

The Last Candle of Hope

Thought for the Day

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This week Jewish communities throughout the world marked an anniversary: exactly 2100 years since the Temple built by the biblical King Solomon in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Those exiles, who, in the words of the well-known psalm, “*by the rivers of Babylon, sat and wept as we remembered Zion*”, eventually returned and built a second Temple – the one familiar from the New Testament. That was later destroyed by the Romans, along with the entire ancient Jewish city of Jerusalem, on the same date of the Hebrew calendar, leaving only the Western Wall that remains the holiest site in Judaism.

This anniversary, *Tishah b’Av*, is traditionally marked by fasting and customs of mourning. Services take place in a darkened synagogue. Some communities hold candle-lit services, and at the end they blow out the candles one by one, till the synagogue is completely dark, symbolising the spiritual darkness that followed the destruction.

It’s a remarkable coincidence – if there are such things as coincidences – that this week’s commemoration of the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War fell on *Tishah b’Av*. The Jewish Community came together in Britain’s oldest synagogue in the City of London to mark both anniversaries, at exactly the same time as the moving service and vigil in Westminster Abbey, which ended with that very same ritual of candles being extinguished one by one, till only one remained to signify the hope that always remains to dispel the darkness.

Sadly, as we know all too well, the so-called “war to end all wars” didn’t! In fact it planted the seeds for the Second World War and the Holocaust, and its redrawing of the maps not only of Europe but in Africa and the Middle East laid the foundation for all the continuing bloodshed there.

Are there not better ways to settle disputes? Must we blow out that last candle of hope too?