SCoJeC was delighted to provide Jewish students in Scotland with an opportunity to raise issues that matter to them with First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP.

To set the scene before the First Minister spoke, two third year students shared their experiences of being a Jewish student in Scotland. Toby, an Accounting and Finance student at the University of Strathclyde, shared his concerns about the rise of antisemitism on university campuses, and told us later, “I think the evening was crucially important, to have the opportunity to share our personal experiences being Jewish students in Scotland with someone of such high power and status as the First Minister, especially in times of rampant antisemitism.”

Abel, a Psychology student at the University of Glasgow, told the First Minister of his concerns about education in Scotland, and his desire for the general public to be aware of the Holocaust. He later commented, “As a Jewish student, my peers and I often feel overlooked, that is why I greatly appreciate the First Minister taking time to talk to us and answer our questions head on. Even though this does not solve the grand issues we face, it does assure me that our voices can be heard. Thank you to SCoJeC for organising this event!”

During the hour-long question and answer session, many students raised concerns about antisemitism on campuses, and the First Minister pledged to remain steadfast in her support of Jewish students by making campuses a safer place, saying “universities are part of broader society … zero tolerance of antisemitism has to be as enforced and as strongly held on our university campuses as it is in any other part of our society.”

The First Minister also reassured her commitment to tackling all forms of hatred within the SNP, saying, “I accept the responsibility to make sure that we always learn and seek not to fall short on these issues.” She noted that the SNP has adopted the widely accepted working definition of antisemitism, and acknowledged concerns raised by many students that the Green Party has not done so, but promised that all the Ministers in her Government, including those from the Green Party, are expected to comply with the definition.

She said there is “a duty on all of us to understand” the importance of Israel to the Jewish community, and discussed ways that Scotland and Israel can come together, noting in particular her conversations during COP26 about Israel’s success with their vaccination programme.

Eden, a fourth year student at the University of the West of Scotland, commented “It was an enlightening experience to see the voices of Jewish students heard by such an important figure within Scotland.”

SCoJeC Chair Nicola Livingston, who is also a former Chair of Jewish Student Chaplaincy Scotland, said “We are pleased that the First Minister continues to engage with the Jewish community, and this event provided an opportunity for the issues that truly matter to our students to be raised with her. I thank her for her honesty, and I look forward to welcoming her to another event in the near future.”

Arthur Lawson MBE, a former President of the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council and national Chairman of the Association of Jewish Ex-Servicemen and Women, who is in his 100th year, laid the wreath at the Cenotaph in Whitehall during the 100th Anniversary AJEX parade.
Families from Pittenweem to Glasgow joined us at Dunnikier Park in Kirkcaldy where the team from Operation Play Outdoors laid on a series of fun activities. We built dens from rope, tarpaulin, and natural materials found in the woods, roasted hotdogs and toasted marshmallows around the campfire, learned to identify trees from their shape and that of their leaves, and, to round off the afternoon, we planted trees in compostable cups to take back home. Four larger trees were planted in pots and given to representatives of different cities around Scotland.

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There’s an old – and, I admit, not very funny – adage about all Jewish festivals being summed up as, “They tried to kill us. They failed. Let’s party!” OK, it’s partly true – clichés have to be or they wouldn’t last long enough to become clichés – but it conceals a much more complex truth. Some festivals celebrate our survival as a people, while others celebrate the survival of our religion. Or to put it in more modern terms, some bigots direct their murderous hatred at other religions, some at other races. And of course sometimes it’s difficult to disentangle the motivation, not least because looking for reasons presupposes rationality but hatred is by its nature irrational!

Of course partying is not the only form of remembrance – fasting is another, and Judaism has no shortage of those, sometimes in tandem with a party, but mainly days of solemn commemoration of past tragedies. The most solemn of these is Tisha b’Av, the 9th of Av, in mid-summer, which marks the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem first by the Babylonians more than 2,600 years ago and then again by the Romans in the year 70. Those were both cataclysmic events for the Jewish religion, and the Talmud can be read as the working out, over hundreds of years, of how it could survive in people’s minds and bodies without its solid physical base in Jerusalem.

Tisha b’Av has come to commemorate other disasters too, so it is not surprising that some also dedicate it to remembering the annihilation of the vast majority of the Jews of Europe during the Holocaust, a genocidal obsession that both contributed to and was only brought to an end by the defeat of the Nazis. The world commemorates this on International Holocaust Memorial Day in January, but that is not a date in the Jewish calendar. It is not a Jewish event, nor even an event about Jews. It recalls events in which Jewish people participated, but only as the most numerous of the victims, so it is appropriate that that Jewish Community’s voice be heard. But it was established by the United Nations in 2006 as an international, secular, event marking the lowest level of degradation to which humanity – if that is not an ironic term in this context – can stoop, and has stopped.

For far longer – since 1951 – the Jewish world has our own commemoration, Yom haShoah, a week after Pesach, when we will hold ceremonies to remember the families we never had, the entire communities that were wiped out, the town and villages that were razed. As befits a date chosen in remembrance of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, it also honours the heroism of those who resisted and fought back, as well as the ever-decreasing numbers of those who escaped or survived.

To reaffirm the self-evident truth of the unique enormity of the evil that stalked Europe within the span of human memory is not to diminish or forget the other genocides in history, or to make little of the suffering of others, but Jewish people also recall its precedents. It’s not for nothing that rabbinic tradition identifies both Haman of the Purim Megillah and the Nazis with the biblical Amalek, as all three sought to annihilate the Jewish people entirely. This was genocidal racism, pure and simple, not theological rivalry gone mad – a single grandparent could be a death warrant, and conversion saved no-one.

That’s where Purim differs from Chanukah, where it was the Jewish religion not the Jewish people who were in peril. Where Pesach fits this typology is more complex – the Exodus story that we retell at the seder begins with the Jewish people being enslaved, not massacred, but Pharaoh orders the baby boys to be drowned, which is scarcely more benign! However, Moses repeatedly asks “Let my people go, so they can worship [Gd]”, and the Exodus is literally the road to Sinai, so it is the religion as well as the people who are delivered from Egypt.

That is an important lesson for today, when in the forceful words of a recent book title, People Love Dead Jews – but “living Jews not so much”. The lesson of Purim and Pesach is not merely remembrance, but celebration of a living tradition by a living community.

Chag sameach!
Scotland’s Census 2022 is shaping our future!

The next Scottish census will take place on 20th March 2022, having been postponed during the pandemic, and it’s important for the Jewish Community to make our mark (literally!). The Scottish census differs significantly from the English, which did go ahead last year. In Scotland, the religion question asks “What faith...do you belong to?” whereas in England it asked “What faith are you?”. SCoJeC has always argued that wording may significantly reduce numbers as in large parts of the country there are no Jewish organisations to belong to. However, this time SCoJeC persuaded National Records of Scotland (NRS) also to include a prompt to write in “Jewish” under “Other” in the Ethnicity question, so people who feel they don’t ‘belong’ in religious terms will still be able to record their cultural, ethnic, or genealogical background or affiliation.

That can make a big difference – two censuses ago, in 2001 when there were two religion questions – current “belonging” and upbringing – 1785 people said they were Jewish by upbringing, but did not tick a box to say they currently “belong”. In 2011, 812 people wrote in “Jewish” in response to the Ethnicity question despite there being no prompt to do so.

This doesn’t just matter to statisticians and pedants. It matters because however people do – or do not – express their Jewishness, circumstances may lead them to need or want specifically Jewish welfare or other services. In fact research just published by the Institute for Jewish Policy Research (IJP) notes that even people who responded “None of the above” to a list of ways of identifying as Jewish, were in fact identifying simply by responding to the survey! Public services need to be aware that there isn’t just one way to be Jewish.

Obviously, the census can only count responses on forms, so we all need to provide these responses. Your responses help ensure that communal organisations, local authorities, and public services are able to provide culturally appropriate services for everyone who would like to use them. So we urge everyone who regards themselves as Jewish in any way, whether by background or descent, by religious observance, or culturally, socially, or in any other way, to select the Jewish option under both Religion and Ethnicity. Please be counted, to help shape our Jewish future in Scotland.

Be Counted!

For the first time, this census can be completed online, although there is also a paper version. Top: the paper version of the religion question. Centre: The first screen of the ethnicity question - clicking ‘other’ will bring up the bottom screen where you can write in ‘Jewish’.

Antisemitism in 2021

This reveals the highest annual total that CST has ever recorded – 2,255 incidents across the UK – a 34% increase on 2020 figures. 31 of these incidents were in Scotland, compared with 20 in 2020 and 28 in 2019. These numbers make Scotland look good, but are more than double the 12 and 15 incidents in 2015 and 2016.

As unfortunately to be expected, the number of incidents spiked during the Gaza conflict in May and June, and CST commented that trigger events such as this consistently affect the levels of anti-Jewish hate directed at the Jewish community in the UK.

Worryingly, CST recorded 176 violent antisemitic incidents in 2021, the most ever recorded, and an increase of 76% on 2020. Three of these were serious enough to record as a single incident.

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Help SCoJeC help your community:

- DONATE: www.scojec.org/donate.html
- Amazon will donate 5p for every £10 you spend!
- REGISTER AT: smile.amazon.co.uk/ch/SC029438

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