

## Can't we learn to be neighbourly?

### *Thought for the Day*

*Ephraim Borowski (Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities)*

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Yesterday's appalling events in Paris have brought the new year silly season to an abrupt end, as the headlines have turned from the trivial to the tragic. No more is the news dominated by poor Paddington Dog, abandoned with his toys in a suitcase in Ayr, or even by the discovery of an Earth look-alike planet more than 475 light years away.

Suppose there are sentient beings there – might they be able to live amicably with one another better than we seem to be? and would we care?

That's an extreme case, but my attention was drawn to the inverse relationship between empathy and distance by the continuing interest in the tragic accident in Glasgow in December. Does it matter more to us because it was close to home, or because, but for the grace of God, we could have been in George Square that day? Whatever the tragedy – and there are all too many – we do seem to be more touched, the more we have in common with the victims.

That's natural: we don't think of helping our family as charity, and we may feel less obligation to help victims of natural disasters in far off places than, say, to support the homeless in our own town. Sadly a plane lost in the Indian Ocean can be just another headline, whereas one destroyed over Lockerbie chills us. Twelve people killed in Paris can seem to matter more than 200 000 in Syria.

Hate crime is defined as being motivated by hatred of a group, so it doesn't just affect the immediate victim, but also undermines the security of every member of that community. Hate crime can be global as well as local, and yesterday's terrorist outrage in Paris reminds us, with the year barely a week old, that the omens are not good.

We often talk of the world getting smaller. It follows that everyone is our neighbour. So can't we learn to be neighbourly?