

Locals Gather for Celebration of Hanukkah

By ONOFRIO CASTIGLIA | *The Winchester Star*

Dec 15, 2017 Updated Dec 16, 2017

WINCHESTER — Fiddle music, fried latkes and Hebrew prayers are all staples of a traditional Hanukkah celebration, much like the one that unfolded Friday evening at Beth El Congregation on Fairmont Avenue, where local Jewish families gathered to celebrate the Festival of Lights.

“Don’t applaud until you taste the latkes,” Rabbi Peter Grumbacher jokingly told the congregation as the women who cooked them prepared to say a prayer before the menorahs were lit and dinner was served.



Beth El Congregation Rabbi Peter Grumbacher, from left, Stacy Hetzel and Michelle Kotkin watch Debbie Grumbacher light Shabbat candles Friday evening during Hanukkah celebration. Photo: Scott Mason/The Winchester Star

Each family lit a menorah — four of eight candles to signify the fourth day of Hanukkah.

“He must be an orthodox candle,” one woman said of a candle that stubbornly refused to light.

Despite being a minor holiday in the Jewish calendar, Hanukkah may be the most recognizable of the religion’s holidays outside of the faith.



Dagan DeSimone lights his menorah candles Friday evening with his family at a Hanukkah celebration at Beth El Congregation. Photo: Scott Mason/The Winchester Star

That's for a lot of reasons, members of Beth El say. For one thing, Hanukkah coincides closely with Christmas. Hanukkah also features the lighting of the menorah, which evokes the Christmas tree in the minds of many. Then, there are the latkes and dreidels that mark the occasion.

But the meaning of Hanukkah has a special significance for Jews, said Grumbacher. The name stems from the Hebrew word for "dedication," referring to the struggle for religious liberty. "We here in Beth El Congregation are dedicated to the preservation of our religion and our people."

The annual Festival of Lights, as Hanukkah is called, continues for eight nights and days. It began Tuesday, but it can begin as early as the end of November or as late as the end of December. It commemorates the re-dedication of the Holy Temple at the time of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the second century B.C., when

the Jewish nation rose up against King Antiochus and the Syrian Greeks, who had enacted oppressive laws to discourage the practice of the Jewish faith in the Middle East.

“It is one of, if not the first battle, for religious freedom,” said Steve Sosson, a congregation board member. “It’s a sort of David and Goliath-type of story.”

Grumbacher called the Maccabees a “gorilla outfit, probably the first in the world’s history” that planned its revolt for years because the Greeks were trying to stamp out the Jewish custom. “You can mess with our minds... but never mess with our religion.” Eventually, the Maccabees won, and what they did afterward is commemorated by the celebration of Hanukkah.

One candle on a nine-branched candelabra — called a menorah — is lit on each of the eight nights. The *shamash* is lit first and is used to light the other candles, then it is returned to the ninth candle spot, which is set apart from the others.

The lighting of the menorah predates Hanukkah, but it is now done as a reminder of when the Maccabees regained control of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

Jewish troops were determined to purify the temple — which had been defiled by the worship of foreign gods — by burning ritual oil in the temple’s menorah for eight days.

The Jews discovered that there was only one day’s worth of oil left in the temple, as the legend goes, but they lit the menorah anyway. To their surprise, the small amount of oil lasted the full eight days — an event known in the Jewish faith as the Miracle of Kislev or Miracle of Light.

Hanukkah is primarily home-based, with individual families practicing commemorations together. But the Beth El congregation gathers for a dinner each year to celebrate, pray and eat.

Ellen Zimmerman, a member of the small congregation, said she remembers being asked to go to her children's school to give a presentation on "Christmas around the world." But Hanukkah is not "Jewish Christmas," she said. Sometimes the holidays overlap, but some years they don't. For example, this year Hanukkah ends on Dec. 20, five days before Christmas.

Zimmerman said one year Hanukkah came early enough on the Jewish calendar that it overlapped with Thanksgiving. It was called "thanksgivukkah." It was the only time that's happened in her lifetime.

#

– Contact Onofrio Castiglia at ocastiglia@winchesterstar.com