

Hobby Lobby will offer Jewish holiday items

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The owner of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain, under fire because his stores did not carry Hanukkah merchandise and because of a reported employee's remark that offended many Jews, has apologized and announced that some stores will begin to carry Jewish holiday items.

In statements October 3 and 4, company president Steve Green said Hobby Lobby is sorry for comments "that may have offended anyone, especially our Jewish customers and friends," and that it will carry Jewish-themed items in New York and New Jersey by early November "to test the market."

That's in time for Hanukkah, which begins this year on November 27.

The company credited "overwhelming demand in the Northeast" for its decision and added: "We appreciate the feedback we've received from our customers, and we hope these products will meet their needs."

Some have long taken issue with Hobby Lobby's wide choice of Christmas items but lack of any Hanukkah merchandise. The apology and the merchandising decision are likely to gratify some within the Jewish community and elsewhere who wondered whether Green's conservative Christianity translated into a disregard for Jewish customers.

Suspensions heightened after a report that a Hobby Lobby employee in the company's Marlboro, New Jersey, store responded, "We don't cater to you people," when asked if the store carried bar mitzvah cards.

Several news outlets, including Religion News Service, wrote about the controversy, stirring a heated online debate in which reactions ranged from cries of anti-Semitism to cries that Green is being demonized for his strong Christian faith.

On October 4, the Anti-Defamation League, a national group that counters anti-Semitism, accepted Hobby Lobby's apology and strongly defended the company.

"ADL firmly believes that the religious views of a business owner cannot be a basis to infringe upon the legal rights of others, but a store choosing not to carry Hanukkah items does not violate anyone's rights," read the statement. "Moreover, we have no reason to believe that Hobby Lobby has refused to stock Hanukkah items because of hostility to Jews or anti-Semitism."

In Hobby Lobby's apology, Green outlined his connections to the Jewish community in the U.S. and Israel.

"Our family has a deep respect for the Jewish faith and those who hold its traditions dear," read the statement. "We're proud contributors to Yad Vashem [Israel's official Holocaust museum] as well as to other museums and synagogues in Israel and the United States."

The statement also noted that the company has "previously carried merchandise in our stores related to Jewish holidays."

Marlboro blogger Ken Berwitz—who ignited the recent controversy with his account of Hobby Lobby's responses to questions about the lack of Jewish items —said he was "gratified" by Green's most recent announcement.

Green, a conservative billionaire, owns more than 550 Hobby Lobby stores nationwide, all of which are closed on Sunday. He is also known for his lawsuit against President Obama's health-care law, which he said forces him to provide employees with free insurance coverage for some contraceptive services that he objects to on religious grounds. —RNS