

Publicising the Miracle

Thought for the Day

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My attention was drawn yesterday to a press release from the Lord Advocate's office headed "Festive knife crime warning". It made me wonder what on earth could make knife crime festive?

Of course I'm not criticising the Lord Advocate's use of English – there are some people it's wise not to fall out with! – but I do find the way language changes fascinating. "Festive" has come to be a catch-all for "end of year" – the sales, the days off, the food, the lights, even the traffic jams. Personally, I find the supposedly politically correct "Winterval" a barbarism too far – and that's an interesting example too, since "barbar" was a racist jibe the ancient Greeks threw at non-Greek-speakers. But nowadays, making fun of how people speak ain't done no more!

That's my point: an inclusive, diverse, well-integrated society where we can all get on with one another despite our differences is undoubtedly a good thing. But getting on despite our differences doesn't mean denying our differences.

Today is the first day of the Jewish festival of Chanukah. For the children it's about lighting candles, and getting presents, and eating oily doughnuts to commemorate the miracle of the jug of oil that lasted 8 days. For the grown-ups it's about how Judaism survived persecution in the generation after Alexander the Great – and also about lamps and doughnuts!

But, like language, customs change: the traditional observance is to light lamps at home, in the doorway or window "to publicise the miracle", as the Talmud puts it. Recently it's gone truly public: there will be Chanukah lamp lightings in parliament, in Downing Street and Princes Street, in the Speaker's House at Westminster.

My inner cynic worries whether that's a Jewish answer to the better-known trees, rather than publicising the miracle even more, but my outer romantic rejoices in the myriad of lights that dispel the darkness.

So whatever your festive predilection, a happy Chanukah, a happy holiday, and a happy new year to one and all.

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