

## **The Christmas Menorahs – How a Town Fought Hate by Janice Cohn**

This powerful book tells how two children, two families – one Jewish and one Christian – and a community, resolve to stand together against shameful actions happening in their home town during Hanukkah. When a rock crashes through the window of a Jewish family's home 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 they oppose such hate crimes. Organising a campaign to place Menorahs all over town, they make a powerful statement against intolerance and for religious liberty.

Based on real events that happened in Billings, Montana in 1993.

### Lesson Activities

- Look at the title page. Do the pupils find anything unusual in the combination of words in the title? What is a Menorah? Establish that it is a symbol of the Jewish holiday of Hanukkah. Show the pupils a Menorah and light the candles. Tell them the story of Hanukkah. How does it make you feel?
- Re-create the scene where Mrs Davis and Isaac are staring at the broken window. Ask two children to come and stand as the two characters. Can two other pupils sculpt them into position as they are in the illustration? If possible put a Menorah on the floor in front of them? Ask the children to share how the two characters are feeling. Can they verbalise what they may be thinking? Record onto some large thought bubbles. What does the Menorah on the floor represent? Read/ reveal the text to the children. Discuss what has happened and how the characters react. Why do they think someone threw a rock into Isaac's house?
- Read on until page 18. Stop at the point where Isaac's parents allow him to choose whether or not he will put his Menorah back up in the window. Ask the pupils to work in pairs and to brainstorm what they think Isaac should do. Ask them to note down the positive and negative reasons about Isaac putting his Menorah back up. Share some of the ideas as a whole class. Ask a child to come and pose as Isaac holding the Menorah. With the rest of the class create a 'whispering tunnel' by forming two lines facing each other through which the child representing Isaac will walk through. One side of the tunnel needs to whisper to Isaac the reasons why he should put the Menorah back in the window and the other side of the tunnel needs to whisper the reasons why he should not put the Menorah back. Give the children some thinking time to consider what they think Isaac should do and then ask them to write their thoughts justifying their answers.
- On page 20 Chief Inman tells the crowd that, 'they need to take a stand as a community.' Stop reading just before Mrs MacDonald's idea – can the children predict what will happen? How would the children resolve the conflict? Establish that the town decides to solve the conflict in a peaceful manner. Remind them that in the Bible Jesus models the power of non-

violence. On the night of his arrest when violent men made their move on Jesus he told Peter who was ready to fight, 'Put your sword back in its place – for all those who draw the sword will die by the sword.'

- Re-create the town meeting in the classroom. Allow the children to debate how they feel that the conflict should be resolved in a non – violent manner.
- Look at inspirational people – Martin Luther King and Ghandi who both fought hate using peaceful methods.
- In the Bible it states, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or free, there is no male or female, for you are all one in Christ.' Explore this statement together and how it links to the outcome of this story. Highlight the Legend of the story of Danish King Christian during World War Two. It reports that the King chose to wear a yellow star himself in support of Danish Jews during the German Occupation. The Danish people followed his example – thus making the order unenforceable. Show the children once more the Menorah from the story. Using this as a symbol how can the people of Billings follow the example of the Danish King and stop the violence? Establish that the community ensures that the Jewish homes cannot be identified by all displaying Menorahs.
- Explain to the pupils that they are going to pose as news reporters. They can choose to report on the crime or the town's reaction to it. Ensure that they include some religious content within their report – for example an explanation on Hanukkah and the lighting of Menorahs during the festival.
- Show the pupils a picture of a child. Claim that they live in the same town as Isaac but they have decided not to put a Menorah in their window. Ask the pupils to think about what arguments they would use to persuade the child to change their mind. Allow them to work in small groups to decide on 2 or 3 reasons for their argument. Discuss these together as a whole class. Give the children some time to choose the three best reasons they would use to persuade the child. Ask them to write a letter to the child persuading them to change their mind using their best reasons. Or share these ideas by recording a video message.
- Recall the story of Hanukkah. What does the story of Hanukkah celebrate? How is the meaning of Hanukkah related to the issue that the town of Billings faced? Remind the children that every year Jews celebrate Hanukkah by lighting menorahs and remembering the victory of the Maccabees against religious intolerance. How is this linked to the story at Billings?
- How did Isaac feel when he saw Menorahs in windows all over the town? What do you think the menorah's say about the citizens of the town? What effect do you think they had on the people who carried out the hate crimes?
- The theme 'light in the darkness' is very strong throughout the book. Return to the text and illustrations and ask the pupils to note how light is represented and described. Ask the pupils to explore how light and festivals of light form main features of many of the world's religions e.g. Candlemas, Divali