

Thoughts on Uvalde- Bechukotai 5782

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Irma Garcia¹ taught at Robb Elementary School for 23 years, and was a devoted and loving wife to her husband Joe for 24. She was a caring mother to her four children and was beloved by her students, too. In 2019, she was named a finalist for the Trinity Prize, which honors local teachers chosen as distinguished educators. It was to her students that she remained dedicated until she drew her last breath, as she sacrificed her own life to try and protect her students.

Amerie Jo Garza, 10, loved her family, especially her three year old brother Zayne. She was also a diligent student, and on Tuesday, she celebrated with other students in a public Honor Roll ceremony. Just minutes after the ceremony was over, she was shot to death while calling 911.

I could go on, because we **don't** get the picture. These are just two names, 10% of the victims of Tuesday's shooting. Every person was a world, every one of them had unlimited potential, endowed with *tzelem Elokim*, created in the image of God. It is impossible to comprehend the level of evil required to perpetrate such an action, or the low threshold between evil thoughts and evil deeds that led to Tuesday's carnage. It defies description to talk about the level of human suffering left in its wake. Children are now mourning parents, siblings and cousins, parents and grandparents are mourning their grandchildren, families stretched to their financial limit now have to take on burial expenses, a country reeling as it lurches from one shooting to another in a seemingly interminable pattern of death, outrage, thoughts and prayers. So what is there to say?

¹ <https://people.com/crime/what-we-know-about-the-victims-of-texas-elementary-school-shooting/>

I have to confess that I'm not sure I'm equal to the task of answering this question; there is no answer. As you can imagine, I'd rather talk about anything else at all this week. The organization ITIM enlisted many shuls throughout the world to participate in a Shabbat dedicated to *Ahavat HaGer*, the mitzvah of loving the convert. I would have loved to speak about that; it is the mitzvah repeated most often in the entire Torah, no fewer than 36 times. But that mitzvah is rooted in the importance of protecting the vulnerable and being a voice for those who are afraid to speak up for themselves. I feel that we are in a similar situation now, and we need to speak up on behalf of the victims. It is the day before Yom Yerushalaim, and it would have been a great opportunity to learn about Yerushalaim together. But Yerushalaim is called, by the prophet Isaiah, an עיר הצדק², the city of justice. Being worthy of Yerushalaim means that we cannot be silent when tragedies and travesties happen. I am also mindful that this tragedy, alongside all other mass shootings, has been politicized almost immediately by those who reacted to it. But while I don't talk about politics, I do teach Torah, and I can't escape two Torah thoughts that have been uppermost on my mind.

The first is about timing. Tuesday's events happened during the week in which we read the *tochacha* in the diaspora, the passages that describe, in gruesome detail, the punishment for failing to recognize God's role in our lives, and to heed His commandments. The words of the *tochacha* are so shocking, so appalling, that the custom is for the *baal keri'ah* to chant them in an undertone and for that aliyah to be given to the *baal keri'ah* himself. One of the most horrifying of the many awful verses in the *Tochachah* is this one³:

² Isaiah 1:26

³ Vayikra 26:30

You shall eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters

This seems a little extreme- it is not something any normal, civilized, even remotely human person would do. What is this verse even talking about? The Tochachah speaks about complete societal breakdown; enemies completely overtaking us, our families torn apart, illness running rampant, our holy places laid to waste, When society breaks down, it is children who pay the price- with their bodies, with their psyches, with their souls. A nine year old child should not have to mourn the loss of even one friend, let alone nineteen. “Eating the flesh of our children” means that adults condemn children to death through attitude, ineptitude and turpitude.

When they decide that children are acceptable collateral damage for whatever their agenda might be, that is a sign we are living in *tochachah* times. There are children being killed in schools, there are children who don't have the baby formula they desperately need, there are children living in war zones, areas of genocide and famine, there are children living with abuse or an abuser and have nowhere to turn- and somehow the plight of none of these seems to stir us to the kind of uncomfortable and principled action that is so necessary right now. But even if we do wake up, even if we do effectuate change, there must be a lesson we can take for our own personal lives, and I think it is this really difficult lesson: children cannot be collateral damage to protect the interests, ideologies or identities of adults- Not in marital conflict, not in educational settings, not in a normal social life.

There is another, more pointed lesson, and here I recognize that I'm about to ruffle a few feathers.

There is no question that self defense is an important Torah concept; we are told that “הבא להרגך השכם להרגו”⁴ – when someone comes to kill you, arise earlier to kill him. Indeed, one of the curses of the Tochachah is that we will be fearful when there is no reason to fear, and defenseless when there is reason to defend⁵:

והנשארִים בָּכֶם וְהַבֹּאֲתִי מֵרֶדְךָ בְּלִבְכֶם בְּאַרְצָת אֹיְבֵיכֶם וְרִדְךָ אִתָּם קוֹל עֲלֵה נִדְרִי וְנָסוּ מִגִּסְת־תָּעֶרֶב וְנִפְּלִי וְאִין רִדְךָ:

As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues.

וְכָשְׁלִי אִישׁ־בְּאַחֵיו כַּמִּפְּנֵי־תָעֶרֶב וְרִדְךָ אִין וְלֹא־תִתְּנֶה לָּכֶם תְּקוּמָה לִפְנֵי אֹיְבֵיכֶם:

With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword. You shall not be able to stand your ground before your enemies,

So engaging in different forms of self defense, including learning how to use a firearm or even owning one, may be permissible, even appropriate. Reasonable people can debate whether we are safer when more people have firearms or are trained in their proper use, or fewer- there are certainly statistics to back up each of these claims. And we could have a serious discussion about whether it is weapons that kill people, or whether it is other people who do. As a nation, though, we have progressed past the point of reasonable debate about this issue, because guns are no longer just necessary weapons for self defense. Instead, they have become symbols of machismo, of freedom, of patriotism. This is the reason safeguards that the *firearms industry itself* had in place as recently as 15 years ago, regarding what kind of weapons they would sell to whom, are no longer in place. A culture that values guns- the more powerful, the better- as more than just tools for

⁴ Midrash Tanchuma Pinchas 3

⁵ Vayikra 26:36-37

self defense; a toxic political culture fueled by outrage, victimhood and conspiracy theories- these are all ingredients for disaster, and, as we mentioned before, it is children who pay the price. So let's be clear. **It is one thing for a Jew to own a gun. It is something else entirely for the gun to own the Jew.** It is deeply un-Jewish to view the ownership of a weapon as a source of pride or as an identity marker- or even to take pride in one's *opinion* about these issues. A number of halachic authorities, like Rav Ovadia Yosef, rule that when one purchases a gun, one should not recite a *shehechyanu*, because we do not recite a blessing on an item we wish we never had to own. It should be noted that these authorities live in Israel, where it is much more difficult to get a gun license, and they don't even consider the possibility that a Jew would purchase a gun for recreational purposes.⁶ Let us not forget that the words על חרבך תחיה⁷, you shall live by your sword, was a curse- one that was pronounced on Esav.

I am not an expert in public policy, but legislation is not going to solve a cultural problem. That is on us- and if we cannot change the culture around us, we must at least make sure we don't allow it to change us in turn. Let us always be mindful of the true blessing we are promised, and strive to attain it⁸

וְנַתַּתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאַרְצָךְ וְשָׁכַכְתֶּם וְאֵין מִתְגַּדֵּד וְהַשְׁבַּתִּי תִּיהָ רֵעָה מִן־הָאָרֶץ וְחָרֵב לֹא־תַעֲבֹר בְּאַרְצְכֶּם:

⁶ My colleague Rabbi Rael Blumenthal quoted these sources in an excellent piece here- https://raelblumenthal.org/lets-talk-about-guns?fbclid=IwAR2QBBghDpaA9ydxVR7SkKsDcSNWG_PvL_dzGF4Fi19-sLrmQLOfPaL93dc

⁷ Genesis 27:40

⁸ Vayikra 27:6

I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword- no weapons, no fighting, no carnage, no senseless death- shall cross your land.

אמן כן יהי רצון