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Baldacci hosts Hanukkah party at Blaine House for the last time

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AUGUSTA, Maine — Gov. John Baldacci hosted a Hanukkah party Monday afternoon at the governor’s mansion, the last of his administration. Despite the snowy travel conditions, about two dozen people gathered in the Blaine House to light the menorah, sing a few Hanukkah songs and enjoy cookies and punch. The severe wintry weather to the north prevented representatives

from Bangor's Jewish community from making the trip this year.

"Freedom to worship is an essential right in our country," Baldacci said in prepared remarks released before the event. "The traditions of Hanukkah remind us of the importance of this right. The lighting of the Menorah recalls the freedom over oppression, of light over darkness."

Hanukkah is a celebration of a military victory rather than a religious holiday. The celebration dates to 165 B.C. and marks the rededication of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem after the victory of the ancient Jews over a tyrannical Seleucid regime.

According to legend, when the Jews entered the temple after defeating the enemy, they found only enough oil to burn in the temple's menorah for one day.

Miraculously, it burned for eight. Hence, the celebration lasts eight days.

Former first lady Mary Herman, wife of former Gov. Angus King, publicly marked Hanukkah at the governor's mansion for the eight years her husband held the office. As a Jew, she felt it was important to publicly celebrate the event, which falls in the midst of the Christmas season. What began 16 years ago as a small gathering of Jewish state workers evolved into a tradition so important to Maine's Jewish residents that they urged Baldacci, a Catholic, to continue it.

"It's one of the traditions I'd like to see continued at the Blaine House," Baldacci said Monday. "We represent all communities. It's always very nice to have families from all over the state coming together."

Dan Demeritt, communications director for Gov.-elect Paul LePage, said Monday that LePage and his wife, Ann LePage, would host a similar Hanukkah event at the Blaine House during his administration if they are asked to do so. The couple has said that they intend to live in the governor's mansion, as the Baldaccis have.

During Monday's ceremony, Rabbi Susan Bulba Carvutto of Temple Beth El in Augusta thanked Baldacci for his hospitality over the years as well as for his service to the state. Afterward, Bulba Carvutto said she was pleased Baldacci decided to continue the Hanukkah tradition. She said it helped her and others in Maine's Jewish community develop a personal connection with the governor.

"As a result, we have gotten to know the governor and his wife," she said.

Rabbi Steven Schwarzman of Beth Israel in Bangor said children in the Conservative synagogue's Hebrew School look forward to the event.

"Since the Jewish community of Maine is small — less than one percent of our population — one might not expect that the holiday of Hanukkah would be recognized annually in a ceremony at Blaine House," the rabbi said Monday in an e-mail. "That this has become a part of our state's holiday tradition, observed by governors of different political affiliations, says a lot about Mainers. I know that members of our community appreciate that our elected officials invite us each year, just as they invite other faith communities for their holidays."

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