Temple Beth Sholom: Resilience Hub Case Study
by Susan Silber

The theme of *Tikkun Olam*, which means Repairing the World in Hebrew, guides the resilience work of Temple Beth Sholom, a synagogue located in the center of San Leandro. From supporting members with mutual aid to its certification as a green business, Temple Beth Shalom has spent the past years developing both its programming and infrastructure to become an impressive model for climate justice work and as a resilience hub.

The synagogue is proud to be known as the longest running synagogue on the West Coast, having started in 1881 with the founding of the San Leandro Hebrew Congregation. In 1889, the community built its first ‘shul’ (the Yiddish word for synagogue) on Chumalia Street, which was later moved to the backyard of the bigger shul (built in 1947), and they continue to offer programming there.

“Like many places of worship, owning our building is always one of our greatest assets,” noted Executive Director Beth Zygielbaum.

Just a few years ago, the synagogue’s leaders, knowing they were needing new members, dove deep into examining their role in the community.
“We thought, there is so much passion for climate justice. How could we center this as a core Jewish value? Dr. Hoi-Fei Mok from the City of San Leandro introduced us to the resilience hubs training in 2021, which was incredible in that it helped us to understand our assets and how to best center community needs and connect with other organizations doing aligned work,” says Zygielbaum.

Central to the organization is their commitment to community-driven projects. “We always check in with our members and ask, what are folks feeling most passionate about?” noted Zygielbaum.

Key elements to their success include their active Green Team and social justice committees, and their dynamic new rabbi, Josh Wiseman, who was hired in part because of his commitment to climate solutions.

**Climate Justice and Environmental Solutions**

Temple Beth Sholom is dreaming big about environmental projects, using the regional Alameda County Green Business Program certification process as a guide and working on both programming and infrastructure projects. They have already renovated the main building with energy efficient appliances, and are now seeking funds to fix the roof so that they can install solar panels.

To date, they have installed many water conservation features, with only low-flow toilets remaining, and are looking to plant a butterfly garden to help supplement the preschool’s education. The Green Team has organized a very successful Buy Nothing event, with community members both donating their unwanted household items while taking what they wanted.

**Community Care and Inclusivity**

Places of worship are known for their commitment to community care, but Temple Beth Sholom takes this a step further, with an impressive array of programming aimed at centering equity and racial justice. Their many activities to support community members include organizing meal trains for the infirmed, running a childcare and afterschool program, introducing new members to three “buddy” member households based on their similar interests and affinities, and helping members to move.

During the pandemic, the leadership organized a mutual aid system where they surveyed the needs of the community and stepped in with ad hoc community services, including food deliveries when needed. The community recently joined San Leandro’s Interfaith Network mutual aid system, which they hope to collaborate with more in the future regarding community resiliency.

**Disaster Preparedness**

The installation of off-grid power is the synagogue’s most ambitious goal, recognizing that San Leandro is extremely vulnerable to power shut offs during wildfire season and windstorms. Solar panels with battery backup will not only provide clean renewable
energy for the building year-round, but will help to provide the community with reliable power during a shut off. In particular, the site hopes to power older community members’ life-sustaining devices during a crisis.

“It’s a no-brainer to install a backup battery,” says Zygielbaum. “We have to redo the roof anyway!” Making sure that the buildings are resilient enough to withstand extreme weather is another issue; the building sustained damage from the recent atmospheric rivers.

Photo credit: Susan Silber
Temple Beth Sholom’s small but mighty staff and membership will continue to dream big as they work diligently toward strengthening their community’s resiliency.

Rabbi Weisman agrees. He notes, "Climate resilience is an existential and moral imperative for our community. If we allow climate change to proceed unchecked, our community won't exist in 100 years. If we don't stand up for climate resilience now, what do we stand for?"

They are proving to be a model in community resilience through the mission of Tikkun Olam.