

The Taste of Freedom

Thought for the Day

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No-one could ever accuse the Jewish religion of being simple! Even the calendar is complicated – how could it not be, when the Bible describes the new year as falling in the seventh month?! The months themselves follow the phases of the moon, but the calendar is adjusted to the solar year, so that the spring festival – *Pesach* or Passover – will actually fall in the spring!

That, in a nutshell, is where we are this week. Passover is less than a week away, and most Jewish homes are in domestic turmoil. Spring cleaning does not do justice to the deep probing of inaccessible corners that goes on at this time, in order to ensure that not a crumb of leavened food is to be found. The festive meal on the first nights of the holiday is also labour-intensive: take a full four-course dinner, add a number of symbolic dishes and traditional foods; add a participatory educational experience and a service of thanksgiving during the meal, and you're half-way there!

It really is remarkable, as the Chief Rabbi pointed out on a visit to Glasgow last week, that it's the Jewish observances that require most effort that continue to be the most observed even in an era of general laxity. There's a lesson in that for us all – the greater the endeavour, the more we have to clear our minds and our diaries, the more significant the event is to us, and the less likely we are to disregard or neglect it. As they say: easy come, easy go!

Pesach is also called the Festival of Freedom, commemorating the story of the Exodus, when the Jewish people escaped from slavery in Egypt, and first became a nation. Paradoxically, that lavish festive dinner commemorates the meal they ate in haste as they fled, but it has the taste of freedom. There's no paradox in celebrating freedom with all this exertion – renewal means clearing the decks for a fresh start, and freedom is worth the effort.