

It is not for us to finish the task

Thought for the Day

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There seems to be only one show in town at the moment – especially if that town is Glasgow and you're snarled up in traffic! Thinking about the fact that today is Guy Fawkes Day, I'm quite struck by the contrasts between the two events – in 1605, the Gunpowder Plotters literally wanted to blow up Parliament and met a barbarous end for their troubles, whereas most of today's climate protesters want to put a metaphorical bomb under the world's governments in a completely different way – not to bring governments down, but to speed up the action they take.

I find it striking too, how far public opinion has moved in the past five years. Few now deny that the world is warming, or that the consequences would be catastrophic if that continues. Even many of those who don't believe that human activity is to blame for this do accept that human action can play a part in slowing and perhaps reversing the process of climate change and mitigating its effects.

When the late Jonathan Sacks was appointed Chief Rabbi, I was puzzled that he adopted as his motto the teaching from the Talmud that "*It is not for us to finish the task, but that doesn't mean we should give up on it*". At first that seemed to me to be a counsel of despair, predicting defeat even before starting the task, but on reflection I've come to understand that it's the very opposite. It may be realistic to recognise that some challenges are too enormous for us to even hope to complete them, but that does not absolve us from doing our bit. Just as we give charity without thinking that will eliminate poverty, or plant trees without expecting to see them fully grown, every step, however small, takes us closer to our goal.

And, as the Talmud also urges, "*If not me, who? And if not now, when?!*"