

**Gun safety**  
RH morning 2022  
Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

A world-renowned cardiologist sadly died. He was so famous that he was given an extremely elaborate funeral that was attended by his fellow physicians, family members, friends and members of the public who he'd treated over the years.

During the service, there was a huge heart made out of flowers that stood behind the casket. At the end of the service, the heart opened and the casket slowly rolled inside. When the casket had disappeared, the heart then closed, sealing the doctor inside forever.

Everyone was very emotional and crying at this beautiful moment, except for one mourner who burst into laughter. Everyone turned to stare angrily at him.

He said, "I'm sorry, I was just thinking about my own funeral – I'm a gynecologist."<sup>1</sup>

Joking aside, I wish that I wasn't delivering this sermon today. I've spoken of this topic at previous High Holy Day and Shabbat services over the years. I wish that I could stand here before you and say that gun violence and mass shootings are in the past; that we have crossed the Rubicon, we have surpassed the peak of gun violence in our country, things are finally looking better for the next generation. It sadly isn't. Mass shootings are becoming more frequent and more deadly. And I'm deeply worried about it. I'm scared for you, our families, and the people around our country however I believe there are things we can do about it.

But first of all, I want to address why this is a Jewish topic worthy of sharing with you during one of most sacred days of our year. On Rosh Hashanah, according to the Talmud, the books of life and death are opened and on Yom Kippur our fate is sealed. Life and death are integral to the High Holy Days. Our lives literally and figuratively hang in the balance. And then there's that haunting prayer, *Untaneh Tokef*, who shall live and who shall die, by medieval Rabbi Ammon of Mayence. In this recitation, we have a listings of the ways one will die such as, who by hanging, who by famine, or who by sword. Today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we could easily add the lines, "Who will be shot in the grocery store? Who shall perish in a classroom? Who will die attending a concert? And who will be murdered at a 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade?"

For me, when I am deeply troubled, I read and I study and so I have read many articles and recently read [The Violence Project](#). In previous sermons, I have spoken about strengthening our gun laws nationally, making it easier for people to red flag those who could be a danger to themselves and others, mandatory training for anyone to purchase a gun so that they know how to fire it and safely store it. I have shared with you before that the United States stands alone among western nations in having the highest number per capita of deaths due to gun violence. If you were to compare us to England, Germany, and Japan, there is no contest. Our nation is sadly

exceptional in a very grim way.<sup>2</sup> “Americans are ten times more likely to be killed by guns than people in other, similar high-income countries...the U.S. gun homicide rate is about eight times higher than the rate in neighboring Canada, eighteen times higher than in the United Kingdom, and twenty to thirty times higher than in Scandinavian Europe.”<sup>3</sup>

There are so many responses to gun deaths and mass shootings in our country. There are those who argue from the extreme such as taking away all guns from people. We recognize that will never happen. Our 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment is fixed in our constitution and will remain protected. On the other side, there’s an argument that gun deaths are the price for this freedom. This statement is anathema to me and completely counter to Jewish values. The idea that deaths are acceptable is to throw in the towel and accept greater and greater numbers of tragedies. I believe we owe it to ourselves, our children, and grandchildren to do better.

The Violence Project by Dr. Jillian Peterson & Dr. James Densley is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research center known worldwide for its work on mass shooting prevention and there’s a recent book that just came out. These professors have studied mass shootings, where four or more people are murdered in a public location, from 1966 to 2021, a total of 172 of them.<sup>4</sup> They have interviewed family members of the shooter, the few shooters who are still alive in prison, victim families, first responders, those who knew the shooter, and experts.

Peterson and Densley start with the premise that shooters are not monsters but they are among us, going to school, working alongside us, and in our communities. And the circumstances that leads one to commit a mass atrocity can be averted at a number of points before it comes to fruition. There are a number of off ramps, they assert, before a person takes a lethal weapon and murders men, women, and children. The researchers go into detail about how a person has a crisis, feels hopelessness and despair, and then becomes suicidal. And then, they search online and easily find sites that normalize their despair and turn it into anger and rage in the form of hateful ideologies. It is on such sites that murder and violence are glorified and individuals will aspire to be known for something, even if its murder. The last step is procurement of guns which is all too easy. And then they make their plans and often leave clues in the wake of their criminal act.

As we look at the terrible toll of gun violence and mass shootings in our society, there are many solutions put forward. What I like about Peterson and Densley is that their solutions are research based and multi-faced. It begins with mental health care. These professors assert the importance of counselors and therapists at every school in our country and accessible care to adults as well. This is significant because many schools around our country have no health professionals and when they do so, often there aren’t enough of them for the population they serve. Let’s take that in for a minute. Many schools lack basic mental health care.

The researchers then advocate for there to be teams in place in schools and work places where teachers, workers, counselors, principals, and bosses can share information about someone who is in need or in danger. This is because often more than one person notices that someone is struggling. This is not just to prevent a possible shooter, it's to provide support to those who are in pain. Peterson and Densley point out the importance of relationships that can help those who have experienced multiple traumas in their lives. They write, "According to the Harvard Center for the Developing Child, the single most common factor for children who are resilient in the face of trauma is a stable, committed relationship with a supportive adult in their lives."<sup>5</sup> Even one connection can help alleviate the strain of isolation and depression that can precede one taking his/her life.

As I speak about psychological care, it's important to note that most people with mental illness are not violent. Just because someone is depressed or has another diagnosis, does not mean they will harm themselves or others. In fact, they are more likely to be the victim of a crime.<sup>6</sup> It is only with certain types with trauma, suicidal ideation, getting radicalized online, and easy access to firearms that will lead some people to take the lives of others as well as themselves.

Mass shootings, Peterson and Densley inform, are a form of suicide. Shooters will devote lots of energy to researching past shootings, canvas their target, procure their weapons, and even write a manifesto but put little to no thought into how they will get away. It is their last act. And so, there is much to be gained in helping those who are at risk for any number of ailments.

Schools are investing millions dollars in putting up walls, locks on doors, having security guards, and putting children through active shooter training that ends up only creating more trauma. Peterson and Densley write based on "data on 133 completed and attempted school mass shootings over the past forty years show that there were no differences in the number of people killed or injured between schools that regularly ran lockdown drills and those who didn't."<sup>7</sup> According to researchers, "There's no evidence that any of this "hardening" works."<sup>8</sup> This is because school shooters are the children themselves and measures to keep the 'bad guys' out only just lock everyone in. Instead, wouldn't our resources be better served in procuring counselors, therapists, and crisis teams not only for the young but also for adults as well?

Just think of what how our society would benefit from making psychological and psychiatric care accessible and affordable. How many suicides could we prevent? What about interventions that can give traumatized teens and adults a chance at leading productive lives? There are too many people struggling alone as they turn to alcohol, drugs, and violence. There are too many people who lack healthy methods of coping with loss, frustration, and anger. If those at risk, had access, at little to no cost, for mental health care, they would be less likely be

homeless, criminal, or destructive. This would be a substantial investment for our society but we would all gain immensely.

Yes, we have had troubled individuals in the past but what is different today is the proliferation of social media. Solitary or at risk individuals can be lured easily to hateful sites where they are radicalized. It is too easy for a disgruntled teen or man, and it is almost always a male, to find common voices of anger, rage and hate on line. It is on these sites that violence is normalized such as 8chan and Gab, and they learn from each other and from previous mass shootings. And then they strive to outdo the last one. There's an immense role for social media sites to govern this kind of hate. And the rest of our media have a responsibility to avoid giving publicity to shooters. One shooter in 2015 wrote that, "Seems like the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight."<sup>9</sup> The killer at the Pulse night club in 2017 in Florida kept checking Facebook and Twitter to make sure his massacre went viral.<sup>10</sup> No Notoriety, an organization started by a bereaved parent in response to the 2012 shooting at movie theater in Colorado was created to starve any shooters of getting their names publicized.<sup>11</sup> This is to prevent inspiring future shooters. No more name recognition, no more fascination with them. No blaze of glory.

And then, we come to the elephant in the room, easily accessible guns. It's impossible to have a mass shooting without a gun. Suicide is much harder without a gun. I speak from experience on this one. When I was in high school, my boyfriend attempted to take his life. He had given me, what I thought was a love note to open in the morning, when it turned out to be a goodbye letter. That morning after a few moments processing my shock, I called his house. His mother answered, "Nancy dear, how are you?" "Mrs Goldblatt, please check on Jason!" I exclaimed. The phone went silent for quite a while until his older brother came to the phone and said they were taking Jason to the hospital. He swallowed as many pills as he could, was unconscious, but this gave an opportunity for intervention that ultimately saved his life.

Densley and Peterson highlight the importance of making it harder for a person to procure a weapon. We must strengthen our red flag laws in every state because it is easy to purchase a gun in Las Vegas and then go to California and murder such as what happened at the Garlic festival in 2019. Also, improved back ground checks. They point out that 63% of mass shooters procured their weapon legally<sup>12</sup> and this is why it is worthwhile to have some process involved before anyone can get a gun. The researchers take aim at the law where the FBI has only three days to allow or deny a purchase. If the FBI hasn't concluded its investigation, the gun purchase goes through. Densley and Peterson argue for a longer period of time so the FBI has time to do a back ground check and also that delaying a person who wishes to kill from getting firearm, can actually prevent some shootings.<sup>13</sup>

They also give examples of cases where a killing didn't happen because of a conversation with a guidance counselor, a friend reaching out, or a situation where some of the stress on the would be killer was lessened. They argue that mass shootings don't happen spontaneously and there is often an opportunity to slow it down or even prevent it from happening. Vigilance on our part can make a big difference. "Eighty-six percent of mass shooters aged twenty and under leak their plans in advance."<sup>14</sup> There was a woman in in the Midwest who saw a boy going to a shed, reported it, and prevented a mass shooting.

Sometimes one will hear that there's no way to prevent all mass shootings or shootings in general. I believe that there's truth to that but what if we could stop one of them?

In Judaism, we value life, even the life of one person. We are taught in the Mishneh

שְׁכַל הַמַּאֲבָד נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת .. כְּאִלּוּ עוֹלָם מְלֵא

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

וְכֹל הַמְּקַיֵּם נֶפֶשׁ אַחַת, קַיֵּם עוֹלָם מְלֵא

And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.<sup>15</sup>

One life equals an entire world. What if the Ulvade massacre never happened? All nineteen of those 4<sup>th</sup> graders were still alive, the parents still had their sons and daughters, families still had their siblings, cousins, grandchildren? What if the two educators lived? How about the other children at the school not going through such a traumatic event? What if we could spare one life, and even one family the tragedy? What if it was our child? There is no doubt that any effort is worthwhile, if it can save even one life.

This past June, I started to have some hope because we had bipartisan legislation that was worked on by both Republicans and Democrats that expanded background check system for gun buyers under the age 21, set aside funding for intervention programs, strengthened red flag laws, and mental health resources. While this may not be enough, it is a step in the right direction. To lessen the number of gun deaths in our country, to reduce the number of mass shootings is going to take an immense effort but we have so much to gain.

What would it look like if during this year, we saw a decrease in the number of mass shootings that the number deaths due to gun violence went down?

There's a teaching out of Pirkei Avot (2:15), Chapters of our Fathers,

רַבִּי טַרְפוֹן אוֹמֵר, הַיּוֹם קָצָר וְהַמְּלָאכָה מְרֻבָּה

Rabbi Tarfon said: the day is short, and the work is immense,

The task ahead is hard, time is running short, but we must not desist from trying, trying to save lives. We must strive to have a country where our children can go to school without fear, where we can go to work, entertainment venues, houses of worship, in safety. That our next generation will be blessed with long and fulfilling lives. And we pray, that through our actions more people will be inscribed in the book of life.

**Notes**

1 <https://laffgaff.com/funny-death-funeral-jokes/>

2 The Violence Project pg. 19

3 “ “ pg. 21

4 “ “ pg.11

5 “ “ pg 51

6 ” “ pg. 59

7 “ “ Pg. 108

8 “ “ pg. 90

9 “ “ pg. 111

10 “ “ pg. 113

11 pg. 13 & 118

12 “ “ pg. 159

13 “ pg. 162-163

14 pg. 79

15 Mishneh

16 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/25/us/politics/gun-control-bill-biden.html>