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Maine Hanukkah celebrations take on extra meaning following Australia attack

Two celebrations in Portland on Sunday came with heightened police presence, but vigilance and public displays of faith are some of the best responses to hate, Jewish community leaders say.

Communities: Portland, Brunswick Posted Yesterday at 9:28 PM **Drew Johnson** Updated at 6:51 AM Staff Writer A × 10 10 Listen to this article now Powered by Trinity Audio • 4 min read • Font size + **#** Gift Article **₽** Print **<** Share When Zach Schwartz first learned of the attack on a Hanukkah celebration in Sydney,

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Australia, on Sunday, he felt several emotions, but shock wasn't one of them.

"It's really sad to say, but it was not surprising," Schwartz said in an interview Monday. "Our community has come to expect some form of attack somewhere in the world on our major Jewish holidays."

As director of the Jewish Community Relations Council at the Jewish Community Alliance

of Southern Maine, part of Schwartz's role is to help ensure safety at public gatherings and to

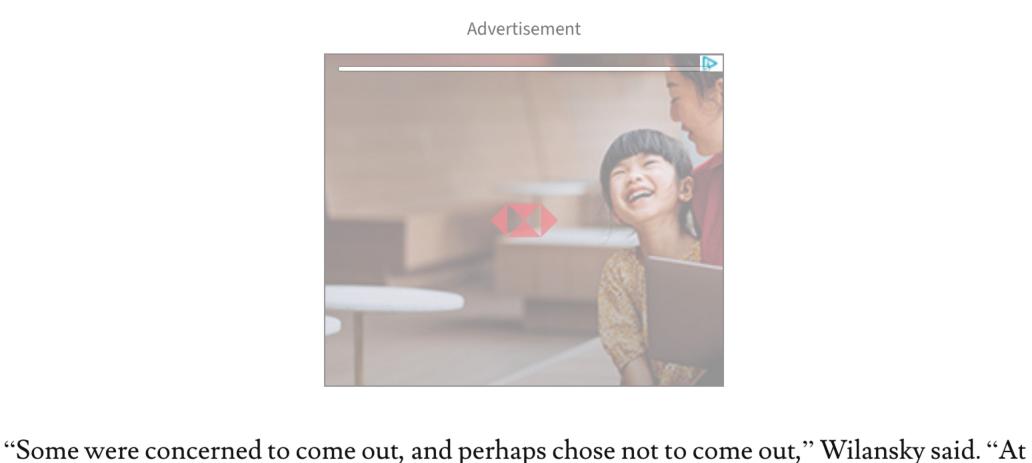
respond to antisemitism, he said. With multiple celebrations to take place in Portland Sunday evening, both of those responsibilities were top of mind. One of Sunday night's celebrations in Portland was organized by Chabad of Maine. Chabad, a global Jewish organization, had organized the event that was attacked in Australia, claiming

At least 15 people killed in attack at Hanukkah celebration in Sydney

the lives of at least 15 people and injuring dozens more.

"My first reaction was thinking about the fact that we would basically have a mirrored event that night," Schwartz said. "I immediately contacted the police and the mayor's office, and they were very gracious in responding and adding additional security to both of the city's Hanukkah celebrations."

There was a mix of emotions, said Rabbi Levi Wilansky, assistant director of Chabad of Maine. It's a joyous holiday, he said, but "at the same time we are grieving and mourning the loss of 15 people, and many people wounded."



the same time, many people who don't usually come made an effort to come because they wanted to show support and make sure Hanukkah was celebrated as beautifully as it always is." The Maine Jewish Museum hosted the other menoral lighting on Sunday. Dawn LaRochelle,

the museum's executive director, said it took on a new meaning following the attack. "What happened in Sydney is a painful reminder that antisemitism is not abstract or distant;

it shows up in real places at real moments of Jewish joy," LaRochelle said in an interview Monday. "Yet, we've always responded not by disappearing, but by gathering, caring for one another and continuing to live openly and visibly, which is exactly what we are doing now." Schwartz also said Sunday's celebrations were extra meaningful.

"The Hanukkah story is a story about a miracle, about the resilience of the Jewish people, and

the fact that we have been threatened over and over again in our existence," he said. "The celebrations took on an extra meaning this year, and the story of Hanukkah became even more important."

Wilansky also emphasized the parallels.

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after organizers of that event expressed concern.

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darkness is adding extra light, which is really the message of Hanukkah." The increased police presence was appreciated, LaRochelle said, as was officers' enthusiasm.

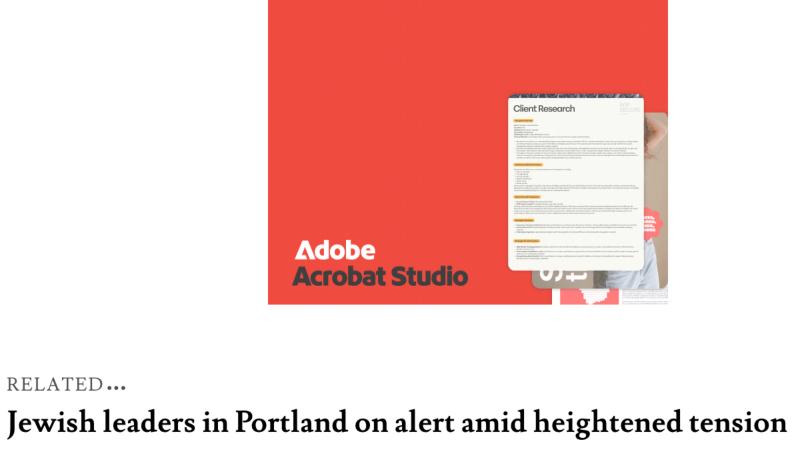
"Portland police were wonderfully supportive and not only showed up to protect us, but participated in the singing and prayers with a lot of ruah, or spirit," LaRochelle said. "We did

not let that terrible act of hatred force us to hide in the shadows and hide our light under a barrel." More Hanukkah celebrations are scheduled in Maine communities this week, including one in Brunswick on Tuesday. That one will also feature more security than usual, Schwartz said,

"We're very grateful to the authorities in both Portland and Brunswick who have agreed to add extra eyes to Hanukkah celebrations," Schwartz said.

The attack in Australia comes amidst a sharp increase in antisemitism across the globe, and Maine is not immune. Schwartz said that both Australia and Maine have seen attacks and threats triple since 2022.

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"In Maine, just in the last few months, there have been death threat letters sent to multiple Jewish institutions in Portland," Schwartz said. "There are flyers going up around Maine that

say 'Jews no longer have a place in a healthy white society.'"

The Maine Jewish Museum was the recipient of some of those threats, LaRochelle said, but none turned out to be credible.

paramount. This is why we are spending a significant amount of money on building hardening as well as hiring security guards as needed."

"It's very scary, but we remain vigilant," she said. "The safety of our staff and our visitors is

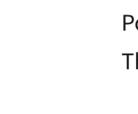
Some of the best ways to respond to hate are "education, culture and human connection," LaRochelle said, values that the museum embodies.

"One of the most Jewish responses to hatred is to live our Jewish lives more openly, not less," LaRochelle said. "What could be more open than a public menorah lighting, and what could be more symbolic than shining a light in the darkness?"

Drew Johnson Staff Writer

Public displays of faith and solidarity are another.

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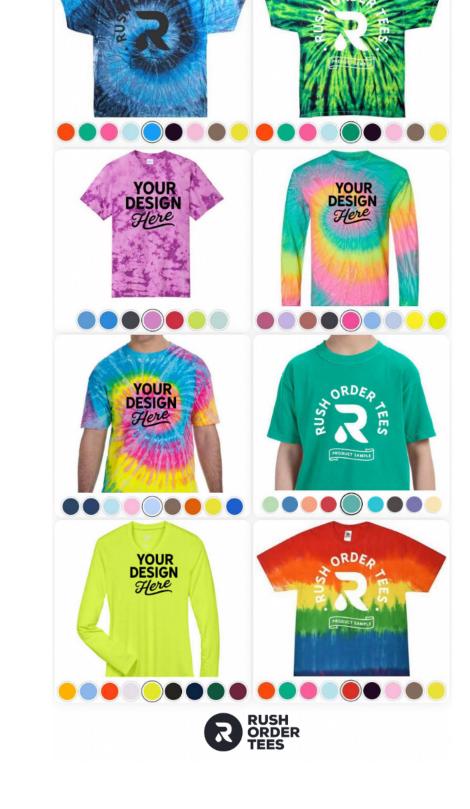


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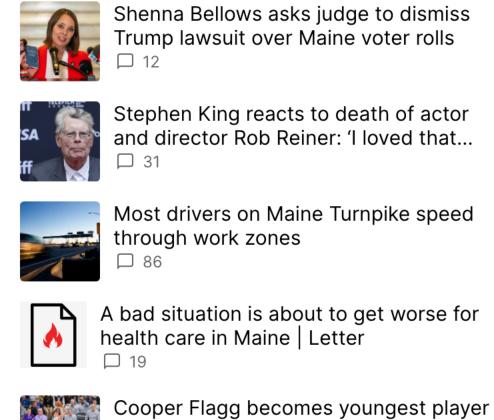
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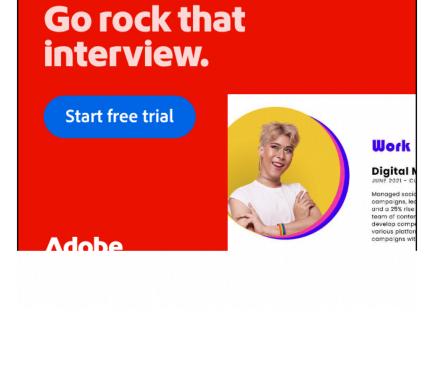
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