



Bill Graham Menorah Project



The Bill Graham Mama Menorah 1975

A local miracle happened in San Francisco in 1975 when community leaders joined together to create the first big public menorah and celebration of Chanukah outside of Israel. The San Francisco “Mama Menorah” public celebration has now become a global phenomenon with large menorahs lit annually in over 500 cities worldwide.

Bill Graham Menorah Project Background

The Bill Graham Menorah Project is a unique and semi-independent program of Chabad SF (www.chabadsf.org). Chabad, (www.chabad.org) formally known as Chabad-Lubavitch, is a major movement within mainstream Jewish tradition with its roots in the Chassidic movement of the 18th century. Chabad cares for the spiritual and material needs of all Jews, wherever they can be found. A Chabad House is a “Jewish Center”. Today, over 3,000 Chabad centers are located in more than 65 countries including South Africa, South America, Russia, Australia, India the UK, and many parts of the US. A Chabad House hosts classes, lectures, and workshops on Jewish topics; religious services; Shabbat meals; and special events as needed in their community.

The concept of lighting a menorah in a public area dates back to ancient times, where menorahs were lit outside of people's homes and in other public places. Today, home menorahs are often kindled in a window that faces the public thoroughfare. In 1987, Chabad Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, instructed followers to initiate a campaign to erect public menorahs, saying that "Wherever Jews live, large Menorahs should be lit to publicize the Chanukah miracle and an effort should be made that every Jew light candles in his home." adding that "may this also allow everyone to illuminate his soul with the light of Torah and also, light up the entire public thoroughfare, increasing light every day."

The first giant public menorah went up in San Francisco's Union Square, in 1975. Erected with the support of the late rock promoter and Holocaust survivor Bill Graham, it was known as the “mama” menorah because of the thousands of others it inspired globally.

Rabbi Chaim Drizin, Chabad representative to San Francisco at the time, along with Rabbi Yosef Langer and Zev Putterman, former program director at KQED public radio, approached Graham, asking for his help in constructing the menorah and staging the event. Bill Graham was a righteous rather than a religious man. His production company was skilled in what they called, “adventurers in human assembly”. Given Bill's Jewish heritage and his passion for worthy causes, he agreed. That was the key that opened the door.

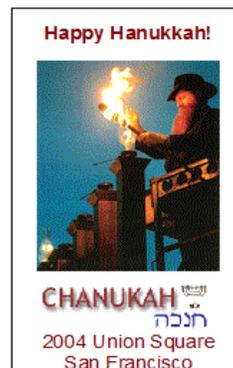
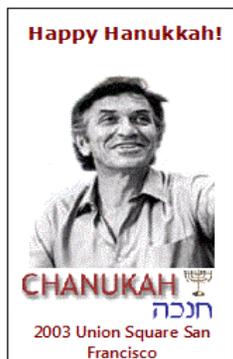
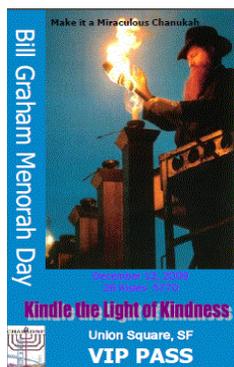
At the time it was a dramatic first step. But then, as now the San Francisco Jewish community was open to new possibilities. Rabbi Drizin and Rabbi Langer rallied representatives of all the city's Jewish organizations in support of the idea, and met with "practically no objections." The supersize menorah--25 feet tall by 15 feet wide—went up in Union Square, where the first lighting drew 1,000 people.

Bill Graham built and supported the annual lighting of the Menorah until his death. While Bill was alive he never looked for any accolades surrounding the Menorah. After his death, Chabad wanted to honor his memory by dedicating the Menorah in his name. In 1993, Mayor Frank Jordan declared that the first Sunday of Chanukah would forever be Bill Graham Menorah Day.

This flagship Chabad SF project has become one of the biggest Jewish events in the Bay Area, with over 5,000 people from all walks of Jewish life coming together to hear rousing music, meet Jewish celebrities, eat traditional Chanukah foods and, of course, light Chanukah menorahs. More than any other, this event has helped project an upbeat, joyful image to traditional Judaism in the media and in the eyes of Jews everywhere. A first for America, the San Francisco Bill Graham Menorah has become the most copied Chabad program, with menorahs lit every year in Berlin, Paris, London, Singapore, Ho Chi Min City, Moscow, and in both large and small cities across the United States.

Within Chabad, these lightings are viewed as a way to reach out to secular and/or non-affiliated Jews in high-density population areas and to promote Torah observance among Jews. Today these menorahs are found all over the globe. Chabad-Lubavitch now sponsors thousands of public menorah lightings worldwide, but not all lightings fall under their auspices. Currently the Chabad website (www.Chanukah.org/events) lists Chanukah events in 678 cities and 38 countries worldwide.

Today Rabbi Yosef Langer, Executive Director, Chabad of S.F., and local promoter Billy Cohen have established the **Bill Graham Menorah Project** in San Francisco to produce and support the annual Chanukah Festival of Lights in Union Square. The eight day event draws many civic and community leaders and variety of artists from the Bay Area music community. Celebrities from Carlos Santana to George Zimmer have participated in lighting the Menorah. Bill Graham Menorah Day Festival concerts have included a wide variety of performers including; Matisyahu, Perry Farrell, Merl Saunders, Peter Albin, the Moshav Band from Israel and Rebbe Soul, performing a mixture of traditional and contemporary music.



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www.billgrahammenorah.org