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Script for BBC Thought for the Day
29 February 2024
Sun Versus Moon

Good morning.

And a very happy birthday to all those around the world who were born on 29 February and so don't have actual birthdays quite as often as the rest of us! If you are one of those people, perhaps spare a thought for my friend Aaron whose Jewish birthday over 30 years ago was the 21st of the month Adar Rishon falling on 29th February in one of those rare years where the secular and Jewish leap years coincided – so he has even fewer birthdays than you do and won't have another until 2052!

In the Jewish calendar leap years involve adding not just an extra day but a whole month. Over a 19-year cycle we insert seven leap months. This keeps the lunar and solar annual cycles aligned, and means that we always celebrate Passover in the spring.

Focusing on both solar and lunar years gives Jewish tradition some of its most powerful imagery. A recurring theme is the contrast between the sun as a constant – reflected in the saying in Ecclesiastes that there

is nothing new under the sun – and the waxing and waning of the moon which represents inconsistency.

Rabbinic interpretation of the Biblical creation story describes how God created the sun and moon as equal lights. Following an argument between them, God reduces the light of the moon, promising that its full blaze will be restored in the eventual Messianic era. So if the sun is in some sense “better” than the moon, more constant and reliable, why does the Jewish year primarily follow the lunar cycle?

One answer is that while the sun represents the constant perfection of angels, the moon represents the heroic leaps and falls of humanity. Constantly aiming to improve and create, with its inevitable cycle of successes and failures, is what makes us human. Trial and the risk of error are inseparable: “nothing ventured nothing gained” has been the recurring cry of human endeavour dating back at least to the Histories of Herodotus in the 5th century BCE. The Jewish New Moon prayers focus on renewal for the future and forgiveness for the past. They acknowledge that human imitation of the lunar cycle of advance and retreat is better than accepting a constant stagnation; and though it comes with the inevitable price of failures that require forgiveness, that price is well-worth paying.
