

Threads of Light in the Tartan

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 9 December 2015

Chanukah, the Jewish “Festival of Lights”, which lasts all this week, is unique because it’s the only festival in the Jewish calendar that commemorates events that aren’t mentioned in the Bible.

Instead they’re part of the break-up of Alexander the Great’s empire, when the Syrian faction conquered Jerusalem, erected an idol in the Temple, and were eventually expelled by partisans, the Maccabees. Tradition has it that when they went to relight the menorah, the golden candelabrum that burned constantly in the Temple, they found only enough oil for one day but it miraculously lasted for eight. So we recall this oil by lighting a lamp each night, and eating oily foods (there’s always food!).

But Chanukah is also different because it’s inherently public. Unlike the customs of other Jewish festivals, the point of lighting candles is what the Talmud calls *pirsuma d’nisa* – publicising the miracle. So the preferred place to light candles is outside the front door – not always possible in the face of storms like Desmond! – or in a window overlooking the street.

In recent years this has gone further – there are menorah lightings in all kinds of public places. This week candles have been lit in several parts of Scotland, including Princes Street Gardens and yesterday in the Parliament. There have also been lightings in 10 Downing Street, and in public spaces throughout the UK – indeed around the world, even the White House!

Seeing these Chanukah lamps join the other festive lights in our streets and windows really does bring brightness to lighten the darkness of midwinter. And it’s an apt metaphor this week, when Lady Butler-Sloss published her report on *Religion and Belief in Public Life*, emphasising both the place and the diversity of faith in modern Britain. It’s perhaps even more apt in Scotland, which aspires to make its minorities – religious, ethnic, and cultural – feel integrated rather than either separate or assimilated – like the threads in the tartan: distinct, but all contributing to what holds our society together.