

# Let There Be Light

Holiday Celebrations Show How Forest Hills Embraces All Faiths

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The United States of America and Forest Hills Gardens have one thing in common; the religion of their founding fathers. Both entities were formed by Christian leaders and both are adjusting to the times, especially when it comes to celebrating holidays. America was founded on a principal that all folks were welcomed to set up home here and worship freely. The Sage Foundation, the creators of Forest Hills Gardens echoed these sentiments when proposing the construction of a new garden city back in 1914. The goal was to design a community for people from diverse backgrounds. Yet despite such good intentions the recognition of celebrating other religious holidays took a back seat. The good news is both America and Forest Hills Gardens are maturing. In 2001, George Bush was the first U.S. President to bring the lighting of the Menorah into the White House. A year later, the first official Chanukah celebration took place in Station Square, Forest Hills Gardens.

The history of Forest Hills Gardens celebrations go as far back as 1915. The first recorded celebration was Christmas Eve. According to early Forest Hills Gardens Bulletins, Christmas Eve was celebrated with a 'pageant of two floats of carolers and Santa Helpers passing up and down the streets of the Gardens. There was also singing provided by local talent in Station Square'. Then in 1922, the Forest Hills Celebrations Association was formed. It's original primary function was the planning of the Fourth of July festivities. Shortly afterwards the coordinating of the Christmas Eve celebration was included as well.

Most of these Christmas traditions still take place today with a few minor exceptions. Instead of two floats driving members of the Men's Choir and circling the winding roads of The Gardens, today there is only one float. A very large one carrying Santa and his reindeer that is carefully navigated around the narrow curves of Ivy Close and Bye Street, to name a few. Often Santa can be heard not only ho hoing, but asking parked cars to be moved. Station Square is still adorned with a Christmas tree decorated with lights. However, the display of a cozy fireplace scene that use to appear on the steps of the Long Island Railroad Station has given way to the present day crèche scene of an almost life size Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus being visited by wise men, shepherds and barn yard animals. The season of good will and cheer is still annually capped off with a Christmas Eve celebration the likes of a



Norman Rockwell painting, complete with caroling, a Yule log, a visit from Santa Clause, and afterwards a gathering around ye olde wasser bowl hosted by The Forest Hills Inn. But these times; "they are a changin'!. Among the traditional Christmas symbols there now appears a 10 ft. steel menorah. For eight evenings in December a group of people watch the lighting of a new 'candle'. Rabbis lead the celebration with songs and prayer. A hand-out with both English and Hebrew words is provided for all to join in. Such treats as latkes and chocolate are give out. Other items such as driedals and mini menorah sets are also dispensed. The ambience is one of community and celebration. All are welcomed, even a shiksah like me. The rabbis answer any questions posed by those not familiar with the Jewish faith and the Chanukah holiday. The ceremony is short and sweet.

This history behind the first Chanukah Celebration in Station Square begin with the Gardens Corporation and the Celebrations Association receiving numerous letters from members the Jewish community requesting, (and sometimes kvetching) their desire to celebrate Chanukah in Station Square, just like their Christian neighbors. These letters became the catalyst behind discussions of how these requests could be satisfied. Members of local churches met with several persons of the Jewish faith to brainstorm. Even though there was only a small group of Celebration volunteers and not enough people for coordinating even the Christmas Eve festivities, there was a strong

willingness among these volunteers to see their Jewish neighbors celebrate their winter holiday. According to a long time Forest Hills residence, the Jewish community was unofficially told that if they wanted to celebrate Chanukah, then 'just do it'. Which they did. A few days later, an eye witness saw a group of orthodox Jewish men talking amongst themselves and while examining the parameters of Station Square. It turns out they were looking for perfect spot for a menorah. Later that week, one was placed on the eastern area of Station Square. The Gardens Celebration Committee met acknowledging that Chanukah would indeed be celebrated in Station Square. The first official Chanukah celebration. took place in 2002.

No doubt little thought went into the inclusion of other religions besides Christianity when the Sage Foundation wanted to build a community for a diverse group of people. Just like our fair country, Forest Hills Gardens is still evolving into a place where everyone can call it 'home'. The fact that Chanukah is now openly celebrated in both Station Square and The White House, indicates that Americans are living out what there founding forefathers preached. On a smaller scale, a sweet example of living in unity can be found in the fact that the electricity for the Menorah which proudly stands in Station Square has so far been supplied by The Christian Science Reading Room, which is located a few feet away from it. Now if that's not a shining example of learning to live together that I don't know what is.