

About 20 years ago, shortly after my husband and I moved into our first home in Queen's Park, in Westminster, we noticed bunches of flowers outside the local doctors surgery. That's never a good sign in London. It turned out that two 14-year-old boys, friends, had been having a playfight. This might sound like a contradiction in terms, but parents of boys may know what I mean – the kind of wrestling match that just releases energy and testosterone. The problem was that one of them had a knife and in the heat of the moment, used it. They had been schoolfriends – there was no history of animosity between them. But at the end of the day, one of them was dead and the other facing a long spell in youth detention.

I thought of them when I looked at this week's parsha with its description of six cities of refuge for those who kill by accident. My son is now the same age as those boys and I worry all the time about who he might meet as he cycles around the local area. 20 years ago it was profoundly shocking – and it still is – but it is becoming more common. Knife crime has reached the highest levels since records began in England and Wales, and in London it's increased by more than a third in the last five years. It doesn't just affect young people, but more than a thousand youngsters between the ages of 10 and 19 were admitted to hospital with knife wounds last year.

The causes are many and complex. Poverty, cuts to youth services, the criminal trade in illegal drugs and gangs that exploit vulnerable children – they all play their part and there are probably many other factors involved.

At the end of this week's reading, in the last aliyah, we hear that violence pollutes the land, and that we must not make the land impure through violence because God lives among us and we are made in the image of God, we are all incredible, precious, unique beings and it is our responsibility to stop or at least to minimise violence where we can.

The Biblical way of minimising violence was to create six cities of refuge where those who had killed someone by accident could live, safe from being killed for revenge by the victim's family. We know that much of the violence on our streets is a result of vendettas, tit for tat killings, postcode wars. The Torah's solution is to curb it, to put the perpetrator somewhere safe to stop the bloodletting.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, compared our contemporary cities to the cities of refuge. According to the Rabbis of the Talmud, a city of refuge should not be too big, or fortified, there should be free access to water, house diverse populations and tightly regulate the sale of weapons. Levinas points out that religious salvation is impossible without earthly justice.

Religion, he said, can only thrive in a city where even the most marginalized find safety, a happy urban environment in which real people live, work and play.

We know, here at Kol Chai, that we don't live in a vacuum. We are affiliated to Harrow Citizens and Harrow Citizens is a part of London Citizens, where a working group is looking at campaigning around youth and knife crime. We can be part of the solution – and there are some solutions to be found.

Recorded crime in Scotland is now at a 40-year-low after Glasgow reframed the problem of violent crime as a public health issue, bringing together health, education and social work agencies to tackle poverty, inequality and drug addiction which were all fuelling violent crime. It's not an easy task but there are answers out there.

What can we do, here in Hatch End? Well I'll keep you all posted on what's going on in Harrow Citizens and any opportunities to make a difference. But above all, we need to listen. And listening is central to who we are as Jews and what we are commanded to do.

The Shema, our central prayer, is all about listening. The 19<sup>th</sup> century Rebbe, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt, said that the six cities of refuge in the Torah were a way of repairing the world and that we could replicate this by reciting the Shema. Why? For him the first six words of the Shema that make up the first line, are equivalent to the six cities of refuge, offering spiritual asylum and

refuge for the soul. If we really want to repair the world and leave it a better place than we found it that we need physical refuge for the body, and spiritual refuge for the wounded soul.

But this is not a magic incantation. Rabbi Heschel, or the Ohev Yisrael as he is commonly known, suggests that the words of the Shema only operate as oases of refuge if we are truly aware of our own wounds, if we acknowledge what's painful in our hearts, just as we cannot solve knife crime until we understand it's cause. This is the task of repair, this is what we mean by Tikkun Olam, it's a repair of the world that has to begin in our own hearts – and only then can we go and fix the rest of the world.

We need above all to pay attention – to what is going on in our hearts and to what is going on in our cities. Then perhaps all our cities can become, as the Rabbis of the Talmud imagined, cities of refuge and cities of justice.