

## The Miracle of Survival

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Next week, the Jewish community will celebrate the festival of Chanukah by lighting an eight-branched candelabrum, the *Menorah* or *Chanukiah*, eating oily foods, and exchanging gifts.

This commemorates the events described in the post-biblical Book of Maccabees as well as in ancient Jewish sources. Following the break-up of the empire of Alexander the Great, the Greek rulers of the Holy Land desecrated the Temple in Jerusalem, set up altars to their idols, and banned many Jewish religious practices. Resistance to the Greek decrees came to a head in 166 BCE when Judah Maccabee led a rag-tag army to victory against the might of the empire, rededicated the Temple, and relit the six-branched Menorah that had burned continuously since the days of King Solomon.

At this point they hit a snag: they only found one sealed jug of the pure oil needed for the Menorah - enough to last one day, but it would take eight days for fresh oil to be pressed and brought to Jerusalem. According to the ancient sources, a miracle occurred, and the single jar of pure oil burned for eight days until the new supplies arrived.

Of course children learn that the festival commemorates that miracle, but what Chanukah really signifies is not the miracle of the oil, but the survival of a minority religion and culture in the face of the unrestrained efforts of the dominant imperial power to eradicate it. It celebrates, in other words, cultural diversity.

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Last week my colleagues and I met the First Minister for almost two hours to discuss a wide range of issues of concern to the Jewish and other minority communities, and I could not help reflecting on the remarkable, perhaps miraculous, contrast.

Successive Scottish Governments have promoted a Scotland of many cultures. Minority communities have benefited from a wide range of policy and funding initiatives, as a result of which Scotland has managed to avoid the pitfalls both of assimilation and of separate development. The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities has received grants for a wide range of projects: some, like last year's Interfaith Pilgrimage, to improve community relations; some, like the production of a weekly news digest, MEMO, to assist other minorities to engage in civic society; and others to connect scattered and isolated Jewish people to their community and heritage.

Just last week, we arranged a "Kosher Ceilidh" tour of rural Scotland, and reconnected people who had thought they were alone. It is those connections that make up the threads of different colour that make up the tartan, and we are fortunate to live in a country that celebrates that diversity. (To read more about all of the above projects see [www.scojec.org](http://www.scojec.org))