

NAPLES JEWISH CONGREGATION MEMBERSHIP NEARLY TOPS 100 BUT STILL FEELS LIKE A FAMILY

By Elizabeth Kellar

When the Naples Jewish Congregation was founded, its numbers were small—just 26 members. Their meeting place was modest, too. The group gathered in each other's homes.

Now, the congregation is preparing to celebrate its 25th anniversary.

There certainly have been some changes: The membership almost tops 100, and the synagogue has formed a partnership with the Unitarian Universalist Congregation to hold its weekly services at the church's North Naples campus. But despite this growth, members agree that the congregation has held onto its warm, cozy feeling.

"It doesn't feel like an institution," said Rabbi Howard Herman. "It feels like a family."

Herman joined the congregation in 2017, serving as its third full-time rabbi.

"I feel blessed to have such a wonderful group of adults who come together and have a love of services, love of learning and most importantly, have a love of each other," Herman said.

When it was founded as a Reform congregation, it was with the idea that the group would serve the needs of adults without young children, a focus that would allow its resources to be fully devoted to its adult members.

"That's kind of a unique congregation," Rabbi Herman noted.

To that end, the Naples Jewish Congregation offers adult education classes once a month October through March. These classes are held prior to the 7 p.m. Friday night services; all are welcome, regardless of their faith. The topics vary, ranging from healthy aging to Jewish views on current events. One recent adult education class addressed a spiritual perspective on growing older. More than half the members typically attend.

The congregation's sisterhood sponsors numerous activities during the year, including Tai Chi classes, book discussions, dinners and other gatherings.

The congregation also hosts a popular social event called "Flamingle." Held about once a month at a park or restaurant, the event gives members a chance to meet and discover more about their fellow members. About half the members usually participate.

Charles Flum, the synagogue's president, said there's a reason for the consistent



Rabbi Howard S. Herman, of the Naples Jewish Congregation, speaks during an adult education class on self reflection on Nov. 10. Photo by **Chris Tilley**

turnout.

"We just like each other," Flum said.

Steve McCloskey agreed. He and his wife Shelley joined as members in 2014.

"Our resource is our people," he said. "Our members. And our ability to reach out to each other."

The membership shares a passion for many of the same causes and concerns, as well. Social justice is a cornerstone of the congregation. Clothing, food and eyeglasses drives are all regular undertakings, and during election season, the membership staffs an election precinct. The congregation is also part of the Interfaith Alliance of Southwest Florida.

"As reformed Jews, part of our calling is to

engage in social action," McCloskey said.

There's another passion that unites the congregation, too: its members' love of song.

Jane Galler is the congregation's cantorial soloist and Alla Gorelik is the group's music director and pianist. Both are longtime members of the synagogue.

"I love this congregation," Galler said. "They're wonderful. They're supportive. And they do love to sing."

To mark its 25th anniversary, the congregation will host a special Hanukkah dinner this year at 6:30 p.m. Monday, Dec. 11, at Cypress Woods Country Club in North Naples. All are welcome. For more information, visit naplesjewishcongregation.org **NP**