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EDITOR'S PICK

Chanukkah Event Sheds a Light on Hatred

By Christopher South
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Beth Judah Temple, in Wildwood.

File Photo

WILDWOOD – The Beth Judah Temple is holding a menorah lighting on Saturday, Dec. 17, at 8 p.m. to celebrate the beginning of the eight-day festival known as Chanukkah.

According to Ruth Edelman from Beth Judah Temple, a menorah was built into the side of the temple when it was constructed in 1929.

"It's very unique," she said.

Chanukkah (or Hanukkah) 2022 will be celebrated from Dec. 18 to 26. Wikipedia describes it as a Jewish festival commemorating the recovery of Jerusalem and the rededication of the second temple at the beginning of the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the second century BC.

Chanukkah is observed for eight days starting on the 25th day of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar, which might occur at any time from late November to late December on the Gregorian calendar.

Known as "the Festival of Lights," the word Chanukkah means "they rested on the 25th." The day celebrates the triumph of the Jews over their oppressors, who had outlawed their faith.

The menorah actually has nine candles. The one in the tallest position is called the shamash, meaning "attendant" in Hebrew, and it is used to light the other eight candles. The eight candles represent oil in Jewish lamps lasting for eight days, when they only had enough for one day. The holiday is considered minor in Jewish tradition but has cultural significance in the United States.

Besides lighting the menorah, Chanukkah traditions include singing songs, playing the game of dreidel, and eating oil-based food, such as latkes (potato pancake) and sufganiyot (jelly doughnut) and dairy foods.

Edleman said they will be singing and eating traditional Chanukkah foods that night, as well as hearing from Roberta Clark director of the Jewish Federation of Atlantic and Cape May Counties, who will speak on the current state of antisemitism in the region and nationally.

"They had some incidents in Atlantic County, and some people feel concerned. We are happy this synagogue is part of a community of individuals and clergy of all faiths," Edleman said, "but people want to be prepared."

Beth Judah Temple, a congregation that has been in this area since 1913, decided that while they were celebrating Chanukkah they would also take the time to learn about oppression.

Responding to Hatred with Hatred Doesn't Get Us Anywhere

“Hatred isn’t about logic or rationale,” said Clark, who worked for the Jewish Antidefamation League before joining the Jewish Federation of Atlantic and Cape May Counties.

“It’s not about intelligence. People very often choose to hate those who are different than they are based on immutable characteristics – things we can’t change or be asked to change,” Clark said. “I’m not sure any of us can explain hatred but we know it exists.”

Clark said there has been a huge increase in antisemitism in this country, borne out in both words and deeds. She said it is a great concern to members of any Jewish community in the country because this expressed hatred just fuels the fire of those who engage in antisemitic actions, whether it is vandalism or whatever.

“Chanukkah, in particular, is about religious freedom, so it is quite appropriate on Chanukkah to talk about religious freedom and the right of people to live Jewishly,” she said.

Clark said it is important for people to understand the sources of antisemitism, although they are varied. She said there are a lot of “canards” (untruths, lies) that persist in the U.S., such as that the Jews run the government, own all the banks, are greedy, or even that they were behind 9/11.

“There are many more lies like them, and people feed into them,” she said.

Clark said there is not one reason why people accept and repeat a canard, saying sometimes people want a scapegoat upon which to blame their troubles, or perhaps they feel another group of people does not have the same rights as they do. Clark said hatred has been around for a long time, but these days the world seems so much more polarized.

“The feeling is if you are not like me, you are the enemy,” she said. “And I’m not sure you are going to change the mind of people who think someone’s life is less valuable.”

“Our job is to focus on people feeling this way and help them be allies. Responding to hatred with hatred doesn’t get us anywhere,” Clark said.

Clark said people need to assume goodwill in the face of antisemitism and consider that someone might not know that a particular canard is insulting, or not true, or offensive. She said people should be ready to confirm the facts, be careful with their own words and actions, and disagree respectfully; but never be silent in the face of hatred.

“Speak out respectfully against hatred – or at least have the courage to walk away,” Clark said.

For all people, Clark said they should extend compassion and companionship to people being targeted – be a support system – and treat people the way you would like to be treated. She said in those bad moments people feel sad, but it’s a happy feeling to know you have allies.

“In this community, outside of law enforcement, the first people reaching out to me when something happens are the NAACP, asking, ‘What can we do to help?’” Clark said.

Clark said the program at Beth Judah Temple included a question-and-answer session.

Christopher South

Reporter