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PETERBOROUGH REGION

# ‘Your Jewish friends are not doing OK’: Peterborough community unites in Hanukkah solidarity after deadly attacks in Australia

About 65 people gathered to light candles together Monday evening at Beth Israel Synagogue.

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Dr. Ben Langer, left, makes remarks as Beth Israel Congregation held a Hanukkah candle lighting ceremony Monday in response to horrific attacks at Bondi Beach in Australia.

Clifford Skarstedt/Examiner

## Read summary



By Joelle Kovach Reporter

Members of the Jewish community in Peterborough gathered Monday evening at Beth Israel Synagogue on Weller Street to light candles on the second night of Hanukkah.

It was the first day after at least 15 people died on Bondi Beach in Sydney, Australia, when two shooters opened fire on a “Chanukah by the Sea” celebration.



Dr. Dan Houpt holds a candle in the air as Beth Israel Congregation held a Hanukkah ceremony Monday in response to horrific attacks at Bondi Beach in Australia.

Clifford Skarstedt/Examiner

While lighting of menorah candles usually takes place at home, on Monday night about 65 people from the Peterborough Jewish community, plus some supporters, gathered to light candles together.

Karen Fisher, a synagogue board member, said in an interview that people were seeking solidarity.

“Check in with your Jewish friends — they’re not doing very well. Your Jewish friends are not doing OK,” she said.

Dr. Dan Houpt, a member of the synagogue’s board, led the proceedings.



The Beth Israel Congregation held a Hanukkah candle lighting ceremony Monday in response to horrific attacks at Bondi Beach in Australia.

Clifford Skarstedt/Examiner

“The lighting of the Hanukkah candles shouldn’t be an act of defiance — but it is,” he said.

Houpt is a family physician in Lakefield. He said Monday he had experienced a “whirlwind” of emotions.

“Immense sadness. Anger. Defiance. And happiness — because it’s Hanukkah,” he said.

“People ask me, ‘How can there be such evil in the world? How can God — a loving God — allow evil, in this world?’ Well, I’ll tell you: Without evil, we can’t recognize good. Without darkness, there is no light.”

“The word Hanukkah means ‘dedication,’” said Joy Simmonds, another member of the synagogue’s board, before leading an incantation.

“This is a moment to re-dedicate ourselves to bringing peace, love and light to world — in whichever way you do that.”



Joy Simmonds, middle, lights a menorah at a Hanukkah candle lighting ceremony Monday in response to horrific attacks at Bondi Beach in Australia.

Clifford Skarstedt/Examiner

Beth Israel is only one synagogue in Peterborough. Dr. Benjamin Langer, a board member, said about 60 families make up the congregation.

A family doctor and obstetrical surgeon in Peterborough, Langer said in an interview that more families are regularly joining, with a trend toward young people moving here from Toronto.

He said there is no rabbi at Beth Israel, but there's a cantor — a trained singer and spiritual leader — from Belfast, Leon Litvack, who joins on high holidays. Local members of the congregation lead services.

Langer said Hanukkah candles this year will be lit “both in celebration and in grief — and with determination to honour the lives of all of those taken from us in hatred and violence.”

Karen Fisher read a message from Litvack to the group.

In his message, Litvack drew parallels between Australia and Canada: both countries value freedom of religion and of expression, he noted, both have strict gun laws, and both have “a small but significant Jewish community.”



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Clifford Skarstedt/Examiner

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“This catastrophe raises valid concerns for Canada, and indeed for anywhere Jews gather for prayer or celebration,” Litvack said in writing.

Private security staff and a Peterborough Police officer were in the synagogue Monday.

Sandra Dueck, communications manager for Peterborough Police, told the Examiner in an email Monday afternoon that while “there is no known threat at this time,” city police remain “in communication with the local community.”

“We will be maintaining a heightened presence around Jewish places of worship and will continue to remain vigilant for any threats,” she said.

Peterborough-Kawartha MPP Dave Smith was there Monday night but did not speak. Monaghan Ward Coun. Matt Crowley was there too, to listen.

Meanwhile, Mayor Jeff Leal issued a statement early Sunday in response to the terrorist attacks in Australia.



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Clifford Skarstedt/Examiner

“We stand with the Jewish community of Peterborough, Ontario, and Canada in the wake of today’s horrific antisemitic terror attack at a Hanukkah event in Australia,” the mayor stated.

“We have no tolerance for hate against any group. Our Jewish community should be confident they can celebrate Hanukkah in peace and safety. We thank the Peterborough Police Service for providing extra presence at Beth Israel Synagogue.”



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Clifford Skarstedt/Examiner



*Joelle Kovach is the city hall reporter for the Peterborough Examiner.*

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