

The Irrationality of Hatred

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

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These days I seem to be enjoying a glut of anniversaries. Most of this week has gone into a special magazine to mark my synagogue's 70th anniversary, and coincidentally our building's 35th. But my own congregation is just a baby compared with the magnificent Victorian synagogue in the centre of Glasgow.

This was the first purpose-built synagogue in Scotland, and since 1879 it has been a symbol of the integration of the Jewish Community into Scottish society, through its members' contribution to the life of the country, in many fields such as medicine, science, the law, government, and the arts. Its members have included a Lord Provost and Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons, two members of the Lords, two High Court judges, an Ambassador, and the Sculptor in Ordinary to the Queen.

At a recent service to mark its 125th anniversary, the Chief Rabbi referred to Garnethill as "the mother synagogue of Glasgow, [setting] the tone and the pattern for ... the city." But he also drew attention to a darker anniversary. 1879 was also the year in which a German racial theorist coined the word "antisemitism" because he felt that the word "Judenhass" – "Jew-hatred" – was too explicit.

The hypocrisy of simply changing the name is obvious – hatred is just as ugly whatever it is called. Today we are unfortunately living through another resurgence of hate, whether against Muslims, Jews, asylum-seekers, or people in general who are somehow different. The history of the Jewish community of Scotland is a symbol of how irrational that kind of hatred can be, for as Germany spiralled into genocide and war, Scotland benefited from the very people whose contribution to medicine, science, civil society and culture the Nazis had rejected.

How sad it is that this lesson has still to be learned - that by accepting diversity and by working together, people with different backgrounds and cultures can promote the good of all of humanity, whereas by fostering hatred and fear we bring only war and destruction.