

## Haverhill temple closes after 88 years of service

By Jonah Frangiosa and Angelina Berube Staff Writers



Rabbi Ashira Stevens of Temple Emanu-El in Haverhill stands in the sanctuary, a warm and welcoming place of worship with seating for more than 400.  
TIM JEAN/Staff photos

**HAVERHILL** — The last synagogue in the city prepares for its last Shabbat after nearly nine decades of serving the local Jewish community.

Founded in 1937, the longtime spiritual and communal hub Temple Emanu-El will shut its doors at the end of June. Apart from a Chabad house down the road, the Main Street synagogue is the sole meeting place for members of the faith within city limits.

Shifting demographics and financial hurdles have made it “impossible” for the congregation to keep its home, according to Rabbi Ashira Stevens.

“It became impossible to stay in this space given the size of our membership and the cost to maintain the building,” said Rabbi Stevens.

“Even selling the building wasn’t going to make it possible for us to be a viable organization on our own.”

In March, the 10,000-square-foot building, which stretches from 10th to 11th Avenue, was sold to Methuen’s Christian Family Center.

In a January newsletter to the congregation, President Jennifer Lampron announced the synagogue had signed a purchase and sale agreement for \$780,000.

Temple Emanu-El is renting the space back from the new owners until it officially closes June 30.

After working as an intern, Stevens was ordained and became the synagogue's spiritual leader in 2023. But, she said the closure has been a long-time coming, set in motion well before her arrival.

"Haverhill used to be a major center of Jewish life in the Merrimack Valley," said Stevens. "But, the numbers have dwindled."

"There was a gradual decline in the congregation for decades, largely due to demographic changes. People have moved out of Haverhill. They grow older and move down south or to Boston," she said.

Suffering similar fates

Synagogues across the Merrimack Valley have suffered similar fates as she recalled Lowell's Montefiore Synagogue which closed in 2020 or previous religious institutions that have closed in Haverhill.

The temple once had a membership of about 400 households, but by the time Rabbi Stevens arrived, that number had been cut in half. Today, only about 100 families remain in the congregation, she said, which isn't enough to maintain the property or pay the staff.

Membership dues and donations are a lifeline for religious institutions like Temple Emanu-El, but both have declined with shrinking services. To help with operating costs, the synagogue tried renting out classrooms to organizations like Bradford Christian Academy and Haverhill Public Preschool.

But after the preschool left, they were without a long-term tenant and a steady source of income.

Now, the city's only synagogue will be closing down, with its congregation looking ahead to their new house of worship: the similar-sounding, Temple Emanuel.

The Andover institution will absorb the temple's services and has invited all Jewish Haverhill households to join their community.

Unification talks between the two congregations and others in the area have been ongoing for nearly a year. Temple Emanu-El representatives spoke with multiple temples before deciding to unite with the congregation at 7 Haggetts Pond Road, Andover.

Exciting new chapter

Temple Emanuel of Andover president Dana Katz said the Andover temple is excited to begin this next chapter in its congregation's history and help another historic one find a new spiritual home.

Both temples are long-standing centers of Jewish life in the Merrimack Valley. Temple Emanu-El has been around since 1937 while Temple Emanuel opened its doors in 1920. Representatives from both have met over the last few months to smooth the transition with leadership on both sides committed to unifying the two communities.

"Our hearts go out to them with their temple closing, but we are happy to welcome them into our community," Katz said. "We have shared values and a shared commitment to a warm and vibrant Jewish community."

"It's a little bittersweet," Temple Emanuel Rabbi David Wilfond said about the closing of the Haverhill synagogue. "But we think that the sweet is more than the bitter."

Wilfond said it is not uncommon for synagogues to unify after financial challenges when it becomes too costly to operate a building independently as membership dips to under 100 families. "Beit HaShalom" is a common name used by synagogues throughout the U.S. as a chosen name for unified congregations.

Great response to move

Temple Emanu-El has around 100 families while about 400 families make up the Temple Emanuel community. Katz said she doesn't know exactly how many families from the Haverhill congregation will join the Andover congregation, but so far she said she's seen a great response with families already signing up for membership.

Both communities have welcomed each other over the past year. Haverhill congregants have visited the Andover temple and vice versa.

"I think people are looking to find community and build relationships," Katz said.

"This isn't just a wedding, but this is a marriage which benefits two families," Wilfond said.

The two temples were basically "sisters" with so many similarities in their theology, style of worship and practice of Judaism. Both are Reform Jewish communities.

"Part of why this unity of the congregations was so easy is there's so much in common in terms of shared values and practices," Wilfond said. "They are very similar, but just serve different geographical areas."

Temple Emanuel will hold special programs and mentoring for new families making the transition. There will be ceremonies to welcome new members.

Special programs planned

The synagogue will also welcome religious artifacts from the Haverhill congregation. It plans to put Haverhill's mezuzah scrolls at the entrance to the synagogue.

"This way a piece of their old congregation is part of a new building for them," Wilfond said. "The first thing they see will be a physical piece of their old synagogue."

For Wilfond, this unification will bring new ideas to the temple and likely new programming and activities along with it as well as optimism for a shared future.

"It's so sad whenever a community is unable to sustain itself and needs to close a chapter of its existence," Wilfond said. "But there's also a sense of joy to having new friends and new ideas. We're savoring the blessings of people being open-minded and open-hearted."

In a parting gesture, Temple Emanu-El will host a weekend of farewells on May 16-17. Falling on the Jewish holiday of Lag Ba'Omer, the send-off, starting at 6 p.m. Friday, will bring families together one last time for a cookout and Shabbat service.

Saturday's programming begins at 9:30 a.m. with a morning service, followed by a kiddush luncheon at noon. The celebration will conclude with a Havdalah, or separation, service to honor the synagogue's 88-year legacy.