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At a Dark Time, Jews in New York Celebrate the Festival of Lights

By Liam Stack, Olivia Bensimon, and Wesley Parnell



- *Some people at a menorah lighting at Grand Army Plaza in Brooklyn said the mass shooting in Australia had moved them to attend. Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times*

Jews across New York gathered to light the menorah on Monday after the Hanukkah attack in Sydney, Australia, in public ceremonies and private at-home gatherings that were marked sharply by feelings of both sorrow and resilience.

In Park Slope, Brooklyn, dozens of people gathered on a bitterly cold night to watch Representative Daniel Goldman, a New York Democrat, and Rabbi Shimon Hecht light the second candle on a menorah so tall they needed an industrial scissor lift to reach it.

“This year, more than ever, we need the light of the menorah,” said Mr. Goldman, who stood with his two daughters on the lift as it raised them up to the candles. “And I am proud that everyone is out here tonight. We will stand up, we will persist, as we have always done.”

Jason Shechter, 42, an anti-money-laundering analyst from Clinton Hill, stood on the icy pavement below them. He said he had come out on a frigid night because he “wanted to come do something that was in public, because it is a hard day.”



- *“This year, more than ever, we need the light of the menorah,” Representative Daniel Goldman said at the Brooklyn gathering. Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times*

New York is home to the world’s largest Jewish population outside Israel, and the mood in the city mirrored the grief and horror in Jewish communities across the United States.

Some people said the attack in Sydney had inspired them to attend a public Hanukkah celebration for the first time. Hunter Dillard-Jakubowicz, 24, said he had never been to the menorah lighting in Grand Army Plaza before, even though he grew up in nearby Crown Heights.

“It’s definitely a scary time to be a Jew these past couple of years, but a large part of it makes me want to come out and be sort of more Jewish,” said Mr. Dillard-Jakubowicz, a dog walker.

He said it felt important “to continue being visible, as Jewish, and to be here and as resilient as possible.”



- *Families gathered at Grand Army Plaza for the second night of Hanukkah. Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times*

The United States has experienced an increasing number of antisemitic incidents in recent years, including a deadly attack on a peaceful vigil in Boulder, Colo., and the shooting of two Israeli Embassy employees in Washington, D.C.

On Sunday, the Police Department said that there was no credible threat to Hanukkah celebrations in New York but that officers would “be out in full force at events and synagogues so that our communities can gather safely.”

Many Jews’ sense of safety has been shaken since the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel, which killed around 1,200 Israelis and led to the taking of 250 more as hostages, and Israel’s subsequent war in Gaza, which has devastated the territory and killed about 70,000 people, according to local officials.

In interviews on Monday, several men said they were afraid to wear skullcaps in public. Alex Rosenthal, 34, who works in tech and lives in Crown Heights, was one of them. He said New York was probably the safest place in the world. “But I still feel uncomfortable,” he said. “I’m afraid. And, with what happened over the weekend in Sydney, I think that people are going to feel more bold and emboldened to be hateful.”

David Smigel, a student at Yeshiva University, joined a gathering at Yeshiva’s Upper Manhattan campus on Monday night for a menorah lighting ceremony that doubled as a vigil for the victims in Australia.

The speakers included an Australian rabbi who teaches at the university, an Australian student whose friends in Sydney had been at the beach at the time of the attack, and Rosie Schlanger, 21, a niece of Rabbi Eli Schlanger, 41, who was killed in the attack.

“The fact that he was taken away on the day that represents goodness and light was very powerful and very painful,” Ms. Schlanger told the crowd. “But I think that what he would want for us is to continue, is to find light, even in the darkest times when things seem like they’re crashing down.”

Mr. Smigel said the Sydney attack had left him deeply shaken. Like many Americans, he watched footage of the assault on Bondi Beach on social media.



- *At Yeshiva University, students and faculty members lit menorahs and mourned the victims of the mass shooting in Australia. Credit...Dave Sanders for The New York Times*

“I opened my phone, and it was devastating,” Mr. Smigel said. Distraught, he talked with his parents about what he had seen. Watching the footage made him feel as though “you can’t feel safe just being a Jew, really anywhere, anymore,” especially since the Oct. 7 attacks, he said.

“I think is a terrifying reality that we’ve all had to grapple with,” he said.

The war in Gaza has ignited protests around the world and led to a dramatic increase in the number of Americans who hold negative perceptions of Israel and oppose sending U.S. aid there, according to a poll from The New York Times and Siena University.

Those shifting perceptions have contributed to political tensions surrounding the election of New York City’s next mayor, Zohran Mamdani, a longtime critic of Israel.

Mr. Mamdani won a decisive victory in both the Democratic primary and the general election, although his views on Israel alarmed many Jews.

Many other Jews have said they agree with his views, in a reflection of the generational divide over how American Jews feel about Israel and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

At the Park Slope ceremony, Mr. Dillard-Jakubowicz said he thought it was “a very un-Jewish thing to not care about the Palestinian people and what they go through.”

“We are commanded directly in the Torah to be concerned about strangers,” he said, as he watched the light from the first two Hanukkah candles glow in the frigid Brooklyn wind. But he added, “Israel will never be an excuse to treat the world’s Jews poorly for any reason.”

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