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**Daniel Greenberg CB**

**Script for BBC Thought for the Day**

**14 December 2023**

**Heaven and Hell**

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Good morning.

Today is the last full day of the Jewish festival of Chanukah and this year I discovered a new Chanukah custom. My son organised the Chanukah event for the local council where he works as a lawyer. He invited the local rabbi, a follower of the late Rabbi Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who brought a plentiful supply of doughnuts with more than enough for everybody. As giving coins to children is a common Chanukah custom of uncertain origin, he also brought a supply of chocolate coins, but exactly enough for one per person. He handed one to each guest with instructions that, instead of eating it yourself, you were to swap yours with the person next to you. So everybody got both a chocolate coin and the pleasure of giving.

This reminded me of what my wife used to tell our children about heaven and hell when they were young, based on an old image shared by many faiths and cultures. She would describe heaven and hell and say that in both people are sat at a table with bowls of delicious food, but the only implements they have to eat with are long-handled spoons that cannot reach their own mouths however hard they struggle. So what’s the difference between heaven and hell? Only that in heaven, they’ve learned to turn the spoons around and feed the person across the table. Each culture adds its own flavour to this age-old picture, and this Jewish version is fundamental to our conceptions of heaven and hell. In Jewish tradition hell is not a perpetual purgatory, but a state of cleansing that the soul goes through after life, removing the spiritual consequences of sin and preparing for the eternal spiritual health of heaven. In the story this is symbolised by the moment at which a person realises that by turning their long spoon around and feeding their neighbour, everyone can be happy.

This simple children’s tale contains a deep truth that should be one of the messages of the light of Chanukah this year. So many people around the world are living in abject darkness of so many different kinds: modern slavery; domestic abuse; climate devastation; or, of course, the evils of warfare and destruction. Each of us has the key to lighten someone else’s darkness in some way: we just have to look for the right way to turn the spoon around and feed them over the other side of the table.

Wishing us all a festive season full of light for everyone.