Jewish community in Aggieland coming together to celebrate Hanukkah

By CAITLIN PERRONE

While many students at Texas A&M University are preparing for finals or heading home for the end of the semester, Aggieland's Jewish community is providing Jewish students chances to celebrate Hanukkah around their schedules.

The three Jewish entities in the area have planned parties and menorah-lighting ceremonies over the next week in part to help serve the student population, since final exams started Friday and run through Wednesday, one day after the start of Hanukkah.

"This is why Hanukkah is complicated in the Brazos Valley," said David Toback, the president of the Congregation Beth Shalom in Bryan. "Hanukkah is coming basically during finals at the end of the school year, and the Brazos Valley is very A&M-centered, so it means that our activities are not going to typically run the way one would expect them to."

The eight-day holiday represents when the Maccabees, a small Jewish rebel group, fought and overthrew the Syrian Greeks and rededicated the Jerusalem temple around 150 BCE. The lighting of the menorah represents the rededication with the last of the oil that still had the seal of the high priest. Though there was only enough oil left for one day, the light burned for eight.

Last year, the Bryan congregation, Texas A&M Hillel and the Rohr Chabad Jewish Center celebrated Hanukkah together for the first time since the holiday fell at the end of November. The three entities celebrated on campus with the lighting of a 13-foot-tall menorah, followed by festivities at Texas A&M Hillel.

The previous leap year made the Jewish holiday fall early and overlap with Thanksgiving, Toback said, but it isn't common for it to fall so early.

"For hundreds of thousands of Jews, and for folks of all different faiths, the school year was not designed around their needs," he said. "What we try to do is make something meaningful to the people who want to participate."

The three Jewish entities are hosting various celebrations to serve the student community and residents in the area. The Rohr Chabad Jewish Center typically holds a menorah-lighting ceremony on campus; though, due to the finals schedule this year, all three will hold ceremonies elsewhere.

The Rohr Chabad Jewish Center will light a 13-foot-tall menorah at 8 p.m. Tuesday evening at the center, and hold a lighting and craft event Wednesday at 6:30. Students have a chance to participate when they light the large menorah every evening, said Rabbi Yossi Lazaroff, and the center will host a party Friday night.

"We want to create a homelike environment for the students to play traditional dreidel, just be around and enjoy each other's company around the lights," Lazaroff said. "The students obviously can't light in their dorms, so we give them the space and the environment to be able to light the menorah every single night of Hanukkah."
The Congregation Beth Shalom in Bryan will hold religious school Sunday from 10 a.m. to noon and will celebrate the end of the Sabbath Dec. 20 with a private Hanukkah party at a congregation members' home, Toback said.

Texas A&M Hillel hosted a pre-Hanukkah party Saturday night at the student center. On Tuesday evening, there will be a small candle lighting for the students, and the center will serve potato pancakes, offer dreidel games and play music, said Rabbi Matt Rosenberg.

"We figured students will leave typically once they're done with finals, and so many students have projects that by Tuesday night everyone will be gone," he said. "This year we're just trying to make an opportunity for students to have fun and enjoy each other's company, kind of a final goodbye party before they head home for the semester."
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