

Save One Life, Save the World
A Response to the Mass Shooting at
Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, Florida
Rabbi Stephen Weiss, B'nai Jeshurun Congregation, Pepper Pike, OH
Shabbat Terumah, February 17, 2018

Our sages taught that the reason God created only one individual, Adam -- from whom all humanity is descended -- was to teach us that if you destroy one life, it is as if you destroyed the whole world, and that if you save one life, it is as if you saved the entire world.

This past week, seventeen worlds were destroyed, seventeen lives each of which was a world unto itself, worlds of love, worlds of family, worlds of accomplishment, worlds of caring, worlds of great potential, of futures that will never be realized. The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School left the families and friends of victims, their entire community and our nation reeling with pain.

How do we make sense of such a tragedy? As religious Jews, how do we square such evil with our faith in God and with our understanding of our world?

The first thing I want to say is that Judaism unequivocally states that such tragedies are not the handiwork of God. God does not control human action.

Our faith teaches that God is all powerful, but it also teaches that God chooses to surrender some of that power to human beings by granting us free will. When evil is carried out by humans and they harm one another, God cannot stop them. If God were to stop us every time we committed a wrong, we would not have free will. We would not be responsible for our actions. There would be no meaning or value in life.

It is for this reason, the rabbis teach us, that the angels were jealous when God created human beings. Why? We have something that angels do not have: autonomy. Angels are mere manifestations of the Divine. They are like robots. God thinks, and they do. But we choose. God is not responsible for human actions. We are.

We might ask, then where is God at times like these, and why should we believe in God? God is with us in our tragedy and grief, crying along with us, feeling our sorrow, giving us comfort to get through each day and the ability to transcend moments of pain and to ultimately overcome them.

So, the second thing I want to say is that in responding to the events of this week, we must turn to God, and turn to prayer. Our hearts go out to all the families in Parkland. We pray that God watch over the souls of those who perished and grant them blessing in the world to come. We ask that God also watch over these families, send them comfort and healing and the strength to rebuild and to go on with their lives. May God enable them, despite their pain, to still find beauty, meaning and holiness in life.

We must also go beyond prayer and emulate God's love and caring by reaching out to these families in real tangible ways, so that they can feel our love and support.

I want to encourage you to take a moment this week. Read the bios of the 17 victims in Parkland -- you can find them online -- and write a note to one or more of their families. I know that is a hard thing to ask you to do... but that is what it means to be supportive. It means we put ourselves on the line to make ourselves present for others when they are hurting. You can mail that note to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School or to the Parkland Sheriff's department. Both addresses are available online as well. They will forward it to the families. I don't know if you will hear back from them, but you will have let them know that you stand beside them.

The third and final thing I want to say this morning, though, is that prayer and notes of support are not enough by themselves.

This past High Holy Days one of my sermons was entitled, Walk a Mile in My Shoes. You may remember that I used a song sung by Elvis Presley to drive home the point that we must learn to have real empathy for each other, to seek to truly understand and identify with each other's pain.

In that sermon, I quoted an analogy used by Brene Brown of seeing someone who had fallen into a deep hole. Sympathy, she says, is when you look down into the hole from above, you wave and say "Hi there, that looks really bad," and you walk on. But empathy means getting down into that hole. You stand with them, and you say: "Hey, I know what it's like down here. I've been down here. You're not alone." Then, together, you seek to find a way out.

Do we know what it's like to stand there in the hole with the families from Parkland? Are we prepared to truly feel their pain as our pain? Do we know what it is like to stand there in that hole with high school students across America and truly feel their fear as our fear?

Deborah Tarr, a high school senior at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School, says she cannot remember a time when she did not know about school shootings. Think about that. Her sister, she says, has been doing code red drills since she began middle school, in the sixth grade. Think about that. That is not just in Parkland, where now Deborah has lived through a mass shooting. That is in every school across America, including right here in our own community. We now have a whole generation whose lives and times are shaped by living in a world where every day they go to school, and they don't know if they will come home.

Maybe you don't stop to think about it that way; but I guarantee you there has been at least once, if not many times, that your children have. This is the reality that our children face. The children of the "Mass Shooting Generation," as the NY Times has dubbed them, grew up practicing active shooter drills and huddling through lockdowns. They talk about threats and safety steps with their parents and teachers. With friends, they wonder darkly whether it could happen at their own school, and who might do it. This is what passes for childhood in our day.

One of my most vivid memories from my school days was the regularly scheduled nuclear missile drills. How many of you here did them as well? Remember? The alarm would go off, and we would climb under our desks, get on our hands and knees and cover the back of our neck with our hands. That was supposed to protect us! ... From a nuclear bomb! ... Now I'm safe! ... (Sigh)... I recall I didn't feel very protected. And from your response, I am guessing you didn't either. We laugh now, and we laughed then too and made fun of those drills, but the truth is that they terrified us. And now it is our children who are terrified.

Our response to being terrified by those drills was that we were the generation that rose up and demanded that we move toward nuclear disarmament. And now, our children are raising their voices. They are demanding that we, as a society, do something to end this scourge. It is not enough to respond to them with prayers and sympathy. We must offer empathy. True empathy. We must be able to climb down in that hole and stand beside them, to walk a mile in their shoes, to make their pain our pain, to make their fear our fear. That is what they are asking us to do. In their tweets and Facebook posts, in statements to the press, they are saying that they want to see a change that can enable them to feel safe.

They don't want prayer. They don't want sympathy. They don't want platitudes. They want to know that they can go to school... and come home.

There are active steps we could take now as a society to reduce gun violence in this country. A good place to start would be banning semi-automatic weapons, which are assault weapons and have no legitimate civilian purpose.

We could also ban magazines that fire more than ten rounds.

We could create a centralized way to keep track of how many guns a person purchases and place a limit on the number of guns we are allowed to own, so that they cannot be stockpiled as they were by the shooter in Las Vegas.

We could raise the age for buying all guns, in all states, to 21. In Florida, a handgun cannot be purchased until the age of 21, but a semi-automatic assault weapon can be purchased at the age of 18.

We could require a proper background check for all guns. Not a five-minute background check, which is all that is required for some guns in many states. Not the three-day background check, which is not sufficient time to really investigate a person's past. Rather, we could require a ten-day background check; and then invest money in the FBI to expand their staff so they can thoroughly check out those who seek to purchase weapons to make sure they don't pose a danger to society.

We could tighten the system by prohibiting high risk individuals – such as someone with a restraining order against them due to threat of violence, for example – from getting a gun. Yes, that person can buy a gun today.

We could also tighten the system to prevent those who are violent or mentally ill from getting a gun.

We could tighten the loop holes that allow guns to be sold by private individuals both at gun fairs and on the internet in 32 states without any background check whatsoever.

We could support the use of smart gun technology that allows a gun to only be used by its owner, either through a fingerprint or a fob with a chip in it.

These are just a few suggestions. I am not advocating all of them. I know that all of them are not likely to ever be enacted all together. Any one of these alone... any one of these alone... would save significant lives.

There are those who oppose any form of gun laws on the grounds that any restriction of access to guns threatens our rights under the second amendment. But restrictions on gun ownership do not necessarily violate the second amendment.

The first amendment grants me freedom of speech. Nonetheless, I cannot engage freely in slander or libel, or in hate speech, or speech that endangers others, such as yelling "fire" in a crowded theater. I have the freedom to gather, and yet under various circumstances I need a permit to do so, and under some circumstances, that permit can be denied.

Even the amendments to the Constitution have limits. These limits generally arise out of a conflict with the demands of the main body of the Constitution itself, which grants each citizen the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Right now, our current gun laws as they stand could be said to violate our most basic right: the right to life.

There are also many Jews who feel strongly the need to protect the right to buy arms because we as Jews know what it means to be powerless. We must have the ability to defend ourselves if the government should turn against us. I share some of that concern. I empathize with that idea. I understand it. But I also know that our current gun laws as they stand on the book not only give us the

right to have a weapon to defend ourselves. They also allow hate groups – white supremacist groups, anti-Semitic groups – to stockpile weapons and hold paramilitary training camps that are designed for the purpose of starting a race war and murdering Jews, blacks, homosexuals and others. Our current gun laws permit that.

There were some reports that the young man who did the shooting in Florida was a member of such a group and participated in such a paramilitary training camp. Then came a denial, that it was not true. Then came third information that it may in fact be true. I don't know whether it is true or not true. But you don't have to spend very long Googling to find out how many paramilitary training camps there are in the country, how many white supremacist groups there are just right here in Ohio, how many weapons they collect and what their purpose is. Could we maybe find a way to enable individuals to have a gun for self defense without enabling the arming of militias intending to do harm?

For years now, we have been locked in a conflict between those who would ban all guns and those who would allow all guns; those who “defend the second amendment” and those who “oppose the second amendment.” While these extreme theoretical positions are argued in the public arena, our public policy remains deadlocked and our children are dying.

Just since the shooting at Sandy Hook in 2012, there have been 239 school shootings. 438 people were shot, 138 of whom were killed, almost all children. The World Health Organization reports that among high-income nations, 91% of children under age 15 who were killed by bullets lived in the United States. On average, two dozen children are shot every day in the United States. Two dozen. The medical journal Pediatrics reports that 1297 children die annually from gun injuries – some of them accidental, some of them intentional -- making guns the third leading cause of death for children in America.

What we need now is the ability to come together and to compromise, to find a middle ground that allows some change, any change, that can stop what – if it was an illness – would be called an epidemic.

When the Israelites stood at the shore of the Sea of Reeds, trapped between the waters and the Egyptian army moving in, Moses stood upon a rock above the waters and called out to God in prayer. He sought God's intervention to save the people. God responds to Moses by saying, *Mah titzak elai? Sa!* “Why are you crying out to me? Go!” The lesson is that there is a time for prayer and there is a time for action. This is a time for action.

If you destroy one life, it is as if you destroyed the whole world, say our sages. If you save one life it is as if you saved the entire world.

Let's find a way to save the world.