

A Week After Sandy Hook

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Rabbi Adam Stock Spilker

This has been a grueling week. Half way through our festival of lights, no number of candles could dispel the darkness of the extinguished lives of Newtown, Connecticut.

Our hearts have been filled with sadness, aching for those affected by this great tragedy, and our prayers have been extended to the children, families, and teachers of that small place, now Our Town, Connecticut.

I reread this week a sermon I gave on April 23, 1999, the Shabbat after Columbine. Our sanctuary was filled that Shabbat with over 150 teens here for a youth weekend. I said then, in sentiments I feel now years later: “We are weary from grieving: Grieving for parents who ache from their loss. Grieving for children whose sense of safety in this world has been shattered. Grieving for a community that has witnessed the unbearable, but will somehow find the strength to move on.”

Over the past days President Obama has spoken our pain and our resolve. There is just one comment he made last Sunday, a theological reflection meant to comfort, yet I must firmly disagree with when he said: “God has called them home.”

Rabbi Robert Levine wrote words that echo my beliefs: “No, Mr. President, God has nothing to do with this unspeakable act. God wanted these precious children and their educators to enjoy full, happy lives. The God I have a relationship with cannot swoop down to stay the hand of the depraved and the ill. God does give us the inspiration to learn from our actions and do better next time. God does implant within us the strength to go on, the hope that as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we will one day see the light. ...”

God also calls upon us to act.

After Columbine, I shared a story I had just heard from Marian Wright Edelman. She is the founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund. She was speaking to a group of teens and youth leaders in Minneapolis; I was there with several Mount Zion teens. She spoke about a man she met in New York whose daughter was killed in the crossfire of a shootout. The man had tried to keep her safe; he had moved to the suburbs, picked her up from school each day, taught her about safety. Someone tried to comfort the grief stricken father: You did everything you could. The father said: No, I did everything for *my* daughter; nothing for my neighbor’s daughter.

The only way forward is about collective responsibility and community action. But which action?

1. Are we to change the way violence is venerated in our society from movies to video games?
2. Are we to wake up to the lack of adequate mental health care in our country?
3. Are we to break the idolatry of gun ownership with sensible gun regulation?

All of these issues are complex and some might feel insurmountable. We will not prevent every future act no matter how much regulation, no matter how much therapy, no matter how many acts of good will.

Our country whether we like it or not is a gun owning country. There are as many responsible gun owners as there are irresponsible non-gun owners. But the simplistic yet effective slogan: "Guns don't kill people; people kill people" has blinded us to the fact that we can still act, we can still limit, we can still ameliorate the dangers in our society.

There have been horrific acts before last Friday and God forbid, but there will be acts to come. In fact it happens daily. 30,000 people die every year in America from guns; almost 2/3rds are suicides. We all know now that the difference between that staggering number and that from any other industrial country is beyond comprehension. And the statistics are clear that the guns are 30x more likely to be used in a homicide or suicide than to defend a person.

We have an opportunity, not one lightly or happily taken, but an opportunity nonetheless at this moment to call upon our leaders for responding now.

In the wisdom of the ethics of our ancestors two millennia ago: "The day is short, the work is heavy, the workers lazy, the wages high, the master of the house, insistent. -Rabbi Tarfon (Pirkei Avot 2:15)

Above all, let us remember this: Sensible gun-regulation is a religious issue. It is not the only thing, we all know that will help, but it will help.

Rabbi Eric Yoffie wrote in an editorial this week: "Controlling guns is not only a political matter; it is a solemn religious obligation. Our gun-flooded society has turned weapons into idols, and the worship of idols must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy. And the only appropriate religious response to blasphemy is sustained moral outrage and focused moral action.

There is not a single word in the sacred Scriptures of the Christian, Jewish or Islamic traditions that either opposes commonsensical gun control or supports the idea of some God-given right to automatic weapons that fire 100 shots in a single minute."

Jewish tradition debated how to think about weapons two millennia ago in the Mishnah, Shabbat 6:4. This was in a time – mind you – of Roman occupation:

One should not go out with a sword, bow, shield, club, or spear. And if one went out [with these items], that person is liable to a sin offering. R. Eliezer says, "They are ornaments." But the sages say, "They are nothing but ugly, since it is said, 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 any more (Isaiah 2:4)." [Translation by Rori Picker Neiss]

The minority report is preserved, these weapons are fine; what's the problem, but the sages object.

If you feel moved and want to know what you can do, The Jewish Council of Public Affairs has created a petition at www.endgunviolencenow.org expressing our community's pain and our resolve to enact comprehensive reform, including meaningful legislation to limit access to assault weapons and ensure access to quality mental health care for all who need it. A few copies will be available in the lobby.

Friends on this darkest day of the year, may be find the warmth in our hearts, the passion for crafting a better world, for finding strength in times of weakness, and a better day inspire us to give some measure of meaning to the loss of life, that we can improve our society measure by measure.

Ken yihi ratzon.

Before Kaddish: Our thoughts are with the friends and families of those whose lives were taken. A prayer by Rabbi Rick Sherwin:

Embracing God,
While some ask where are You
that wanton disregard for life
violates all moral standards
in schools, theaters and malls,
we know exactly where You are,
even as You cry in Heaven above
and within our hearts.

You are in those who respond to terror,
offering comfort and compassion
emergency care and medical attention
holding parents as they cry
and calming the shattered innocence
of children.
We recall the words of the Psalmist (6.7)
Our souls burn with deep, searing pain;
how long, Eternal God, will this continue.

We know Your response:
Until you use My gifts:
your resolve to step forward
your strength to speak out
your mouths to speak up;
your insistence not to let your vulnerability
make you feel powerless.

May we see the day when we need not fear
to send our children into the world,
when Your Voice of Conscience guides all.

May we see the fulfillment of the message
offered by the prophet Ezekiel:
And they shall no more be a prey within the nation,
nor shall the beast of the land devour them;

but they shall dwell safely,
and none shall make them afraid.

Charlotte Bacon, 6
Daniel Barden, 7
Olivia Engel, 6
Josephine Gay, 7
Ana Marquez-Greene, 6
Dylan Hockley, 6
Madeleine Hsu, 6
Catherine Hubbard, 6
Chase Kowalski, 7
Jesse Lewis, 6
James Mattioli, 6
Grace McDonnell, 7
Emilie Parker, 6
Jack Pinto, 6
Noah Pozner, 6
Caroline Previdi, 6
Jessica Rekos, 6
Avielle Richman, 6
Benjamin Wheeler, 6
Allison N. Wyatt, 6
Rachel Davino, 29
Dawn Hochsprung, 47
Nancy Lanza, 52
Anne Marie Murphy, 52
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