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Local News

'Mountains of Wisdom' Honors Rabbi Stephen Cohen's Decades of Service

Three days of festivities pay tribute to his work with Congregation B'nai B'rith in Santa Barbara and UCSB Hillel

by Ann Pieramici, Noozhawk Contributing Writer

May 6, 2025 | 8:40 pm

Congregation B'nai B'rith retiring Rabbi Steve Cohen and wife Marian listen to tributes to him during the weekend-long "Mountains of Wisdom" event honoring his decades of service to the Santa Barbara community. | Isaac Hernandez photo |

The Santa Barbara community gathered last weekend for "Mountains of Wisdom," a heartfelt weekend of festivities celebrating Rabbi Stephen Cohen's retirement after four decades of dedicated spiritual leadership.

Rabbi Cohen, whose passion for hiking inspired the weekend's mountainous theme, has served as senior rabbi at Congregation B'nai B'rith for 21 years, following 19 years at UCSB Hillel.

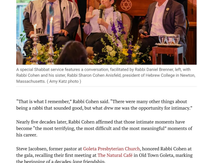
The culminating event was the sold-out Sunday evening gala, "Wisdom on the Wild Side" at the Santa Barbara Zoo, where 300 guests traveled from as far as Rwanda, Israel, Boston, New York and Hawaii to honor Rabbi Cohen's profound impact.

"That's 500 people, 1,000 opinions and at least 15,000 memories of Rabbi Cohen," Congregation B'nai B'rith board co-president Nancy Sheldon said, "and we're ready to celebrate every one of them."

Fellow co-president Marcy Winbush added: "Rabbi Cohen has demonstrated true leadership by asking the right questions, listening deeply and meeting people exactly where they are. He does this with honesty, vulnerability and heart — somehow making an entire community feel like family."

At the gala, Rabbi Cohen shared an answer to a question that he said he's been getting asked a lot lately: How and when did he decide to become a rabbi? He revealed that his path was decided when he was a 20-year-old undergraduate having lunch with his hometown rabbi in Rochester, New York, during his Thanksgiving break.

Rabbi Ron Shapiro told Cohen that as a rabbi, he got to be intimately involved with people at pivotal moments in their lives: birth, coming of age, marriage and death.



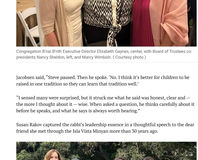
A special Shiddur set our Kabbalat o communities, facilitated by Rabbi Daniel Brenner, left, with Rabbi Cohen and his sister, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, president of Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts. | Amy Katz photo |

"That is what I remember," Rabbi Cohen said. "There were many other things about being a rabbi that sounded good, but what drew me was the opportunity for intimacy."

Nearly five decades later, Rabbi Cohen affirmed that those intimate moments have become "the most terrifying, the most difficult and the most meaningful" moments of his career.

Steve Jacobsen, former pastor at Goleta Presbyterian Church, honored Rabbi Cohen at the gala, recalling their first meeting at The Natural Cafe in Old Town Goleta, marking the beginning of a decades-long friendship.

He shared a story of inviting Rabbi Cohen to his Goleta congregation — an opportunity for people to learn about Judaism from a real rabbi. During questions, one congregant shared that his daughter had a Jewish fiancé and asked, "Don't you think it's best to have children experience both traditions, so when they become adults, they can choose?"

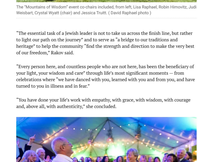


Congregation B'nai B'rith Executive Director Elizabeth Gaynes, center, with Board of Trustees co-presidents Nancy Sheldon, left, and Marcy Winbush. | Courtesy photo |

Jacobsen said, "Steve paused. Then he spoke. 'No. I think it's better for children to be raised in one tradition so they can learn that tradition well.'"

"I sensed many were surprised, but it struck me what he said was honest, clear and — the more I thought about it — wise. When asked a question, he thinks carefully about it before he speaks, and what he says is always worth hearing."

Susan Kaiser captured the rabbi's leadership essence in a thoughtful speech to the dear friend she met through the Isla Vista Minyan more than 50 years ago.

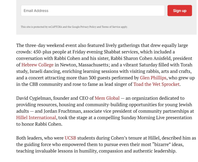


The "Mountains of Wisdom" event co-chairs included, from left, Lisa Raphael, Robin Hitnovitz, Judi Weisberg, Krystle Wyatt (chair) and Jessica Truitt. | Deed Raphael photo |

"The essential task of a Jewish leader is not to take us across the finish line, but rather to light our path on the journey" and to serve as "a bridge to our traditions and heritage" to help the community "find the strength and direction to make the very best of our freedom," Rudee said.

"Every person here, and countless people who are not here, has been the beneficiary of your light, your wisdom and care" through life's most significant moments — from celebrations where "we have danced with you, learned with you and from you, and have turned to you in illness and in fear."

"You have done your life's work with empathy, with grace, with wisdom, with courage and, above all, with authenticity," she concluded.



Rabbi Steve Cohen and his wife, Marian, dance at the "Wisdom on the Wild Side" gala in his honor at the Santa Barbara Zoo. | Isaac Hernandez photo |

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The three-day weekend event also featured lively gatherings that drew equally large crowds: 450 plus people at Friday evening Shabbat services, which included a conversation with Rabbi Cohen and his sister, Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, president of Hebrew College in Newton, Massachusetts; and a vibrant Saturday filled with Torah study, Israeli dancing, enriching learning sessions with visiting rabbis, arts and crafts, and a concert attracting more than 500 guests performed by Glen Phillips, who grew up in the CSB community and rose to fame as lead singer of Toad the Wet Sprocket.

David Cygielman, founder and CEO of Mem Global — an organization dedicated to providing resources, housing and community-building opportunities for young Jewish adults — and Jordan Fruchtman, associate vice president of community partnerships at Hillel International, took the stage at a compelling Sunday Morning Live presentation to honor Rabbi Cohen.

Both leaders, who were UCSB students during Cohen's tenure at Hillel, described him as the guiding force who empowered them to pursue even their most "bizarre" ideas, teaching invaluable lessons in humility, compassion and unshakeable leadership.

"The greatest lessons I learned in my four years of college came from Rabbi Cohen and this Jewish community," Cygielman said.

Steve Jacobsen, former pastor at Goleta Presbyterian Church, honors Rabbi Cohen at the gala, stating, "So many of us in the local community have learned so much from him. What stands out is his unique combination of humility, his constant commitment to reach out to others with vision and courage, inviting us to join him in doing important things. He unites us, delights us, and inspires us." | Jay Fatteman photo |

Both credited Rabbi Cohen's mentorship and steadfast encouragement as foundational in shaping their paths to prominent positions within the global Jewish community today.

Rabbi Cohen's vision — to build a diverse, inclusive congregation where individuals and families come together to create a vibrant house of living judaism — has shaped the communal life at Congregation B'nai B'rith for two decades and left an enduring legacy on the broader community.

"So many of us in the local community have learned so much from him," Jacobsen said. "What stands out is not one particular moment or teaching. It's his constant commitment to reach out to others with vision and courage, inviting us to join him in doing important things. He unites us, delights us and inspires us."

Guests — some of whom traveled from as far as Rwanda, Israel, Boston, New York and Hawaii — dance during the sold-out "Wisdom on the Wild Side" event at the Santa Barbara Zoo. | Jay Fatteman photo |

Rabbi Cohen plans to continue to serve as senior rabbi through June 30, at which point Rabbi Daniel Brenner will assume the role. Rabbi Brenner joined Congregation B'nai B'rith nearly eight years ago, first as rabbinic intern, then as assistant rabbi, and has served as associate rabbi for the past four years. Rabbi Cohen will become Congregation B'nai B'rith's rabbi emeritus and plans to stay in Santa Barbara, where he will have more time to spend with his family and to hike the Santa Barbara trails.

"Rabbi Daniel Brenner is just the right person to lead our congregation into the next phase of our history," Rabbi Cohen said. "He is already beloved by people of all ages; he teaches and preaches with intelligence, passion and sensitivity," he added, a strategic thinker with a keen understanding of the landscape of American Jewish life, and on top of all that, he is an extraordinarily gifted musician."

The weekend events were spearheaded by Crystal Wyatt, Robin Hitnovitz, Lisa Raphael, Jessica Truitt and Judi Weisberg. The event was catered by Rincon Catering and Marc Bonwelt, a longtime friend of Rabbi Cohen.

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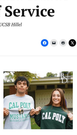

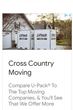

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