Local Jews celebrate first night of Hanukkah

By Lanz Christian Bañes

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Hanukkah is more than just a festival of lights -- it's a celebration of the tenacity of the Jewish people, said one local rabbi.

"What we're celebrating ... are miracles," said Rabbi David White on Friday at Congregation B'nai Israel on Nebraska Street.

Friday marks the first of the eight days of Hanukkah, which commemorates the unlikely Jewish victory over the Syrian army in 168 B.C. Each day of Hanukkah, a new candle is lit.

Cindy Noonan and her family prepare to light a menorah with her husband. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)

The synagogue was full of different styles of menorah, the nine-pronged candelabras used to hold the Hanukkah candles. The ninth place in the menorah holds the *shamash*, a candle used to light the other candles throughout the week.

"It's to say the fact that we are all unique, we are all different, we all carry precious legacies forward," White said during a special *shabbat* service at the synagogue that included a fellowship dinner intended to bring the congregation together.

Celebrants sing at Friday's seder. (Mike Jory/Times-Herald)

Typically, Congregation B'nai Israel alternates Friday *shabbat* services -- the Jewish holy day -- between the sanctuary one week and with a fellowship dinner the next week, Shoshana Nurik said.

Nurik, a Benicia resident, is president of the local chapter of Hadassah, which sponsored the Hanukkah *shabbat* and meal this year.

The Israel-based organization brings together Jews and Arabs in the troubled Middle East and advocates reconciliation and a "practical Zionism," Nurik said.

The first candle of Hanukkah is usually lit as the Jewish Sabbath begins at sundown, but White waited until about 7 p.m. Friday in order to gather everyone together, he said.

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