

## Chanukah message from Rabbi Richardson:

Last week there was an article in the *NY Times* about a bomb-sniffing German shepherd named Miky, who was trained in Israel but somehow ended up in Montana, a difficult transfer since Miky only understood Hebrew. It took a Lubavitcher rabbi to try to instruct Miky's new trainer in the proper pronunciation of Hebrew commands. In any event, Miky's story reminded me of another story regarding Montana and its connection to Jews and Judaism.

### **THE CHRISTIAN MEMORAHS: HOW BILLINGS MONTANA DEFENDED CHANUKAH**

*In 1993 Billings Montana, suffered a wave of hate crimes by the Ku Klux Klan and the white supremacist Aryan Nations. These included marching into an Afro-American church, spray painting swastikas on the home of a Native American, overturning tombstones in the Jewish cemetery and finally throwing rocks through windows displaying a Chanukah menorah. The turning point was the town's decision to fight back and the symbol of the struggle for religious, racial and ethnic freedom was appropriately, the display of a menorah by over 10,000 non-Jewish residents among 85,000 citizens.*

In December 1993 Isaac Schnitzer, a six year old Jewish boy (whose father was a Jewish doctor and his mother a devoted convert to Judaism) decorated his window with a colorful paper Chanukah menorah.

The next day a rock came flying through that window, leaving broken glass across Isaac's bed. Luckily Isaac was not in his room. Who could have done this, wondered Isaac? His parents comforted him. This is another hate crime. People hate minorities including Jews. Isaac replied, you mean someone threw a rock at my window because I am Jewish? The police assured the Schnitzers that they would do their best to protect them but perhaps they should remove their menorah from the window in order not to invite further vandalism. However, Isaac's mother refused to "lower her profile," to hide her Judaism. She told her son: we will keep our Chanukah decorations and we will not hide. Then she called the press and asked them: "Please make this front page news because I want people to understand what it's like to be Jewish."

The Schnitzers discovered that there had been many more hate crimes and that many in the community would be supportive of its minorities. When the African-American church was harassed, tens of people came to the church to show their support. The Reverent reported, "they rallied round and let them (the bigots) know, 'Hey if you bite one, you bite us all,'" and that was a very good feeling we had." When a Native American's home was spray painted with a swastika, thirty painters from the local union turned out to repaint it. One painter lamented, "We can paint the house over, but hat do you do with those [Native American] children's memories? They're scarred." The head of the local human rights organization said, 'If they want me to be silent, then that's just not going to happen."

When Isaac's room had been vandalized, his five year old non Jewish neighbor came over with a hand made Chanukah decoration to put up in his room. When the activists met to decide how to

respond, someone recalled the legend of the Danish King during the Nazi occupation of Denmark. The story goes that when the Nazis required every Danish Jew to wear a yellow star, the king chose to wear one as well. Christian and Jewish citizens would not be forcibly distinguished and their solidarity undermined. (Later on Rosh Hashanah as the Nazis planned their surprise arrest and deportation of Danish Jews, the Danish underground preempted them by spirited away thousands across the sea to neutral Sweden). The Holocaust story reminded the people about the danger of silently giving in to violent prejudice.

Soon the campaign began to put a menorah or a picture of one in every window in Billings. That was a small act of courage but a big expression of brotherhood. The hate organizations threw bricks through more of the newly decorated Chanukah windows such as the one in the Methodist church. Nevertheless 10,000 residents put up menorahs and the hate crimes decreased markedly, because "ordinary citizens put themselves on the front line against hate and intolerance." Chanukah really did become a celebration of freedom because people expressed their convictions publicly in the window, even if it meant receiving a brick through the glass.