



**SERMON EREV VAYIKRA:
A BYASS FREQUENTLY OBSERVABLE**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 11 March 2022
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue

- 1 “Much more safe and sociable than is commonly imagin’d.” Not just the subtitle of my CV, but a description of the Jews from a groundbreaking 1714 pamphlet entitled *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland*.¹
- 2 John Toland was an Irish philosopher who died 300 years ago today. His essay was just about the first plea for Jewish people throughout the UK to be given full and equal civil rights; it predated by several decades the actual emancipation of the Jews.²
- 3 He subtitled his work: *A Defence of the Jews Against All Vulgar Prejudices in All Countries*, and so it was. He described – and debunked – many common antisemitic stereotypes. “I am not ignorant,” Toland wrote, “how much the world is govern’d by prejudices, and how farr some, who wou’d not be counted of the vulgar, are yet sway’d by vulgar errors. There are among the Jews, to be sure, sordid wretches, sharpers, extortioners, villains of all sorts and degrees: and where is that happy nation of which the same may not be as truly affirm’d?”



They have likewise their men of probity and worth, persons of courage. One rule of life, which is willingly admitted – nay, and eagerly pleaded – by all societies in their own case (and miserably neglected in that of others) is not to impute the faults of a few to the whole number, which, considering the unavoidable mixture of good and bad in all communities, is only justice.”³

- 4 That passage seems well ahead of its time. The world is indeed governed by prejudice. It seems almost unbelievable that there was somebody walking around in the early 18th century who understood the evils of racial prejudice: who understood its illogic, its hypocrisy, the injustices it causes, the way it is alluring even to upright and intelligent people.
- 5 It seems almost unbelievable that these things were understood in 1714, yet that even today there are people who still try, actively, to deny that racism is a problem in society, to sneer at and deride attempts to eradicate prejudice. That articles appear in the press comparing workplace training on racism to astrology,⁴ that columnists jeer at “the racism racket”,⁵ that the chairman of a major global company would describe the very concept of racial bias as “complete and utter [four-letter word]”⁶ – these things are shocking. Did John Toland write in vain?



- 6 Racial prejudice absolutely exists, even in those of us who are proud to label ourselves broad-minded and tolerant.
- 7 Evolutionarily speaking, there are sound and sensible reasons for these biases. In her book *Sway: unravelling unconscious bias*, the behavioural scientist Dr Pragya Agarwal explains: “Being prejudiced against a perceived out-group increased the chances of safety and survival. Humans have a bias that members of out-groups are less magnanimous and more dangerous than those who belong to in-groups. A fearful reaction to dangerous things is one of the most fundamental reasons for developing prejudices. For instance, to most people, darkness denotes fear and danger, and psychologists have shown that darkness can trigger the latent tendency for ethnic stereotypes.”⁷
- 8 Between them, John Toland and Pragya Agarwal successfully plot the link between the reflexive and innate fears programmed into all of our brains, and the real-world consequences of these fears playing out: real-world consequences that ruin (or end) lives, cement inequality, and, on a macro level, destabilise nations.
- 9 And it is all a mistake! Dr Agarwal describes it as unconscious; Toland observed that even the intelligentsia find it hard to put aside their evolutionary instincts.



- 10 The Torah is incredibly forgiving of humans who make mistakes. In this Shabbat's parashah, we are told of all sorts of different types of sacrifice which may be brought to atone for sin. But perhaps the most interesting is the one which the rabbis refer to as an **אשם תלוי**, an offering for a case of doubtful sin.⁸
- 11 The main example the rabbis give is of someone who had two pieces of meat in front of them, one permitted and one forbidden, and who cannot remember which they ate.⁹
- 12 But it goes wider than that. The Sefer ha-Chinuch, a 13th-century commentary on the 613 commandments, tells us that the real message of the **אשם תלוי** is that "one should be careful, and closely analyse all of their actions so that they do not stumble into sin, and while the Torah requires us to bring an **אשם תלוי** when we have been careless, this offering atones only for the laziness that allowed the sin to occur in the first place".¹⁰
- 13 Jews have been victims of the cruel real-world impacts of what began, no doubt, as prejudice in the minds of our persecutors, before spilling over into sickening violence. As John Toland sadly wrote, "the annals of all European nations are foully besmear'd with the Jews' blood, and it wou'd be



endless to relate the havoc that was made of their goods and persons in every country".¹¹

14 Yet our status as victims of racism does not somehow immunise us from being carriers of it. Almost a year has passed since Stephen Bush released his report on racism within the UK Jewish community.¹² Of particular relevance to Toland's warning about vulgar prejudices, the Bush report recommended that all leaders in the community should receive training on ethnic diversity.¹³

15 It seems to me that training, or, even less ambitiously than that, a little bit of thought, is the bare minimum duty we carry as responsible members of society. We can't rid ourselves of our genetic make-up, any more than the man in the rabbis' example of an accidental sinner could force himself to remember which of the two pieces of meat he ate.

16 But we can do what the Sefer ha-Chinuch advised: analyse our behaviours. Eschew the laziness of self-satisfaction. Take care. Recognise that, when it comes to vulgar prejudice, we are all **אשמי תלוי**, and we must all resolve to do better.

17 Well – all of us except, perhaps, John Toland, who, on his deathbed 300 years ago today, could justifiably reflect back on the words he wrote in his pamphlet urging equal treatment for the Jews: "I cannot but enjoy the



particular satisfaction of having discharged what I believ'd to be my duty.”¹⁴

זכרונו לברכה: may his memory be for a blessing.

GKW 11.03.22

¹ John Toland. *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland on the Same Foot with All Other Nations, containing also a defence of the Jews against all vulgar prejudices in all countries* (1714). Reprinted in P Radin (ed), *Pamphlets Relating to the Jews in England during the 17th and 18th Centuries* (San Fransisco: California State Library, 1939), 40-65: 64 – <<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=wu.89088247440&view=rup&seq=103&skin=2021>>

² Pierre Lurbe. “John Toland and the naturalization of the Jews”, *Eighteenth-century Ireland* 14 (1999), 37-48: 46.

³ Toland, *ibid*: 49, 50.

⁴ Carrie Clark. “Unconscious-bias training is divisive nonsense”, *Spiked* (28 September 2020): <<https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/09/28/unconscious-bias-training-is-divisive-nonsense/>>

⁵ Joanna Williams. “The racism racket”, *Spiked* (9 April 2021): <<https://www.spiked-online.com/2021/04/09/the-racism-racket/>>

⁶ Joanna Partridge. “‘Unconscious bias is crap’: KPMG staff share shock at UK chair’s comments”, *The Guardian* (11 February 2021): <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/feb/11/unconscious-bias-is-utter-crap-kpmg-staff-shock-uk-chair-zoom-comments-bill-michael>>

⁷ Pragma Agarwal. *Sway: unravelling unconscious bias* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020): ch 2 (e-book edition).

⁸ Derived from Leviticus 5:17; the term **אשם תלוי** itself is rabbinic, see eg m.Zevachim 5:5.

⁹ *Sefer ha-Chinuch* 128

¹⁰ *Ibid* (in a fairly loose translation).

¹¹ Toland, *ibid*: 51.

¹² Stephen Bush. *Commission on Racial Inclusivity in the Jewish Community* (Board of Deputies: April 2021): <<https://www.bod.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Commission-on-Racial-Inclusivity-in-the-Jewish-Community.pdf>>

¹³ *Ibid*: recommendations 93, 117 etc.

¹⁴ Toland, *ibid*: 64.