

It happened again. A man walked into a secure school armed with an AK-47 with intent to shoot. Luckily and miraculously due to the courage of a front office employee, she managed to not only call 911 but talk the shooter down from his imposing carnage. Her name was Antoinette Tuff. Her name tells her story. She was tough that day!

But the terror the gunman inflicted was overwhelming. Children and teachers snuck out the back of the school, while the police cut open a wire fence so the children could climb on buses and be taken to a local mall parking lot where their fearful, frightened and worried parents waited to see whether their elementary school children were safe, The gunman held the front office staff as hostages while one employee managed to keep talking to him. Her actions prevented great carnage that hot August day in Georgia.

This story had a happy ending. The gunman only shot off a few rounds. He did not shoot anyone and the police were able to arrest him. He did however terrorize an entire school and their families. The psychological scars will remain for many years.

Of course this story is but one of many horrible scenarios. Just the other day a baby was shot in his stroller by a gunman as his parents took a stroll in their Brooklyn neighborhood. And in North Carolina last week a student was injured by a gunshot as students went back inside after a fire drill.

In Chicago over the Fourth of July weekend, 72 people were injured by gun violence and 12 fatally. This is the bloodiest weekend on record.

And right here at Santa Monica College in June a gunman went on rampage after killing his father and brother and setting fire to his family home. John Zawahiri, 23, carjacked a woman and proceeded to SMC's campus where he continued shooting. Four people were killed by Zawahiri before police shot him in a firefight outside of the school's library.

But if we look at the recent spate of violence from Newtown, Connecticut this past December when 28 people died, 20 children and eight adults to Aurora Colorado shooting a year ago July when 12 people were killed and 70 injured; to a year ago last month when a gunman walked into a Sikh Temple in Wisconsin and murdered six people and injured four more. And who can forget that terrible day in 2011 in Tuscon, Arizona when a member of Congress, Gabby Giffords and many others were killed and injured or the Virginia Tech Massacre in 2007 when a senior student there killed 32 people and injured 17 others in a two separate shootings on the same day. You can chalk it up to a lack of mental health services, one lone gunman, an irregular tragedy, but let's be perfectly clear and perfectly honest with one another -- It is too easy to access guns in our society.

There are 90 guns per 100 people in the United States of America. Firearms injuries are the fifth leading cause of death in the United States. The fourth leading cause of death is car accidents. U.S. lifetime medical costs for gunshot injuries total an estimated \$2.3 billion

in studies from 1994. U.S. taxpayers pay for almost half (\$1.1 billion or 49 percent) of lifetime medical costs for gunshot injuries. Statistics show that where there is greater poverty there are more gunshot victims. And if you are an African American male in this country between the ages of 15-19 you are eight times as likely to be a victim of gun violence as white males of the same age. Three million children live in homes with loaded and unlocked guns. As we have seen even a 3-year-old can pull an unlocked trigger. Parents you should ask not only if a parent is home during a play date but if there is a loaded gun in the home!

There is a problem in our country. And as the New Year begins we must ask ourselves what is our role, our Jewish role in solving this insidious and ongoing problem in America? Do we have any responsibility at all? Do we have anything to contribute in ending this public health crisis?

There was a lot of talk, a national conversation of sorts following the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting last December and January. A sense that America was willing to engage in an honest conversation about the serious health issue that guns and gun violence represents.

There was even a move to consider stricter gun laws in the wake of seeing those children-sized caskets lowered into the earth. But like all things political, with the ferocious power of the NRA -- the National Rifle Association -- and a Congress that is committed to finding ways NOT to do its job, it seems that the silence is deafening. No one is talking about the tremendous problem we have here in America-and that it is easier to own a gun, own an assault weapon or semi-automatic gun than drive a car.

At least for driving a car, you have to pass a test. Take a driver's education course. And for driving a car you are retested periodically including your eyesight. For gun ownership, there is only a background check and then so many loopholes to avoid background checks, like buying at a gun show. Forty percent of all guns are sold in this country without background checks either by gun shows or private transfer. But in most states you do not have to pass a test that you know how to use a particular gun safely or store it safely and there is no follow-up or retesting and no testing of eyesight let alone re-certification on any kinds of weapons.

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California has some of the toughest laws in the country including requiring the purchase of a gun safe or lock for every handgun purchased. In addition to background checks, you must pass the Handgun Safety Certificate program. California bans the sale of assault weapons. We could and should be the model for a national law.

But in many states it is very easy to obtain guns of any sort. And in three states in the U.S. you do not even need a certificate that lets you carry a concealed weapon. And the Missouri Legislature just passed a law that abrogates federal gun laws and any federal officer that tries to apply federal guns law maybe sued by the offender! What's wrong with this picture? We love our guns more than our children.

What's even more disturbing than this, is the gun lobby headed by the National Rifle Association and Gun Manufacturers Association including the National Shooting Sports Foundations, and SAAMI, the Sporting Arms and Manufacturer's Institute which all receive millions and millions of dollars from domestic and foreign arms makers have prevented a public health approach to Gun Violence Prevention as well as attacking the ATF, the Bureau of Alcohol and Tobacco and Firearms through Congressional Lobbying hampering their ability to accurately count acts of gun violence!

These lobbyists have even gotten guns exempted from examination by Consumer Products Safety Commission. They can recall products for problems with everything from cribs and car seats to high heels and tell clothing manufacturers that they must remove the strings around kid's hoodies for fear they choke themselves or others. But guns and ammunition they can't touch.

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The Assault Weapons Ban that went into effect in 1994 expired in 2004. Nearly another decade has passed. Sen. Feinstein who was witness first hand to the assassination by gun of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk, tried earlier this year to re-introduce the Assault Weapons Ban as part of our nation's laws. But Wayne LaPierre of the National Rifle Association and others went on an attack of their own, drumming up fear that all guns would be removed from ownership. That somehow our United States Constitution and our Bill of Rights' that said we have the right to "keep and bear arms" was being abridged and removed from our national documents. And they successfully turned the conversation around from sensible gun control, limiting some military style weapons and magazines for popular use, demanding background checks for guns purchased at gun shows was somehow infringing on inalienable rights granted by God and the constitution of the U.S. to bear AK-47 or AR type guns.

The gun lobby successfully created a campaign to divert attention from the real issues and the public health concerns related to gun violence. Instead we began talking about the lack of mental health services rather than expanded background checks for gun owners. Now increased funding for mental health services is important and something we ought to wholeheartedly support but that alone won't stop the mass shootings, and the menace of gun violence in our communities.

The phrase "right of the people to keep and bear arms" was first used in the text of the United States Bill of Rights (coming into law as the Second Amendment to the Constitution of the United States), although similar legal wording can be found in the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 and the English Bill of Rights 1689 which states "Subjects which are Protestants may have Arms for their Defence." But at last look while the Torah and Jewish law is very clear that there is a right to self-defense in certain cases it does not explicitly mention the AR Bushmaster semi-automatic rifle used by Adam Lanza at Newtown.

Our Ten Commandments are often misunderstood. It teaches "Thou shalt not murder." Often translations in Christian bibles say, "Thou shalt not kill." But that is an inaccurate translation of the Hebrew word -- Retzach. Premeditated Murder is prohibited.

Our Jewish law recognizes that there are occasions for self-defense and that we must defend ourselves from violence and harm; for example the Talmud teaches us that if a burglar tunnels under the wall of your home at night-time you can attack the burglar, beat him to death, and if he dies you are not held responsible. If however the same thing happens during the day time, and the burglar dies you are held responsible. What's the practical difference here? The rabbis assumed that at night the burglar had the intention that included harm to the home's inhabitants. While during the day time the burglar might logically assume everyone was out of the house. And only meant to rob you, not harm you. This comes under a larger rubric based on Exodus 22.

The Talmudic discussion of this Exodus passage introduces the classic Jewish principle of self-defense, "Im ba l'hargekha, hashkem l'hargo," "If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him (first)." If there is homicidal intent, self-defense is more than permitted; it is required.

It is true that between 1993-2011 handgun violence is down according to a Department of Justice study of crime victims statistics. What is perfectly clear is that gun violence prevention is a public health concern. There are over 30,000 death in the U.S. per year from gun violence and another 70,000 other injuries from gun violence. The children of our county are the most frequent of targets. According to the Los Angeles County Coroner, 75 percent of all deaths in Los Angeles County in 2009 were caused by use of a firearm, a trend that is mirrored nationally. In addition, a 2010 report by the Department of Public Health identified homicide as the second leading cause of death for 15-24-year-olds. Latino and African Americans in our county are at the top of the victims of gun violence.

Jews have always had an ambivalent relationship with guns. Jewish law prohibits the selling of weapons that might fall into criminal hands (Avodah Zarah 15b) and hunting for sport was frowned upon by the sages: (Orech Chayim 316:2). One Mishnah Shabbat 63b teaches that Rabbi Eliezer permitted the carrying of a weapon on Shabbat because it was seen as ornaments to the one who bears them. But the Sages over ruled him saying, "They are shameful," quoting the prophet Isaiah, "They shall beat their swords into plow shares," And there certainly weren't western style shotguns in Rabbi Eliezer's time. Perhaps a saber or two but never a revolver in a leather hip belt ala the "Lone Ranger."

That being said gun ownership is not forbidden but we are taught to be extra careful with access to dangerous situations and our Talmudic teachings reinforce that we ought to stay far away from dangerous situations. Using this rationale as a basis, in contemporary times, both the Conservative movement and Reform movement are on record as favoring an assault weapons ban and limiting access to guns by complete and full licensing and registry. No gun show or transfer exceptions.

It is likely that for now this issue of gun violence and some form of assault weapons ban will not re-appear on the national legislative agenda. The earliest we might see something is in 2014 prior to mid-term elections. But we must continue to have the conversation. Guns are killing us. And the easy access to guns continue to create an environment of fear, and terror in our own cities. We don't need an Al Qaeda to terrorize us when we have to worry about walking into a movie theater.

On this Rosh Hashanah as we begin the New Year, I am challenging you to speak up. I am asking you to join with me and press our representatives of every political stripe about our concerns about gun violence in our communities. To passionately make this a priority. Not to take away all the guns. There are plenty of people who shoot for sport. But to create a sensible plan that helps reduce the number of victims and the number of military style weapons available to anyone who walks in to a gun show, or buys it on line. We will be having additional speakers throughout the year on this topic and what more we can do. And I am asking you to be an advocate. The passage we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon in the Torah contains two important guidelines for understanding our approach to reducing gun violence in our country.

First: Do not stand Idly by the blood of your neighbor. (Lev. 19:16) it is our fellow citizens, our community's children, it is each of us. We can no longer sit on the sidelines of such an issue as this. And also in Lev. 19:14) is the verse "Place no stumbling block before the blind" Interestingly our rabbis opened this verse up to include doing no harm to others.

Jewish law teaches that "it is a positive commandment to remove and be vigilant about any stumbling block where there is a danger to someone's life ... and if you do not remove it or

leave the stumbling block and it brings about danger you have failed in your mission to fulfill the commandment and [you] may have been responsible for spilling another's blood" (S.A Choshen Mishpat 427:8). In another words, if you sell a stumbling block or leave it in the open you are responsible if someone dies even though you did not pull the trigger. (Rabbi Mark Katz, Tablet Magazine,)

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