

Jewish families in midst of Hanukkah

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WINCHESTER — While Christians attended Christmas Eve services on Saturday, Jewish families began their eight-day Hanukkah holiday.

Hanukkah is determined by the Hebrew calendar, which aligned it this year with Christmas. Hanukkah began at sunset Saturday and will end at sunset Jan. 1. Over the next four years, Hanukkah will begin as early as Dec. 2 and as late as Dec. 22.

“In many respects, Hanukkah is the least important of the Jewish holidays. It only gained its popularity because of Christmas,” said Peter Grumbacher, interim rabbi at Winchester’s Beth El Congregation on Fairmont Avenue.

While Christian holidays are centered on the birth and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Jewish holidays, or festivals, have religious, cultural and national elements. The most important Jewish holidays, such as Rosh Hashanah and Passover, are found in the Torah, said Grumbacher.

Hanukkah celebrates the miracle of a one-day supply of oil lighting a temple for eight days after Seleucid Greeks desecrated the temple and extinguished its eternal flame. It marks the defeat of the Greeks that had tried to prevent the people of Israel from practicing Judaism.

“The importance of the story is, ‘Don’t mess with our religion,’” Grumbacher said. “The story may be a myth, but I say never let the truth get in the way of a good story.”

The holiday is also known as the Festival of Lights. Children play with dreidels, a top-like toy. Potato pancakes fried in oil, called latkes, are eaten, and a nine-branch candelabrum called a menorah is used to mark each day of the holiday.

The appropriate greeting this week is “Happy Hanukkah,” said Grumbacher, who believes generic greetings such as “happy holidays” diminish the importance of one’s religion.

If the rabbi had the opportunity to speak to a congregation of Christians, what would he say?

“Oh, there are a thousand things,” Grumbacher said. “One is that we should not tolerate one another. Tolerate is a terrible word. “It means, ‘I don’t like you, but I’ll let you live.’”

He continued, “We should live together in peace and understanding.”

Grumbacher said the Jewish faith has a different way of saying the Golden Rule. “We say, ‘Do not do unto others what you would not want done to you,’” said Grumbacher. “I believe that’s a much more powerful statement.”

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