

May 25, 2022/ Iyar 24 5782

SUBJ: The Massacre in Uvalde, Texas

Dear Judea Reform Friends,

The drive to school this morning felt longer than ever. That's because it was. About halfway through the drive, with Caleb and Carmel in the backseat, I heard honking from the car behind me. I glanced at the speedometer to see I was driving 10 mph below the speed limit. It was at that moment that I realized how hesitant I was to even accelerate. I didn't want to arrive at school. I didn't want to let them out of sight.

This was the dread of every parent today, learning about the horrific mass shooting yesterday in Uvalde, Texas, when 19 children and 2 teachers were murdered. It's natural for parents to think, "that could've been my child." It's impossible to comprehend that for these parents of fourth graders, it really was. They will never see their children's eyes sparkle again. This is everyone's worst nightmare.

And so we return to the same onslaught of emotions— to grief, outrage, heartbreak, and despair. Time and time again, our leaders are called upon to speak to these massacres, to "sense-make" that which is senseless. My colleagues and I are called "faith leaders," but we are more often "doubt leaders," wandering like Israelites through a wilderness of ultimate questions for which there are no answers; only lamentation.

Last night, President Biden gave voice to these questions. He did so in God's name, pleading, "How many scores of little children who witnessed what happened see their friends die as if they're on a battlefield, for God's sake?"

How many times will we ask this question before realizing that the people of this nation have already answered it. After Columbine, we answered "more." After Sandy Hook Elementary, "more." Time and again, more and more and more. This year alone, America has tolerated 27 school shootings. Here we've had more mass shootings than days of the year in 2022. What more can we say?

Some will say, undoubtedly, "now is not the time to politicize." What we know from our tradition, however, is that nothing could be further from righteousness than cowering from a civic response. When we find ourselves asking, "who did this," and we answer by naming only the gunman— and not the gun lobby and the political and economic infrastructure that conduce these bloodbaths—we, ourselves, become complicit in the next mass shooting; and the next.

Leviticus teaches, *lo taamod al dam rei'echa*, often mistranslated, "you must not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor" (19:16). Truer to the context of the Holiness Code, the URJ and Eitz Hayyim Torah Commentaries render the verse: "do not profit by the blood of your fellow." As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said decades ago, "some are guilty, all are responsible." So long as we have a say in electing our leaders, shaping our legislatures, and organizing people

and money to dismantle a system that profits from these children's blood, we all bear responsibility.

This affirmation of our responsibilities does not diminish or detract from the prayers we offer to the families of those children and teachers who were killed; it dignifies our tears. Their memories (*zichronam*) - become a blessing (*livracha*) through the mitzvot of the living.

To our parents and teachers, please know that your Judea Reform community is here for you as a spiritual support, extending our love and prayers. On Friday night we will, of course, say Kaddish in the blessed memory of those 21 precious souls. Below I am including resources for those who are tasked with offering direct support to our children, as they ask the very real questions for which there are no answers.

May we seek peace and pursue it, with all our love and all our might.

L'shalom,
Rabbi Matthew V. Soffer

RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES:

The National Association of School Psychologists: "Talking to Children about Violence: Tips for Parents and Teachers"

(<https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-safety-and-crisis/school-violence-resources/talking-to-children-about-violence-tips-for-parents-and-teachers>)

American Psychological Association - "Helping Your Children Manage Distress in the Aftermath of a Shooting" (<https://www.apa.org/topics/gun-violence-crime/shooting-aftermath>)

American Academy of Pediatrics - "Talking to Children about Tragedies and Other News Events" (https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Talking-To-Children-About-Tragedies-and-Other-News-Events.aspx?_ga=2.32699774.1317213026.1653452798-1223965003.1653452798&_gl=1*121c240*_ga*MTlyMzk2NTAwMy4xNjUzNDUyNzk4*_ga_FD9D3XZVQQ*MTY1MzQ1Mjc5OC4xLjEuMTY1MzQ1MzE1MC4w)