

This Year is Different

Thought for the Day

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I hope you had a good leap year day!

Actually for Jewish people it's two leap years, as we're in a sort of shadow month while we wait for the lunar calendar to catch up with the solar year!

Like the Muslim calendar, ours has lunar months; but unlike the Muslim calendar, we make periodic adjustments to ensure that Pesach, Passover, which the Torah calls the Spring Festival, does fall in the spring. So we repeat the previous month, which of course causes complications – and disputes! Are festivals, birthdays, anniversaries marked the first time or the second; it's not even clear which one is the extra month?!

One thing is certain: it's spring – and as the Talmud says, time for more fun! The minor festival of Purim, described in the Biblical Book of Esther, brings presents and parties, to celebrate how the Jewish community in ancient Persia overcame genocidal antisemitism.

But this year is different. Jewish people have two things on our minds at the moment: the horrific attacks perpetrated by Hamas on farmers and party-goers on 7th October; and the explosion of antisemitism in the UK ever since. The government is funding guards for synagogues, Jewish students are made to answer for a foreign government and are hiding their identity, people are talking again about keeping a suitcase packed for quick escape.

I pay tribute to the First Minister, whose own family are caught in the maelstrom in Gaza, for his unambiguous statement that events in the Middle East can never justify antisemitism in Scotland. And I commend Anas Sarwar for recognising that “Antisemitism is not a Jewish problem, and Islamophobia is not a Muslim problem.” We don't have to agree about everything – or even anything! – but we have to learn to disagree with respect, rationality, and empathy.