



From Rabbi Nancy Wechsler



How?

“One who welcomes the month of Adar increases happiness.” (traditional greeting for the new Hebrew month that begins today.)

I am not sure how we are to do this “increasing of happiness” in the face of Wednesday’s horrific shooting. I know you share with me the sickness and despair caused by these reckless shootings.

A football coach, an athletic director and young, fresh-faced students were among the 17 - people killed by a gunman in Parkland, Florida at their Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

The local deputies were called to the gunman’s family home 39 times since 2010. The neighbors said the gunman used to point BB guns at homes and did target practice in the neighborhood. He also had an Instagram account with posts that include photos of a rifle and a collection of firearms on a bed.

And he legally purchased the firearm used in the shooting at a gun store in Coral Springs, Florida. His public defender described him as a “deeply disturbed, emotionally broken” young man.

There are two profoundly wrong things that we are not sufficiently addressing. The first is gun regulation and the second is mental illness.

Let’s just look at Florida for example:

In Florida, the state does not require a permit or a license for someone to own a gun, nor does a person have to register a firearm. Nor does a person need a permit to conceal a rifle or shotgun although you do need it to conceal a handgun.

In fact, one can purchase as many guns as wanted at one time, gun sellers do not have to get a state license to sell firearms, and Florida does not regulate assault weapons, .50 caliber rifles and large capacity ammunition magazines. The Gliffords Law Center, a gun-control advocacy group that tracks firearms legislation says Florida has 12-gun deaths per 100,000, the 25th highest rate in the nation. Why? In the first article of Florida’s Constitution it says, “The right of the people to keep and bear arms in defense of themselves and the lawful authority of the state shall not be infringed...”

The second issue: Mental Health access. How can it be that there were so many clues to this young man’s illness and yet it could reach this explosive and tragic moment?

Why didn't the local deputies have this information connected with mental health support after called to his home 39 times? Where was the help he and his family desperately need?

Here we are on the first of the month of Adar where we are called to happiness.

However, this year, we need to **earn** that sense of "happiness" through how we address these the way we respond to the violent sickness we have come to feebly tolerate. Happiness does not come by looking the other way. Happiness comes through looking directly into the mess and cleaning it up on all levels.

At Congregation Beth Shalom as well as other congregations in our community, we are addressing mental illness through our programming. With gratitude to CBS member Ellen King and her committee, we held a 4-part series on Mental Health with the National organization, NAMI. (National Association of Mental Illness). We have had speaker, David Woods Bartley on staff of Bread of Life speak with us from the bima. He will be speaking with our teens next month.

As for gun regulation. Years ago, after the 2012 Sandy Hook tragedy where 20 first graders and six adults died by an assault weapon, members of CBS met to mourn and process how anyone perform such atrocity. While more mass shootings occurred, not much has changed in nation's laws. Six years have passed, and more than 400 innocent people have been shot in over 200 school shootings.

Congress has refused to tighten restrictions on gun ownership. It is as though "we are lessening the threshold of how crazy someone needs to be to commit a mass shooting" said Austin Eubanks, who survived the 1999 shooting at Columbine high school. The NRA invested millions and its affiliates spent over \$50 million in political advertisements in the last US general election. What does that tell us about national priorities?

My dear friends, join me in waking to the harsh reality and support one another in being "woke." Pay close attention to opportunities to learn more about mental illness and ways to let our leadership know that lax gun regulation is a pandemic we will no longer permit.

And may we all earn the happiness that the month of Adar longs to share.

Rabbi Nancy Wechsler