

Looking Both Ways

Thought for the Day

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Tonight is the start of the Jewish new year. Unlike the secular new year, this isn't a time for partying but for prayer; not a time for *disorder*, but for putting our spiritual affairs *in* order. The prayers we say during tomorrow's long service are not festive but solemn, as we look both ways before taking our first tentative steps at the crossroads of the year.

On Sunday I had the pleasure and privilege of attending the installation of the new Chief Rabbi of the UK and Commonwealth in the presence of the Prince of Wales and leaders of all the main faiths. That ceremony too looked both ways, as we were addressed both by the outgoing Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, who has truly become one of the voices of the conscience of our times; and by his successor, Ephraim Mirvis, who eloquently and humbly set out his vision for the community he now leads. Using the Talmud's image of the world standing on three pillars – education, community, and social responsibility – Chief Rabbi Mirvis spoke about recognising our obligations to, and doing our best for, future generations, our colleagues, and our neighbours.

I'll admit to a parochial Caledonian thought too: the post of Chief Rabbi was only created in 1704 – a recent date in historical terms, yet older than the United Kingdom itself! The future of that Union is now an open question, a question that is set to dominate domestic politics for the next year, the question that will decide, not just the future of our nation, but indeed which nation we belong to, for generations to come. Scotland is at a crossroads, and we too need to look both ways.

But neither Scotland nor the Jewish Community exists in isolation, and we live in a dangerous world, perhaps more endangered now than for two generations. So in the words of one of our traditional prayers, may the old year with its evils end, and may the new year begin with blessings.

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