

# Hobby Lobby Apologizes for Hanukkah Flap

The owner of the Hobby Lobby craft store chain, under fire because his stores do not carry Hanukkah merchandise, apologized for employee comments “that may have offended anyone, especially our Jewish customers and friends.”

Many Jews and others took offense after reading a Sept. 27 blogpost by a Marlboro, N.J., man who wrote that a Hobby Lobby employee told a Jewish woman that “we don’t cater to you people” after she asked if the store carried bar mitzvah cards.

“Our family has a deep respect for the Jewish faith and those who hold its traditions dear,” read a statement issued late Thursday by Hobby Lobby President Steve Green.

“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, however, did not answer whether Hobby Lobby would carry Jewish holiday-related items in the future.

“We have previously carried merchandise in our stores related to Jewish holidays. We select the items we sell in our stores based on customer demand,” the statement said. “We are working with our buyers to re-evaluate our holiday items and what we will carry in the future.”

Ken Berwitz, in his “Hopelessly Partisan” blog, wrote that after he heard that the Marlboro Hobby Lobby does not carry items for Jewish holidays, he called the store and was told that Green’s Christian faith precluded the chain from doing so.

When he then called Hobby Lobby headquarters in Oklahoma City, Berwitz said he was told the company was not stocking items for Hanukkah or Passover but was not given a reason.

Several publications, 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 Christian faith.

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

Green's statement Thursday reiterated one made by a Hobby Lobby spokesman days before—that the company is investigating the matter. Berwitz said Thursday he hopes Hobby Lobby employees are not going to get in trouble for explaining the lack of Hanukkah items in the store, because he believes they were simply stating company policy.

"They're investigating this as if someone made an offensive statement about Jews," said Berwitz. "I didn't take it that way."

The problem, he continued, is that a company that sells general merchandise has decided not to carry Jewish-related items, even in locations where there are a significant number of Jews.

In a follow-up blog post, he writes that Hobby Lobby has a right to sell or not sell whatever it wants but that it should know it's sending a message to Jews.

"It is telling them 'You can come into our store, and spend your money here. ... But we won't put out a thing that has any

Jewish orientation here, even during the specific times of the year when you would be most likely to come looking for them. And if you don't like it, take a hike.'"

"Why would a Jew feel welcome there?" he said.

Here is Hobby Lobby's statement in its entirety:

"Hobby Lobby President Steve Green has issued the following statement on behalf of the company:

"We sincerely apologize for any employee comments that may have offended anyone, especially our Jewish customers and friends. Comments like these do not reflect the feelings of our family or Hobby Lobby.

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

"We are investigating this matter and absolutely do not tolerate discrimination at our company or our stores. We do not have any policies that discriminate; in fact, we have policies that specifically prohibit discrimination.

"We have previously carried merchandise in our stores related to Jewish holidays. We select the items we sell in our stores based on customer demand. We are working with our buyers to re-evaluate our holiday items and what we will carry in the future."