



Monmouth Reform Temple Celebrates 60 Years Serving its Congregants and the Greater Community



Sixty years ago, a group of 29 families in the Red Bank area came together to start their own Reform Jewish Congregation. That congregation, the Monmouth Reform Temple (MRT), has grown to over 325 families and maintains a packed calendar of programs and activities for its members' worship, education and socialization. This includes its important tradition of "tikkun olam"--community service to "repair the world" in making it a better place.

The synagogue includes a large proportion of interfaith families, and is active in partnering with other religious houses of worship including Christians and Muslims. Perhaps this was always part of MRT's DNA as in its early years, while its building was under construction; the synagogue worshipped and educated its children at the Presbyterian Church at Shrewsbury.



MRT founding members Albert and Barbara Goldstein at the famous MRT Festival of the Arts.

Longtime member Peggy Baker recalls those early years, "I remember having services in the church and how we changed the sanctuary by taking down the cross and putting up the Star of David."

That was a ritual the small congregation performed every Friday night before its Shabbat service. They then carefully restored the religious accretions so all was in place for Sunday Christian worship.



Ground-breaking for the MRT temple building in 1960s.

Lila Singer adds, "Meeting at the Presbyterian Church was more than spiritual; it was fun; especially when we prepared for the oneg. A couple of times we blew a fuse, and once it was a job finding where the cross had been placed."

Founding member Barbara Goldstein adds, "After starting our congregation in the Presbyterian Church, we continue that relationships today as we jointly celebrate Thanksgiving each year alternating between each other's houses of worship."

MRT flourished under the spiritual leadership of several Rabbis including Rabbi Henry Bamberger, Rabbi Richard Steinbrink, Rabbi Edward Ellenbogen, Rabbi Harry Scherer, and Rabbi Alton M. Winters. MRT's longest serving Rabbi, Sally J. Priesand, is a historical Jewish figure, as she was ordained in 1972 as America's first female rabbi. After serving as MRT's spiritual leader from 1981 through 2006, she remains today its Rabbi Emerita.

Reflecting on this the 60th anniversary milestone she states, "Upon arriving in 1981, my goals were to strengthen our congregation's sense of family, provide a Jewish presence in the community, teach Torah, and create memories for our children and grandchildren of what it means to be a Jew in today's world.



MRT spiritual leaders for 25 years Rabbi Sally Priesand, now Rabbi Emerita.

Working in partnership with our members, I was privileged to accomplish these goals and others like them, thereby leaving the congregation with a strong sense of identity when I retired.”

MRT was led by several Rabbis in the succeeding years including Rabbi Jonathan Roos, Rabbi Michelle Pearlman and Rabbi Robert Ourach.

Rabbi Marc Kline has been MRT’s spiritual leader since 2014. He continues its strong tradition in social justice while providing strong spiritual leadership to his congregation. A leader in the local interfaith community,



MRT Rabbi Marc Kline with Imam Mustafa el Amin el Amin during interfaith healing service following the synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh.

Rabbi Kline has strengthened and forged relationships with local churches as well as the mosque in Middletown. In a time when membership in religious institutions is declining throughout the country, MRT has stayed strong.

He comments, “Every day, I am blessed to serve this congregation. One of the most amazing things about MRT is how the people step up. To our membership this is their family away from their family. It enables us to perpetuate Torah and live our mission to be relevant in the life of our community. Being a good citizen is the core of being Jewish. We help people live their Judaism in the context of the real world.”

Many examples of members who always “step up” are found throughout the MRT community over its sixty year existence. From founding members such as the Goldsteins who were leaders

in all aspects of the temple to other long-time involved members such as Alice Berman who has served as choir director since 1996. Additionally, Alice held many leadership positions including running its famous juried Festival of the Arts for many years and serving on the Board of Trustees.

Berman came to the temple as a young widow starting her life anew and found a community in MRT. She adds, “I most admire how the temple is sensitive to the needs of the individual and I admire their ability to maintain fair share dues.”

Peggy Baker, who is the matriarch of three generations of MRT members adds, “I think MRT has maintained its persona of a warm and welcoming community. We were never the synagogue that people came to dress up.”



MRT students and members volunteer at MRT Mitzvah Day.

Lila Singer although recently retired to another state, best represented MRT’s commitment to Social Action. She and husband Max spearheaded an initiative of the Rufuseniks in the 1970s, bringing their message to Washington. To bring pressure on the Russian government to allow oppressed Jewish people to emigrate they led chants of “Let my people go.” They also personally made trips to Russia to clandestinely meet with these oppressed Jewish people. According to Singer, “to give them support and let

them know they were not forgotten.” Over time, they were successful in getting everyone out and even met them at the airport to welcome them to their new homes in America.



MRT master gardeners and volunteers harvesting their bounty in the Gan Mazon “Garden of Plenty” destined for Monmouth County food pantries.

Today, MRT maintains a strong program of social action partnering with such organizations as Interfaith Neighbors, the Center at Asbury Park, the JBJ Soul Foundation and the YMCA. MRT's vegetable garden, Gan Mazon (Garden of Plenty) has grown and delivered an estimated 8,000 lbs. of food for local non-sectarian pantries in Asbury Park and Freehold. Every year, the entire MRT family comes together to perform many community service events on Mitzvah Day.

MRT is renowned for its beautiful religious services enriched by the talents of its beloved cantor, Gabrielle Clissold. She states about the congregation she has served since 2002, "I believe MRT is a jewel and we have the most amazing congregation that always steps up. It goes over and beyond to do its best in every way. That is why people in the community respect us and everyone knows who we are. For a small congregation we act as a large one in what we offer in creative worship and our education is unique."

The school's education program begins with Bagels and Blocks (infant to pre-K), exploring the beginnings of the Hebrew Aleph-Bet in elementary school and wrestling with the themes of social justice in Mitzvah Academy. Young adults dive deep into Jewish tradition as they prepare for bar and bat mitzvah, and Confirmation. Religious School parents share best practices in parenting skills and adult groups engage in lively discussions on the validity and relevance of the Ten Commandments. MRT provides opportunities for meeting Jewish friends through junior and senior youth groups (grades 3 to 7 and 8 to 12 respectively) and clubs in cooking, chess, dance and theater.

MRT religious school parent Amy Sukinik-Conway found a great community for her young family when she joined MRT. Her daughter Rosie is in fourth grade and has made good friends in the temple religious school. Sukinik-Conway, who serves as Vice Chairperson of the Religious Education Committee, states, "We go to First Fridays, a service geared toward kids; and she loves it. She has picked up all the songs and has fun; sometimes I will catch her singing them at home." As an interfaith family she adds, "It is a very comfortable and welcoming community. My husband (who is not Jewish) will even go



MRT Rabbi Marc Kline supervises his religious students during a social picnic.

without me. We joined and fit right in."



MRT leaders, Cantor Gabrielle Clissold, MRT Board President Margie Wold, Rabbi Marc Kline and long-time board member and community leader Dean Ross

As the Jewish New Year shortly begins, MRT plans on celebrating its 60th year with a weekend of celebrations.

MRT President Marjorie Wold explains, "Working alongside our Rabbi Marc Kline and Cantor Gabrielle Clissold is an honor and a privilege. I look forward to celebrating our 60th anniversary with a special Shabbat service honoring our former spiritual leaders on Friday November 15 and a Gala Dinner Dance at the Sheraton Eatontown on Saturday night, November 16. All in the community are welcome to join us in the celebration!"

Rabbi Kline adds, "Moses lived to 120; that is only our half-life.

We are still young and still growing and our mission is before us."

For more information on the celebration, contact the MRT office at info@monmouthreformtemple.org. !?" benefit the MRT Religious Education Endowment Fund!