

Homage to History

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 8 August 2012

What a difference a week can make!

Last week I was in Jerusalem on the most sombre day of the Jewish year, a day of fasting and lamentation for the destruction of the biblical Temple; this week I find myself back in a somewhat unfamiliar Scotland, where the political Punch and Judy show has been displaced by a rather parochial version of Olympic fever.

If even a sporting illiterate like me has noticed, you can't have missed it: the way some people are interpreting how well "we" - Team GB - have done as how well "we" - Scotland - might have done if we'd had our own team! Never mind Trident or keeping the pound – a hypothetical Team Scotland has knocked them both from the headlines!

I know there are good arguments for nationalism – and good arguments against – but I have to say that kind of chauvinism bothers me. I've never understood how it fits with the Olympic ideal that "The most important thing is not to win but to take part". That may have made sense when all you won was a laurel wreath, but it's mocked by today's commercialism and nationalism. The modern games are dominated by national teams, anthems, medal tables, and have been disfigured by terrorism and boycotts; the ancient games meant putting national rivalries aside.

I find it remarkable that when the Olympic games began, Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was already nearly 200 years old. Both lasted more than a thousand years. And both ultimately succumbed to Roman repression.

Of course Rome and Jerusalem represented opposing values, but did the naked force of Empire really win in the end? Sitting in a reconstructed Roman theatre on Mount Scopus, overlooking this modern city on an ancient site that is just as much a homage to history as the Olympics, I wondered. The irony was not lost when my companions followed the traditional readings mourning the destruction of ancient Jerusalem with songs celebrating its re-creation and survival.

Ephraim Borowski

Thought for the Day: Radio Scotland, 8 August 2012