

UNITED STATES

Meet the Jews of the Grand Canyon and rural Arizona, where Jewish life takes dedication

BY NICOLE RAZ NOVEMBER 25, 2021



Rabbi Nina Perlmutter officiates a wedding overlooking the Grand Canyon in 2017. (Tom Brodersen)

([Jewish News of Greater Phoenix](#) via [JTA](#)) — Stan Coffield and his wife were pretty open-minded when deciding where they would retire.

“I wanted someplace that was lower cost of living [than New York] — warm, dry, near a body of water that I could water-ski on, and had some manner of Jewish presence,” Coffield said.

In 2010, they moved into their house in Lake Havasu City, about 200 miles northwest of Phoenix. Even though the synagogue is small, he hasn’t looked back since.

“When my wife and I first moved out here, you would turn a street corner and really be tempted to just pull over to the side of the road and stare; it looks like a picture postcard,” he said. “And you go three blocks, and it’s another picture postcard.”

He and his wife are two of Lake Havasu’s nearly 60,000 residents, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and part of the roughly 30 members of the area’s only synagogue, Temple Beth Sholom.

“Given that we’re the only congregation and synagogue within all of Mohave County, we have the full gamut [of members],” he said. “We’ve got people in Havasu, God bless them, who manage to be Orthodox and keep kosher, all the way out to the fringes of Reform.”

Jewish life takes a different shape in rural areas than it does in the city — and often requires great dedication. In some places, that means the congregants have to learn how to lead services since they can only afford to bring a rabbi in periodically. For some, that means driving hours from a remote area to attend a tiny synagogue in another small town. And in nearly every community, a rural Jewish life is one in which your synagogue is like a family for better or for worse, and like any family, you only get one.

Coffield has been president of the congregation for about six years and does his best to provide regular services and Torah study and to grow the congregation. A rabbi travels to Lake Havasu from Los Angeles about once a month to run a Shabbat service on Friday and a Torah study on Saturday. The congregation tries to coordinate his travel with Jewish holidays.

The synagogue strives to have a schedule posted three months in advance to ensure members, some of whom drive nearly two hours to get there, have ample time to plan.

“We get congregants from Laughlin, Bullhead City, Blythe, California, Needles — I mean, we’re it,” Coffield said.

Being the only Jewish institution for miles can mean Coffield becomes the person people call on to attend end of life matters. Lake Havasu is

“almost exclusively retirees and service personnel,” Coffield said. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the median age in the city is 54.2.

As president of the congregation, he gets “sorrowful phone calls” from people he’s never seen at the synagogue but who are suddenly in need of spiritual support. Coffield does his best to accommodate those requests, “but it’s just hard from so many different perspectives.”

Yuma, about 200 miles Southwest of Phoenix, also has a small but dedicated Jewish community. With a population of nearly 100,000 people, the city’s only synagogue has about 20 family units.

“Those range from people that are single, to couples, to people who have kids,” said Leone Neegan, president of Congregation Beth Hamidbar. The synagogue, whose name means “house of the desert,” meets in a space rented from a church.

“I am not sure that anyone for whom their Jewish religion is the most important part of their life would move to a place with so few Jewish institutions,” she said. “We don’t know how many, but there are Jews here who don’t belong to the congregation, who just aren’t religious at all.”

For the past seven years, a rabbi has driven from Orange County in California to Yuma to lead High Holiday services. “The rest of the time, he gave us a class in doing lay-led services, so we take turns leading Shabbat services, and we pool our knowledge,” Neegan said.

Members meet for services twice a month most of the year — in the summer, that’s halved. Some of the congregants also meet in a weekly Torah study group.

Neegan was born and raised in Phoenix but moved to Yuma in 1975 after graduating from the University of Arizona when a friend told her about a job at the local library that had opened up. At the time, she didn’t think she’d stay in Yuma long. “I couldn’t imagine anyone living here. It was just, to me, a very small, dusty town,” she said.

For a few months, she thought she was the only Jew in town. But one day, she saw an article in the local newspaper about High Holiday services. “I went to services, and found that there was a small Jewish community here, and the people were very welcoming,” she said.

At the time, the congregation wasn’t affiliated with any branch of Judaism, since the people who attended had a variety of Jewish backgrounds and observance. Eventually it affiliated with the Union for Reform Judaism.

Neegan never expected to become as involved in her congregation as she did.

“If I had remained in either Phoenix or Tucson, or some other large city with a larger population, I might not have become as involved with either the religion or the congregation as I ended up being,” she said.

Neegan’s fellow congregants have become “a giant, extended family,” she said. “It’s like being on an island with people. If you get angry, there isn’t another synagogue to go to. You have to work it out somehow.”

Rabbi Nina Perlmutter, rabbi emerita of Congregation Lev Shalom in Flagstaff, said she’s often found that the further a Jewish person lives from an established Jewish community, the more dedicated they are to building Jewish community.

Many Jews who live in the Grand Canyon, where Perlmutter often officiates at lifecycle events, or other rural areas of Arizona moved for the beauty of the landscape, she said. For most of them, Jewish life wasn’t necessarily a priority and isn’t easily supported by the Jewish infrastructure of the area.

“But then they often find that they miss having Jewish connections,” she said. “I know people who have commuted a long time, like the Grand Canyon folks, to Flagstaff. That’s not easy. You gotta really want to do it.”

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