

Local Scout first Montanan to win the Maccabee Award for study of Judaism

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Cub Scouts in Montana have a nearly unsurpassed environment for pursuing merit badges in fishing, camping and dozens of other outdoors related subjects. Big Sky Country is not, however, generally considered a great spot for the study of Judaism.

That didn't stop Max W. The 7-year-old spent the past several months learning about Jewish history and tenets of the religion. Friday night, he became the first Montanan to earn the Maccabee Award, one of four awards Scouts can earn through the National Jewish Committee on Scouting.

Max studied with his rabbi for six months to fulfill the award's requirements. "It's kind of hard because you have to work and work," Max said.

The award presentation took place at the Bethel Lutheran Church, where Great Falls' relatively tiny Jewish population meets for worship. Once a month, Junior Rabbi Jake Singer-Beilin flies into Great Falls from his Los Angeles home to lead the congregation of about 30. Friday's service was a special one, as it took place shortly before Passover, a major Jewish holiday that commemorates the Jews' exodus from Israel. The holiday begins at sundown April 19.

With so few members of the faith in Great Falls, practicing Judaism can have some challenges, said Helen Cherry, who was at the service Friday.

Congregation members have to order kosher food online and many of their neighbors don't know much about their faith, or even that it exists in the area. "People are surprised to learn there is a Jewish community in Great Falls," she said

Cherry said she's used to being a religious minority, so it doesn't cause serious problems.

"I don't know what it would be like to be anything else," she said