

D'var Torah, Shabbat Bamidbar 5776
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Shabbat shalom. A Shabbat of Peace. We need this greeting especially today. This past week brought us all too familiar yet tragic news of another lone gunman on yet another campus, this time at UCLA.

I want to reflect not as much – or not only -- about the horrible incident itself, but on something I noticed about myself this week vis-à-vis this terrible incident – something I am guessing that I am not alone in feeling or experiencing.

When the full reporting of the incident came out, I read the link from the Washington Post. I read the article start to finish with interest. But when the article was done, I flipped to find the next news article to read. I am not clear there was even a pause. I moved on to my day, without more than a few sighs of frustration to show for it.

I didn't think anything of it at the moment. It was only about an hour or two later that I stopped and realized that I read this article and ingested this information as I would have a review of a movie or a book that looked interesting to me. I had not stopped to pause, to be moved, to be enraged – not only at what happened at UCLA but also at every other time that these mostly preventable tragedies happen, about every other innocent souls whose lives were lost due to gun violence. There was something that felt distant, removed.

The incident may have not come back in my mind at all had it not been that **Thursday, June 2 was National Gun Violence Awareness Day** and many of my friends and colleagues wore orange (and posted in social media) to raise awareness about the issue. I also later found out that one of my rabbinic colleagues in LA happened to be on the campus and was in the lockdown at the time.

And I began to be really bothered by my casual and disengaged reaction to the news story. Yes, I recognize that my heart cannot be opened and broken by every thing that happens in the world that is not right. And I know that we need to have compassion on ourselves for doing the best we can in an overwhelming world. At the same time, how did I so quickly come to accept this epidemic of gun violence in America as "normal"? How did I move on so quickly with my day?

This week's torah portion, I believe, can illuminate us and challenge us in a positive way to greater empathy and engagement.

At the end of the torah portion Bamidbar is a lengthy passage about the special roles for the Kohathites, a clan of the Levite tribe. The context is that the Israelites are a wandering people and the elaborate furnishings of this sacred space must be taken apart, put away and carried after each use. The Kohathites are given the incredible responsibility of watching over and transporting the most sacred objects of the Tabernacle including the holy of holies- the ark. The text makes it clear that this **holy** job is not one without risk—there are several mentions of instructions the Kohathites have to do or refrain from doing "so they will live" and more to the point "so they won't die."

At first, the torah instructs that the Kohathites can only come into contact with the objects once they are covered by Aaron and the priests. At the very end of the parsha, the torah takes the prohibition a step further—the Kohathites cannot even witness the covering of the objects and the sanctuary being dismantled, lest they die.

Commentators are perplexed by this – why this added prohibition not to see the holy objects? Ovadiah Sforno, a torah commentator of the 15th century, explains that this law is to teach this Levite clan not to treat this dismantling as a casual spectacle, for if they do, they God forbid, might begin to see the objects that are most holy **as ordinary and unimportant.**

I understand Sforno's idea as a powerful teaching about **indifference.** Sforno spoke to an important truth: The more we see something, the easier it is to become indifferent. To view as "not worthy of our attention." Or perhaps even more dangerously, what seemed out of the ordinary becomes ordinary, becomes the "new normal." We adjust. We get used to it.

Sforno is not just judging indifference – it's a natural thing that happens when we view things again and again and potentially in a casual way. But, even though it's "natural," it's not a desired state. It's something we need to guard against. Further, this casual indifference that we might develop is also not without its dangers, as the text of the torah teaches. We could become "cut off" as the text says. The torah warns the Kohathites with the threat of death. And we might even argue that our indifference can cause physical death as well as spiritual death as accepting the status quo does nothing to help us from changing our situation and preventing what happened in the first place.

Returning to the teaching of Sforno, we learn that indifference may be a natural result of coming into contact with something so often or in a casual way. But we also learn that this is not the desired state of things and that we need to take efforts to guard against our indifference, to protect ourselves from it.

For me, the place to begin or restart, as I have had to do this week, is with an internal commitment to refuse to accept gun violence as the "new normal." With that comes a commitment to pay attention. In the spirit of the census taken in our torah portion in which each and every Israelite gets recorded by name and by tribe, we can take the time to know the names and know a bit of the stories of the innocent victims. This week: William Krug, engineering professor and father of 2, Ashley Hasti, estranged wife of the perpetrator.

The challenge I want to leave myself with – and you with – is how we might recognize the times and ways in which we do inevitably and often by no fault of our own become indifferent. And if we can despite that, challenge ourselves to expand our capacity for empathy and to stay engaged. For when we can feel the pain and the anger and frustration, we can gather our resources to fight for a day when this epidemic of gun violence will come to an end. Ken Yehi Ratzon- May it be God's will and our own: Amen!