**EREV ROSH HASHANAH 2022**

**Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley**

**Rabbi Niles Goldstein**

Shanah Tovah, good yuntif, and a sweet New Year

to each & every one of you,

whether you are here with us at CBS

or watching our High Holy Day services at home.//

I am so grateful to you, the men, women & children

of our community

for your patience, your understanding,

and your support

despite the many challenges that our shul,

and our country, have faced this past year.//

It truly does take a village, or a *shtetl*, & I’m happy

and proud to be a part of ours in Napa Valley.//

& I can’t imagine a more talented team of partners

and professionals than Gordon, Lauren, & Leah,

nor a board, a president, or volunteers

with as much passion & commitment to excellence

as those who now lead & drive us.//

My heartfelt appreciation to all of you for your time

& efforts—I’m excited about the year ahead.//

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I thought long & hard about what to discuss tonight,

as every rabbi does before Rosh Hashanah:

There’s the ongoing war in Ukraine,

the overturning of Roe v. Wade, political turmoil,

climate change, Covid.//

But the one issue I kept coming back to,

the topic that seems so pressing & so profound,

& that Judaism can offer us so many insights about,

is *gun violence*.//

Since the start of 2022,

there have been well over 300 mass shooting events

in the United States, in cities like Buffalo,

Uvalde, Highland Park, & elsewhere.//

That comes out to an average

of almost two mass shootings per day, every day.//

The murder of seven people in Highland Park,

a town near where I grew up,

occurred on the Fourth of July,

and it offers a terrible irony:

gun violence at this scale & scope

is a uniquely American disease,

one that has worsened into a disturbing addiction --

we are a nation holding itself hostage.//

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The Jewish ideal is a world of peace & tranquility,

a world without weapons or violence.//

We see this sentiment expressed very clearly

in the words of the prophet Isaiah,

“…they shall beat their swords into plowshares,

their spears into pruning hooks;

nation will not raise sword against nation,

nor will they learn war any more.”//

But this is a *messianic* goal,

& the world in which we live is far from perfection.//

In reality, weapons have always been with us,

and sometimes they are necessary for self-defense,

to protect our lives & those of our families.//

The U.S. Constitution’s idea of the right to bear arms

*does* have Jewish support.//

The Talmud teaches that if someone comes to kill you,

you should rise up and kill him first.//

The Sixth Commandment tell us not to murder,

not to take an *innocent* life;

it does not prohibit an ethical right to kill

based on a clear need for self-defense & survival.//

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But where our country has gone so horribly wrong

is in its *glorification* of guns,

& in the ease with which people,

particularly troubled young men,

have such effortless access to high-powered,

military-style weapons designed to kill large numbers

of human beings.//

The Talmud tell us elsewhere that weapons

should not be admired as “adornments”;

they should be seen instead as ugly & reprehensible.//

Yet too many Americans today *do* treat guns

as adornments,

as extensions of their identities.//

They are viewed as integral to many people’s sense

of self-confidence, to their personal liberty,

their empowerment, even their birthright.//

There are well over 400 million guns in this country.//

There are only 330 million people.//

This is excessive & extreme, reflective of the worship

of a weapon over the well-being of the community,

as Rabbi Menachem Creditor puts it.//

This huge amount of available guns,

including high-powered weaponry,

is an invitation to widespread societal violence,

especially when it falls into the hands of the troubled,

the angry, & the mentally unstable.//

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Limiting access to guns would save countless lives,

both those who are murdered each year

& those who commit suicide.//

Universal background checks

would protect those struggling with mental illness

from harming themselves & also stop others

from acquiring guns used to kill innocent people.//

Our nation has been plagued by lethal mass shootings

twice daily so far this year.//

The weapons of choice by many of the murderers

have been AR-15-style long guns, which were banned

by Congress in 1994 & should be banned again.//

As one Congressman wrote in 2016,

“There’s simply no reason for a civilian to own

a military-style assault weapon.

It’s no different than why we outlaw

civilian ownership of rockets & land mines.”//

In our country’s idol-worship of weapons,

too many people have become clouded & confused,

replacing their common sense with radicalism.//

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On occasion, in the aftermath of mass shooting events,

there are calls for action, for reform,

but there have yet to be any major or lasting changes,

no national or legislative response—

our country seems virtually paralyzed by intransigence

& numbness.//

How can we bridge the divide between gun owners

& gun reform advocates?//

This isn’t a political crisis, it is a deeply *moral* one,

& it demands a moral response.//

Faith communities of all denominations & traditions

are grounded in the idea that every human life

is created in the divine image.//

Religion can remind us of our shared humanity,

& it can instill in us the most human

of responses when confronted by the needless deaths

of our fellow citizens: *compassion*.//

Americans of all political leanings & backgrounds—

liberals, conservatives, gun owners, police,

gun law reformers, mental health advocates—

all support and wish for the fulfillment of a principle

that is both moral & spiritual in nature:

the basic human right to live in peace, free from harm

& violence, the right to life.//

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Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel,

a civil rights advocate & a modern prophetic voice,

claimed that “there is no time for neutrality”

when faced with division & social fragmentation.//

He wrote, “one of the lessons we have derived

from the events of our time is that we cannot dwell

at ease under the sun of our civilization,

that man is the least harmless of beings.”//

We have seen, & we now understand, that humans

are the *most* harmful, the *most* violent of beings,

& that we cannot be complacent when our society

is so ruptured, so violent,

so far from Isaiah’s vision of peace & tranquility.//

We must allow our *compassion* to pierce

our numbed hearts;

we must let our sense of human *dignity*,

of respectful, mutual obligation toward one another,

guide our practices & policies.//

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Heschel wrote that when we “feel fiercely,”

we mirror the prophets of the past.//

When we bear witness against the status quo,

when we bridge the political & the spiritual,

we echo the prophets as well.//

For a world without fierce feeling is a world

without spirit,

& a religious tradition with nothing to say

to the issues of the day

is no longer engaged in *Tikkun Olam*,

the repairing of our fractured & broken world.//

Judaism teaches us that if we save a single life,

it is akin to saving the entire world.//

It also urges us to *act*—if not now, then when?//

Let’s not wait for another Buffalo, Uvalde,

or Highland Park;

let’s do more than offer thoughts & prayers;

let’s listen to & *heed* the prophetic call to action.//

May this New Year renew our hearts, our resolve,

& our commitment to action;

may we see the divine in the eyes of other people,

& may that vision fill us with compassion.//

Let us pray for, & work toward, the day

when we will indeed

beat our swords into plowshares,

and our spears into pruning hooks.//

May that day come speedily, & in our own time.//

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God’s will