

Thursday, December 22, 2011

Biddeford celebrates Hanukkah through next week - Dec. 22, 2011

By David Harry
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Sometimes a little oil goes a very long way.

A day's worth of olive oil fueled candles burning in the rebuilt Holy Temple in Jerusalem for eight days and became the basis for the Hebrew festival called Hanukkah, which began at sunset Tuesday. The festival ends at sunset next Wednesday.

Locally, celebrations began Sunday with a party and potluck supper at Congregation Etz Chaim in Biddeford. The congregation serves about 100 families throughout southern Maine, said member Julie Campisi.

David Strassler, who directs the Etz Chaim Hebrew School for congregation youth, said the events that are the basis of the festival continue to resonate.

"It is about a miracle that happened, a sign from God we are important as a people. It is a story of faith," he said.

As told at Hebrew historical website chabad.org, Jews who had successfully rebelled against Syrian and Greek rulers approximately 200 years before the birth of Jesus Christ anticipated enough oil to light temple candles for one day. Instead, the oil lasted for eight days, a miracle celebrated differently than holy days of Passover, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah.

"This is considered a festival, we can go to work," Campisi said.

Hanukkah is not always celebrated in the week of Christmas – the observance is based on the Hebrew calendar calling for it to begin at the end of the 25th of Kislev. The calendar is based on lunar cycles, which allows Hanukkah to be anywhere from Nov. 28 to Dec. 26.

Each evening, the candle in the center of the menorah is used to light the surrounding candles until all eight are illuminated.

According to chabad.org, Hanukkah (sometimes spelled Chanukah) was first observed about two centuries after the canonization of the Old and New Testaments into the Bible.

At Congregation Etz Chaim, the celebration geared up last week as young Hebrew school students crafted menorahs of construction paper and students again learned of the significance and relevance of the festival.

"The kids are all very familiar with the storyline," Strassler said. "They are all very aware of how families celebrate and what the candles mean."

During a break from classes last week, 12-year-olds Ethan Levy, Lucy Macomber and Ivana Mulcahy said their classmates in public schools do not fully understand what Hanukkah means.

"It is inspiring the way they lasted eight days," Levy said, noting Israelis and Syrians are still in conflict more than 2,000 years after the uprising that is the basis of Hanukkah.

"It is really exciting," Macomber said. "Lighting the candles, getting the presents, celebrating every day."

But the gifts each day are often small, until one big gift is given and received, she said.

At home, Mulcahy said she and her family celebrate Hanukkah and Christmas, and Hanukkah is likely to be the more understated of the two.

"But I am lucky for much more than presents," she said.

Campisi said celebrating for eight days can be challenging because of busy work and social lives.

"There are nights when it is 8:45 and you are just lighting the candles," she said.

Strassler said he grew up on Long Island, N.Y., in a much larger Jewish community. He recalled excitement each year as the festival approached, for lighting candles, exchanging gifts and playing dreidel games.

The dreidel is a four-sided top Hebrew children played with, sometimes as a cover when Greek and Syrian soldiers approached caves where children were taking clandestine religious education classes, according to chabad.org.

Strassler said the festival may be less appreciated and understood in southern Maine, recalling how a store clerk at Christmas asked his young son if he had been good.

"He just said 'yeah,'" Strassler recalled.

Campisi said the congregation is always eager for the festival.

"Hanukkah is great because it is fun. We meet, we eat, we dance," she said.