SALT LAKE CITY — Vicki Anne Crane won’t be putting a menorah in her window for Hanukkah this year. She didn’t last year either. It’s not because she doesn’t celebrate the holiday. It’s because she’s afraid to do so publicly.

Crane, a 29-year-old Jewish writer who lives in San Diego, said last year someone spray-painted swastikas on the sidewalk in her neighborhood. And in April, on the first night of Passover, a gunman attacked a synagogue — the Chabad of Poway — just a few blocks from her wife’s workplace.
I look out my window right now, and the neighbors have already decked out everything with Christmas decorations,” she said. “But if I put a menorah in my window, I’m afraid that someone’s going to break that window, or hurt me or my wife.”

In a recent survey of American Jews by the American Jewish Committee, one in four respondents said they “avoid certain places, events or situations out of fear” for their “safety or comfort as a Jew.” Nearly a third of the more than 1,200 respondents said they avoided “publicly wearing, carrying or displaying things that might help people identify” them as Jewish.

These events are part of a larger trend: the number of anti-Semitic incidents across the United States as a whole rose 57% in 2017, according to an audit by the Anti-Defamation League, the largest single-year increase on record and the second highest number since the league started tracking such data in 1979. According to FBI data from 2016, the last year for which figures are available, 54.4% of victims of anti-religious hate crimes were Jewish.

There have been three synagogue attacks in a little over a year: the Poway attack, a synagogue shooting in Halle, Germany, and the Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue shooting in October 2018, which left 11 dead. It was the deadliest attack on Jews in U.S. history.

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During Hanukkah, it is traditional for Jews to light the menorah and place it in the front window — symbolizing the hard-won freedom of the Jewish people to practice their faith without fear of persecution.

“ThisDisplaying the Hanukkah menorah in the window is a time-honored tradition,” said Dr. Steven Bayme, the American Jewish Committee’s director of Contemporary Jewish
Life. “The message is a very inspiring one for America as a whole, about religious freedom and tolerance and Jews having the right to their own fate.”

But with anti-Semitism on the rise, the Deseret News talked to more than 50 Jews around the world — from the U.S. to Israel to the U.K. — about whether they will put a menorah in their window this year.

‘I would be afraid of being attacked in the street’

Several Jews told the Deseret News that like Crane, that wouldn’t be putting a menorah in their window this year due to fear for their own safety or that of their families. (Some asked the Deseret News to identify them only by their first names, out of concern that they could be targeted.)

“Because of childhood and young adult experiences, as well fear for my family, I hide my Hanukkah decorations,” said 33-year-old Stephen, who lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. “You can only see them from inside. I even strategically block line of sight from the windows.”

“We normally put an electronic menorah right on the house every year but for the last two years I have been afraid to do so,” said Brenda Claveloux, a 64-year-old in Union, New Jersey. “My concern is that my grandchildren would be here and could suffer from an anti-Semitic attack on our home.”

Colby, who lives with his family in Oregon, agreed.
“[I] have not ever done so and probably won’t start this year. I have NEVER felt comfortable publicly sharing my Judaism, especially around the holidays. Anti-Semitism has been a part of my world since birth,” he told the Deseret News.

Abigail Esman, a 59-year-old journalist, said she splits time between New York and the Netherlands for work. When she’s in New York she feels completely safe, she said, but Holland is a different story.

“I would feel uncomfortable with my neighbors looking at me (with my menorah in the window) and knowing I’m a Jew,” said Esman. “I would be afraid of being attacked in the street, throwing stones in my window, having my house set on fire.”

‘We will not allow hatred to deter us’

Some Jews expressed fear, but said that rising anti-Semitism has actually made them more committed to put a menorah in their window this year.

“I am definitely more afraid to put my menorah in my window than I ever have been before. I will also definitely put it in the window.” — Michael, New Jersey

Jonathan Roytenberg, 23, who lives with his family in Ottowa, Canada, agreed.

“We light our Hanukkah candles near the window because of a traditional Jewish custom of publicizing the miracle that the candles stand for,” said Roytenberg. “We will not allow hatred to deter us from taking pride in our heritage and who we are.”

Gillian Friedman @gillianreporter · Dec 3, 2019
“It’s more important than ever for me to place our Menorah in a visible spot,” said Matt, a 32-year-old based in Minneapolis. “I want my daughter to celebrate Judaism and to be proud of our heritage and traditions, not be afraid or hide who we are.”

Others said that they feel strongly that America is a very safe place to be Jewish, and that they feel completely comfortable putting a menorah in their window. They emphasized that Jews should not be seen as helpless victims, and that many Jewish communities have taken steps in recent years to fortify their synagogues against such attacks.

Are you Jewish and feeling afraid or ambivalent about putting a menorah in your window this year, with anti-Semitism on the rise? Or the opposite: is it especially important to you to do so? I'd love to speak with you for a story. DMs are open and feel free to share.

BadJuJu
@BaaadJuJu

PROUD to display our menorah ⚫ in the window, mezzuzah on our door and star of David around my neck! ESPECIALLY since this flyer was found on a tree less than 100 feet from our door last year!

“Run, Hide, Fight”: A Utah Jewish synagogue trains to face an active shooter after the deadliest assault on Jews in U.S. history
“For the life of me I don’t understand this,” said Mike Goodseed in New York City. “I live in Brooklyn (the home to all the anti-Jewish violence) not only am I not afraid, I’ll be attending tons of large public lightings of the menorah. I am openly Jewish and have never been afraid to show it.”

Rabbi Avremi Zippel, the program director of the Chabad Lubavitch of Utah, said he’ll be putting a menorah in his window this year, like every year before. In fact, he hosts an annual event in Salt Lake City called “Jewish Heritage Night with the Utah Jazz,” in which he lights a menorah on the court during half-time at a basketball game, in front of more than 18,000 spectators.

“We have a choice to go away quietly and give in to the hateful influences around us,” said Rabbi Zippel, 28. “Or we can be like the Maccabees and decide to light our menorahs more proudly than ever, and see to it that just as the flame of Hanukkah burned through thousands of years of Jewish history under tremendous persecution, it’ll burn just as strong and even stronger today.”

‘Not in our town’
The Deseret News also heard from several non-Jews who said they were planning on putting menorahs in their window in solidarity with Jews.
“I’m not Jewish, but I will be celebrating Hanukkah in my house in solidarity with the Jewish community. I have had mixed feelings about putting a menorah in my window, but whatever persecutions the Jewish people suffer, they don’t suffer alone, and neither would I,” said Daniel Amspaugh, a 33-year-old who lives in Frisco, Texas.

There’s historical precedent for this. In 1993, in Billings, Montana, a series of anti-Semitic incidents culminated in a brick being thrown through the bedroom window of Isaac Schnitzer, a five-year-old Jewish boy who displayed a drawing of a Hanukkah menorah in his bedroom window.

His mother reported the incident to the local paper, which printed a paper menorah along with an editorial urging people of all faiths to display the menorahs in their window in solidarity with the Schnitzer family and the Jewish people. Vandals broke windows in some houses and businesses who displayed the paper menorahs, but people continued to display them. Rick Smith, store manager of Universal Athletics, posted a message on his sign board: “Not in Our Town! No Hate. No violence. Peace on Earth.”

While the events in Montana made national news and were widely celebrated as a powerful example of interfaith solidarity, some Jews told the Deseret News that non-Jews putting menorahs in their windows would make them feel uncomfortable.

Stephen from the Bay Area said while the gesture may be well-intended, the idea of non-Jews “appropriating” a Jewish tradition as their own does not sit right with him. “It would be better if they could hang signs of support and come out to Hanukkah events as allies,” he said.

Rabbi Levi Welton, 36, of New York City agreed. “I believe having a nonreligious symbol to express solidarity would be more inclusive and better suited to unite people of all religious and no religions,” he said.

But Crane, back in San Diego, said the gesture of support from non-Jews would make her and her wife feel safer in their neighborhood.

“It would be nice and feel safer to not be the only Jewish presenting house for miles. I hope they research and learn about the holiday and Judaism in the process,” she said. “Everybody should be able to experience the joy of Hanukkah.”
Crane said she looks forward to lighting the menorah with her wife this year, but she’ll do so in the privacy of her living room, shrouded from public view. But she hopes maybe one day, perhaps when she has children of her own, she’ll feel safe enough to light the menorah and place in proudly in their family’s front window.

How one Utah senior exercises more than ever at 89 years old