

## SHEDDING ANCIENT LIGHT ON AN ANCIENT TRADITION

By Julian Walker, Times Staff Writer

More than 2,000 years ago, when much of the discovered world was populated by warring empires seeking to conquer and control, religious freedom was unheard of.

The people of a particular nation- state were obliged to adhere to the tenets of the theological ideology practiced by the ruler of their lands. Dissenters were routinely put to death.

In 168 B.C.E. (before the common era), the people of Israel found themselves in that predicament.

Ruled by the Syrians, those ancient Jews were instructed to ascribe to the polytheistic traditions of what is now considered Greek mythology -- the worship of Zeus and a pantheon of other deities.

That wasn't kosher, pun intended, in the minds of the Maccabiahs, a sect of militant Jews who took up arms in defiance of the Syrians.

Inspired by that bravery, other Jews joined the battle and ousted their oppressors by 165 B.C.E.

To celebrate that victory, an eight-day holiday known as Hanukkah -- somewhat patterned after the eight-day format of Sukkhot (fall harvest festival), which begins four days after Yom Kippur -- was established.

Part of the pageantry of the holiday, which began Sunday night, is lighting one candle held in a Hanukkah menorah each night for the duration of the celebration.

In the time of the Maccabiahs, oil lamps (or nerot) were used for this purpose and for illumination.

"When you look at the light (of the candle or lamp) on Hanukkah, let it remind you to act like a good Jew, because that's what the Maccabiahs fought for -- for us to be able to be free in our land," Rabbi Andrea Merow explained to the students who attend the Northeast Religious School at Temple Sholom, at Large Street and Roosevelt Boulevard.

The school is a joint venture between Temple Sholom and Oxford Circle Jewish Community Centre-Brith Israel. It evolved out of the Northeast Synagogue Consortium planning process, which brought together seven Lower Northeast temples in the summer of 2000 to address and devise solutions to their common issues.

Last week, Rabbi Barry Dov Lerner paid a visit to the school, which educates about 90 students, who range from preschool age to seventh grade, in the ways of Hebraic culture, to explain the tradition and significance of lighting flames during Hanukkah.

The rabbi brought with him a collection of ancient Hanukkah lamps fashioned in clay that he obtained during his annual trips to Israel.

The oldest dates back to 2800 B.C.E., as authenticated by the Israel Department of Antiquities. In other words, the clay lamp is about 4,200 years old.

"We don't know the last time it was lit. We don't know if it was in a private home or if it was owned by a poor family or a rich family," said Lerner. "The only thing we do know is that it is from Jerusalem."

According to Lerner, who worked in pulpits in New York and New Jersey for 30 years until health concerns caused his recent retirement, oil lamps had many purposes in addition to their religious importance.

They were a source of light in the evening but could only be used as such when they were not being employed for holiday observance, and the black smoke that they burned off was collected and used as a chalky ink for writing, said Lerner, who recently moved to Wyncote to join his wife, who has worked for an area Jewish community agency for the past four years.

"The lamp itself has no sanctity, but the illumination from it can't be used for a secular purpose while it is being used for Hanukkah," he explained.

Because the lamps were made of porous hand-molded clay -- most resembled brown sea shells -- water was poured in before oil, and a wick, made of dried palm fibers, was added to the mix to prevent the leakage of precious olive oil.

That oil, said Lerner, was a commodity used for cooking and was a source of vital fat calories for Jews during the lean winter months.

Initially, only one lamp per household was used to celebrate Hanukkah, because oil was too precious to rapidly deplete. As time passed and the people of Israel became more prosperous, one lamp was lighted for each person in a household.

That later evolved into the current tradition, where one lamp per night was lighted for the duration of the eight-day holiday.

"The custom was for the lamp to burn at night, at least a half-hour into the night."

Since his retirement, Lerner has busied himself traveling to temples, community groups and even individual homes to share his knowledge about Jewish tradition.

To further that mission, he established the Foundation for Family Education Inc. and created adjunct Web sites -- [www.foundationforfamilyeducation.org](http://www.foundationforfamilyeducation.org) and [www.jewishfreeware.org](http://www.jewishfreeware.org) -- to spread the word.

"This is about perpetuating the relationship of family through the major and minor events of the Jewish calendar and life cycle," he explained, noting that the story of the Maccabiah and Hanukkah's origins encompasses that tradition "by teaching Jewish kids that everybody has a right to follow their own religion."