

YK morning sermon

I have a confession to make. My 11-year-old son loves nerf guns. For those who don't have children in this age bracket, nerf guns are large plastic guns that shoot foam bullets and occasionally water. I do remember saying that if I ever had a son, I would never buy him a gun and we withheld our support for a couple of years, but his passion overcame my reservations. He can't hurt anyone with them, he only plays with his friends and nobody has ever complained.

Kai Agyepong, aged 12, was playing with his plastic toy gun, inside his home in north London, when a passerby saw him through the window and called the police. His mother said that more than 20 officers stormed her house and then detained and handcuffed her terrified son before realising it was a plastic gun. The report apparently said they had seen a gun being handled by a black male. I have seen photos of the gun. It doesn't look that different from some of the nerf guns my child plays with, and I have seen photos of Kai, who is very obviously a child, and I wonder whether someone will ever call the police on my white son. I suspect not.

Stories like this were a feature of the summer, as we began to emerge from complete lockdown and demonstrations erupted around the world, following the killing of George Floyd. If you have sons, growing into young men, it's hard to ignore the difference in the experience of young black men. Hungo Boateng was 13 and on a

charity bike ride with his father along the River Lea when he was grabbed from his bike by a plainclothes police officer, threatened with a stun gun, handcuffed and arrested with his dad. Why? There had been a stabbing in the local area and the victim described his attackers as black males on bikes.

As isolated incidents of racial profiling these are perhaps not very significant. Nobody was hurt, nobody died. They moved me because in every other respect other than their ethnicity, these boys reminded me of my own, and the freedom they have to ride their bikes on the streets or play with toy guns at home. But of course, incidents like this happen all the time. Just not to us. Not to our community.

Now some of you might be wondering what this has to do with Yom Kippur. Isn't this our day to think about being Jewish? To look inwards not outwards?

But the theme of Yom Kippur is not really about being Jewish. Our Torah readings don't say - we have enough to worry about, let's not waste energy on other people's problems. They invite us to look at what we have not done, as well as what we have - what my mother-in-law used to call "sins of omission".

We have three Torah readings today - two this morning and one this afternoon. And they form a sequence. In the first, Moses re-makes the tablets of law after having shattered them with fury because the

Israelites were worshipping the Golden Calf. It's about second chances – a chance to do the right thing even after having got it badly wrong, a chance to make right our mistakes. The second is what we call the holiness code – it's about how to live a good life, how to be a good person, culminating in the words – Love your neighbour as yourself. That is the heart of the day – love your neighbour as yourself, put yourself in their shoes, and then act accordingly.

And in this afternoon's reading, God sets before us life and death, blessing and curse and commands us to choose life. What does that mean, to choose life? It's a challenge. And it throws up more questions than answers. I know that right now, it may feel like it takes all our effort just to make sure that we and our family stay alive. But in the long term, looking after our own is never enough. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, the essence of living as a *human being* is being challenged, being tempted, being called. Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy. And yet being alive is no answer to the problems of living. To be or not to be is NOT the question. The vital question is how to be and how not to be. How are you going to live your life this year? What are we going to teach our children.

Rabbi Heschel is a role model in more ways than one, particularly at this time of rising nationalism, and when institutionalised racism that we thought had ended years ago, seems still to be alive and well.

Heschel was raised in a Hasidic Polish family and studied in Berlin before being rescued from Nazi Europe at the very last minute. He met Martin Luther King in 1963 at a meeting in Chicago on race and religion and they were both called to the White House to discuss the issue with John F Kennedy. Heschel replied: Please demand of religious leaders personal involvement not just solemn declaration. We forfeit the right to worship God as long as we continue to humiliate negroes. The hour calls for moral grandeur and spiritual audacity. For Heschel, spirituality and activism were inseparable. For him, religion was about God's fierce opposition to indifference and injustice, an opposition which demands action.

Our Haftarah, from the Prophet Isaiah, says much the same thing. There's no point in fasting as a kind of magic ritual out of context. The point of fasting, says Isaiah, is to let the oppressed go free, to break the yoke of oppression, to share your food with the hungry and bring the homeless into your home. He goes on to say - If we care about justice we can bring healing to the world.

The Amidah which we say three times a day also condemns indifference. We ask God to heal the sick, bless the earth and bring

justice – and if we don't take steps to do all these things, they're empty words. The theme is echoed again and again in our literature.

We are supposed to deliver justice because we know that God's only impact on the world is through us. Everyone in any position of power is supposed to stand up and speak up for the vulnerable. Avinu Malkeinu, our father our king, show mercy and compassion. That's what good kings do. That's what good leaders do. We need to care for those made vulnerable by their race, religion – we need to be good allies.

This is a community that cares about social justice. This coming Shabbat, we are launching our partnership with other community leaders to try to provide supported housing for the homeless in our neighbourhood. I hope you'll join us.

Our Torah reading offers us the possibility of doing better in the year ahead, of starting afresh, of making new commitments to make the world a better place. I think making sure that everyone has a roof over their heads, and that every child has the same opportunities to participate in the world as ours do, regardless of the colour of the skin, is a good place to start.

As Rabbi Tarfon said: Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor, ve'lo ata ben horin libatel mimena. It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free to neglect it. May we all be sealed in the Book of Life for a good and transformative year. Ken Yehi Ratzon