

Thunder and Lightning and Thick Darkness

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Published in the Helensburgh Advertiser, 2 June 2010

By contrast with other frequent fliers, I seem to have had a fairly charmed existence of late – in and out of Heathrow five times the week it was closed by snow, never stricken by strikes, and unsullied by volcanic fall-out. The worst that happened to me was that a flight home a few weeks ago didn't follow the east route up the M6 and M74 (who needs maps?!), but flew west to Bristol, zigzagged across to Newcastle, and then eventually landed in Glasgow from the north. We were offered no explanation, but I guess this magical mystery tour was to evade the latest assault from Iceland on the British way of life!

That's ironic, because I was on my way home to celebrate what is, in a roundabout way, the Jewish festival of volcanoes, *Shavuot*. Like the other main festivals, this is partly a harvest festival, and is partly of historic significance. The agricultural significance is hinted at in the name, *Shavuot*, which means "weeks", because in the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, farmers brought offerings of the new barley crop at Passover, and then, after seven complete weeks, brought offerings of the new wheat crop at *Shavuot*. This also is the origin of the Christian Pentecost – Greek for the fiftieth day.

But *Shavuot* also marks the revelation of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, when, as described in the book of Exodus, there was thunder and lightning and thick darkness, and smoke belched from the mountain as from a furnace, and the mountain shook, and the noise saturated the senses. On the eve of *Shavuot*, just as the Bible tells us that the Jewish people remained alert to prepare for this overwhelming experience, so many have the custom to stay awake all night studying in preparation for the festival. In fact, one of the advantages of being Jewish in Scotland is that we may have the shortest night of study in the world – starting when the sun is completely set at around midnight and finishing with the first fingers of dawn at around 3am (but of course day-long summer fast days rather make up for that)!

That was certainly a better reason for staying awake than all those poor stranded folk who literally didn't know whether they're coming or going – and if so, when! As I watched my friends' plans to spend the festival with family abroad evaporate in a cloud of ash, and as my own synagogue had to abandon its planned programme for the night because the American students we had invited to lead the youth programme were stuck on the wrong side of the cloud, I realised how fortunate I had been not to have been seriously inconvenienced.

But behind my good fortune, there is a more important and universal message for us all: that the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft a-gley – or, as my late mother was so fond of quoting – that "man proposes, but Gd disposes".