

Alexandria's Jewish Congregations

During the first half of the 19th century, Alexandria offered Jewish immigrants commercial and religious opportunity. Coming from Europe (mostly from Germany), they were escaping political oppression and revolutions. In 1857, the Jewish residents of Alexandria established a Hebrew Benevolent Society to provide their group burial grounds. In 1859, there were 50 single Jewish male adults and families living in the city and Beth El Congregation was founded.

Today there are six synagogues in the area once comprising Alexandria City and County – four synagogues in the City of Alexandria and two in Arlington County.

Hanukkah and Alexandria

Hanukkah, a “festival of lights,” is a Jewish celebration over eight nights. Many families celebrate together at home by lighting a menorah, praying, singing, eating foods fried in oil, and playing dreidel, a game spinning a four-sided top.

Hanukkah means “dedication” in Hebrew. The holiday celebrates the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem during the second century B.C.E. after Jews led by Judah Maccabee drove the Syrian Greeks out of Jerusalem. According to the Talmud, one of Judaism’s primary texts, a miracle enabled one jar of oil to provide enough oil to light the Temple’s menorah for eight days, until additional consecrated oil could be obtained.



Lighting of the menorah at the Chanukah Festival in Old Town, sponsored by Chabad Lubavitch of Alexandria-Arlington.

Celebrating that miraculous event, a Hanukkah menorah candelabra has eight candles and the shamash, a “helper candle” set higher than the other candles. The shamash is lit first and used to light all the others. A new candle is placed on the menorah each night from right to left; the menorah is lit left to right, so that the newest candle is lit first. Blessings are said as the Hanukkah lights are lit after sundown.

A Hanukkah menorah is intended to spread light to others, so a household’s menorah is often placed where it can be seen from outside. In the 21st century, communities like Alexandria gather together to celebrate Hanukkah in public spaces. Local synagogues and Jewish Community Centers host events to play dreidel, celebrate with latkes, donuts fried in oil, and of course, to light the menorah. Today’s Beth El families bring their menorahs to the synagogue for lighting on the first night and the congregation hosts a children’s program during the eight nights to play dreidel and eat latkes. In Old Town Alexandria, Chabad Lubavitch of Alexandria-Arlington sponsors an annual public menorah lighting by community leaders and Chanukah Festival featuring food, entertainment, and music.



Beth El Congregation's Washington Street Temple. Courtesy of Beth El Hebrew Congregation.



Hanukkah menorah lighting, courtesy of Beth El Hebrew Congregation.

