

Being Jewish in Scotland and Persia

Thought for the Day

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Our government, here in Scotland, wants to know more about what matters to minority communities. That's why it's sponsored our study of people's experience of "Being Jewish in Scotland", to help us understand our community better and provide better support for their needs. The project has already heard from hundreds of people of all levels of affiliation and none, from the Borders to the Northern Isles.

Some remarkable stories have emerged: like the two middle-aged women living in the same small village, neither of whom knew that the other is Jewish; or the young girl in Edinburgh who was so familiar with communal Burns Suppers that she asked her mother if non-Jews celebrate Burns too. Unfortunately, we've also heard about the darker experiences of racism and xenophobia; and sad stories like one Jewish family who didn't know the community existed – but lived only 15 minutes from a synagogue.

Tonight and tomorrow, Jewish people throughout the world will be remembering another story – one from long ago. We'll celebrate the festival of Purim by reading the biblical Book of Esther from hand-written scrolls; we'll exchange gifts, give charity – and party!

The festival celebrates the events in the Persian empire more than 2000 years ago, when the orphan Esther became queen, and was able to save her people from destruction at the hands of a hate-filled member of the king's court. It's a classic case of "They tried to destroy us; they failed; let's party!"

But it's more than that. Like the 'Being Jewish in Scotland' study, the story of Esther and Purim shows that minorities were actually accepted and catered for in ancient Persia. It illustrates the varieties of experience and identity, and the possibility of being true to our faith and our history, while still being integrated and successful members of society.

We can celebrate both what makes us different and what makes us alike, we can walk the line between segregation and assimilation – we can, if you like, have our kosher haggis and eat it!

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