

Kehillat Israel: History, and Another Beginning

By Nina Kidd | August 21, 2026



Congregants and friends are greeted in Hebrew and English as they step across the stone threshold into the sanctuary of Kehillat Israel.

Religious Life has played an important part in the founding of Pacific Palisades and was integral to the community as it grew. The Palisades 2025 Fire destroyed several religious institutions, and CTN Religious Correspondent Nina Kidd continues her series of reporting on congregations, including where and when services are held and upcoming events.

Under the leadership of Rabbi Abraham Winokur in 1952, the Jewish Community of Pacific Palisades was created, which evolved into Kehillat Israel, a Reconstructionist congregation. After buying property at the corner of Muskingum and Sunset, the congregation had to get the land rezoned to build a temple, which was a challenge in the established Christian community. Rabbi Winoku said, “Most of the neighbors were unhappy that we were coming in there and were literally going up and down the street like Paul Revere: ‘The Jews are coming!’ We eventually got the building permit, but it was hard.”

As the congregation grew to 400 families, a larger temple and school was built. It was completed in 1997. During construction, the Lutheran congregation worshipped in a church adjacent to the property and invited KI to hold Shabbat services in their sanctuary.

KEHILLAT ISRAEL

16019 Sunset Boulevard

Phone: 9310) 454-2328

Senior Rabbi: Amy Bernstein

Website: www.ourki.org



Senior Rabbi Amy Bernstein (far right) sings with cantors to celebrate Cantor Chayim Frenkel's 40th Anniversary at K.I. Flanking Cantor Frenkel are, left: K.I. Cantorial Intern Jessica Jacobs, and right: Cantor Shira Fox Steinberg, a friend of K.I.

PALISADES 2025 FIRE:

During the night of January 7, 2025, the fire roared, eating the Palisades hillsides. On dark Muskingum Avenue near Sunset, four houses exploded in flames, lighting up the street. Burning palm fronds fell through the smoke, blew sideways and caught in jacaranda branches, trees just feet from the Kehillat Israel's stucco walls.

The fire stopped there. Kehillat Israel and houses on its side of the street survived. But then came the official government lockouts, for houses and the temple, Inspections, and remediation.

18 MONTHS LATER:

The bookshelves looked full, but in mid-August '26 packing boxes still surrounded the couches in Rabbi Amy Bernstein's office at Kehillat Israel.

Still, after the 2025 fire, the K.I. congregation and leadership had demanded more than remediation. They upped their synagogue restoration to a true remodel. The rabbi's sense of energy and hope themselves demonstrated post-disaster resilience and the Jewish state of mind.

EVACUATED:

The KI congregation, like others from the Palisades, gathered for worship in a space in Santa Monica. They held occasional picnic style Shabbat services and gatherings on the beach. Even as they called their flock together and planned for their return, the leadership prayed and imagined a renewed KI.

And the congregation's reaction to the fire?

"[The Jewish people] are uniquely prepared to embrace the idea of trauma," the Rabbi said. That is a source of pride. Recalling Jewish history, she said, all of the stories are about "what got built."

RETURN TO SUNSET:

Last May services resumed in a changed sanctuary. "We took the color scheme from the sea and shore," the rabbi told me. "It's a reminder of where we are." And subtly repeated we see the Hebrew letter Shin. Shin, an initial of one of the names for G-d, appears as pattern on metal screens and etched in pavers.

The enthusiasm in the refreshed building in mid-August didn't ignore the community's lingering fire trauma. This past July K.I. offered. Saved by a Story: Wildfire Survivor Writing Workshop. Free to the community, it featured writing prompts about memories and loss.

Rabbi Amy and Pastor Grace of Palisades Presbyterian Church have started a series of guided meditations at KI, open to all: Persons of faith or with no professed faith. The purpose is to calm thought and discover paths back to self-control.

Throughout the time of evacuation and waiting, KI's cultural history and study continued in classes (online via www.ourki.org). Examples include: "Let's Talk Israel" a series; and *Judaism 101*, weekly in-person Torah Study, and a current lecture series *Jewish America at 250*.



View from the lectern toward curved and terraced congregation seating, a modern sanctuary design but reminiscent of ancient theaters.

UPCOMING SERVICES AND EVENTS:

The leadership is determined that KI's remediation-remodel will be fully functional by the start of High Holidays (September 11-- Rosh Hashanah).

KI's well known preschool re-opens August 23, and for elementary through high-school aged students the Jewish Experience Center (JEC) holds a First Day Family Program August 30.

On September 21 at 5 p.m., KI invites the community to hear Zelana Montminy, psychologist and author, speaking about strategies to stay focused and present in a distracted world.

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