

## **Tri-Valley Cultural Jews Handbook for Members**

Tri-Valley Cultural Jews  
1817 Sinclair Drive  
Pleasanton, Ca 94588

Phone: 925-485-1049

Website: <https://trivalleyculturaljews.wordpress.com>

Email: [info@tri-valleyculturaljews.org](mailto:info@tri-valleyculturaljews.org)

You can also Like us on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/TriValley-Cultural-Jews-127758807244931/>

- Tri-Valley Cultural Jews (TVCJ) provides a welcoming home for those who find their Jewish identity in culture, history, and family, rather than religion.
- TVCJ is a member of the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations.

TVCJ is a 501(c)(3) organization. Donations (including membership fees) may be deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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## **A Cultural Society**

Jews have always been a diverse people. The many movements in Jewish tradition provide comfortable homes for Jews of differing beliefs. We believe that this diversity is a strength.

We believe that a Jew is one who, regardless of birth, identifies with the history, culture, and future of the Jewish people. Throughout Jewish history there have always been Jews who identified with Judaism through history, culture, and peoplehood. Secular Jews have had various names throughout the ages... some accepting, some less complimentary. In response to the Enlightenment, Secular Jews in Eastern Europe began to name their movement and to celebrate Jewish culture in nonreligious ways. In the late 1800s Secular Judaism emerged as a recognizable movement in Jewish life. It was joined in the 1960s by Humanistic Judaism, which has a more Western European flavor and outlook. The two movements together now form the North American contingent of a Secular Humanistic Jewish movement, with branches in many countries around the world. The Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations (CSJO) and Society for Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) together support the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism, which trains rabbis, leaders, educators, and cantors for the movement.

Tri-Valley Cultural Jews is part of this movement. Our Jewish heritage is a source of identity, pride, and ethics. Jewish history teaches us much about rights and responsibilities, about human behavior, and about community. Jewish culture enriches and inspires us. Our goals are to honor, celebrate and enjoy our heritage, passing our ethics and culture on to future generations.

## **Tri-Valley Cultural Jews**

TVCJ is a Secular Humanistic Jewish organization which makes its home in the East Bay region of the San Francisco Bay Area. We began in Livermore with a Rosh Hashanah celebration in 2005. The following year our Jewish Culture School (JCS) started in Castro Valley to provide a secular Jewish education for children. We now offer a wide range of programming for children and adults. Our philosophy, curriculum, holiday observances, and programming reflect our secular and humanistic perspective.

We welcome families and individuals of varied backgrounds. TVCJ includes non-traditional families and families of mixed cultural backgrounds.

Overall, the emphasis of Tri-Valley Cultural Jews is on an understanding of Jewish heritage and actively participating in Jewish communal life and improving our local communities, our country and our world.

## **What We Stand For**

- Judaism is the creation of the Jewish people. All generations are responsible for carrying it forward and adding to it.
- Only natural forces and human beings are responsible for what happens in this world. People have the ability and responsibility to solve human problems through striving for equality, social justice and peace.
- We believe in the equality and dignity of every human being, and in the power of community.
- Religion is a private matter properly taught in the family. The state should have no religious functions. We support the separation of church and state.
- A Jew is someone who identifies with the history, people, culture and fate of the Jews.
- The freedom and dignity of the Jewish people must go hand-in-hand with the freedom and dignity of all peoples.

## **What We Offer**

- Holiday celebrations and access to Secular Jewish life cycle ceremonies, all god-free.
- Jewish Culture School culminating in a Secular Bar/Bat Mitzvah.
- Membership in the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations and the benefits of membership, including scholarships.
- Potlucks and programs: speakers, discussions & great food!
- A chance to learn about Jewish subjects without any expectations of prior knowledge or belief.
- A welcoming community for those whose connection with being Jewish is

through history, culture, family and a commitment to progressive social values.

- An inclusive atmosphere comfortable for non-traditional families and households in which not everyone is Jewish.
- “Philosophers’ Café”
- Movie nights
- The opportunity to participate in progressive social action.
- A diverse and caring community of new friends.

## **Life Cycle Events**

TVCJ offers a full range of life cycle events, including baby namings, Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies, weddings, funerals, etc.

### **Baby Naming**

In the modern Jewish world, we give our children Jewish names to connect our future with our past: both the past of Jewish history, and the past of our personal histories. In our tradition, boy and girl babies are treated the same, and babies are named at personalized ceremonies created in conjunction with the parents. Ceremonies may be private or open to the community. The naming ceremony can occur at any time in the child's life. If a circumcision is to be performed, it is generally conducted in the hospital before the baby comes home.

### **Bar/Bat Mitzvah**

The TVCJ Bar/Bat Mitzvah program runs concurrently with the Jewish Culture School's 6th and 7th grade years. It is a two-year endeavor that includes several projects and community service chosen by the student.

This effort culminates in the Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebration. This unique collaboration, written by our students, their parents, and our culture school teachers, provides a highly personal and meaningful highlight in our students' Jewish communal lives.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah program is a process of self-discovery and the development of cultural identity. The students demonstrate their knowledge by conducting and sharing research on Jewish history and culture.

Students also analyze and interpret their Torah and Haftarah portions, reading both in English so that they thoroughly understand them and can present a thoughtful response.

In addition to academic preparation, TVCJ Bar/Bat Mitzvah students participate in community service projects performing at least 30 hours of volunteer work that is meaningful to them. We believe it is important for our young members to demonstrate to themselves that one person can make a difference.

Adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah program is also available.

We encourage modest ceremonies and celebrations.

### **Weddings**

We work closely with all, including interfaith and same sex couples, to design unique and meaningful wedding ceremonies, that reflect their personalities and values. Our officiants are open to co-officiating wedding ceremonies with other religious leaders. Jewish rituals, such as the chuppah, ketubah, and breaking of the glass, may be included in the ceremony, as can traditions from other cultures.

### **Funerals**

TVCJ can provide a secular Jewish funeral or memorial service for your loved one. These services can take place in a location of the family's choosing.

### **Welcoming Ceremonies**

Many who are not born Jewish find themselves within the Jewish community and eventually discover that they identify as Jews. We are pleased to work with them to enhance their Jewish education and to devise ceremonies of welcoming them as part of the Jewish community.

## **Jewish Holidays**

TVCJ observes the Jewish holidays throughout the year. Observances and celebrations are included as part of membership, and are open to non-members with a suggested donation.

Our holiday and festival celebrations, conducted primarily in English, are designed to provide creative approaches to Jewish traditions and practices. They allow us to acknowledge our cultural and historical experience while recognizing their importance in present day life. Children are welcome, and are in fact central, to most TVCJ holiday observances. And, of course, there is always plenty of music and food to share!

### **Rosh Hashanah**

We observe Rosh Hashanah with a gathering on the first evening. Our observance consists of poetry, music, singing, readings, meditation and the traditional blowing of the shofar. Part of our tradition includes a Tashlikh gathering, during which we metaphorically cast off our wrongdoings, in the form of bread crumbs, into a body of water.

### **Yom Kippur**

Each year, we offer either a Kol Nidre night or Yom Kippur daytime observance. Our Yom Kippur observance is focused on reflecting on the past year as a community and as individuals within the world community. Through music, silent reflections and readings from Jewish philosophers, we discuss social justice issues, and the idea that we must use our energies and actions to improve the world around us. We conclude the ceremony with a Niskor (memorial) observance.

### **Sukkot**

We celebrate Sukkot by building and decorating a sukkah at a member family's home for the entire TVCJ community to enjoy. Games, singing, and a potluck round out the morning.

### **Hanukkah**

Hanukkah is celebrated with a party and potluck. We make latkes and enjoy them with applesauce and other toppings. We play dreidel, light the menorah, sing, and schmooze with friends and family.

### **Tu B'Shvat**

On Tu B'Shvat we concentrate on the environment. We organize a community field trip or program where members can learn about and/or improve the local ecology. Past trips have included a butterfly preserve, forest hike, and shoreline trash clean up.

### **Purim**

Our Purim Carnival includes games, crafts, costumes, and a Purim shpiel (play). We bake hamentashen together at the event. It is a raucous and joyous good time, during which we retell and celebrate the story of Esther.

### **Passover**

Each Passover, TVCJ holds a community Seder. Our secular, progressive Haggadah stresses themes of freedom, social justice, and resistance to tyranny. It includes songs in English, Yiddish, and Hebrew. Our seder plates include the traditional Passover foods along with modern symbolic additions to create a more inclusive celebration.

### **Lag B'Omer**

On Lag B'Omer, the scholars' holiday, we have a traditional picnic which culminates in our famous watermelon toss. We often celebrate the "Week of Action" at our picnic by collecting donations for a local charity, program, or school.

### **Shabbat / Havdalah**

Besides the annual holidays, there are many other occasions where our members get together. We have a family Shabbat or Havdalah every month, hosted by a member family. At these events we either chip in for pizza or have a potluck. Sometimes we turn these evenings into a movie night or game night as well.

## **Jewish Culture School**

Jewish Culture School (JCS) focuses on giving our children a positive feeling about their Jewish heritage, an idea of the scope of Jewish knowledge and action, and the desire to further their education and to act as Jews in the modern world. The goal is to give the students opportunities to:

- Learn about the historical, cultural and ethical aspects of our Jewishness
- Participate in cultural events such as festivals, holiday celebrations, cooking, life cycle events, and storytelling
- Understand the ethics and values which can be derived from Jewish traditions and history
- Develop an appreciation for the aesthetics of the Jewish experience through examination of and participation in Jewish art, music, dance, language and literature

JCS holds classes for elementary school children up until the end of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah year. Classes are held on two Sunday mornings per month from 10:30 am to 12:30 pm. The curriculum varies each year, and includes hands-on lessons and community-building activities. Some of our curricular themes include:

- Jews Around the World
- Our Eastern European and Sephardic Jewish Heritage
- Life Cycles and Holidays
- Jewish History Through Art and Science

### **Jewish Culture School Graduates**

JCS graduates are as diverse as adult members of TVCJ. Some of our graduates have gone on to work as teachers' aides in the Jewish Culture School, blow the shofar at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, provide childcare, and lead children's activities at our community events. We encourage our graduates to take an active role in our community. At Bar/Bat Mitzvah age we invite them to sit on the board, lead community activities, and assist with TVCJ programming.

### **School Policies**

Students and staff treat each other with respect. The ideas of others are listened to with respect and kindness.

Jewish Culture School begins at 10:30 am and ends at 12:30 pm. All students should plan on attending for the entire two hours. Late arrivals and early departures should be kept to a minimum. Check the calendar in your newsletter or on our website for special times for special events.

Although the atmosphere at JCS is informal, we do require derekh-eretz (respect). All students are expected to conform to reasonable standards of behavior. Every effort will be made to find an activity to occupy a disruptive child happily. If disruptive behavior continues, the child may be removed from the class temporarily. If necessary, a parent will be asked to attend JCS with the child. Our policy is to not expel students.

Parents are welcome in class at any time (but expect to be put to work)!

### **Preschool Holiday Program**

TVCJ offers workshops for preschoolers to attend with an adult in conjunction with the Jewish holidays. They learn about the upcoming holiday, sing songs, hear stories, cook, eat and do art projects. This program is contingent each year upon registration numbers.

## **Adult Program**

The Tri-Valley Cultural Jews offers informal get-togethers, as well as educational and social action programs for adults. Throughout the year, there are several opportunities for our adult members to engage and socialize with each other. Some of these activities include:

- Jewish Film Festival
- Hikes
- Sunday morning brunch and social (during Culture School)
- Lecture series / Conversation events
- Game nights
- Movie nights
- ...and there's always food!

We are always open to new ideas and suggestions for programs.

## **The Executive Board**

The executive board is a group elected by the members, and acts as a planning committee for the organization. Anyone 13 years of age and older is eligible to sit on the board. This group is primarily responsible for planning holiday celebrations and other events. The board meets monthly, and all members are welcome to attend.

## **Your Part in the Community**

### **The nuts and bolts of our operation: You**

TVCJ is a volunteer organization. (Our only paid staff is our head teacher.) We rely on our members to organize and carry out our programming. We like to spread the work around, so that no one person ends up with a big obligation.

Please check off a box in the volunteer section of the membership form, or just write us a note about what you would like to do. There are several ways that you can help with our celebrations and events, such as by being an event coordinator, shopping, setting up and cleaning up, organizing activities for the children, or greeting new guests at the door.