

STOPPING GUN VIOLENCE
Shabbat December 21, 2012
Rabbi Suzanne Singer

In this week's Torah, portion, Joseph asks his brothers: "Is my father still alive?" Very unfortunately, that question resonates with last week's tragedy in Newtown, Ct. How many parents must have asked a similar question, upon learning of the shootings: "Is my child still alive?"¹

And all too often, families and friends have asked, "Is my loved one still alive?" following the shootings at Virginia Tech; Aurora, Colorado; Oak Creek, Wisconsin; Tucson, Arizona, and so many more.

Aside from these horrific mass shootings, every day, people are killed by guns, every day, children in our inner cities have to dodge bullets on their way to school or sitting at the dinner table at night.

Did you know that children ages 5 to 14 in America are 13 times as likely to be murdered with guns as children in other industrialized countries?²

That is what New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof reports, adding that a life is lost to guns every 20 minutes in this country.

That's 8 children and 75 adults who die from gun violence every day.³

In fact, more than 30,000 lives are lost every year to firearms.

Kristof also reports that:

¹ Suggested by Rabbi David Lerner.

² Nicholas Kristof, "Do We Have the Courage to Stop This?" *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 16, 2012.

³ From Rabbi Josh Davidson's sermon, December 15, 2012, on the Religious Action Center website.

“More Americans die in gun homicides and suicides in 6 months than have died in the last 25 years in every terrorist attack and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.”

Isn't it time to do a better job of regulating guns?

We are not talking about denying people the right to buy guns.

We are talking about sensible laws to protect people against the abuse of guns.

Right now, in 33 states, criminals can buy guns at gun shows

without background checks. Guns can be purchased online

without background checks. In fact, 40% of gun sales nationwide take place without any checks at all.

And is there any reason for people to own assault weapons

with multiple, high-capacity clips, each capable of holding 30 bullets

like the killer in Newtown?

California actually has one of the strictest bans on assault weapons in the nation.

As The New York Times puts it, the California law forbids

“semiautomatic rifles and pistols with easy-to-reload, detachable magazines, if they also have just one other military-style accessory.”

Isn't it time for another federal ban?

Nick Kristof points out that there are more regulations for toy guns

than there are for real ones, and way more regulations for ladders, school buses and school cafeterias.

He also quotes one of his Facebook followers saying:

“It is more difficult to adopt a pet than it is to buy a gun.”⁴

He suggests we “impose a universal background check for gun buyers, even with private sales...make serial numbers more difficult to erase, and back California’s effort to require that new handguns imprint a microstamp on each shell so that it can be traced back to a particular gun.”⁵

These suggestions are well within the values of our tradition.

As Rabbi Josh Davidson explains:

“Civil legislation in Deuteronomy prioritizes public safety, with the Talmud and subsequent legal codes demanding that any threats to public safety be removed, and even that circumstances causing the public to fear for its safety be similarly eliminated.”⁶ The Talmud actually prohibits the distribution of weapons to those who would resell them to criminals. Selling weapons to enemies was strictly forbidden since they might use them against you.⁷ Jewish law permits one to sell weapons to friendly neighbors and even to allied nations .⁸

However one cannot sell weapons of any kind to someone who has committed murder or to a “cowardly thief.”

⁴ Kristof column, December 16, 2012.

⁵ Kristof, 12/16/12

⁶ From Rabbi Josh Davidson’s sermon, December 15, 2012.

⁷ Avodah Zarah 15b, from *Tablet* magazine, “The Jewish View on Weapons,” December 19, 2012.

⁸ Avodah Zarah 16a, from *Tablet* magazine, *ibid.*

The Talmud also records a debate between Rabbi Eliezer and a group of sages about whether one may carry weapons on Shabbat. According to Eliezer, weapons like swords, bows, or cudgels were considered “adornments” like jewelry or hair ribbons. Since these items are essentially like one’s clothing we don’t have to worry about them violating the prohibition against carrying on Shabbat, he argues.

The sages disagree. They call these weapons a “disgrace” and point to the text from the book of Isaiah: “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” As always, when in contention with Rabbi Eliezer, the sages win the debate.⁹

I think we can extrapolate from this that our tradition urges us to make sure we sell guns to responsible folks without a history of mental illness or a criminal background.

What effect will gun legislation have?

Well, if Australia is any example, a mass killing there in 1996 led to legislation that “banned semi-automatic and pump-action rifles and shotguns, bought back more than 650,000 of these weapons from existing owners, and tightened requirements for licensing, registration, and safe storage of firearms.

⁹ The Mishnah, in Tractate Shabbat, from *Tablet* magazine, *ibid*.

While 13 gun massacres occurred in Australia in the 18 years before the [legislation], resulting in more than one hundred deaths, in the 14...years [since], there were no gun massacres.”¹⁰

The murder rate from firearms has dropped 40%, and suicides have been cut by more than half.

If you are wondering what you and I can do about the tragedies we have been witnessing in epidemic proportions, we can urge our politicians to pass sensible legislation.

I have a handout with some resources – to receive more information on guns, to contact the president, senators, and congress people, to sign petitions.

This is a wake-up call.

We must all take responsibility for protecting one another from this senseless violence.

Let us not be swayed by false arguments such as: “Guns don’t kill, people do.” Ironically, the same day of the Newtown tragedy, 22 children were stabbed in front of a primary school in China.

None of them died. Had the knife-wielding man had the kind of weapon Adam Lanza used in Newtown, those children would not be alive today.

¹⁰ Harvard Injury Control Research Center,
http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/research/hicrc/files/bulletins_australia_spring_2011.pdf.

Let us do all we can to ensure a future where firearms are used to hunt deer, not people, and where mothers and fathers no longer have to ask:

“Is my child still alive?” following a murderous gun rampage.

Let us beat our swords into plowshares.

Ken yehi ratzon – may this be God’s will.