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Script for BBC Thought for the Day
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Visiting Parents' Graves

Good morning.

In this Jewish month of Ellul, leading up to the Jewish New Year in a couple of weeks, we have a custom of visiting parents' graves. My father died three years ago, and last summer we lost my mother, so last Sunday I paid my first New Year's visit to the graveside of both my parents.

Like many Jewish customs relating to death I found the experience a moving mixture of the sombre and the joyful. My parents both died in old age having touched and improved many lives, professionally and personally. I stood and contemplated the profound influence my father had on advancing the understanding of occupational health risks and championing widows and orphans in their search for justice and a better world; I rehearsed my mother's two successful careers, first in public medicine and then in studying semitic languages; and I pictured them, with the humility and sensitivity that characterised them, never neglecting an opportunity to provide comfort, cheer and support to anyone who came within their reach.

Of course, this solemn moment of reflection intensified the grief that never dies. But I also found it an encouraging and even invigorating preparation for the New Year. I can perpetuate the memory of my parents' determination to leave the world a better place for their having been in it – which they certainly did – by setting myself the challenge for the year ahead to try to do the same, in my own way.

Unhappily, not everyone buried in the cemetery enjoyed such full and rich lives. As I left I passed stones sadly recording memories of loved ones cut down in their prime. Near the entrance I passed the section set aside for the deaths of very young children: an intensely sombre place, but I was startled, and then deeply moved, by the sense of positivity that emanated from so many of the inscriptions, leaving a clear message that even the briefest of lives leaves its own indelible message of joy, comfort, and companionship. I learned that although grief and regret will differ for every bereavement, each memory also offers solace, happiness and inspiration.

In these terrible times that bring death and destruction in so many places around the world, I offer a wish as we approach the Jewish New Year that all of us who have loved ones to remember will draw inspiration from their memories in ways that will guide and support us in the year ahead.
