

Temple Beth Am, Board of Trustees
Motion by Tikkun Olam Committee on Gun Responsibility
November 21, 2013

BACKGROUND

In the wake of the seemingly endless string of heart-breaking shootings and deaths caused by gun violence, people of faith in Seattle and across America have come together to seek common-sense solutions to end the tragedy of gun violence in our communities and our nation. We have resolved that this time can be different, and that the time has come to raise our voices to demand action. It is within our power to create a safer, more just society, with fewer deaths from gun violence.

The Tikkun Olam Committee (TOC) requests that Temple Beth Am, through its Board of Trustees, pass the proposed motion below that will enable TBA as an organization to advocate, within certain parameters, for common-sense positions to reduce gun violence. Those positions along with the Jewish values and widespread communal support behind them are described below.

Jewish Values

In Judaism, physical safety is a religious concern. In general, safety regulations are treated with far greater stringency than any other section of halacha (Yoreh Deah 116:7). Furthermore, we are taught that we cannot stand idly by when others are in danger. "You shall not stand by [the shedding of] your fellow's blood. I am Adonai" (Leviticus 19:16). Rashi further explains that you may not watch your fellow's death when you are able to save him. Despite our Biblical command to protect ourselves and others, this does not approve unlimited access to violent weapons. Deuteronomy 4:9 teaches, "Take utmost care and watch yourself scrupulously."

Specifically regarding background checks, Jewish law is concerned with who has access to dangerous weapons. The Talmud prohibits someone from selling offensive weapons to idol worshippers and suspected criminals (Avodah Zarah 15b; Yoreh Deah 151:5-6). It is likewise prohibited to sell such weapons to anyone suspected of reselling them to criminals. This halacha requires that the buyers of firearms be carefully screened. Choshen Mishpat 427:7 places the gun owner at fault as well. If a careless gun salesman unintentionally contributes to illicit violence, he is guilty of "placing a stumbling block before the blind" (Lev. 19:14).

The prophet Isaiah (2:4) calls upon us: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-knives; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, a third-century Jewish sage, once taught (Derech Retz Zuta): "Great is peace ... if the Holy One had not given peace to the world, sword and beast would devour up the whole world." In an ideal world, swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and peace will prevail.

TOC's Advocacy Proposal

TOC recognizes there is a diversity of opinion within our congregation and among people of faith throughout the country about specific policy proposals that would help limit gun violence. As congregational leaders, we recognize that issues-based advocacy position may appear to be consistent with

a partisan position of a political party. However, we cannot legally and will not ethically support a specific political party. We believe that it essential for TBA to be a place of open dialogue and discussion, where people with differing opinions can talk openly and safely about the important issues affecting society. The TOC recommends specific issues-based advocacy positions that represent broadly held and deeply felt beliefs from within our community. Thus, we want TBA to support issues-based positions that uphold the Second Amendment and the rights to protect oneself, while also advancing policies that will help to reduce gun violence.

We believe that the following positions are solidly within the mainstream of current Jewish thinking on the issue of gun violence, and that by advocating for legislation that includes them, we have a genuine opportunity to influence public policy in keeping with Jewish values:

- **Universal, meaningful background checks.** Every person who buys a gun should pass a criminal background check, whether the sale happens at registered dealers, online, at gun shows, or through private sales. Preventing dangerous people from having access to firearms will save lives, and we should advocate for universal background checks via the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) on every gun sale.
- **A ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.** Military-style, high-capacity weapons and magazines are not needed for hunting or self-defense. Their combat features are appropriate to military, not civilian settings. We should advocate for our elected officials to reinstate and update the Federal Assault Weapons Ban.
- **Improved access to mental health services.** We recognize that many of the perpetrators of mass killings have suffered from mental illness. Even when it does not result in these highly-publicized tragedies, the combination of poor mental health and guns is a dangerous one. We should advocate for adequate funding to ensure that as a society, we provide access to quality mental health care for every person in need.

Temple Beth Am History on Gun Responsibility

Temple Beth Am has a strong history of social justice advocacy and support for increased gun responsibility. In March 2000, TBA voted to support the UAHC recommendation on gun violence and form an ad-hoc committee to develop a plan under the Social Action Committee. In January 2013 the following motion was passed: "The Board of Trustees of Temple Beth Am grants the Senior Rabbis, in consultation with Temple President, the authority and permission to act and sign documentation as agents on behalf of Temple Beth Am in advocating for Sensible Gun Control."

Community Support

There is widespread communal support, both nationally and locally, for advocacy and action supporting increased gun responsibility.

National. The Religious Action (RAC), the social justice and advocacy arm of the Union for Reform Judaism, currently supporting gun responsibility action through in an array of means, including a summary of gun violence prevention measures, an action alert associated with proposed gun violence prevention legislation, and a Resource Guide on Gun Violence Prevention. The RAC is also a member of the Interfaith Disability Advocacy Coalition (IDAC), which has realized a multi-faith guide of resources surrounding gun responsibility.

Local, Interfaith. The Faith Action Network (FAN), of which TBA is an advocating congregation, is officially working with the WA Alliance for Gun Responsibility as its primary partner on this issue. Gun responsibility is one of the top two priorities for FAN's legislative agenda. FAN is holding legislative meetings with as many members of the Washington Legislature who will listen. FAN will also be hosting a fundraiser to support gun responsibility advocacy, the WA Alliance, as well as the larger topic of dismantling gun violence.

Local, Jewish. Fifteen Jewish organizations, including six synagogues, have openly expressed their support for increased gun responsibility within Washington. These organizations include: Anti-Defamation League, Bet Alef Meditative Synagogue, Congregation Beth Shalom, Jewish Coalition for Justice, Jewish Family Service of Seattle, Kavanna Cooperative, Kol HaNeshamah, National Council of Jewish Women, Seattle Jewish Federation, Stroum Jewish Community Center, Temple Beth Hatfiloh, Temple Beth Or, Temple De Hirsch Sinai, and Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center. Shortly before she left, Rabbi Beth Singer also expressed support for the Seattle Jewish Federation's gun responsibility efforts while serving as TBA's Senior Rabbi. (It is not clear whether she did this in her personal rabbinic capacity or on behalf of TBA, based on the Board's previous motion.)

PROPOSED MOTION

In keeping with the three-part advocacy proposal described above and TBA's established relationships with the URJ, the RAC, SJF, and FAN, TBA's Board of Trustees authorizes TBA's engagement in the following actions and activities:

- Its regular Senior, Associate, and Assistant Rabbis and the Board President can act and sign documentation as agents of Temple Beth Am in advocating on behalf of gun responsibility.
- All Rabbis employed by TBA, and the TOC, TBA members and staff working in coordination with an appropriate Rabbi, may provide educational opportunities for congregants on relevant issues related to reducing gun violence (e.g., availability of mental health services, treatment of violence in media, local advocacy and legislation, etc.) through a range of means, such as sermons, Religious School curricula, adult education programs, etc..
- TOC, in consultation with an appropriate Rabbi employed by TBA, may communicate advocacy opportunities through TBA communication outlets (e.g., Bulletin, website, Facebook, use of TBA phones etc.).
- TBA's Senior, Associate, and Assistant Rabbis, and TOC, in collaboration with an appropriate TBA rabbi, may build coalitions with other organizations, especially interfaith partners, other like-minded Jewish congregations, and other Jewish organizations.
- TBA's Senior, Associate, and Assistant Rabbis, and TOC, in collaboration with an appropriate TBA rabbi, may circulate petitions inside and outside of the TBA community and may also notify congregants of opportunities to sign other organizations' petitions (e.g. RAC and JCPA).
- TOC, in collaboration with an appropriate TBA Rabbi, may organize in-person, social media, email or phone drives to support specific legislation or advocacy opportunities.
- When an issue related to gun responsibility is urgent enough, in the Executive Committee's discretion, the Executive Committee may decide upon a course of quick action to provide an immediate response based on our moral imperatives to speak out as a congregation.