

**To Save a Life is to Save the World**  
**Morning RH 2015**  
**Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers**

Final

On Rosh Hashanah, according to Rabbi Kruspedai in the Talmud<sup>1</sup>, three books are opened; one for the thoroughly wicked, one for the thoroughly righteous, and one for the intermediates. The thoroughly righteous are immediately inscribed in the book of life; the thoroughly wicked are immediately inscribed in the book of death; and those in between are held in limbo until Yom Kippur, when their fate is decided. Life and death are powerful motifs during our High Holy Days. We are supposed to see our lives as hanging in the balance and that any deed can tip the celestial balance in our favor.

Life and death are not just metaphors. Whether a person lives or dies dangles precariously for too many people daily. As we talk about choices we can make in living a full life during our *Yamim Noraim* days of Awe, it feels appropriate to explore ways we can tilt the celestial balance in hopes of saving lives during this upcoming year.

In the Mishnah, we have a famous teaching that states:

אִלּוּי נַפְשׁוֹת עוֹלָם לְבַרְכָּהּ . . . תְּפִיטָהּ לְבַרְכָּהּ

Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world.

וְאִלּוּי נַפְשׁוֹת עוֹלָם מְצַדֵּק . . . תְּפִיטָהּ מְצַדֵּק

And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.<sup>2</sup>

Let's take a moment to think about that. We hear of the deaths of hundreds of people in our country. We hear of thousands dying in Syria, Iraq, and other war torn parts of our world. The numbers start to blur. There's a famous quote that states: "A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic." What if we looked at every statistic involving gun violence as a story about an individual, his/her family, and the loss for their friends, community, and future generations? It is not just one more murder or one more mass shooting. In our country, thousands of people lose their lives due to gun violence. While gang hostility and violent neighborhoods have been a part of our country for years, the thing that has changed, is the number of mass shootings and the increasing number of gun deaths that can happen seemingly anywhere, any time. In 2014, the F.B.I. released a report stating that while there were an average of 6.4 shootings from 2000-2006, from 2007-2013, that number more than doubled to 16.4 mass shootings.<sup>3</sup>

For a long time, I was able to distance myself from this issue. I told myself that I live in a good neighborhood, enjoy the company of nice people, but now I feel that I am no longer immune to the possibility of gun violence taking the life of someone I care about. Just four years ago, there was the shooting in our own backyard at a hair salon in Seal Beach. We've had the

Virginia Tech massacre in 2007, Fort Hood shooting in 2009, the killing in Tucson, A.Z, in 2011 that targeted Gabrielle Giffords among others, the movie theater shooting in Colorado in 2012, the shooting of Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012, and the horrible elementary shooting at Sandy Hook in Connecticut. Just this past summer there was the theater shooting in Lafayette, LA, church shooting in Charleston, N.C., and I don't want to keep listing examples. I stand here and I feel afraid for me, for you, and for our children that we could be at the mall, a grocery store, park, county fair, beach, sending our children to school, or working in our office when a mentally ill or deranged person goes on a shooting spree.

I find no consolation in saying, "Well that's the price for living in America". This is because that is not the price in other western nations. According to a 2007 report by the Switzerland-based Small Arms Survey, the United States ranks number one in firearms per capita and we have the highest homicide by firearm rate among the world's most developed nations. <sup>4</sup> The United Nations office of Drugs and Crime data base confirms that the US has a much higher rate of homicides than all but 3 out of 34 nations surveyed. For example, we have more homicides than Israel, Canada, France, and the United Kingdom to name a few. The country that is top of the charts to no surprise is Mexico. <sup>5</sup>

Second amendment and gun control, I know are very controversial topics. To be honest, I don't know how provocative it is for our community. I look forward to hearing your perspectives on this after services. There are good people who feel strongly that the Second Amendment is necessary. My husband for example is a proud owner of a firearm. This was a shock to me when we were dating because growing up in the suburbs of Buffalo, I didn't know anyone to have a gun. My husband made the case that he feels strongly that he as a law abiding citizen should be able to have a fire arm and that it is protected by the constitution. He also worries that if only the police and criminals have access to fire arms, then we could be in a different kind of danger. In addition, he just loves going to a shooting range and firing at targets.

I recognize that there are many responsible gun owners. But it only takes one person who wants to take vengeance, only one person who is mentally unstable to commit carnage that can devastate families and our community. It just takes an individual to shoot up a church in North Carolina, one to fire in a movie theater, and one to go on rampage at a school. Where do you draw the line between the rights and desire of people and the safety of others?

We are here in a synagogue on Rosh Hashanah so let's take a look at Jewish tradition. Not surprising, we don't have texts dealing with guns because they weren't around during the days of

the Talmud and Middle Ages. However, we do have teachings about weapons of the day such as swords, axes, dangerous animals, and intriguing thoughts about self-defense.

First of all, I have to acknowledge that Judaism has always taught that we can and should defend ourselves. In the Talmud, for example, if a thief breaks into our house and we assume that he is going to fight us, we can kill him first.<sup>6</sup> Moses Maimonides teaches in the Mishneh Torah that if someone is pursuing another person with the intent of killing him, we must do everything possible to save his life. If there are no other options, we can kill the pursuer, i.e. the would be murderer.<sup>7</sup> In Judaism, we are not taught to turn the other cheek. We must save lives and protect others. We can and must defend ourselves. However, these texts that I have shared with you deal with imminent threats where someone is coming at a person in the moment. They don't deal with hypothetical risks.

Even though we can defend ourselves against danger, there's a fascinating selection in the Talmud where the rabbis debate whether one should be able to walk around on Shabbat with a sword, bow, shield, or spear. Rabbi Eliezer feels that these are adornments and should be permitted. However the sages over rule him and express that it is shameful for one to carry weapons on Shabbat. They quote Isaiah, "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares" as reflecting the values of peace.<sup>8</sup> Now one could say this text is only about Shabbat and not about the other 6 days of the week. I think it demonstrates the sage's discomfort with individuals carrying weapons in general.

There's not only concern with the appearance of having arms but also who owns them. The Talmud deals with the question of whether you can you sell weapons to anyone. In Avodah Zarah<sup>9</sup>, we learn that one is warned not to sell weapons or their accessories to idolaters. Avodah Zarah, idol worship, was a major transgression in the day but the rabbis didn't stop there. They also included a prohibition on selling weapons to anyone who might have criminal intentions such as a robber. Also we have a warning about selling dangerous animals such as bears or lions to certain people because they may injure the public. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Jewish legal code known as Shulchan Aroch we learn that an owner in a city must even keep his dangerous dog tied up.<sup>10</sup> While there is concern about the dog defending his master, there is a greater concern with it harming others.

Through these texts, we see the understanding that individuals can and should defend themselves. However there are concerns about "open carry" on Shabbat, selling weapons to the wrong kind of people, and preventing a vicious dog from attacking someone. Clearly the rabbis are not only concerned with personal protection but also the safety of others in a neighborhood. Our religion is concerned first and foremost with life, the saving and preservation of lives and the well-being of our society. This is why you cannot find within Judaism an unequivocal call to

arms for all and at all times.

The proliferation of guns and gun violence is solely an American phenomena. Those who clamor for unfettered access to firearms cite the second amendment from our constitution. The second amendment reads as follows: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a Free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." Now these words can be interpreted in different ways. It can be limited to a militia or can be applied to individuals. The Supreme Court ruled in 2010 that an individual has a right to bear arms and this cannot be violated by the state and local governments.<sup>11</sup> While this was a controversial ruling, even if it is upheld for years to come, it still doesn't mean all guns, all times, to all people.

The thing about our constitution is that it does not give absolute freedom. For example, the first amendment to our Bill of Rights states that "Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech." We have the freedom to speak our mind. We can stand on a box on the corner of PCH and Main and shout out our views on God and the world. This right though is not unequivocal. The Supreme Court has placed limits on speech so that one can't engage in obscenity, child pornography, or speech that constitutes so called "fighting words" or "true threats." In essence, if our speech endangers someone else, it is not protected by the first amendment.<sup>12</sup>

If there are limitations on the first amendment for the sake of safety and health of others, then of course there should be on the second amendment as well. Especially since there is a paucity of evidence to support that having a gun makes a person safer. I'm aware that there's a study from 1995 that has been cited in support of guns being used defensively but it has been widely discredited based on several methodological flaws. On the other hand, a study in 2013 by the Violence Policy Center cites a low number of guns being used defensively. Moreover, according to the New England Journal of Medicine, living in a home where guns are kept increased an individual's risk of death by homicide by between 40 and 170%.

If there are ways to save lives, prevent criminal acts, shouldn't they be considered? If Judaism teaches to save a life is to save a world, how do we save more lives?

As I have been researching for this sermon, I have some suggestions to make even though I must acknowledge as I learn more, I will could easily add or change some of these suggestions.

- I. Looking at the laws on the books: Why can't we objectively look at our gun control laws nationally and in various states and verify which ones are effective and which ones aren't? If they are making a difference, we can continue or enhance them. On the other hand, just adding more laws doesn't make sense if they aren't effective. Can we evaluate which laws are being readily enforced and which ones aren't? What are the consequences? Do we have the ability to ascertain which laws really prevent gun violence and which ones don't? I'm advocating for a smarter, research based approach to our gun laws in our country both federally and state wide.
  
- II. I believe very strongly that there needs to be back ground checks on everyone! I'm reminding you of that teaching I just shared from Avodah Zarah that places limits on who can purchase a weapon. We must verify if a person is mentally unstable, has a restraining order against them, or criminal record before they are able to get a fire arm and ammunition. These background checks needs to be in any situation where a person could procure a gun whether it is from a store, gun show, internet, or even a gift from a relative. Yes, I hear that guns don't kill, people do. However, just as we don't give two year olds sharp scissors to run around with, we shouldn't be providing weapons to unstable individuals. We have a responsibility to protect lives.
  
- III. Training: I believe that just as someone has to prove that they understand the laws and can drive safely before they get behind the wheel of a car, I believe there should be a process before one can purchase a gun and ammunition. Just because someone is old enough to drive doesn't mean they aren't a danger to others on the road. People who desire to have fire arms should not only be trained on how to use fire arms but how to store them safety. This doesn't have to be a lengthy or involved procedure. It can simply be an inexpensive workshop and simple brief test. I believe given how lethal fire arms can be in the wrong hands that it is important for all gun owners to be responsible for their fire arms and for them to know how to take precautions so their children or other people don't accidentally get their hands on them.
  
- IV. I think we also need to look for ways to lessen violence in our society. We need to focus not only on mass shootings but also the regular gun violence. There's an intriguing movement called "Cure violence: understanding violence: looking at that root causes of intercity violence."<sup>14</sup> Their approach to gun violence is similar to how a doctor would work towards treating an illness. This movement identifies that most aggressive behavior is socially learned, is unconscious, and exposure to violence increases a person's risk of

becoming violent. There are neurological, physiological, and psychological effects that accompany violence. This approach teaches that “violence is transmitted in the same manner as a disease. It has been said for a long time that violence begets violence, but it is just as tuberculosis begets tuberculosis, or flu begets flu, that violence begets violence.” Their solutions are based on behavior change techniques and interventions in communities.

- V. Mental health has been getting more attention as well as it should be. We need more resources for mental illness so people in need have access to psychologists, psychiatrists, and mental hospitals. We as a society haven’t made this available to those who don’t have the financial ability.

I have heard the argument that no matter what we do, there is no way to prevent all gun violence. Criminals will get their guns from Mexico, people will illegally share weapons. That may very well be true, but even we can’t stop all acts, even if we can only save some lives isn’t it worth it? What if one mass shooting could be prevented, how many people will be affected? Think of our lives. If we were to perish in a shooting, how many family members, friends, and members of our community would be impacted? It’s not really a numbers game. The Mishneh teaches

אִלּוּ אֶתְּמוּתָא דְּיָמֵינוּ אֵין מְשַׁלְּמֵי עוֹלָם

Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world.

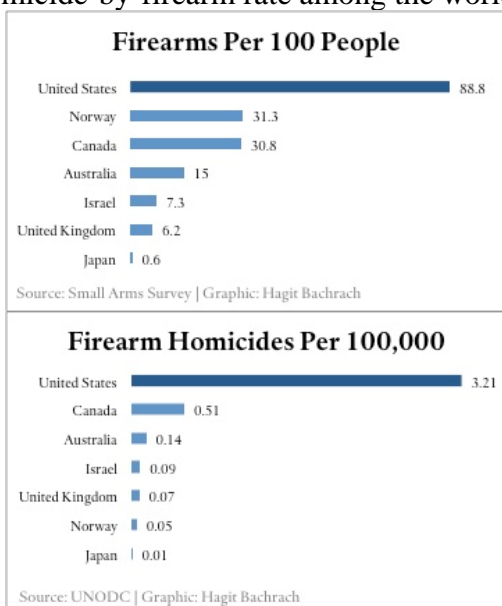
אִלּוּ אֶתְּמוּתָא דְּיָמֵינוּ אֵין מְשַׁלְּמֵי עוֹלָם

And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.<sup>2</sup>

If even one life could be saved, wouldn’t it be worth it?

**Notes:**<sup>1</sup> RH 16B<sup>2</sup> Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 37a<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/us/25shooters.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/25/us/25shooters.html?_r=0).<https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/2014/september/fbi-releases-study-on-active-shooter-incidents/pdfs/a-study-of-active-shooter-incidents-in-the-u.s.-between-2000-and-2013><sup>4</sup> <http://www.cfr.org/society-and-culture/us-gun-policy-global-comparisons/p29735>

The United States, with less than 5 percent of the world's population, has about 35–50 percent of the world's civilian-owned guns, according to a 2007 report by the Switzerland-based Small Arms Survey. It ranks number one in firearms per capita. The United States also has the highest homicide-by-firearm rate among the world's most developed nations.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.businessinsider.com/oecd-homicide-rates-chart-2015-6><sup>6</sup> Sanhedrin 72a

Sanhedrin 72 a MISHNAH. [THE THIEF] WHO BURROWS HIS WAY IN<sup>2</sup> IS JUDGED ON ACCOUNT OF ITS PROBABLE OUTCOME. .

GEMARA. Raba said: what is the reason for the law of breaking in? Because it is certain that no man is inactive where his property is concerned; therefore this one [the thief] must have reasoned, 'If I go there, he [the owner] will oppose me and prevent me; but if he does I will kill him.' Hence the Torah decreed, 'If he come to slay thee, forestall by slaying him'.

<sup>7</sup> Mishneh Torah- Maimonides Rotseah uShmirat Nefesh - Chapter One Halacha 6

.. When, however, a person is pursuing a colleague with the intention of killing him - even if the pursuer is a minor - every Jewish person is commanded to attempt to save the person being pursued, even if it is necessary to kill the pursuer.

<sup>8</sup> Talmud, Shabbat 63a:

One must not go out [on Shabbat] with a sword, nor with a bow, nor with a triangular shield, nor with a round one, nor with a spear; if he does so he is liable for a sin-offering. R. Eliezer says they are ornaments to him [and thus permitted to be worn on Shabbat], but the sages say they are nothing but a stigma, for it is written [Isaiah 2:4]: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-knives; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

<sup>9</sup> Avodah Zarah 15 B & 16 A

R. Dimi b. Abba said: Just as it is forbidden to sell<sup>23</sup> to an idolater, so it is forbidden to sell to a robber who is an Israelite. What are the circumstances? If he is suspected of murder, then it is quite plain; he is the same as an idolater! If [on the other hand] he has never committed murder, why not [sell them to him]? — It refers indeed to one who has not committed murder; but we may be dealing here with a cowardly thief who is apt at times [when caught] to save himself [by committing murder].

Our Mishnah says: ONE SHOULD NOT SELL THEM BEARS, LIONS, OR ANYTHING WHICH MAY INJURE THE PUBLIC. The reason, then, is because they may injure the public, but were it not for fear of injury to the public would it be permitted?<sup>2</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Shulchan Aruch Choshen Mishpat 409:3

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/28/AR2010062802134.html> Supreme court ruling 2010

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/95-815.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <http://smartgunlaws.org/category/gun-studies-statistics/gun-violence-statistics/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://cureviolence.org/understand-violence/science-of-violent-behavior/>