

Kol HaNeshamah turns 18

Englewood shul offers participatory services, intimacy, and learning

Joanne Palmer • Local



Kol HaNeshamah members perform for an audience at the Actors' Home in Englewood. From left, Alan Arenson, Julia Berman, Sarah Peterson, Ben Pomeranz, Levana Rashba, Julius Rashba, Rachel Silverman, Brynn Levy, Abigail Pomeranz, Rabbi Elias, Michael Silverman, and Jason Levy perform and lead Actors' Home residents in a sing-along. Teens from Kol HaNeshamah go to the home one Shabbat each month

Of course every synagogue has its own character, rhythm, history, and feel.

There are some things that just about every one of them shares — a dedication to Jewish tradition (it's the definition of the tradition that varies widely), a feeling of connection to Jewish history (again, variously defined, with different episodes highlighted), and the demand to be recognized as warm and welcoming. (It is often the shuls that present as ice-cold and clique-ish that insist on that label.)

Kol HaNeshamah in Englewood is participatory, intimate, and intense; a place where it is hard to hide but easy to be seen.

Kol HaNeshamah is about to turn 18. If it were a person, it could vote, drive, and enlist in the armed forces. As a community, instead, it can celebrate the life force that has created it — 18, of course, is *chai*, or life, in Jewish

tradition — as it looks both forward and back. “We were started by five families in a house,” Steven Haber, a former president, said. For the last 17 years, Kol HaNeshamah has been renting space in St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Englewood, leading to interesting contortions in the wording on bar and bat mitzvah invitations. But the rented space has allowed the congregation to establish roots on the East Hill of Englewood and Tenafly, in a neighborhood that otherwise would have no egalitarian Conservative Jewish presence.

“We wanted to create a more participatory kind of shul,” Mr. Haber, who has belonged to Kol HaNeshamah almost since the beginning, said. “We didn’t want the rabbi standing on the bimah, controlling the whole show, while everyone else was passively listening. “That’s one of the reasons we’ve stayed together as long as we have. People can’t find as much of this participatory aspect in other synagogues. “There is a whole range of different observance levels,” he continued, and members come from across the Jewish spectrum. Some grew up in Orthodox households, others in completely unaffiliated families. “I think that contributes a lot to the vitality of the shul,” he said. “It’s not a monolithic type of place. “We have Talmud classes, and we have people who had never had an aliyah before.”

Fred Elias is the rabbi of the Solomon Schechter Day School of Bergen County, and he is the rabbi of Kol HaNeshamah as well. He is also a full-fledged member of the community. “It is a community built upon the real contribution of congregants,” Rabbi Elias said. “It is a congregant-centered community that takes Jewish tradition, Jewish practice, and Jewish ritual seriously. It takes *tikkun olam* seriously. “We don’t use the old model,” he continued. “We don’t have a building, so we are not centered around high costs and a building fund. We are centered instead around people contributing to the community through volunteerism. “I am not the only person who can offer services or classes. This is a spiritual group, and it asks everyone to contribute to the community.” Although he delivers most of the *divrei Torah*, often other people take up that task. “When I’m away, the community doesn’t miss a beat,” Rabbi Elias said.

The community now has about 60 member families; on the high holy days, when it offers free services — no tickets, no pledges, no bars to entry — “we have about 250 people,” he said. He praises the Jewish Federation of Northern New Jersey’s push to match ticketless Jews with Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur shul seats, but for Kol HaNeshamah, that service is not an annual initiative but “the core of who we are.”

The shul is ambitious in its offerings, Mr. Haber said. “We have events as if we were a much larger community. There is something every week. There are Talmud classes, volunteer opportunities, a chance to clean up the park” — that’s part of the segment of Palisades Interstate Park in Englewood Cliffs — “or the actors’ home” — the Lillian Booth Actors’ Home in Englewood — “or the Englewood birthday cleanup in April. And we’re very involved in supporting Israel.”

The services are conventional, but with a twist, the Jewish Theological Seminary-ordained Rabbi Elias said. “We conduct standard Conservative services, but if someone has a question, we pause and allow them to ask it.”

Once a month, Kol HaNeshamah offers the Shabbat café — between the morning service, *Shacharit*, and the Torah reading, the community pauses, and discusses Torah, applying it to modern life over coffee and Danish. Shul members tackle such pressing, controversial questions as interdating, intermarriage, same-sex marriage, and how to interpret Torah passages that seem to be sexist or misogynist, as well as the somewhat more academic but still emotionally evocative issues such as whether it is necessary to continue to observe the second days of holidays in the diaspora.

This weekend, Kol HaNeshamah celebrates its 18th birthday. On Friday, May 1, community members will host Shabbat dinners, so everyone can have a festive meal that night. After services on Saturday morning, there will be a Kiddush lunch. On Sunday, May 3, the shul will host comedian Robin Fox, offer sushi and other food for a light dinner, and run both a silent and a live auction; the cover charge is \$50, \$36 for people under 30. Coasting on the high that 18th-birthday parties evoke, it looks forward to entering institutional young adulthood, and hopes to have many decades ahead.