History in National Consciousness

Thought for the Day
Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)
Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 19 August 2016

I gather there's some kind of sporting contest going on in Brazil, but I'd really like to give you a bit of a break from that.

This has been a rather unusual week in the Jewish calendar – it began with the most melancholy day of the year, and it ends with one of the happiest. Last Sunday was Tisha b'Av, a day of fasting in memory of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, no less than two thousand six hundred and three years ago. Aside from going without food and drink – which might be no bad thing – the observances are very similar to personal mourning – sitting on the ground, not greeting friends, not listening to music. The destruction of Jerusalem all those centuries ago is still, to this day, a personal loss.

But only six days later, today is what the Talmud describes as one of the joyous days of the Jewish year. Nowadays it's become a sort of Jewish Valentine's Day, when restaurants in Israel will give gifts of roses to courting couples, but back in those Temple times, the Talmud says that the girls of Jerusalem used to go out in borrowed white dresses to find themselves husbands. That gives us some interesting insights into the society of those days. It wasn't as brutally inegalitarian as we might imagine – the reason for the borrowed clothes was so that rich and poor would look alike, and it was the women, not the men, who took the initiative in this formalised forerunner of speed-dating!

What connects these two days is their source in history and their significance in the consciousness of the Jewish people. That kind of collective memory is part of what unites any people into a nation. This then underpins the sense of identity and identification that in turn explains why we all get a psychological boost when "our team" – whoever that may be – do well at those events in Brazil that I wasn't going to mention!