

Chanukah – a Triumph of Multiculturalism

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

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Most Jewish festivals really only concern ourselves: we light candles, break bread, and eat a festive meal round our own tables to mark the sabbath and festivals; we gather to pray and read the Torah in our own places of worship. If supermarkets didn't cash in on traditional seasonal foods and greetings cards, most other people wouldn't be aware of our festivals.

But Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, which starts next week, is different and unique: we are taught to publicise it, and we celebrate it in public.

Scholars can argue about whether Chanukah might be related to other mid-winter festivals, but for us it commemorates events well within the era of recorded history: after the death of Alexander the Great, his generals squabbled and his empire fell apart. Not for the first time – nor sadly the last – the Egyptian and Syrian fragments then fought over the narrow strip of fertile land between them. The ancient Jewish state was caught in the mangle between the two superpowers of that time.

The Syrians won, overran Jerusalem, banned Jewish religious practices, and installed their idols in the Temple – the same Temple described in the New Testament – sparking a revolt led by a priestly family known as the Maccabees. Chanukah celebrates their success.

They rededicated the Temple, and, using the one jar of oil that they could find, they relit the Menorah, the golden candelabrum that had burned constantly beside the altar. It is to commemorate their victory, that today we light the Chanukah Menorah.

But this isn't just a private party for the victors. The custom is to light the Chanukah lamp in a window or doorway so it can be seen by passers-by, and it is increasingly common to have public lightings hosted by political leaders and in public spaces.

Celebrated like that, Chanukah is a triumph of multiculturalism – of feeling at ease in declaring publicly for all to see that we can observe our own customs and practices, but still be part of the same society as our neighbours.

So whatever winter festival you celebrate, have a happy one!

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