

Out of the Echo Chamber

Thought for the Day

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Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 24 April 2018

I'm a bit uneasy because I don't like it when the Jewish Community is seen primarily through the prism of antisemitism, but unfortunately it's been so much in the news recently that it's impossible to ignore.

During a debate in the House of Commons last week, some MPs were in tears as they spoke about the threats and abuse they have received. Yet far from unanimously agreeing that politics should be an arena for reasoned debate, where intimidation and name-calling have no place, some people have responded by trying to shoot the messengers.

I find it interesting and instructive to compare this "antisemitism denial", as it's been called, with two other current high-profile stories – attitudes to the "Windrush generation" of immigrants from the West Indies, and unresolved issues about the murder of Stephen Lawrence, where no-one would belittle or deny the feelings of those affected. That's how it should be: as a society we need to respect, and indeed learn from, others – not just those we're different *from* but those we have differences *with*.

It's become a cliché that social media encourages echo chambers where people only hear those who agree with them. That's a form of tribalism – you have to be "one of us" for your opinions to have value – and it's a short step to treating those who're not as valueless too, and we all know where that slippery slope can lead.

But in fact we learn most by testing our opinions against those we disagree with, not by having them repeated back to us. The Talmud is a record of thousands of pages of debate – debate that still goes on – but secular thinkers from Plato to today's social scientists say the same. Diversity, whether of appearance or belief or way of life, is part of our world; of course we sometimes find "the other" challenging or uncomfortable, but if we all agree that we shouldn't do to others what we wouldn't want done to ourselves, shouldn't we start by respecting those others?

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