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Script for BBC Thought for the Day
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Loyalty and Values

Good morning.

Tonight we begin the Jewish festival of Shavuos (or Pentecost). This is when we commemorate, and even re-enact, the receipt of the Torah – the Old Testament – by the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. Rabbinic accounts of that occasion centre around the unity of the community and the idea of each of the six hundred thousand assembled people making a personal commitment to God and to the Torah.

Although we had a powerful leader at the time in the form of Moses, the Shavuos story focuses on each person directly witnessing God’s power, hearing His message personally, and making an individual commitment to a life of Torah observance. Moses was the paradigm prophet who transmitted God’s message with unparalleled clarity: but in receiving the Torah the Jewish people put their trust primarily in God, and only secondly and conditionally, in Moses as His prophet.

This epitomises the historic nature of the relationship Jewish people have had with leadership. We value our leaders, but we’re required to test their words against the fundamental principles of the Torah, to ensure that we are not misled. The Christian theologian C.S. Lewis sums it up beautifully, when in his book *That Hideous Strength* he gives these words to a passionate atheist. Loyalty, he says, “is a virtue too important to be lavished on individual personalities”.

Working in public life can sometimes be depressingly disillusioning. In particular, when a leader in whom people have trusted is exposed for corruption, hypocrisy or other moral failure, it's personally upsetting for those who have liked and trusted that leader.

But working in Parliament, in particular, is also profoundly inspiring. Every day we can see how the principles that underpin Parliamentary democracy, in particular the Seven Principles of Public Life – integrity, honesty, openness, accountability, selflessness, objectivity and leadership – transcend personalities and party-political divisions, and unify the Parliamentary community in loyalty to public service values.

Political leaders come and go, leaving varying legacies: but the principles of public service endure and outlast the personalities who from time to time represent them.

Shavuot is a time when we as Jews reaffirm our individual acceptance of the principles by which we live. Its wider message is that we should set aside time regularly to remind ourselves of our own core values, and to internalise them so that we're living them personally – not vicariously through leaders who may or may not turn out to have been worthy of our trust.
