

LET'S TALK ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE....

Another day, another shooting. It seems almost routine; we have become jaded to such news. And during our COVID experience, the number of mass shootings decreased. But now it's back—most recently in Buffalo and in Uvalde, Texas. We who are created in God's image MUST value life. It is not about creating another vigil or offering more prayers; it is about policy shift. According to sources, before Covid--roughly 30,000 shooting deaths occur each year. The number is significant; although critics of such a statistic would like them broken up into various categories, accidental, self-inflicted, crime related, etc. Living in Schenectady, news of shootings is not a daily occurrence but occur far more often than any of us would like. As a community leader [and as a parent], if we could lower that number by just 1, then it is a step worth taking. I think it is imperative to preserve life and as the Talmud teaches: "if you save a life, then you have saved the world."

It leaves us wondering—what can be done to lower gun violence? As a proud American, I believe in the Constitution. While I am not a gun owner, I am waning in my respect the rights of those who are. Remember the comedian, George Carlin? He did a routine nearly 50 years ago which is still relevant: [I edited the curse words out] *Here's one more item for you, the last in our civics book: Rights. Boy, everyone in this country is always running around yammering about their rights. I have a right, you have no right, we have a right, they don't have a right... Folks, I hate to spoil your fun but-there's no such thing as rights, okay? They're imaginary. We made them up! Like the Boogie Man... the Three Little Pigs, Pinocchio, and Mother Goose. Rights are an idea, they're just imaginary, they are a cute idea, cute... but that's all, cute, and fictional. But if you think you do have rights, let me ask you this, where do they come from? People say, well, they come from God, they're God-given rights... here we go again... here we go again. [laughing] The God excuse. The last refuge of a man with no answers and no argument, it came from God. Anything we can't describe, must have come from God.*

As a person of faith, I disagree with George Carlin some. But an underlying point is clear—rights in our society are created by the human hand! Sure there are sacred rights.

It is what Rabbi Neil Gilman described as the system of beliefs that unite us as a society and as a people. As Jews, they are formed and extrapolated by words of Torah. As Americans, it is found in the Constitution. Here now we have to address the second amendment which is part of the very fabric of our country. It states: "A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." I am not going to debate the merits of this, it is the law of the land. So for now-- let's acknowledge that there is no one-quick-fix solution. It is complex and needs to be addressed on different levels which will come very close to the sanctity of rights we have established. Let's not talk only about gun control—although it is essential! Let's not talk only about better background checks [which is a good idea, in my opinion]. Let's expand the conversation to include integrating better mental health access in our community. Let's not talk only about responsibility of social media which has created access for shooters to glorify their murders. Let's not talk only about on-line gaming culture which creates a first-person narrative as the participants shoot and kill in a virtual setting. Let's not talk only about the polarizing rhetoric of hatred that seems to be rampant in our society.

As we debate these issues and then create meaningful laws and legislation designed to enact real and substantive change, let's see what other countries are doing. In England, there is very strict gun control practices and as a result very few violent gun related deaths. But Israel has far more guns per capita than many other Western nations, yet gun violent deaths are somewhat rare. I spoke to my nephew in Israel about that. He said gun access is highly regulated—classes, training, clear purpose why he needed to carry it. His access to a gun was tied to his army service. He was vetted, he admitted. He was trained, he said proudly. He was indoctrinated in proper usage, he stated.... And the punishments that he would face if he failed to live up to the standards, he confessed. To carry a weapon is a privilege, not a right—it is for safety and security. The gun was not easily obtainable, but it came after thorough government screening and education for personal responsibility. Those factors are some of what is missing in this country.

A bunch of years ago, my wife participated in the “Million Mom March”. Back in May 2000, nearly 750,000 “mothers” marched on the Mall in Washington, DC to advocate for stricter gun laws. She came home and realized that she could help keep our children a little safer. She started asking parents of our children’s friends about guns in the house. We thought twice and asked some more questions when we were told of a gun in the house: What safety checks are in place? Is the gun accessible to your child? Does he know where it is? etc. We wanted to keep our children safe from any potential danger—just like making sure they were buckled in a car seat or wore a bike helmet when they rode. The bottom line is this—if we can save one child’s life by doing something, isn’t it worth it? How many children die due to gun violence each year is a statistic argued about by various factions in this debate. But I know this: one child’s life lost due to gun violence is too many.

Let’s recognize that this only part of equation--- the growing trend that glorifies racist thought must be battled. We must teach. We must advocate. We must criminalize hate speech. We must encourage school curricula to encourage self-esteem and the ability to see every life as sacred. Social media needs to reform to reflect that. Our news outlets must understand the power of their rhetoric and use their words carefully and with responsibility in their mind’s eye. But there is no guarantee that this enough!

Our elected officials and other individuals who are committed to keeping us safe can help in this resolve. A few years back, I attended a gathering which was focused on ending gun violence. New York State Representative Pat Fehy admitted that many of her colleagues shy away from any gun legislation. In more conservative districts, gun ownership is higher. Any conversation on gun violence is often met with the fear of taking gun ownership away. In districts where there is a possibility of a contentious election, issues of gun legislation can be a tipping point. Gun owners are more likely to vote on that issue than non-gun owners. Fear of outside resources being added to support NRA friendly candidates have many acting “gun shy”—pun intended. Our commitment must be to break political clout of that lobby or have them shift to a more supportive community approach. I know, that might happen when the Messiah arrives!

But just because the work is hard and the resistance to any change is deeply rooted, that doesn't mean we stop advocating. The Bible commands us not to stand idly by. It is up to us to take steps to save lives. Remember guns and access to them are not the only issues here. It is far more complicated than that. Sure, I can cite religious texts from Isaiah that advocates to remove weapons of violence from the land: "beat your swords into plowshares.." and I can share a rabbinic teaching that idealizes the land free of weapons: "The Rabbis, commenting on the words: 'He placed at the East of the Garden of Eden the Cherubim and the flaming sword' say: 'At the East of the Garden of Eden at the very spot where stood the Cherubim with the flaming sword - there was Gehenna created.'" This is our responsibility—it is not about mere words or prayers, but real shift to address this complex issue on different fronts.