



The Christmas Menorahs: How a Town Fought Hate

By Janice Cohn, illustrated by Bill Farnsworth
(Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman, 1995)

Summary

When a rock crashes through the window of a Jewish family's home in Billings, Montana, they decide to inform people in the community about what happened. Christian ministers, community leaders, and friends of the family decide to take action to show that they oppose such hate crimes. Organizing a campaign to place menorahs in windows all over town, they make a powerful statement against intolerance and for religious liberty.

Initiating Activities

1. Tell the students the title of the book the class will be reading and ask if they find anything unusual in the combination of words. If students do not know what a menorah is, point out the picture on the cover and explain that it is a symbol of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah.
2. Read the subtitle to students and ask them to speculate on what the book might be about. Point out that the dedication of the book gives a clue as to what town is referred to in the subtitle. If students do not know where Billings is, point it out on a u.S. map. You may want to read the "Introduction" to the class before the story is read, although the story may be more engaging if the "Introduction" is read later.

Discussion Questions

1. What made the crash Isaac heard while he was doing his homework? What would you do if you heard a crash while doing your homework? How would you feel? Why do you think someone threw a rock into Isaac's home?
2. What do you think Isaac's mom was talking about what she said, "These terrible people keep threatening and threatening..."? Why won't she tell Isaac what she means?
3. What did Isaac overhear his parents and Chief Inman talking about? What other acts of hate had occurred in Billings? What could Chief Inman, as the police chief, do about the crime? What did Chief Inman suggest Isaac's family and the community

should do about these hate crimes? What would you do if a hate crime took place in your community?

4. Why do you think Isaac said he didn't want to be a pioneer? Do you think it is hard to be a pioneer? How does being a pioneer help a community?

5. How did Isaac's mom decide to let people in Billings know what happened to the Schnitzer family? Do you think this is a good way to inform people? Can you think of examples in your community where people have used television to inform others about something that the community needs to stand together against?

6. What happened at the town meeting called by Chief Inman and Margaret MacDonald? Why did Mrs. MacDonald tell the story of King Christian of Denmark? Do you think the group's plan will work? Why or why not?

7. Isaac told his class the story of Hanukkah. What does Hanukkah celebrate? How is the meaning of Hanukkah related to the issue the town of Billings faced?

8. What story did Teresa tell the class? Do you think Teresa's actions in defending her classmate are the actions of a good citizen? Why or why not?

9. How did Isaac feel when he saw the menorahs in windows all over Billings, including the sign in Teresa's window? What do you think the menorahs say about the citizens of Billings? What effect do you think they had on the people who did the hate crimes?

Follow-up Activities

1. Tell students that our freedom to practice whatever religion we believe in—or no religion at all—is guaranteed by the Constitution, specifically by the First Amendment, which is part of the Bill of Rights. The Bill of Rights was added to the Constitution right after the Constitution was adopted to protect the rights of the people from the government. However, having a constitutional right to free religion does not mean that all the people in the United States are accepting of different religions. Thus, circumstances like those in the book sometimes arise.

2. With students, make a list of people in the story who were good citizens. For each person listed, write an action that person took that shows he/she is a good citizen. For example, Mrs. Schnitzer informed other people of events in their town, Chief Inman and Mrs. MacDonald organized a town meeting, and so on. When students have completed their list, ask each student to choose one person from the list and write him/her a letter explaining why the class thinks he/she is a good citizen.

2. Read *Molly's Pilgrim*, by Barbara Cohen, illustrated by Michael J. Deraney (New York: Bantam, 1983), which tells the story of an immigrant girl whose family came to the United States to find religious freedom. Although she lived decades before Isaac,

she too struggled with being different from her classmates but came to appreciate those differences when she learned more about them. Discuss with students the difficulties of being different, as well as the importance of religious freedom and the ways in which classmates can help a student who is different feel welcome.

Adapted from *C Is for Citizenship: Children's Literature and Civic Understanding*, by Laurel R. Singleton (Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium, 1997). Used by permission of the author.