

One Saturday afternoon this summer, I was walking along Meeting street with about 20 teens, all NFTY kids here in Charleston for an event. They had celebrated Shabbat together at KKBE and on the beach at Isle of Palms, and they participated in a serious program, created and led by our CHARLEY board, about NFTY's social action theme: Gun Violence Prevention.

In light of the recent shooting at Mother Emmanuel AME, just a few blocks from where we were sitting in KKBE's social hall, the conversation had an enormous amount of importance to our teens. After the program, we walked together to Mother Emmanuel on Calhoun street. Standing on the sidewalk looking at the church that had featured so prominently on the news, it began to sink in just how close to home this attack hit us all.

Their comments echoed many of our own in the days and weeks following the shooting at Mother Emmanuel, and underscored the importance of NFTY's commitment to ending gun violence.

“I can't believe it happened right here,” one high schooler said. “I've walked this street so many times.” “They were sitting in church studying the Bible, how could anyone think to do this?” “I thought we were better than this.”

It was clear to these teens that no place is immune to the horrors of gun violence.

A young mother whose kids just started school told me recently about how her daughter came home from school describing the lock-down drill she had participated in that day. “Why did you

practice a lock-down drill?” asked the mother. The daughter replied “It’s for when bad people want to hurt us.”

We hear of attacks like the one here in Charleston described as “tragedies.” But I don’t think that’s quite right. An earthquake, a hurricane, a tornado, those are tragedies. Those are things that schools should be practicing for, because there’s no way to foresee them.

But a mass shooting in places that are supposed to be safe and sacred? We have allowed this to be the cost of living in America.

Each time a horrific act occurs, our nation and our media react with shock, horror, and grief. We blame mental illness, jealousy, violent video games and explicit music. We reignite the conversation about gun control as a partisan issue that

simply devolves into liberal versus conservative ideologies. But the conversation always quiets down as quickly as it starts.

And, it is NOT a conversation about left vs right.

It is NOT a conversation about liberalism and conservatism.

It is NOT a conversation about big government and small.

It is NOT a conversation about the Second Amendment.

It is a conversation about right and wrong, and about life and death. As a nation, we continue to be on the wrong side of this debate. And as a Jewish community, we MUST be on the side that seeks to beat swords into plowshares, spears into pruning hooks.

After the shooting at Mother Emanuel, the conversation quickly turned to the Confederate battle flag at the South Carolina State Capitol. “The flag has to come down!” we heard. And that wasn’t wrong. But taking down that flag was not the

victory that will honor the lives of the 9 innocent souls slain that June night while sitting in church.

Taking down that flag does not absolve us of our responsibility to ensure that violence like we saw that day never again darkens our hearts.

And taking down that flag does nothing to ease the grieving victims of that shooting, and every shooting that has occurred since.

Victims like Kevin Rodas, 7 years old. Shot dead at a family party. Two adults and another child were injured as well. Or the 3 year old boy shot and killed during a drive-by shooting in Cleveland last week. Or 5 year old Tyreik Gadsden who was hit by a stray bullet while leaving his grandmother's house

near America street right here in Charleston. The bullet hit his spine, leaving him paralyzed for life.

Surely, this is the one that convinces us we have to change.

That's what we always say. This one was too horrifying a scene of violence and death to allow ourselves to remain unmoved.

This must be the one that forces us to reckon with the unbelievable rate of gun violence in our country. But it wasn't.

Not Columbine, not Virginia Tech, not Newtown, and so far, not Mother Emanuel.

For too long we have tacitly tolerated a gruesome rate of gun violence in this country. We react to unspeakable horrors like Columbine, Aurora, Sandy Hook, and Mother Emanuel with shock and indignation.

**Yet, WHO can claim to still be shocked?**

**WHO can claim surprise when another horror happens?**

It's only when it hits close to home that we are forced to reckon with the true reality of gun violence, and the aftermath that touches an entire community. But even then shock and horror have a way of fading. The Post and Courier recently told the story of the survivors and family members of the victims of the shooting at Mother Emmanuel. They are already feeling forgotten as the news has moved on. Felicia Sanders was there that night, and her son Tywanza was killed. In a recent interview with the Post and Courier with Felicia Sanders said that, "I'm a survivor and the mother of a child who's died. I'm forgotten about as somebody who's alive, but I'm remembered for someone whose child is gone."

We took down a flag in response to the racism and hatred,  
BUT WE DID NOTHING to make the tools that turn hatred  
into violence more difficult to obtain. We cannot claim  
ignorance to the consequences of firearms and gun violence,  
yet we refuse to stand up and call our leaders to action. We've  
allowed our leaders to abdicate issues of gun violence into the  
hands of the gun makers themselves, and to the most extreme  
members of the gun owning public. But it is not just our  
leaders who bear this gruesome responsibility. Today of all  
days, we must accept our own complicity.

Today, we confess our sin of inaction.

On Yom Kippur we confront our sins, and we confront our  
mortality.

As we pray the words of Unatanah Tokef, “who by fire, who by water...” we must think of the victims of gun violence whose names we knew too well and those whose names go unspoken. Maybe we should add to the Unatanah Tokef prayer, as Rabbi Joseph Meszler suggests,

“Who by bullet and who by negligence. Who by semi-automatic weapon, and who by unlicensed handgun? Who by lack of background check and who by accident?”

The rabbis of old could never have imagined the ease with which firearms allow the taking of a life. To them, the sword was the symbol of violence of one person against another.

Violence with a sword is personal, it's close, and it's gruesome.

Today the gun has inherited that place. When our prophets

Isaiah and Joel call us to “beat swords into plowshares,” they

call on us to turn tools of violence and death into something productive and creative.

The city of Los Angeles took those prophetic words to heart, and melted thousands of confiscated guns down into raw materials that went into bridge and highway repair.

Mexican artist Pedro Reyes melted down over fifteen hundred guns from Cuiacan, a city with a staggering amount of crime and violence. He then re-cast the metal into over fifteen hundred shovels, which he gave to museums and schools where families used them to plant trees.

When Australia witnessed a horrific massacre by gun violence in 1996, which left 35 people dead, the prime minister, along with nearly unilateral support from government, passed a law that banned semi-automatic and automatic rifles and

shotguns. It also instituted a mandatory buy back program for newly banned weapons.

Australia has not witnessed any mass shootings in the 19 years since.

[PAUSE]

We are on the wrong side of this debate. Every other developed nation has proven this point. Israel, a nation with *mandatory* military service, boasts only 7.3 firearms per 100 people to our 89. Guns accounted for seven deaths in Japan in 2011. *More than twice that number of children died in one hour at Sandy Hook elementary school the next year.*

I am not standing here this morning to make a political statement. We are talking about something that supersedes any political allegiances or biases. I stand here as one of your rabbis, charged with the task of teaching and interpreting

Jewish tradition in order to guide and inspire our lives, and to better our world.

On this issue of gun violence, the voice of our faith rings out loud and clear. “YOU SHALL NOT STAND IDLY BY THE BLOOD OF YOUR NEIGHBOR!”<sup>1</sup> And our neighbors’ blood is spilling out at an astonishing rate, yet our leaders are standing idly by. WE are standing idly by.

This past April, the South Carolina House of Representatives passed a bill that would eliminate the permits currently required to carry a concealed weapon. While you have to get a license to drive a car or open a business, a majority of our state Representatives seem to think that anyone - without taking a class or passing a test - should be able to carry a gun at all times.

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<sup>1</sup> Lev. 19:16

Our state does not prohibit accused or convicted domestic abusers from owning or purchasing firearms. Our state allows individuals convicted of stalking to buy firearms. And if you buy a gun online or at a gun show in South Carolina, you won't have to go through a background check.

No matter where you stand on the right to bear arms, I would hope that as a community, we could agree that buying and owning guns should not be uncontested privileges. Those individuals convicted of domestic violence, abuse, or stalking have at the very least, forfeited their right to own a tool designed for killing.

If you're moved by the example of Pedro Reyes to melt down firearms and turn them into shovels, Charleston could use some good to come from evil right now. If you're less

comfortable with metal forging, there is still plenty you can do to stem the tide of gun violence here in South Carolina, and in our country.

These two issues, the so-called Domestic Violence Loophole and the regulation of concealed weapons need your voices in the conversation.

Stand with our youth, with NFTY, and get involved with their Gun Violence Prevention actions. Stand with the survivors of gun violence, and advocate for justice alongside them. Sign petitions and send letters to your elected officials with the help of the Religious Action Center, our movement's lobbying arm in Washington, DC.

If lobbying isn't to your liking, or you'd like to know more about these issues, do some research. Check out the resources

and research from organizations like the Gun Violence Archive<sup>2</sup>, which attempts to track every incident of gun violence in America. Or Everytown for Gun Safety<sup>3</sup>, which researches a number of issues surrounding gun violence including domestic violence and suicide. The URJ's Religious Action Center<sup>4</sup> also has information about the Reform movement's involvement with legislation and activism around all sorts of issues; including gun violence.

We don't have to remain on the wrong side of history. We must be humble enough to admit when we've failed, but we must also be strong enough to work to make things right. This year, we witnessed one of the most horrific and senseless attacks of our time. Let us make this coming year one of action and repair. Like our ancestors before us, let us lead the charge to a

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gunviolencearchive.org>

<sup>3</sup> <http://everytown.org>

<sup>4</sup> [www.rac.org](http://www.rac.org)

better place. We must emerge from this desert renewed in our faith and in each other. Most of all, do not be silent. Speak up. Act. Do not stand idly by.

We are a people commanded to beat swords into plowshares, but those words mean nothing if they remain in the closed pages of our Tanakh. It is up to us to make ancient words relevant again, to take our message into the streets and into the halls of power, so that ALL are written in the book of life, and not one more innocent person suffers because we chose apathy over action.