

"The Christmas Menorahs"
Thoughts on Religious Tolerance from
Billings, Montana, USA

This story appears in its entirety in the award winning children's book, "The Christmas Menorahs: How a Town Fought Hate," by Janice Cohn and Bill Farnsworth

This is a story about a boy named Isaac Schnitzer. He is twenty years old now, but in 1993, Isaac was only seven. That was the year something happened to Isaac that he will never forget. Isaac remembers it like this.

It was the third night of Chanukah, the night that I liked best. Because on the third night our family gives special gifts to each other... gifts we make ourselves.

I was just a little kid, only seven, but I remember how I had worked long and hard on the gifts I made for my parents. The special Chanukah pillow I sewed for my mom -- she still has it. And the tie-dyed Chanukah boxer shorts I made for my dad. I can't believe my dad wore them but he did!

"These are great gifts," I said to myself as I took wrapping paper, scissors and tape up to my room. In every room of the house, in every window, there were beautiful menorahs. Big ones, small ones, animal ones, and even one that looked like a train. And each one had their candles lit for the third night.

I remember how I stopped and looked at the lights. They were beautiful. But, just as I taped a big blue bow on my mom's package, I heard this crashing sound. Pieces of glass flew around my bedroom and my beautiful menorah, the one with the Ten Commandments behind these two little doors, was in pieces on the floor. A round black rock landed right on my bed.

I stood in the middle of the floor.. stunned. But not for long. Suddenly, when I realized what had happened, I raced down the stairs, screaming for my mom and dad.

We held hands and as we headed back upstairs. Mom grabbed the phone and called 9-1-1. While my Dad was calming me down, Mom called the police, who got to the house right away.

The officer said, "This isn't the first time we've had a hate crime. Unfortunately ugly messages were spray painted out at Indian Reservation. They said awful things about Native Americans. And one African-American family had trouble, too. Last month somebody vandalized their house."

At first I had trouble understanding what he grown-ups were saying. Hey, I was just seven. But then it finally hit me. Like a rock. Somebody threw a rock through my bedroom window, aiming right at my menorah... and the reason they did this... was because we're Jewish!

After the police officer left, my parents talked late into the night. "We've got to do something," Mom said.

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"We can't let this go."

"What can we do about it?" Dad whispered. "Anything we say might just hurt Isaac. He's the only Jewish kid in school. I don't want it to get any worse for him."

But Mom was determined and like lots of Moms do, she won out. The next day, before the window was fixed, Mom invited the newspaper out to take pictures. A reporter asked us all about Chanukah and how we felt about what happened. When she asked if I was scared, I said, "Maybe just a little." I didn't want it to get out all over town paper that I didn't even want to go back to my own room... that I'd spent the night in my parents' bed!

The next day at school wasn't bad at all. All my friends treated me like some kind of hero.

They asked me about the rock and the more I talked about it the bigger it got. By afternoon recess, it was as big as the Rocky Mountains!

My teacher showed the newspaper to the class. It had a picture of my bedroom in it with Mom standing by the broken window.

"Hate crimes will not be tolerated," my teacher read. "Look right here, the Chief of Police says that this kind of thing has got to stop. People cannot be harassed because they are Jewish."

"Jewish?" "You're Jewish?" "Hey, Isaac, you never said anything about being Jewish?" "What's Jewish?"

Suddenly everyone was crowding around me. I realized that I liked talking about the rock a whole lot more than I liked talking about my religion.

"Wait." It was Teresa Handley. She was in my reading group and one of my best friends. I was glad she was the one talking. At least I was at first. Until I heard what she said.

"Wait, Isaac. I remember last year in first grade. When we all got to bring to class one gift that we got. You brought a helicopter. But you said you got it for Christmas."

I wanted to die right there. I knew what Teresa was talking about. I brought the helicopter but I didn't want to say it was a Chanukah present. No one else had Chanukah. Only me. I said I got it for Christmas so I wouldn't seem so different from the other kids.

When recess was over I was the happiest kid alive. And I thought this whole Chanukah thing was over until the phone rang. It was Teresa's mom, Mrs. Hanley, calling our house. And the next thing I knew, Mom was grabbing her car keys and running out the door.

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When my mom's car pulled out of the driveway, I went over to my dad. He was taking a nap on the couch. Snoring loud. I remember once he snored so loud he snored himself right off the couch.

I hated to wake him up but this was important.

"Dad, wake up. I've got an idea. Let's take all the menorahs down." My Dad looked shocked.

"Or at least let's get them out of the windows. If they don't see the menorahs, they won't know we're Jewish. Then they won't throw another rock."

My dad got up and hugged me. He started saying stuff like "Don't worry, Isaac. Don't be scared. We'll straighten this out." When I looked at my dad there were two tears coming out of his eyes. I didn't know why but I felt awful.

My mom was still not home so dad and I ate dinner together. We didn't say much. The menorahs were in the windows but with no lights on them. They looked sad, sitting there in the dark. Sad as me and dad were, sitting there with no lights on the fourth night.

Finally Mom came home. Her truck roared into the driveway and my dad said what he always says when Mom gets home. "Better get that muffler fixed."

Mom stood there in her coat, hat and boots. "Come on, you guys. Let's get going. I have something to show you."

I didn't feel like going anywhere. So I said what the big kids say when they don't want to go out with their parents. "I can't Mom. I have tons of homework."

"You do not. You're only in the second grade. Now get your coat and let's get going."
My dad was worse than me. "Ruthie, it's December and this is Montana. It's freezing out. Isaac's right. Let's stay inside."

But Mom wasn't having any of it. She practically pushed us out the door. And slowly, very slowly, she drove down our street.

"Look," she said. "Look at the windows."

"I don't want to look at any windows." I was thinking about what happened the night before. I hate windows and I hate Chanu....."

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I looked up and I couldn't believe my eyes. In every window, in every single house, there was a picture of a menorah. Big ones, little ones, red ones, blue ones, orange and green ones. They had candles drawn on them with bright yellow flames! I started to count but I stopped at 67. There were hundreds and hundreds more. I couldn't count that high! Everybody in the neighborhood... everybody in the whole town of Billings, Montana had made menorahs and put them in their windows!

"Mom, whose idea was this? Who did this?"

"Everybody did it, all together. But it was Teresa's idea. Your best friend, Teresa, and her mom and dad."

"But they're not even Jewish," I said. "And she never said she was going to do anything like this..."

And then Mom said, "You know, honey, hate can make a lot of noise. Love and courage are usually quieter. But in the end, it's love and courage that are strongest of all."

All the way home I looked at the menorahs in the windows and all the way home I thought about what my mom said. And then I made my decision.

"Wait here," I said and I ran into the house. Right upstairs, right up to my bedroom. I put my menorah in the window and plugged it in. Four lights were shining for the fourth night of Chanukah.

And then I took out my markers and made a sign. "Happy Hanukkah to Everyone in Billings Montana. I love you. From your friend, Isaac Schnitzer."



And that is the true story of Isaac Schnitzer and his family ... As the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth night of Chanukah approached, more and more menorahs could be seen in the homes throughout Billings.

And everyone, Christian, Jew, Muslim, and Buddhist, learned the true meaning of the holiday. The miracle of Chanukah for Billings, Montana is that the town continued to fight against acts of hatred and when the hate mongers realized that the town stood together, they gave up. They were no longer welcome and the hatred was gone.

So from all the way across the ocean in southern Italy we say to Billings, Montana... Thank you. Thank you to a town that said, "Never again will we just accept bigotry and think, Oh well, that's just the way the world works today."

Instead we thank you for reminding us that working for religious freedom isn't only an ancient story. We thank you for reminding us that if we are willing, we can be like you because each one of us has it in us to be a Macabbe soldier, too.

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As you light your Chanukah menorah this year think of our friends in Billings, Montana. Chanukah menorahs all over the world send the same message. They speak of tolerance, acceptance, and appreciation. They light the path toward pride in our traditions and love for our heritage. May they illumine our hearts forever, as we remember the words of Isaac's mom:

Hate can make a lot of noise.

Love and courage are usually more quiet.

But in the end

it's love and courage

that are strongest of all

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Sinagoga Ner Tamid del Sud

Lamezia Terme (Calabria), Italy