

Shabbat Bechukotai 5782
Rabbi Peter W. Stein

Silent No More

Over these last several weeks, many of you have heard me make repeated mentions of the Omer, the period between the spring festival of Passover and the summer festival of Shavuot.

We are now six weeks into the seven week period. Each day, we are instructed to make a blessing and note the count of the days.

I have always appreciated this simple ritual for a number of reasons. We are counting up...not counting down...creating a sense of anticipation. We are, literally, numbering the days, giving us an opportunity to reflect on the blessings that can be found in each and every day.

There's been a different and tragic count that has been shared in recent days. There have been more than 200 mass shootings this year. And there have only been 147 days so far this year.

The shooting at the elementary school in Uvalde was the 27th shooting at a K-12 school this year.

I could offer other statistics, but I think the point is clear. By any definition, by any standard, we are living in a crisis. The urgency of this moment is profound.

On Wednesday night, the day after the tragedy in Uvalde, I joined with other faith leaders in a quickly organized interfaith vigil.

One of the Muslim speakers and I both mentioned a teaching that is common to both our traditions: the taking of a single life is akin to the destruction of the entire world. And, the saving of a single life is like saving the entire world.

The world has been destroyed over and over again. The scale of this tragedy is so overwhelming that it can leave us floundering, unsure what to do. But, of course, the rabbis taught: it is not up to us to finish the work, but neither are we free to desist from it. I believe that we must take action, working to make whatever difference we can.

One of my colleagues, whose father was murdered a number of years ago, has been a leader in one aspect of this activism. He has focused his efforts in profound ways on confronting the gun manufacturers, working as part of what is called the Gun Safety Consortium...gunsafetyconsortium.org online.

Our Reform movement's Religious Action Center has focused on advocacy in Congress, in particular on an Assault Weapons Ban, on Universal Background Checks, and on Safe Storage of Guns.

And, there is another legislative effort, called "Break the Cycle of Violence." It is sponsored by a Nevada congressman whose father was shot and killed nearly thirty years ago. The bill would create community outreach and intervention programs in a number of different ways that research has shown would make a huge difference.

There are additional areas where our activism is needed. I don't want to spend our time this evening simply talking about legislation and policy. My hope is that in the coming days, we will partner with the Consortium, the RAC, Everytown for Gun Safety, Rise Up Rochester, and with other groups that are working on concrete solutions. I will continue to share opportunities from the pulpit and through emails and other temple communications.

Rise Up Rochester is active right here in our own community, working to create “a nonviolent culture and to provide support to crime victims and their families.”

Rabbi Tulik and I are both available and honored to enter into conversation with you, both to strategize on action opportunities but also to offer emotional and spiritual support.

I know that this is an incredibly scary time, for all of us but especially for teachers, for parents, and for children. You are not alone, and this is the greatest importance of being part of a temple family.

To an extent, I believe that when we look at something so overwhelming, almost 40,000 deaths due to gun violence each year, that we need to personalize the need. This is why the Buffalo shooting was so hard for us to see...it was home.

We have members of the congregation who have lost family members and friends to gun violence. This is personal, not just a series of tragic headlines off in the distance.

I have a friend who was murdered, shot to death in the hospital where he worked. I want to honor Michael's memory by taking action that makes a difference.

I also have a friend who is in prison, likely for the rest of his life, because he used a gun, killing an innocent man and injuring several others. It has been profoundly moving for me to be in conversation with him for many years now, without excusing him or minimizing his guilt, but to learn how he became consumed by anger, desperation, and indifference.

It is personal, for each of us in our own way. It's not about the hundreds or the thousands, it's about the ethical principle that each and every life is an entire world.

At the vigil on Wednesday, I offered the important Jewish teaching, first offered by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov around the turn of the nineteenth century: *V'da sh'adam tsarich la'avur al gesher tsar me'od, vehaklal veha'ikar—shelo yitpached clal...*

Typically translated that “the whole world is a narrow bridge and the main thing is not to be afraid”, the fuller teaching has a significant nuance: Know that each one of us needs to cross a very narrow bridge, and what is essential is that one should not be overcome by fear.”

No place is safe. We are living under the darkest shadow of sickening and senseless violence. And we must not be paralyzed by fear or overcome by a sense that the challenge is too great. Let tonight be the night that we raise our voices. Let our senators and representatives, our governors and mayors...let all those who are empowered to create laws know: we must ensure that our children can grow up with health, safety, and peace.

Let tonight be the night that we raise our voices and let the gun manufacturers know that our children must be able to grow up with health, safety, and peace.

Let tonight be the night that we raise our voices and say “Enough!” The loss of one single life is akin to the destruction of the entire world, and our world has been destroyed over and over again.

In the coming days, we will resolve to take actions together, as a faith community, as a city, and as a country.

Rabbi Joachim Prinz survived the Nazis and came to America. And he stood in front of the Lincoln Memorial alongside Dr. King and charged us in this way: “...The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence.”

Let tonight be the night when we are silent no more. Tonight, let us set out on the path to peace.