

**A *Takanah* Against Terrorism:
On Saving Souls from Gun Violence
Parashat Naso
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On June 17th, 2015, just one year ago, nine church members who had been studying bible together at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina were shot and killed by a man who had been welcomed into the group with open hearts and open arms. And here we are, a year later.

Where in the world do I begin after the deadliest shooting in modern U.S. history? Where do I begin? Do I begin with the list of names? Do I begin with a prayer?

No, I begin by standing. Standing up against this hate. Standing up against the violence and the pain and unnecessary suffering.

I recently joined a group called Rabbis Against Gun Violence. For quite some time now, the organization has been planning a “Stand Up Shabbat” – a Shabbat dedicated to standing up against gun violence. This Shabbat was designated as such because it occurs on the one-year anniversary of the shooting in Charleston, SC, which took nine lives. And then this past Sunday morning, a madman swept through Orlando’s Pulse Nightclub a club frequented by members of the LGBT and Latino community, killing 49 souls and wounding over 50 others and our “Stand Up Shabbat” began to take on even more urgency.

There we were in shul on Sunday morning on the holiday of Shavuot reciting the 10 Commandments, including the commandment to not murder and little did I know what was happening as I was muttering those words – those worst gun massacre in U.S. History, murder committed on not just one but 49 souls.

I will not stand here and offer prayer after prayer in memory of those who passed, as much as that is what I normally do. Instead, I will stand.

I will stand just as Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut stood for his 15-hour filibuster in the Senate, demanding reform against gun violence. Passionately speaking about the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT and citing the courage of Anne Marie Murphy, a teacher who gave over her life to a terrorist for “it takes courage to look into the eye of a shooter and instead of running, wrapping your arms around a 6-year-old boy and accepting death as a trade for just a tiny, little itty piece of increased mind for a little boy under your charge.” Said Senator Murphy at the tail end of his very long speech to other members of the Senate: “If Anne Marie Murphy could do that – then ask yourself, what could you do to make sure that Orlando or Sandy Hook never ever happens again?” And with that, Senator Murphy yielded the floor and sat down.

Will we stand up against this hate and violence with courage? Or will we continue to sit down idly?

As our bar mitzvah shared with us earlier, our Torah portion this week demands that when we commit any wrong toward a fellow person we must make restitution plus one-fifth. He shared with us the importance of going above and beyond in circumstances like this, not hiding behind our

“sorry’s” but rather paying for the damages – and then some. And I agree with him about the importance of this. But when it comes to murder, when it comes to a massacre of this magnitude, there is no way that our combined efforts will ever be able to pay restitution, let alone add 1/5 to that. There is just no way that we will ever be able to help compensate the victims’ families and friends and all LGBT Latinx individuals who will continue to live in fear after this tragedy.

But that does not mean that we continue to sit down. That does not mean that we succumb to the stalemates in Congress on such issues.

I am not naïve – I know this is political. It’s political for the many elected officials who have received 10’s of thousands of dollars from the gun lobby. And what are the ramifications of these politics? Well, those elected officials who have received the most money live in states where people are not required to have a gun permit. Coincidence? Hmmm...

But really, I get it. There are those who think that requesting appropriate background checks violates their Constitutional right to bear arms. And who wants to violate the Constitution, right?

Well, for starters, I do not stand up here and say that I want to change the Constitution. In fact, I am not even saying that people cannot own guns, nor am I trying to take away one’s right to bear arms. But, might it be possible that we need to look at the law a little differently?

Some wisdom from the Jewish tradition: When it comes to the Jewish tradition, we are people who have always looked at things a little differently. There are so many parts of our Jewish tradition that need re-tweaking over the years. The Torah lists mitzvot, laws, that we no longer follow. The rabbis may have instituted rabbinic law which was in need of reform. But what happened when the times changed? When the rabbinic law was no longer just, no longer suited for the time in which it was created?

Well, at least in the Conservative Movement, we have the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards – this is our “political” body of rabbis, if you will, who has the ability to issue a *takanah*, a correction on a previously-made law that is unjust, a correction on a law that no longer suits modern times or no longer is fair to the world around us. What were some examples of a *takanah* – a “correction” that was issued? Well, we made a *takanah* that permitted cohanim to marry freely – which went against “Torah law” so to speak. We made a *takanah*, a correction in the law that permitted women to be witnesses. We made a *takanah*, a correction of the previous law in order to count women in a minyan...so yes; that means that I would not be here today, as your rabbi, without a *takanah*, a correction of a previously held standard or law.

The second amendment, the “right to bear arms” clause – was instituted in 1791 – 1791-nearly 225 years ago. Is it possible that the world was a different place then? Is it possible that the newly created machine gun, a weapon which can fire 10’s of bullets in a few seconds – might the invention of this be reason enough to re-think things a little bit? To change something that was enacted in 1791? Even if we don’t actually take away the right to bear arms completely, but find ways of regulating it, is it possible for America to issue a secular “*takanah*” if you will, for the sake of safety, for the sake of innocent lives, for the sake of the future of our children?

Again, I’m not saying that people shouldn’t have the right to bear arms! But I am calling on people to have background checks and permits and demonstrate that they are of sound mind to carry weapons, especially machine guns. I did a little bit of Googling myself --- do you know how easy it is to buy a gun? Now admittedly, I was a little bit nervous to do this – someone out there

might have been tracking my online activity – although I have a good alibi (I hope) – this sermon. But just in case you were not aware of how easy it is: gunsamerica.com, gunbroker.com, grabagun.com, impactguns.com, gunaction.com. The list is quite nauseating, actually.

Again, I know this is political, but my pain and tears and advocacy against such acts of terror and violence are not political – they are ethical. They are reflections of keeping our faith with God by not committing wrong toward fellow man. My views do not come from a political place – after all, no particular corporation or lobby group is paying for my salary. My views come from a deep place of concern for the well-being and safety of all of God’s creatures: Americans, Jews, non-Jews, Latinos, whites, blacks, gay, lesbian, straight, people of all gender identities and sexual orientations...people just like me and just like you.

One week ago: Orlando, Florida: 49 dead and over 50 wounded.

Six months ago: San Bernardino, CA: 14 dead and 17 wounded

And five days before that in Colorado, Springs, CO: 3 dead and 9 wounded.

A year ago in Charleston, SC: killing nine who were gathered in prayer.

Three-and-a-half years ago: Sandy Hook, killing 20 children and 6 employees.

Nine years ago at Virginia Tech: 32 killed and 17 injured.

17 years ago at Columbine: 13 killed and 24 wounded.

How long must this madness go on before Congress institutes a change, before they take the plunge in issuing a *takanah*, for the sake of justice and safety? I have been here just under a year already and although I typically speak from week-to-week on various issues and current events, I have already given more sermons on gun violence and terrorism than on any other issue.

Now I know that when I say this, when I stand up against gun violence that this was only part of the problem of the Orlando massacre. The other part of this was deep hatred towards people who loved in a different way – people, perhaps like some of us in the room - who loved people of the same sex or the same gender, people who danced with pride in Pulse because they could not be themselves anywhere else. And so I stand up for all people who live in fear. According to an article in Thursday’s New York Times, LGBT individuals are the #1 targeted group of hate crimes, above people who are black or Hispanic or even Muslim. Did any of you read who was the #2 targeted group of hate crimes?

That’s right. Jews. People hate us because of who we are. And so, we of all people, because we know what’s it’s like to be victims of hate crimes, because our people have been murdered and suffocated and burned because of our Jewish identity, we must also stand up for all other targets of hate crimes. Let us combat hate with love.

Normally, I end many of my sermons with prayers. And yes; I have written prayers but honestly, I have been praying less these days. Instead of praying, I’ve been reading and researching and polling and coming up with ways that I can help in more tangible ways. And so instead of ending with a prayer, I invite you to stand with me.

At the end of my talk, I will distribute a handout with resources describing how we can help end this gun violence and hate crimes. But right now, I will ask you to stand with me, to stand together, to do all of these things.

If you are willing to call a member of Congress to speak out against gun violence, then please rise in your place and stand with me.

If you will sign a petition against gun violence, then stand with me.

If you will end the hate against those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender by not smirking or frowning or rolling your eyes when two loving partners of the same gender kiss or hug or hold hands, then I ask that you proudly stand with me.

If you will donate to causes that will end gun violence or advocate for the LGBT community, then stand with me.

If you will donate blood after this tragedy, then stand with me.

The Torah teaches us that when anyone commits wrong to a fellow person he thus breaks faith with the Lord. As we stand together in solidarity, let us help rebuild our faith to God by working together to make a *takanah* to correct the unjust laws which exist. Just as much as we need God now, God needs us. Let us continue standing loudly and proudly well beyond our time together here today.

May today be a Shabbat Shalom, a Shabbat of ultimate peace.