

A Universal Purim?

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 2 February 2004

Anniversaries are very important – look at the fuss surrounding who exactly is to represent Britain at Gibraltar’s 300th birthday party – not someone too junior lest it offend the Gibraltarians; not someone too senior for fear of offending Spain.

Last week saw two other anniversaries: for Christians, carnival gave way to Lent, but for Jews the month of Adar, according to the Talmud, is the time to be merry.

There’s an old joke that all Jewish festivals have the same story: They were out to destroy us, but we won, so let’s eat! That’s not quite the whole story, though, as there’s usually a day of fasting somewhere in the sequence!

And so it is with Purim, the festival this week which commemorates the events recorded in the Bible in the book of Esther. It’s a well-known story: A weak king allows his malicious prime minister to pursue a personal vendetta, not just against a single colleague who happens to be Jewish, but to wipe out all the Jews of his empire. But thanks to the intervention of Queen Esther, the Jews are able to defend themselves, and overcome the evil Haman and his henchmen. And so to this day Jews throughout the world mark that victory against genocide by fasting and feasting, giving presents to friends and gifts to the poor, and by retelling the story.

Thus a single historical event becomes an eternal ritual. Interestingly, it is not unique. Many Jewish communities in pre-Holocaust Europe once celebrated their own local Purim, to give thanks on an appropriate date for deliverance from a plague or a pogrom.

Will we never learn? Hatred of the other again raises its head, whether in Europe or Africa or now the Caribbean. Is it too much to hope that one day we will all learn to live with our differences, when we will all be free to be whoever we are? That would be the day for a universal Purim!