

MH COMMUNITY CELEBRATES HANUKKAH LIGHTING TOGETHER

2013 Hanukkah began on Thanksgiving Day, won't coincide again for 79,000 years

The frosty night air failed to deter the crowd of Morgan Hill residents bundled up in coats, hats and scarves from gathering at the downtown Third Street Promenade to take part in South County's Congregation Emeth's Hanukkah candle lighting ceremony Dec. 3.

The community event took place on the seventh day of Hanukkah. It was the first time in Morgan Hill the menorah candle lighting was done as a multi-cultural event for the holiday. When members of the Congregation Emeth felt a need for the traditional candle lighting ceremony to be opened to the entire community to celebrate Hanukkah, they presented the idea to Morgan Hill Mayor Steve Tate, said Rabbi Debbie Israel. "He was very enthusiastic about it," she said. "And here we are."



Haley Toch, 12, and Matthew Ogden, 12, from Congregation Emeth, light a menorah during the seventh night of Hanukkah at a downtown celebration. The two are going through b'nai mitzvah class

Tate's enthusiasm was evident at the ceremony as he addressed the crowd. "This really is a great idea to bring this to our town, and our community," he said. "And to have us as part of your celebration is really special. I'm sure it's going to go forward as we go forward."

Israel felt the same. "People from the Morgan Hill community were here and my hope is they'll tell their friends about it, and that next year we'll have even more people from the community coming," she said.

The importance of this Jewish holiday resonates with everyone, Israel said. "We are part of the community, and we want to share this, especially this particular holiday... Its historical basis is based on Jewish persecution, the language of religious freedom is certainly universal."

Israel narrating a brief history of the Jewish holiday. Explaining that Hanukkah means "re-dedication," the eight-day Jewish festival celebrates the Maccabees army's recapture of the second temple in Jerusalem from the Syrian Greeks in the revolt of 166 B.C.E. The traditional Hanukkah lights serve as a reminder of the great miracle that a small band of Jewish rebels defeated a powerful army.

Congregation Emeth students Haley Toch, Matthew Ogden, Nathan Yacano and Levi Glatt, all now preparing for their bat/bar mitzvah next year, took special part in the lighting ceremony. As the four children lit the two menorahs, a chorus led by cantorial singer Angela Gold provided background music of the traditional Hanukkah melody, Ma'oz Tsur, Rock of Ages.

The ceremony continued as Gold strummed her guitar, leading the entire crowd in a number of traditional and contemporary Hanukkah songs, including a comical one called "I Am a Latke," which brought laughter from the crowd and spread smiles on everyone's faces.

“I like it out here, except it’s really cold,” Toch said. “I get to be with all my friends, and being with the little kids is a lot of fun, too.”

Ogden found the community event uplifting. “You get to meet a lot of new people,” he said, and then admitted his worry about making sure he lit the candles correctly. “It was a little nerve racking with everyone watching you,” he said.

Congregation Emeth member Emily Shem-Tov brought her husband Shachar and daughters Mariam and Clara downtown to celebrate at the Third Street Hanukkah candle lighting ceremony. She said that it is an unusual occurrence this year’s Hanukkah season started on the same day as the Thanksgiving holiday. “It will not happen again for another 79,000 years,” she said.

This timely coincidence created quite a buzz to the point that this year Nov. 28 was called “Thanksgivukkah,” Shem-Tov said. The two traditional holidays joined on a single day show that both resonate the importance of food, thankfulness and community, she said.

Israel echoed Shem-Tov’s sentiments. “There is that relationship between our founding ancestors here in the United States who came here in search of religious freedom as well,” she said. “It’s a holiday about miracles.”