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My Hanukah in Ravalli County¹

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Ravalli County Commissioners

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vers. 10 December 2017 noon

Note: Footnotes are included for fact checking. The photo may be used as credited.

Recently, as I prepared to perform on my trumpet, I watched a music teacher in Ravalli County rehearse kindergartners' Christmas carols. I observed that most people in the county are unfamiliar with Jews and with Hanukah. I wanted to add my family's Jewish story to the holiday celebrations.

Ravalli County probably has fewer than 100 Jews with perhaps as many as 5,000 Jews in Montana.² What is Hanukah? What does it mean to "be" Jewish? Here's what I'd like to tell my neighbors about Judaism, my religion, and Hanukah, my holiday, an observance that pre-dates Christ's birth by almost two-hundred years.

Some details: Hanukah is a joyous holiday, called the Festival of Lights, and is the Jewish celebration of a miracle of Jewish survival against all odds,³ but more of that below. This theme of freedom and survival is universal. In English, the Hebrew word *Hanukah* appears spelled with many variations, compensating for the lack of the guttural sound in English. Also, the Western dates of Hanukah are based upon the Hebrew calendar and vary year to year in relation to the solar-

¹ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/ravallicountymontana/RHI125216#viewtop>
95.9% white; 1.9%- foreign born; <http://www.city-data.com/county/religion/Ravalli-County-MT.html>; http://www.ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1913_1914_8_Statistics.pdf;
<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-in-the-united-states-by-state>

Montana	2,500 (1899)	1,450 (2016)	-1,050	1.1% (2016)
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² <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-in-the-united-states-by-state>

³ http://www.chabad.org/holidays/chanukah/article_cdo/aid/102911/jewish/What-Is-Hanukkah.htm

based, Western calendar. Hanukah, then, this year, begins, as it always does, on the 25th day of Kislev 5778 in the Jewish lunar calendar, or, the 12th day of December, 2017.

Jewish holidays always begin the evening before the first day of the holiday. Hanukah, then, commences at sundown and we celebrate for eight days, concluding in the new Jewish month of Tevet, the 20th of December; the 2nd day of Tevet.

Hanukah's triumphant history of freedom, good over bad, inspires everyone. It was on the 25th day of Kislev in 165 BCE that the ancient Jews reclaimed the Holy Temple. Then, the Seleucids (Syrian-Greeks) of Macedonia⁴ ruled the Holy Land and oppressed the Jews. The Seleucids believed in multiple gods, and, as part of their political domination of this area, under the wicked King Antiochus, tried to force the people of Israel to accept Greek culture. Jews are monotheistic. We believe in one G-d.

Led by Judah the Maccabee, Jewish warriors, against all odds, defeated one of the mightiest armies on earth, drove the Greeks from the land, and reclaimed the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Here is the miracle: In this conflict, a one day supply of oil for the eternal light lasted eight days. To commemorate and publicize these miracles, Jewish sages instituted our festival of Hanukah.

The menorah, *lamp* in Hebrew, is the symbol and center of Hanukah. A menorah has nine flames and is the symbolic heart of our festival; bringing light and warmth, love and peace, into the chill and darkness of this time of year and into history. Accompanied by an appropriate prayer, right to left, because Hebrew is written right to left, we begin by lighting one candle, the Shamash,

⁴ https://www.ancient.eu/Seleucid_Empire/

or lead candle. Then we use that one flame to light, each night, an additional candle, until there are eight.⁵

According to tradition, the eight candles of the menorah must be arranged in a straight, even line, not in a zigzag or with some lights higher than others. In ancient times the menorah used oil and the cups were required to hold enough oil to burn for a required time – at least 30 minutes on weeknights, and up to one-and-a-half hours on Friday evening, the Shabbat. For public display purposes, as will be at the Ravalli County Fairgrounds, an electric menorah suffices.

Jewish values are universal.⁶ Peace is better than war. Jewish values emphasize compassion and love, charity, caring for everyone. Our values are devoted to creating human dignity, social justice, fixing up the world to make the world a better place, creating an harmonious and peaceful global community, and to world peace. Life is sacred and we share family values with all of mankind, honoring men, women and children.



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Photo credit: Chabad.org Flash90 Children often light the menorah.

⁶ http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3852164/jewish/What-Are-Jewish-Values.htm

Jews contribute to society in all ways, in all professions; all arts and sciences. Jews have formed an important part of modern Christmas celebrations. Jews wrote many familiar songs associated with Christmas. Irving Berlin wrote “White Christmas” and “Let It Snow, Let It Snow, Let It Snow,” was written by Julie Styne with lyrics by Sammy Cahn. There are many additional examples.

As a Jew, at last, I am so excited and proud about being able to invite our brethren to experience this historic first menorah lighting in Ravalli County! Between the 12th through the 20th of December. Chabad of Missoula, under the direction of Rabbi Berry Nash of Chabad Missoula, www.jewishmissoula.com, the Jews of Ravalli County invites everyone to celebrate our Hanukah miracle. Our public menorah is located for eight days at the Fairgrounds and was lighted on the 12th December at dusk with many community members attending.

At the lighting, led by Rabbi Nash, we recited special blessings, sang traditional melodies and served jelly doughnuts, *sufganiyot*. Rabbi Nash says, “The purpose of the menorah’s presence is that if there’s darkness in the world; let’s spread light. We do not fight fire with fire, but offer something good. The menorah is adding light to the world.”⁷

⁷ http://missoulian.com/news/state-and-regional/menorah-lighting-request-sparks-discussion-in-ravalli-county/article_500f5ef9-fbce-522a-893d-e5c9fa091a8b.html#tracking-source=home-top-story