



A MASSING OF MENORAHS BRINGING LIGHT TO THE WORLD

By Eugene L. Meyer

Madelyn Katz surrounded by her beloved menorahs.

Photographs by Clarence Williams



It is called the Festival of Lights. But how many lights? At least eight, one for each night, plus the shamus to light the others. But if Madelyn Katz, a retired Jewish educator in suburban Van Nuys, California, lit all her 350 menorahs at once, she might light up her entire block and beyond.

“People always ask, ‘which ones do you light?’” she says. “We wind up lighting the same as when our kids were little,” including a “Chanukah Crayons” menorah, one with a swing set and two little bears. But the unused and unlit are everywhere.

They include one with nine baseballs found outside a minor league ballpark in Arizona: “Somebody took a whole bunch and made a menorah out of them.” Then there is a wedding scene with the bride and groom kissing under a chuppah. She bought that one on eBay for \$35 or \$40. “The guy said, ‘I’m getting divorced and want to get it out of my house. I don’t want to look at it anymore.’”

Says Katz: “My home is never going to be in Homes and Gardens, but it’s a fun collection to look at.” In addition to the 350 crammed into her modest three-bedroom, two-bath house, she has 100 in boxes in the garage: She plans to give them to the National Council of Jewish Women. “We don’t live in a mansion,” she explains.

To her, the menorahs are a metaphor for “bringing light to the world.”

Once upon a time in Texas

She began collecting almost 40 years ago when she was education director at Temple Beth El in San Antonio. Her first was a thank-you gift from the Sisterhood as she was leaving to move to California, where she first taught Judaic studies at the Stephen S. Wise Temple Day School.

In 1999, she became director of student life at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Los Angeles and eventually associate dean, a post from which she retired in 2020. By then, she also had 100 menorahs in her office, which came home with her.

In addition to her omnipresent menorahs, she has, consistent with the Chanukah theme, 115 dreidels.

“When [people] see these collections, everybody goes, ‘wow!’” says her husband, Ricky Katz, a jazz musician and music teacher. “You walk into this house, and you know this is a Jewish home. No two ways about it.”

Ricky owns some 30 guitars but says they are just for his work as a performing artist and guitar instructor. He gives lessons in the only room without menorahs, a former bedroom. “I don’t collect guitars. I just buy what I need to do my job,” he swears.

The house in suburban San Fernando Valley is where Madelyn and Ricky Katz raised their two daughters—Rachel, an aspiring actress, and Amy, a social worker.

“Think how crazy it is to dust the shelves,” says Rachel. “They’re just filled.” Growing up, during Chanukah, each sister would light one—

not one candle, but one menorah—and, of course, their mother would also light one. “There were plenty to choose from,” Rachel recalls.

Amy cherishes memories of her mother coming to her classroom with suitcases full of menorahs to show the students. “I loved being my mom’s helper. It’s the part of the year I really looked forward to,” she says. Her husband made one with a 3D printer for her mother. It is in the form of an octopus with candle holders at the ends of eight tentacles.

The Katz menorahs are not untouchable. “It’s not like a museum,” Madelyn says. Amy’s four-year-old son Asher loves to play with them and is even allowed to take some home, on loan.

“Whimsical” describes most of the collection. There’s a transportation section, including a bus, a trolley, a Cadillac and an airplane, and a music section with a piano/tzedakah box and guitars. There are animal menorahs, featuring a giraffe, Noah’s Ark, clay turkeys and a peacock. Not limited to Earth, the collection also includes one menorah modeled on the solar system.

A serious backstory

A few have a serious backstory. A menorah she’d ordered with the New York City skyline arrived in the mail on Sept. 12, 2001, the day after terrorists crashed airplanes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Center’s twin towers, killing thousands. “When I opened it up, it was cracked down the middle. It was spooky.”

Then there is a figurine of Ruth Bader Ginsburg, standing resolutely in her judicial robe and holding a gavel, behind eight candle holders and the words “I DISSENT.” But there is no shamash. “Oh my God!! I never noticed!!!” she texted. “Maybe that’s why it was cheaper than the others.” Then she recalled a “spare” candle holder sitting in a jewelry box. “I guess it fell off her head!!”

What she calls her “breast cancer menorah” hits close to home. It stands upright with glass shards painted bright colors and candle holders on top. The menorah was the collective work of students and Sasha Kopp, a glass artist and Jewish early childhood educator enrolled in HUC-JIR’s School of Education. Katz found it on her desk when she returned to work after her own breast cancer treatment. For her, it was metaphorical: “It said that I was broken but I was coming back.”

Katz’s collecting is eclectic but, she says, not expensive. She scours eBay and Etsy in search of new acquisitions and sometimes finds them in the Judaica sections of drug store chains. “I don’t think I ever spent more than \$150 on one,” she says. She jokes that one of her husband’s guitars costs as much as all her menorahs combined.

“You want to buy a couple of menorahs? I got some for sale,” Ricky Katz says, adding, “Just kidding! I just think it’s a great hobby for her. She really enjoys it. She’s enjoyed it for years. I’ll just stick to the music.” 🎵

