



KOLOT
MAYIM
REFORM
TEMPLE

Our History
1997-2021

Kolot Mayim – “Voices of the Water” is Victoria’s Reform Congregation and was founded in 1997 by a few dedicated families, meeting monthly in each other’s living rooms. Today, they are an inclusive, warm, and welcoming congregation of about 100 people. The congregation has met at the Jewish Community Centre since its early days. Originally, they began by celebrating monthly Friday Night Shabbat and the High Holy Days, all led by congregants. They have evolved through several stages (lay leader, sh’lich tzibur, student rabbis, visiting rabbis, part-time rabbis) to now having their own Rabbi, Rabbi Lynn. They hold weekly services, celebrate all holidays and festivals, have weekly Torah study, year-round learning opportunities, conversion classes, bar mitzvah classes, and celebrate life-cycle events.

Kolot Mayim’s membership reflects all educational, socio-economic, political, and cultural backgrounds. They have many interfaith couples, LGBTQ individuals and families, members with varying abilities, and an age span from 3 to 90+. The essence of Kolot Mayim is enriched by its dedication to Jewish continuity. Their congregation and its leadership have a strong focus on learning about, practicing, and celebrating Jewish life. To this end, Kolot Mayim is making a healthy contribution to a thriving Jewish Community in Victoria.

“The friendships that I’ve formed, the growth of the congregation, the welcoming spirit, the thriving of the congregation, the community, the home that we could provide for so many people’s varying needs within our group – all of these things are very positive experiences for me.” – Joel Fagan



The History of Kolot Mayim

Early Days

The seeds of Kolot Mayim were planted in 1997 when founding member, Joel Fagan, sent out letters to those interested in beginning a Reform group in Victoria. Joel and his wife, Sandy, had moved to Victoria in 1995 from Calgary, where they had been among the founding members of a Reform congregation there, B'nai Tikvah. Having had experience with developing a Reform congregation in Calgary, Joel thought he would try to duplicate that experience in Victoria, where one did not exist. Joel approached the Jewish Community Centre in Victoria, where it so happened that they had been collecting a list of names of those who had pronounced interest in forming a Reform congregation in Victoria. After Joel acquired this list of names, he wrote personal letters to each person asking if they would be interested in attending an informal meeting to discuss beginning a Reform chavurah.

Charlynn Ashford, one of the first people Joel contacted and earliest member of Kolot Mayim, continued the search by contacting people on the Jewish Community Directory list. David Torontow, who would join Kolot Mayim shortly thereafter, was publishing this list on behalf of Congregation Emanu-El at that time. To Joel's excitement, about 15 to 20 families attended the preliminary meeting. Those that attended were excited to join and to be a part of developing a new inclusive space for Judaism in Victoria. After the first few meetings, the group decided to meet once every month, initially taking turns running services in each other's homes. As numbers grew, they began to meet every three weeks, and then every two weeks for a long period of time.



A homemade Bimah in one of the member's living rooms in 1997

Grassroots Development

In their grassroots beginnings, although the founding members of Kolot Mayim did not have a building of their own, they had the will of spirit. As their small congregation was made up primarily of parents with young children, the early days were very family oriented. As these founding families developed their new congregation, they had to be creative with what they had. There was little overhead guidance on how to form a new Reform group, so each family brought with them bits from whatever congregation they had belonged to previously.



Families under the Sukkah

Their ritual form followed as close as possible the Reform Prayer Book, which has gone through revisions, and to this day they always follow the current revision. They were intent on developing a congregation that had egalitarianism of gender, mixed seating, women at the Torah, and both Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. As they were developing the style of their new congregation, they had to select what type of music they would play. Initially, they played some melodies from a cassette tape for services. Then, wanting more, a few of the families decided to get together in each other's houses to learn and practice the melodies they wanted to sing. To this day, Kolot Mayim is known as the congregation that sings. Together, they developed what they wanted in a congregation.

At this time, the services were led by congregants, and a core group of people at every service volunteered to keep everything running smoothly. Everyone was involved in whatever they could be involved in, and if someone had a particular strength, they took over that responsibility. This was a group of people with roughly the same interests in creating something new, and the motivation to do so was there. There was a desire to build a new community around a shared mutual interest in Reform Judaism. Early members recall that it was a heimish and warm group of folks at that time.



Building the Sukkah in a member's backyard

"My son was the first Bar Mitzvah in the congregation. So, there were no preconceived ideas about what you had to do for it to be a Bar Mitzvah. We just did what worked, and what worked for us as a family, which was just amazing. Cause we could do whatever we wanted, right? Whatever worked well. It was just very much grassroots." – Caroline Hergt

Early Growth

After about 18 months, the group coalesced to the point where they were prepared to form, in a more formal sense, a synagogue. They decided to begin meeting each Friday night in the Jewish Community Centre as the Jewish Reform Congregation of Victoria. In September 1998, they held their first High Holiday services led by Cantor Karen Gillat from Seattle. To make space for the numbers, they rented space in a downstairs meeting room at the Nellie McLung branch of the Victoria Public Library on Cedar Hill Road. For these early High Holiday services, they borrowed a Torah from Congregation Emanu-El, as they did not yet have one of their own. At the time, it was still very much a member run community, much as it is today. Each in their own way contributed in a very significant manner through conducting services, serving on the board in various capacities, being on committees, and supporting the overall activities of the congregation. Collaboratively, they worked to sustain and promote the growth of the congregation. At this time, things were really coming together, as they were all worked up and energized to create something new. Charlynn Ashford started writing the congregation's newsletters in September 1999, and at one point, she printed and mass-mailed the newsletter

to everyone in the Victoria Jewish directory, so that they were aware that the Reform group was there. The members all wanted a congregation that could both grow as a family and be welcoming to the community. It was a small and intimate group where everyone knew each other. The sense of warmth, community, and welcoming spirit drew in many members, and they felt that they were on their way.

“The first time we went to Kolot Mayim, here’s me trying to figure out whether I was going to be a Jew or not ... and Joel Fagan stood up, shook my hand and said, ‘You’re welcome here.’ That was, I will never forget it.” – Yehudi Freedman

The members of Kolot Mayim have presided over all aspects of the synagogue. Many members took part in conducting religious services as lay members of the congregation. Others took on the roles of Presidency and Vice Presidency, and various other positions on the board and ritual committee. Almost everyone has served in some capacity as a volunteer. Joel Fagan was the first President for two years. Charlynn Ashford was the first Vice President and became President after Joel. Jerry Marks, Joel Fagan and Joe Gougeon-Ryant were each President three times over. The same people did things over and over, and everyone did a lot. Each in their own way has contributed in a very significant way through conducting services, serving on the board in various capacities, being on committees, and supporting the overall activities of the congregation. Each member of the board, each president, and each volunteer have played a pivotal role in promoting the wellbeing of the congregation.

“It just goes to show the inclusivity that everybody had, and that everybody has a very valuable role to play. You don’t have to be the Rabbi. You don’t have to be good at certain things. You just have to show up and participate. And by showing up and participating, you’re contributing to the growth of the congregation because everybody has something to add in. Everybody does.” – Caroline Hergt

The Torah Story

A significant chapter in the development of Kolot Mayim was the acquisition of their own Torah. In 1998, a gift from Louis Sherman of blessed memory allowed Kolot Mayim to purchase a Sefer Torah. Sherman was an older man, well into his 80s, when he joined Kolot Mayim. In his working days, he was a professional violinist, and for 20 years was a member of the Toronto Symphony Orchestra. He retired in Victoria in 1979, and nearly two decades later he found Kolot Mayim. The congregation became very near and dear to his heart. He soon recognized that the congregation did not have a Torah. When he passed, he left a bequest of a significant sum of money to enable the purchase of a Torah. With Sherman’s donation, Joel Fagan contacted the Klein Brothers store in Brooklyn, New York, which specialized in selling Torahs and other religious paraphernalia. When Joel spoke to Rabbi Klein, he was told that, with great coincidence, there was a Rabbinic convention in Vancouver that he would be attending, and that he would like to meet with Joel on that trip to discuss the purchase of a Torah. After the convention, Rabbi Klein came over from Vancouver to Victoria carrying two large suitcases. In these suitcases were individual panels of perhaps ten or eleven Torahs. He visited Joel in his home and arranged the panels on the dining room table, telling a bit of background for each, and recommended a particular Torah that was affordable to the small congregation. This was the Torah that was ultimately purchased. It was over 100 years old but had clear calligraphy and was in excellent condition.



Joel Fagan with Louis Sherman, welcoming the Torah to Kolot Mayim in 1999

A Torah dedication ceremony was held on February 26, 1999. Rabbi Fine of Seattle led the dedication ceremony and married the Torah to the congregation. All of the congregants took turns walking around the Torah that day. While other Torahs are wrapped away, never to be touched, Kolot Mayim's Torah has been the living tree of life. For the first few months, it travelled around from family to family in a cardboard box, as they did not have a permanent building or a safe box to keep it in within the Jewish Community Centre. Of course, everyone wanted to have a turn with the Torah being in their house. Eventually, members David and Dorothy Torontow called on their son, who was a welder, to create a safe box for the Torah to be held within the Jewish Community Centre. Their son volunteered to create a secure fireproof locked box, which was fitted with a special lock, and secured to a wall in the Jewish Community Centre where it is still secured today. One year after the Torah dedication ceremony, Caroline and Martin Hergt created the annual Louis Sherman award in his honour. Every year at Kolot Mayim's Annual General Meeting, the award is gifted by the previous year's recipient to anyone that they would like to recognize in the congregation. The first award was given to Joel Fagan in 2000 for "going above and beyond". Now, each year when awarded, the giver comes up with a new caption for the recipient.

The Ark and Bimah

Shortly after the congregation acquired a Torah, Charlie Schneider designed and built the Aron HaKodesh, often known as the ark. In 2000, when Jenny Laing was acting as lay leader, she asked David Torontow to modify the ark to incorporate a section for books. David took it upon himself to expand and beautify the ark. He built on casters so that it could be moved as a mobile unit, and he installed a battery-operated light for the Ner Tamid. For the Bar Mitzvah of a young

man in a wheelchair, Jenny asked David if it was possible to build the Torah's raised platform, or the Bimah, so that it allowed him to read from his wheelchair. David designed and built this special Torah stand which allowed it to be elevated and lowered so it was able to be read from for this Bar Mitzvah. This was a keystone event in the history of Kolot Mayim, as accessibility came to be something that the congregation was known for.

After her husband did the woodworking, the first Bimah linens were created by Dorothy Torontow. In 2003, Julie Elizabeth hired an artist, Judy MacLeod, to design a new parochet and Bimah linens in honour of her 65th birthday Bat Mitzvah, and as a gift to the temple. Caroline Hergt sewed the curtain for the ark and later donated the Torah shield as a gift for when her son had his Bar Mitzvah. Over time, others donated things to beautify the ark, from the yad to the bells on top. It has grown to the point where it has become the beautifully decorated piece that it is today. Congregants have also consistently donated to purchase all prayer books as the congregation has grown. It is a telling display of Kolot Mayim's grassroots evolution and the tremendous care of each of its congregants.



Charlie Schneider with Aron HaKodesh that he designed and built

Midway through 2000, the congregation chose their current name, Kolot Mayim Reform Temple, and they were accepted as a member congregation of the Union for Reform Judaism. Randy Enkin proposed this new name, and the words came from a melody that was sung in their early days. The words 'Mikolot Mayim' which come from Psalm 93:4, mean 'voices of the water.' This was a very suitable name for their coastal congregation.

Religious School

The next substantial event in the development of Kolot Mayim was forming their own religious school. In November of 1999, the congregation opened the doors to their first religious school students. With so many children in the early congregation, a religious school seemed like the next most evident and important step. The earliest members recall that the children were a very important part in the development of the congregation. At first, Wendy Rolf helped to establish the foundations of the school. Then, when Jenny Laing moved to Victoria in 1999 and attended a service at Kolot Mayim, Wendy gave a call to the previous synagogue that Jenny was a member of back in Ohio. She discovered that Jenny was a curriculum writer and educator for the Jewish education program there. So, the next time Jenny walked into the Jewish Community Centre for Rosh Hashanah celebrations, she was asked to come on board and help build their school. They started the school that winter with the first nine children in one class that school year.



Jenny Laing with students in one of the earliest classes of the religious school

In the following year, waves of children were coming through, as more young families joined the congregation. At this time, Jenny became the Director of Education, and she separated the school into classes. Jenny, along with her daughter Jessie, were the principal teachers at the religious school doing education for kids and adults. Jenny was doing B'nai Mitzvah education for adults and hired teachers for the other children. In May of 2000, Kolot Mayim celebrated their first Bar Mitzvah for the son of Caroline Hergt. The Bar and Bat Mitzvahs were Jenny's favourite events because she loved watching people growing comfortable with Judaism. Jenny ran the school for ten years, and also ran a B'nai Mitzvah campout every year. She was also acting as a rotating lay leader at that time and became the full-time lay leader from 2006 to 2008. Jenny was a most invaluable member in the development of Kolot Mayim. Jenny moved to Calgary in 2010, and Kolot Mayim's Hebrew school was combined with Congregation Emanu-el's. Today, Rabbi Lynn does tutoring and preparations for Bar and Bat Mitzvahs,

though early members recall that the school was a very important part of Kolot Mayim, especially as a draw for people with young children. It is everyone's highest hope that more young families and children will continue to join Kolot Mayim and that they may create their own thriving Hebrew school again.

“Watching people, any people at all, grow comfortable with Judaism is one of the best things there is. I love people becoming comfortable with Judaism, figuring out that this is theirs. It doesn’t just belong to us, it belongs to kids, it belongs to anybody who wants to.” – Jenny Laing



Jenny Laing all dressed up for Purim in 2002

Student Rabbis and Visiting Rabbis Over the Years

After Kolot Mayim’s first few years of congregant led services, the access and availability to fund student Rabbis greatly contributed to their growth. They were able to engage the services of student Rabbis from Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, and they acted as officiants their small congregation. With the first student Rabbi, they felt like they were on their way.

Rabbi Suzanne Singer was the first student Rabbi at Kolot Mayim. She came all the way from California, where she had been a film producer. She had won three Emmys for women’s documentaries before becoming a Rabbi in her later life. At Kolot Mayim, she led B’nai Mitzvahs for most of the first group of kids, and presided over High Holy days for two years, from 2001 to 2002. After she was ordained in 2003, she returned to do High Holy days from 2006 to 2007 and a Shabbaton in 2008. Various other student Rabbis followed, along with several visiting and local Rabbis. Rabbi Karen Soria was a local Rabbi who conducted services on occasion from 2003-2004; Rabbi Jane Litman was a visiting Rabbi from 2008 to 2011. Rabbi Jane was one of the first women rabbis, the first openly LGBTQ person admitted to a rabbinical seminary,

and the first female Rabbi in Victoria; Rabbi Louis Sutker was visiting Rabbi from 2012 to 2014. Rabbi Louis brought a guitar and mandolin with him and filled ears with music; Rabbi Moch was visiting Rabbi from 2014 to 2016, who is also remembered for his love of music. Each individual contributed in their own way to the evolution of the congregation with their own personality and own approach to worship and administration.

In between the student and visiting Rabbis, congregants took turns leading services. Most congregants enjoyed leading services, or at least giving a drash, as it is a very nice way to be involved in the congregation. Jenny Laing was the prominent lay leader for many years in the beginning and in between visiting rabbis. Julie Elizabeth, Joe Gougeon-Ryant, Jerry Marks and Michael Ganz played a prominent role in leading services, cycling through between Rabbis. Although each Rabbi and lay leader brought with them new traditions and perspectives, there was not a continuous feeling of being served properly, and during these years, volunteerism ebbed and flowed.

The installment of Rabbi Lynn as their permanent resident Rabbi in September 2018 was a milestone in the development and stability of the congregation. As with any new and growing congregation, Kolot Mayim has faced its growing pains. Since Rabbi Lynn's installment, more people are joining, and all kinds of people are volunteering for all kinds of things again. Her installment ceremony was attended by people from all over the Jewish community, not just from Kolot Mayim. It was, and is, a very exciting time in the community at large, as this Vancouver Island born and raised woman became a local Rabbi in her late life career.

"The congregation has grown very substantially, but in certain ways, it's remained exactly the same as a friendly, welcoming, inclusive liberal congregation. So, its fundamental character has not changed although its composition has changed." – Joel Fagan



Rabbi Lynn at her installment in 2018

Music Over the Years

From their cassette recordings in the early days, Kolot Mayim has developed into a congregation known for music. The music has varied through the years depending on its members and leadership at that time. With each new Rabbi came new traditions and that became the tradition for the year. They have brought in a variety of different instrumentalists, and for some time they even had their own choir. Today they have a variety of traditions with many different tunes.

In the early days, Randy and Eva Enkin always sang at services. Randy Enkin conducted the group and played the keyboard, his wife Eva sang soprano, and his daughter sang alto; Wendy Rolph played piano for most things; Francis Aknai did a lot of singing. Over time, they were able to hire a cellist from the Lafayette String Quartet, Pamela Highbaugh Aloni, for their High Holiday services. Joel Fagan saw Pamela play in the Quartet around 12 years ago, then asked if she would play at Kolot Mayim's holidays. Pamela and her husband, Yariv Aloni, have played at the Erev Yom Kippur Services ever since.



One of many musicians who worked for Kolot Mayim playing at Sukkot

Events Over the Years

Kolot Mayim celebrates every Jewish holiday, and for some members, it is often the first time that they have done some of these holidays. On top of High Holiday events, members reminisce on family dances, children's parties, Israeli dancing classes and bagel making events. In the past, events at Kolot Mayim have been very innovative as they reflect the creative energy and ideas of the board and Rabbi in place at the time. They often put a west coast flare on their High Holiday celebrations, including Lag BaOmer where they have celebrated with a party down at the beach with a big campfire. Caroline Hergt recalls that for Sukkot in the early days, they

made a west coast Lulav by collecting local nature species. Even after services permanently moved into the Jewish Community Centre, Kolot Mayim would sometimes have services outside in somebody's garden, at the beach, or at a park.

Kolot Mayim has always focused on building community. They host Shabbat potlucks once a month and have sometimes hosted roving Shabbat dinners in each other's homes to get to know each other. Passover Seders have always been a big event, with everyone happy to volunteer. There have been upwards of 90 people at the Seders at some points, and the volunteers did the shopping, prepared the food, cooked in the evening, and helped serve. Frederica Bowden ran the first few Seders and had the whole production down to a science, with everything organized in a binder. She eventually handed the role off to Katrina Greenfield, who ran them for another few years, again with all of the volunteers cooking and helping with everything. Leah Kinarthy also ran the Seders for many years and has always been there to step in whenever something extra needs doing. These Seders were memorable evenings with lots of people, lots of volunteers, and lots of interesting food where they would just look after everyone. Early members reminisce that Alec Lewis and Rennie Parrish, who were collectors of fine china, would always look after setting up the table, so the food was always served on fine china for Seders, as well as for almost every Friday night Oneg.



Volunteers getting ready in the kitchen for Passover Seder

Onegs were always a wonderful event for the members of Kolot Mayim. Members enjoyed staying at the Jewish Community Centre till 10 pm after the services ended at 9 pm. They enjoyed just being together, forming the kind of congregation where everyone knew everybody, and everyone cared about everybody. Another fond memory of early members was the Monday morning minyan at 7:30 am. Some of the members would meet for a quick weekday service, and then would go for breakfast with this great group of people and carry on the conversation.

Volunteers have always been the foundation of every event at Kolot Mayim, and also ran various fundraising events for the congregation, such as selling pots of flowers on Mother's Day. A very special and memorable volunteer-run event was the 'Putting on the Ritz' live auction in 2006. Volunteers spent countless hours organizing the event, including spending weeks in the Torontow's basement putting the gift packages together for the auction. Many items were donated, and a lot of money was raised. This was a prime show of the efforts of volunteers, as they did a fabulous job getting gifts and funds – it could not have been done without all of the volunteers' efforts.

Today and Future

2020 has been a monumental year around the world, and events and services at Kolot Mayim have looked a lot different. Despite the pandemic, the warm and welcoming spirit of Kolot Mayim was maintained. They have actually seen their membership grow, as people are now able to attend from up island and other places in the community through Zoom. Kolot Mayim continues to be there for its congregants and meet their individual needs. Board members have continued to send out gift baskets to congregants and to care for one another from afar. Through this last year, the board has been very well organized and very professional with Sharon Shalinsky as President, Morris Blevins as Treasurer, and Sam Margolis on technology support. They have had to be inventive with how they are doing things to adjust to the pandemic and have done a great job.



Tashlich outdoors at Gyro Park, 2021

From their grassroots beginnings, it was the community members of Kolot Mayim that have brought it to where it is now. Today, Kolot Mayim has a permanent Rabbi, a growing membership, and a variety of different events. They host visiting speakers which have added substantially to the overall cultural, religious, musical and educational life of the congregation. Marilyn Wolovick coordinates the education lecture series on Sunday afternoons which is very

well attended. Rabbi Lynn hosts a weekly Torah study. Rabbi Lynn's conversion classes have made a huge difference, as well. One of the founding members of Kolot Mayim, Murray Ashford, was the first to convert with Rabbi Lynn. Charlynn and Murray Ashford had led a Jewish life their whole marriage, and have been with Kolot Mayim since day one, but Rabbi Lynn was the one to convert Murray, marking a very special moment in their time with Kolot Mayim.

Having Rabbi Lynn Greenhough as a full-time Rabbi has been a pivotal, if not the most pivotal, element in the evolution and development of the congregation. With Rabbi Lynn's appearance, her vigour, her effectiveness, her charm, her persuasiveness in recruiting new members, and the overall credibility that she has given to the congregation, it has been the most wonderful thing for Kolot Mayim. It has created a whole new life for the congregation.

"Having played such a significant role in the formation of the congregation, it gives me the greatest pleasure and satisfaction to see how our congregation has grown and thrived. I'm delighted that we have a Reform congregation. I'm delighted that our Reform congregation has its particular character of being warm, welcoming, inclusive, considerate, and compassionate. I think it serves a unique role within the community, and I'm just so delighted that it has come to be so." – Joel Fagan



Rabbi Lynn conducting an outdoor conversion for a new member



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