

Taking Responsibility

Thought for the Day

Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)

Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 21 July 2006

Last week a friend of mine was murdered in a suburb of Washington DC.

He was walking home after dinner with a female friend when they were attacked by a group of teenagers who threatened them and then tried to assault the woman. When Allan attempted to protect her, one of the attackers produced a knife and stabbed him in the neck. He bled to death on the spot.

It is very easy to rehearse what might have been different – he might not have challenged their attackers; they might have gone to a different restaurant; they might have called a taxi rather than walking; he might even have turned down the job that took him to Washington.

Recognising that different choices could have been made – and of course wishing that they had been – is a natural response to tragedy, but that is of little comfort to the bereaved girl-friend who blames herself for being the excuse for the attack, or the parent who might have persuaded him to stay in London, or even the colleagues who might not have offered him the job. We must not confuse the understandable psychological distress arising from that regret with bearing a share of the blame.

I am sure I am not alone in feeling that a personal tragedy like this dramatises and brings home what are otherwise abstract philosophical questions about freedom of choice, responsibility, blame, and the purpose of punishment.

Criminals will want to try to share if not shed the blame – it was the victim's fault, or society's, or their parents' – anyone's but their own. Of course nature and nurture must have contributed to the circumstances that led to the crime, but ultimately the decision to act was their own.

If punishment is to have any positive value, and not be reduced to the moral equivalent of revenge, it must be because we believe that criminals can see the error of their ways and reform. They must take responsibility for their actions, both past and future, and we must continue to believe in the ability of people to reform.

Judaism sees the human condition as the choice between our good and our evil impulses. It is a choice we all face. We should not ignore the possibility of choosing badly, but should accept our responsibility and choose the good.