

Hanukkah offers time for fun, reflection

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

NORTHAMPTON — A 10-year-old boy dressed as an ancient Jew couldn't wait to kick a Greek soldier during a battle scene at the Lander-Grinspoon Academy's annual Hanukkah celebration.

"I get to kick a kicking bag," said Ilan Berkman, a fifth-grader from Amherst who last Friday played Juda Mattathias in the Hanukkah play, an eight-page script that gives an overview of the history of Hanukkah.

The play is modified a little each year, said Deborah Bromberg Seltzer, the event's coordinator, and this year students put the battle scene together. Tin-foiled swords were plentiful.

"The kids take a lot of ownership with it," said Bromberg Seltzer. "It was much more about them enjoying themselves."

Nearly 200 teachers, friends and family came out to see the academy's 84 students celebrate Hanukkah on Friday, the third day of Hanukkah, which is an eight-day festival of lights. Hanukkah this year runs from Dec. 5 to Wednesday.

"Because it's so close to other holidays it gives us a chance to really feel Jewish and reinforces that we're different — there's good energy today," she said. "Hanukkah is just joyful and in our house it brings a lot of smiles. It's something to look forward to at the end of the day."

Before the celebration began, Julia Moss, of Florence, arranged her video camera on a tripod to record her 10-year-old daughter, Eliza Moss-Horwitz, play Antiochus, the Greek leader of the Epiphanes.

"She's an aspiring actress," Moss said. "It's a big deal for her."

The crowd hushed as Bromberg Seltzer welcomed them.

"Hanukkah is not one of the major Jewish holidays," she said. "It's actually not mentioned at all in the Bible."

Others, like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, are more celebrated.

Part of the production involved a retelling of the story of the Maccabees in



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Ann Armon, Hebrew and Judaic teacher at the Lander-Grinspoon Academy's Hanukkah program, lights candles for Hanukkah while kindergarten and first grade students watch.

the village of Modiin rebelling against King Antiochus, of the Greek Empire. Antiochus wanted the Maccabees to follow Greek practices, which went against the Jewish way of life. Once his armies reached Modiin, the Maccabees defended themselves.

"Hanukkah is an opportunity for children to reconnect to an ancient heritage," Justin Cammy, of Florence, said after the celebration.

"It's one of the most American holidays because it's about freedom and how minorities resist tyranny and express their own dignity both culturally

and religiously."

Menorah candles were lit and the Shalom Aleichem song was sung.

"Hanukkah is focused on the light which most winter holidays tend to be focused on," said Bromberg Seltzer.

Following the celebration, a few parents and children answered questions about how they celebrate Hanukkah.

Emily Wainberg, a kindergartner, and Victoria Wainberg, a first grader, said they recite prayers, light their menorah and send e-mails to their grandparents.

For Marta Lev, attending with her

children Ariana Lev, a kindergartner, and Sammy Lev, a sixth-grader, Hanukkah is a celebration of liberation for all people, and also an opportunity to learn more about their heritage.

Sammy Lev said he liked the performance this year. "We learn a little bit more every year."

Marta Lev added, "Every year in terms of history and religion I see how the foundation is being laid and by sixth grade they have a solid understanding of Judaism."

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