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Script for BBC Thought for the Day
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Questions and Answers

Good morning.

This Saturday night after the conclusion of the Sabbath, my friends Paul, Zach and I will return to the Sabbath table, with a few family and friends, to celebrate a *siyum* – the completion of studying the Talmudic tractate Sanhedrin, which deals with the Jewish law of law itself.

We have been studying this Tractate weekly for about 30 years, and I am delighted to say that I know less about Jewish legal methodology than I did when we started.

In Judaism, studying holy texts is not the exclusive province of scholars. The Talmud suggests that the questions a person is asked in the afterlife are, first, did you deal honestly with others?, and, secondly, did you set aside time for studying the Torah. So we are encouraged to study the same Torah texts that have been studied by Jewish scholars over the years.

Why this constant repetition? Don't we know all the answers by now? Yes: but we don't yet know all the questions. Jewish learning is all about questions, and much less about answers. Each new student questions with a fresh eye from a unique perspective. Indeed, the Talmud often answers its own questions with the word "*teiku*" – an acrostic for a Hebrew aphorism meaning "Elijah the prophet will answer questions and problems when he comes". In other words, when we need an answer we'll find one, but in the meantime it is the questions that matter.

Writing to Jean-Baptiste Le Roy in 1789 Benjamin Franklin wrote “... in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes”. His words are quoted so often because they speak a profound truth. And uncertainty is particularly important for those who subscribe to a religious, political or other ideology. Certainty brings dangers. A feeling that I know all the answers can lead to that arrogance without which despotism, terrorism and many other evils cannot flourish: a feeling that I know what is good for others better than they do themselves, and that I have the right to impose my certainty on them even through coercion or violence.

But the more we question, the more questions we see: we feel that doubt in what Kipling’s Tibetan lama in *Kim* calls “This great and terrible world”, a feeling that leads to compassion and concern for all our human companions in uncertainty.

So this Saturday night as we finish one study project and begin another, my friends and I will reflect with quiet pride on how little we have understood and on how much we have still left to learn.
