside one of the most dangerous places in Alameda County.” To make matters worse, he was wrongly housed in a pod reserved for COVID-positive men. “The deputies laughed at him as he consistently and constantly demanded that he was not positive for COVID and fully vaccinated.”

Reverend Jenkins described Santa Rita as a “warehouse predominantly filled with People of Color” and recounted other notorious examples of its “culture of cruelty,” including the withholding of soap and water from detainees soiled by feces; and knowingly putting a detainee at risk for inmate rape. Regarding the Sheriff, who bears responsibility for Santa Rita and also serves as the County Coroner, Pastor Jenkins condemned the tendency to “delay and pollute transparency with incomplete information and false truths about the deaths of many of the 64 who fell victim to this warehouse of injustice.”
Mental illness, substance use disorders, and homelessness are not reasons for incarceration. Neither is poverty, or being Black, Indigenous or a Person of Color. We all long for the day when reason and justice prevail in our criminal-legal system. But the death and inhumane treatment must end now. Incarceration in Santa Rita jail should not be a death sentence – not for anyone.

Our urgent work on criminal justice reform in Alameda County continues and we invite you to add your voice if you are interested in social and economic justice work.

Read below to learn about ongoing Economic Justice Committee activities where you can join in, marked with a check box.

☐ To keep updated on our activities, check out the Economic Justice Committee blog, and our announcements in Kehilla’s Weekly e-news.
What keeps you engaged?

“Great community, social justice lens, innovations”

“Putting my values into practice.”

Photos taken at the May 24th Faith in Action East Bay Justice Rally; credit Bruce Lescher, Pro Bono Photo

Above Rabbi Dev Noily of Kehilla Community Synagogue reads the names of some of those who died in the Santa Rita Jail.

☐ Ask to be on the Friends of the Economic Justice Committee listserv to work with us on letters, petitions, emails, phone calls, or direct action.

☐ Attend Economic Justice Committee meetings. We meet from 7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. on the second Wednesday of each month. Usually, we gather earlier at 6:30 p.m. for a potluck/schmoozing. Since the start of the pandemic we switched to meeting on Zoom – please email the Committee chair, Karen Rachels, for the link.

☐ For further questions about the Economic Justice Committee, please contact karenrachels@gmail.com. To learn about the work of ICJJ, contact rspeiglman@sbcglobal.net or myrna.schwartz@gmail.com.
Kehilla’s Immigration Committee

“It’s such a blessing to help the Kehilla community offer shelter, hospitality and respite for our guests during their long and dangerous journeys in search of a safe home, as people did 80 years ago for my family.” - Immigration Committee member Carolyn Schour

The Kehilla Immigration Committee provides many ways to get involved in the sacred and enriching work of welcoming new immigrants to our community and of fighting for immigration justice. Join an accompaniment team with other Kehilla members to work with a newly arrived individual or family. Bring a meal to or visit a guest who is staying at Kehilla. Provide support at an immigration court hearing or an ICE check-in. Participate in political advocacy to abolish the ICE detention-deportation pipeline and to support just immigration policies that will help families and communities thrive.

Read below to learn about ongoing Immigration Committee activities where you can join in, marked with a check box.

- Join our email list to learn about immigration justice events and actions at Kehilla and in the wider community. Contact information: immigrationcommitteechairs@kehillasynagogue.org

Accompaniment Teams

One of the major projects the Immigration Committee is involved in is accompaniment. Teams of 3-7 people support individual and family asylum-seekers and refugees as they settle in the East Bay. We work with people from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Russia, Afghanistan, and the list goes on. As examples, we’ll highlight an individual and a family we began working with in the past year.

Christine came from Uganda last summer. She had to leave because the oppressive,
community I want to be part of.”

anti-gay government was imprisoning her friends and co-workers who, like her, were actively doing LGBTQ work. Our immigration committee is connected to many other organizations in the Bay Area and beyond, and we heard about Christine from one of them. A Kehilla member eagerly reached out to offer her housing. The accompaniment team taught her how to use public transit, sign up for Medi-Cal, get needed dental work, find a lawyer, part-time gardening work, and an apprenticeship in the trades, as well as a swim teacher and a rugby team. In the last week of August, Christine received word that she won her asylum case, and the team dropped everything to celebrate with her!

Above: Christine and her Accompaniment Team

Two and a half years ago we began working with an Afghan family. When the U.S. pulled out of Afghanistan last August, the family’s brother, Ikramullah, who had worked with the U.S. army, was airlifted to a base in Wisconsin, along with his wife and four young kids. They were very eager to settle in the East Bay to be with their extended family. We partnered with the official resettlement organization, International Rescue Committee (IRC), which was overwhelmed with refugee cases then. IRC was only able to help because of our partnership.
“Kehilla is my only synagogue. I’ve never been part of any other. It’s my spiritual home and a wonderful social and political community.”

Our accompaniment team worked constantly during the first few weeks to find them an apartment, furniture, clothes, household goods, while IRC worked on getting them benefits. Because two of the children have hearing problems, and the wife and mother, Zarina, was pregnant when she arrived in Oakland, we have been busy taking them to medical appointments. They now have a beautiful newborn son. One team member has been a liaison to the kids’ school. And two of our volunteers worked very hard to do the legal work.

This last week of August, the family was able to submit Ikramullah’s asylum claim! We’ve found wonderful interpreters so that we are comfortable working with this Pashto-speaking family as they begin their journey to a safe life in Oakland.

Also, Ikramullah told Immigration Committee volunteer, Lili Shidlovski, he has passed the written test for his driver’s license and is working with a community agency to find a job, and Lili watched his 7-year-old daughter choose red and pink hearing aids, making all that team driving to medical appointments truly worthwhile.

□ New Accompaniment team members are always welcome. Also pay attention to Kehilla’s Facebook page and The Kehilla Weekly e-newsletter to learn about donated materials that are needed by accompanied individuals and families.
Sanctuary Guest Program at Kehilla

Just prior to the onset of the pandemic, the Immigration Committee completed a several year project to build a space at Kehilla to be used to provide temporary shelter to immigrants seeking sanctuary. The timing was perfect, as some immigrants in ICE detention centers who were at high risk for death if infected with COVID were being released—but only if they had an address to go to where they could quarantine. Since we had trained volunteers and the newly completed space, we were able to host several individuals who were sent to us directly from ICE detention. Despite the pandemic, we delivered home cooked meals, visited our guests outdoors, and assisted them to prepare for their next steps.

Since May of 2020, we have hosted 21 guests at Kehilla!

Our current guests are a couple, Sherlie and Time, from Haiti. Sherlie is 7 months pregnant. Sherlie and Time fled to Chile from Haiti. They then made their way over land to the Mexican border where they had to wait in limbo in difficult conditions for 11 months before being allowed into the US to seek asylum. When they first arrived in Oakland, they had nowhere to go and spent some nights sleeping under a bridge. Fortunately, our space was available, and they will likely spend the next several weeks with us while we work with other groups to help connect them to housing and resources.
The Sanctuary Team needs more volunteers to sign up for discrete tasks, such as bringing a meal, doing laundry or errands, or providing rides to appointments. Each person’s help makes a huge difference in creating a comfortable and welcoming temporary home for our guests. Please join us!

A Message from our Executive Director, Michael Saxe-Taller

It’s fantastic to be able to share these in-depth stories with all of you, and especially with members who have not yet been exposed to these three vibrant social justice initiatives at Kehilla. Each story illustrates the values we strive to fulfill in our community. Each story invites you to be engaged.

Please let us know here if you are inspired to coordinate or help produce this community offering on a periodic basis. As a reminder, you can fulfill your Avodah hours with this project.

I hope that with ongoing close-ups illustrating multiple facets of our communal life, we can all better understand how social justice, spiritual practice, mutual care and Jewish learning are lovingly woven together at Kehilla.

These articles speak meaningfully to Kehilla’s purpose statement: At Kehilla we’re co-creating a loving community that reaches for joy, shared liberation and justice, rooted in Jewish spiritual teachings and practice, and sustained by interdependence and mutual care, in the Lisjan Ohlone territory of Huchiun.
Reminder:

![Kehilla High Holy Days banner]

**Kehilla High Holy Days**
*Living in Reciprocity & Mutuality*

Rosh Hashanah - September 24 - 25
Yom Kippur - October 4 - 5

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**Take Community Action with Kehilla:**

- Explore Kehilla’s many active + dynamic committees!
- Sign up for our weekly newsletter
- See what’s happening on the Kehilla calendar