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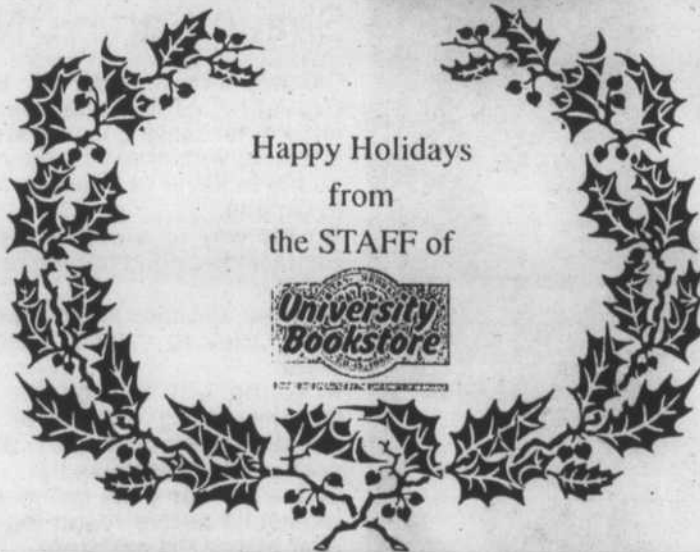
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Michelle Paulman/DN

Cantor Michael Weisser of the South Street Temple, 2000 South St., says Hanukkah is a minor Jewish holiday compared to Christmas for Christians.

Jewish people celebrate Hanukkah as minor holiday, professor says

By Dionne Searcey
Senior Editor

Many Americans may think Hanukkah is to Jews what Christmas is to Christians. Not so, a member of the Jewish community said.

Stuart Margolis, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln professor of computer science, said Hanukkah was not a major Jewish holiday.

"Although it may be represented by the popular press as a major holiday, it certainly isn't from a Jewish point of view," he said. "It's not a major holiday. On major holidays we stop working."

No special services are usually planned for Hanukkah, he said. On the holiday, Jews may have candle-lighting ceremonies or eat a heavily fried potato pancake called latke, and the children play special games.

Jewish people in the United States also take part in gift-giving on Hanukkah, he said.

"In America, Hanukkah has taken on great importance because it happened to fall at the same time as Christmas," he said.

Jewish parents don't want their children to feel left out, Margolis said, when they see their Christian friends exchanging gifts.

"Gift-giving was a small part of the holiday years ago. Today it's taken on major proportions," Margolis said.

UNL has only about 60 to 100 Jewish students. About 1,000 Jewish people reside in Lincoln, 6,000 to 8,000 live in Omaha and few Jews live elsewhere in Nebraska, he said.

Hanukkah is different from other Jewish holidays, Margolis said, because it's the only Jewish holiday that celebrates post-biblical events.



Brian Shellito/DN

Hanukkah celebrates a military and religious victory that took place many years ago, he said.

At that time, the land of Israel was

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—Margolis
political science professor

occupied by Greeks, who forbode the practice of the Jewish faith.

The Maccabee family, a group of priests, led a popular uprising, he said, and the Greeks were defeated.

"This was really a fight for religious freedom — a popular uprising brought about by a small band of people who threw off their oppressors," Margolis said.

After the defeat, he said, Jewish people were able to reinstitute religious practices at the temple in Jerusalem.

But the Jewish people believed the Greeks had used the temple for pagan sacrifices, he said. They needed to find oil to anoint the temple and make it fit once again for Jewish rituals.

But the Jews found just enough oil to last one day.

"In fact, it lasted for eight days," according to the legend, Margolis said.

Now, one candle is lit every night for eight days, in celebration of Hanukkah, which means rededication.

The holiday starts each year on a day marked by the Hebrew calendar, Margolis said. This year, the first night of candle lighting is Dec. 19.