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Gun Violence Response

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It is now almost two weeks since the massacre in Parkland, FL, which is still dominating the headlines, largely due to the outspoken activism of surviving teenage students. While our nation always mourns in shock, the aftermath is different this time and Rabbi Danny and I feel strongly that our TST response needs to be different, as well. People of good faith are naturally distressed and dismayed by tragic events, but it is often our proximity—our geographical nearness, or closeness of relationship, that moves us from distress and dismay to *action*. Parkland is in my sphere of proximity, and this compels me to tell you why and how I am personally moved to respond differently, as a human, as a Jew, and as Cantor of this Temple.

I was raised in Florida during the 1980's. Those were high drug-crime years when violence transcended the artificial boundaries of poverty and affluence, to the extent that no one felt truly secure anywhere we went or lived. While some certainly were far worse off than we were in terms of daily personal safety, when I was in my teens my mother was held up in her car at gunpoint in the grocery store parking lot. Not too long afterwards, she walked into our house just as an intruder, who had ripped our alarm panel off the wall in an attempt to turn it off, was running out the side door. These were traumatic events for her, and for us, leaving us afraid in our own home and prompting my parents to purchase a firearm for protection.

Being an insufferably proud teenage hippie peacenik, I was appalled to have this thing in my home, albeit locked away in my parents' closet. I remember being taken against my will to mandatory training sessions at a local gun range and being made to learn how to load it and shoot at targets.

Thankfully, we never had to aim it at a hostile intruder. But one night, when I arrived home very late and a sleepy, disoriented member of my household was alarmed by an unfamiliar voice in our house, it did get aimed at a friend who arrived home with me. When I look back on that moment it is with relief because I know that our family was narrowly and thankfully spared becoming an accidental gun-violence statistic.

More than twenty-five years later, my brother Adam is a high school teacher in Miami. Many of his students lost dear friends at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and he has spent the past weeks answering their terrified questions because they are grieving and are consumed with fear for their own safety. Adam told me how painful these conversations are for him:

“They ask me if they are safe. They ask me if it can happen here, at their school. They ask what they can do to prevent it, or what to do if it happens. As their teacher, I’m obligated to answer honestly. This means telling them that our school holds regular drills in preparation for such things.

Therefore, if a shooter opens fire during second or sixth period when we are all in our classrooms, we know what to do and should be fine.

But if shooter opens fire during gym, or lunch, or while we're all walking between periods then we, students and faculty, have some choices to make: You have the right to run and hide and do everything in your power to stay safe. If your conscience so dictates you could chose to fight or to defend others. All of these choices are legitimate.

*But whatever choice you would make in such a theoretical situation, you **will** have one critical choice that **will** be totally in your power in just a few short years: That is the choice of whom to vote for at the ballot box.*

So it is my job, as your teacher, to engage with you on these issues respectfully, from every perspective, and to make sure you are fully informed when you take your power to vote—and run for office yourselves--into your own hands. It is my job, as an educator, to give you the tools you will need to be critical thinkers and urge you to be engaged citizens, perhaps even future leaders, of our nation.”

Incidentally, I'm very proud of my brother Adam.

But one more word about my sphere of proximity to Parkland. Some of you may have heard Andrew Pollack, whose daughter Meadow Pollack was killed in Parkland, speak to the President at a listening session last week, saying:

“We're here because my daughter has no voice — she was murdered last week, and she was taken from us, shot nine times,” “How many schools, how many children have to get shot? It stops here, with this administration and me, because I'm not going to sleep until it's fixed.”

Andrew Pollack and his late daughter Meadow are my cousin's cousins, related through our mutual uncle Stanley. I don't know Andrew personally. I never met Meadow. But my cousin Mike flew down for the funeral, and my brother Adam went up to pay a shiva call and they spent time talking with and listening to Andrew.

Andrew is an anguished father and a political supporter of our President. His response to his daughter's murder is to push for school safety measures, including arming teachers. In his pain, he wants schools secured NOW, and said that other considerations, like gun control measures, are tertiary to his urgent demand that not one more child is harmed due to lax school security.

My brother Adam is a teacher. He does not want to be armed. He is aware that even seasoned police officers with extensive training for high-pressure situations often miss their targets in the heat of a moment. His nightmare is being one of many adults holding weapons, trying to simultaneously focus on a target and calmly direct students to safety, as a SWAT team storms into the chaos of an active shooter situation.

Andrew and Adam want the same thing: safe schools and safe children. Like our nation, they disagree about how best to get there.

As I seek clarity amidst this turbulent emotional landscape, I find myself turning to two primary sources: Statistical evidence and Jewish values.

Last week we were home on vacation in Miami and our friends Bev and Max Klau happened to be in town so we hung out together with my brother. Processing all of this, Bev asked: “Couldn’t this happen near us? Is Natick so different?”

The answer is yes, of course, it could happen near us, or anywhere—**but it is statistically far less likely to happen in Massachusetts.** There are explicable reasons why Natick **is** different:

- Statistical evidence: newly available federal data shows that Massachusetts has the **lowest gun-related mortality rate in the country.**
- And Massachusetts, along with New York, Connecticut, and California, has **the strongest gun-violence prevention laws in the nation.**
- We can be “proud” to say that only 3.4 out of every 100,000 of our neighbors die of gun violence in our state. New York, Connecticut, and California are close behind, and all are well below the national average of 11.1 deaths per 100,000—adding up to a national total of 38,700 human lives in 2016 alone. We know it can still happen anywhere, as Sandy Hook proves, but it is significantly less likely to happen in some places than others.
- To that end, USA Today reported on Feb. 21st that “The similarities of states with the **highest** firearm-related death rates can also be telling. For example, **the states with the highest gun death rates are often the states with relatively loose gun restrictions.**”

So if I find clarity in empirical evidence—strict-regulation-equals-low-gun-relate- mortality, I also find it in Jewish values.

Our value of *Pikuah Nefesh* mandates that the preservation of human life takes precedence over **all** the other commandments in Judaism, and comes from K'doshim, Leviticus 19:16, “You shall not stand by while your neighbor bleeds.” It applies to immediate threats and to less grave dangers that have the potential to become serious.

I’ve had personal experience of guns as both an immediate threat and with the potential to become serious. And as alarmed as I am by school shootings and mass murders, I’ve learned in my research that 2/3rds of gun-related deaths are suicides, giving even greater force to the argument that quality, affordable mental health care must be an essential part of any solution.

But not all guns are created equal. All kill, but some kill differently.

It is not about the right to bear arms. It is about what arms we have the right to bear.

AR-15-style weapons and high-capacity magazines allow more bullets to be fired more quickly and powerfully, causing significantly more death and destruction in a single episode than a handgun or hunting rifle can. As Dr. Heather Sher, one of the surgeons operating on Parkland victims wrote:

“Routine handgun injuries leave linear tracks so if the bullet does not directly hit something crucial like the heart or the aorta, and the victim does not bleed to death before reaching our care at the trauma center, chances are that we can save him. The bullets fired by an AR-15 are different... and are far more lethal than routine bullets fired from a handgun, and an AR-15 rifle outfitted with a magazine with 50 rounds allows many more lethal bullets to be delivered quickly without reloading... the damage is far graver than that of a simple handgun-shot injury. The high-velocity bullet causes a swath of tissue damage that extends several inches from its path. It does not have to actually hit an artery to damage it and cause catastrophic bleeding. Exit wounds can be the size of an orange...”

Dr. Sher concluded that *“most of the Parkland victims who had been shot with the AR-15 died on the spot; they had no fighting chance at life.”*

I’m convinced. These extraordinarily dangerous weapons have no place in our communities, and I personally cannot fathom how they are allowed to remain easily accessible in the marketplace.

Aligned with others of good conscience across our political spectrum, I stand in support of legislation that bans these weapons. But recognizing today’s legislative gridlock, I am relieved to see the business community step in where our elected officials are failing to make sensible progress.

It feels like a tide is beginning to turn as businesses set a leadership example that is worthy of our support. Edward W. Stack, the CEO of Dick’s Sporting Goods,

made a powerful statement by saying that after Parkland, *“thoughts and prayers are not enough.”* The alleged shooter, Nikolas Cruz, bought a shotgun from a Dick’s store in November, Stack said during a television interview. Although the weapon purchased at the Dick’s outlet was not the one used in the massacre, Stack said his company was moved to act. *“We did everything by the book, and we did everything that the law required, and he was still able to buy a gun.”*

In our Jewish tradition, the act of tshuva is not complete until we change our behavior. We might say that Dick’s Sporting Goods decision to stop selling assault-style rifles and to raise the minimum buying age to 21 is a compelling act of corporate tshuvah.

We know that there is a risk to a business taking a stand—look at what has happened to Delta in these last few days. We want to say to Dick’s that as Jews who understand the values of Pikuach Nefesh and Tshuva, we want to express our gratitude, support and solidarity. We agree that *“thoughts and prayers”* are not enough, and we too, feel a need to take action.

To this end, on March 18th, our Mitzvah Day, after we pack 40,000 meals for the hungry worldwide in partnership with Rise Against Hunger, our TST community will be gathering together to show support for Dick’s Sporting Goods in Natick. More details will be shared in the coming days as this plan takes shape, but we hope that you will join us to support the stand that they are taking. Rabbi Danny started a conversation about gun violence prevention several months ago

and we are looking for leaders and partners to help us move forward on this critical issue. If this speaks to your heart, come speak to us.

The Talmud teaches if we save one life it is as if we have saved the entire universe (Sanhedrin 4:5). If our action can help save one life, we will have taken an important first step together on what promises to be a long journey towards making America a greater, healthier, and safer country for all of her inhabitants.