

# Jewish Community of the HC hosts menorah lighting

- Donna Provencher



The menorah lighting ceremony held Sunday night at the Kerr County Courthouse was well-attended by members of the Jewish Community of the Hill Country.  
tony gallucci

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The Jewish Community of the Hill Country hosted its fifth annual menorah-lighting ceremony on the Kerr County Courthouse lawn Dec. 18 at 6 p.m. — an ecumenical, open-to-the-public event those of many faiths attend to appreciate its beauty and rich community symbolism.

The lighting of the 12-foot menorah beside the Christmas tree on the courthouse lawn is a “very, very simple” ceremony, said JCHC Board of Directors President Don Burda.

Three Hebrew blessings begin the event, which takes place on the first night of Hanukkah. Then all nine candles — one for each night of Hanukkah and a shamash, which lights the others — are lit, with members of the community offering a traditional blessing over each candle.

The JCHC and community participants dedicated the first Hanukkah light to freedom; the second, to family; the third, to study; the fourth, to holiness; the fifth, to righteousness; the sixth, to sharing; the seventh, to light; and the eighth, to peace.

There are eight nights of Hanukkah, explained Robert Pill, secretary and treasurer of the JCHC Board of Directors. The holiday is a celebration of the legend of the Maccabees, a group of Jews said to have mounted an uprising against Greek-Syrian oppressors. Ancient scholars say that around 200 B.C., Antiochus IV Epiphanes banned the practice of the Jewish faith and attempted to force Jews to worship Greek gods, desecrating the Jewish temple with an altar to Zeus.

But a Jewish priest, Mattathias, and his five sons, the Maccabees, drove the Syrian oppressors out of Jerusalem, said Burda: “It was guerilla warfare and the outnumbered Jews fought valiantly.”

Judah, one of the Maccabees, called for a rededication of the temple and the lighting of the menorah. According to the Talmud, a sacred Jewish text, a miracle happened: the candles, which contained only enough oil to burn for one day, burned for eight instead — the origin of the eight nights of Hanukkah.

JCHC Board member Michael Goldstein said that some of the traditions associated with Hanukkah include dreidel, a game Jewish children play with a spinning top, and the singing of traditional Jewish songs like “Rock of Ages,” “O Hanukkah,” “The Dreidel Song” and “Hava Nagila.” On Hanukkah, Jews also eat latkes, a type of pan-fried potato pancake, and Hanukkah gelt, or chocolate coins covered in gold foil.

“It was a tradition among the Jews to give money at Hanukkah to poor rabbinic students,” Goldstein said. “Some hundreds of years later, the chocolatiers got wind of it and created gelt.”

“There isn’t a holiday that doesn’t pair well with chocolate,” said Pill.

While the synagogue’s membership is small — only 1 percent of Texans are Jewish, according to Pew Research Center data — each year dozens of non-Jewish members of the Kerrville community flock to attend the menorah lighting ceremony.

The ecumenism of the ceremony is deeply moving in today's tense social climate, Burda said. "People don't know a lot about Hanukkah, or Jews," he added. "But as the character Shylock in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice says, 'Hath not a Jew eyes? If you prick me, do I not bleed?' We're just human beings just like everybody else."

Board member Gregory Bitkower noted that the JCHC held its first services in 1982 and became incorporated as a formal not-for-profit entity in 1983. This is the fifth public Hanukkah ceremony offered at the courthouse.

"It's always been open to the public and we've always had a very nice turnout even though the Jewish community has traditionally been very small," he said.

Burda recalled that one year, the ceremony ended and a woman came up to him and asked, with great concern: "Does it bother you that your candelabra is right next to the Christmas tree?"

"I said, 'should it?'" He smiled. "There's too much hate in the world. That's not for us. Just like Christians love sharing Christmas, we love sharing Hanukkah."

Goldstein added that while there's no connection between the religious significance of Christmas and Hanukkah, one major similarity is that they are both joyful holidays.

"That sense of goodwill seems to permeate everything during the holiday season," he said.

Bitkower agreed, noting that both holidays are a wonderful time to celebrate and spend with friends and families. "It's wonderful to love each other and get along," he said. "That's what we have in common. If you believe in blind faith and you believe in a higher power, then you can believe in the miracle of Hanukkah — that something so wonderful could occur."

Burda pointed out that the theme of light is a transcendent one common in all religions — Christians have Christmas trees, Hindus have the Festival of Diwali, Jews have Hanukkah menorahs.

"Most religions look at light as a symbol for dispelling the darkness of ignorance, ushering in the light of intelligence, the light of wisdom — it's a common thread that links us all," he added.

For him, the major takeaway from the menorah lighting each year is a renewed sense of unity in the Hill Country.

“We’re all one,” he said. “There’s no separation. Your name is different from mine, yet we’re both humans. It’s all one. Let’s dispel hate from this world ... we’ve had enough of that. Hanukkah is for everybody. Yes, it’s a Jewish holiday, but we look at it as everybody’s holiday.”

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