

Parashat T'rumah 5773 (2013)

Dear Chavraya,

With this week's Torah portion, *Parashat T'rumah*, the building of the desert sanctuary, the *Mishkan*, begins. With great excitement and pageantry and a way for each one to participate, the building process unfolds through the rest of *Sefer Sh'mot*, the Book of Exodus. The entire people is engaged in giving of themselves, bringing of their own material goods to create holy space. The first detail of instruction concerning the *Mishkan* was given well before this point. Immediately after leaving Egypt, we are told that if someday we would make an altar, it is to be made of uncut stones. Steel tools are not to be used in building the altar, for if hewn stones were used, then steel would be needed in shaping them. The word used for steel is *cherev/sword*. The altar is meant to be a symbol of peace, of people coming together, of wholeness, as in the wholeness of the stones themselves. A weapon, or even that which could become a weapon would desecrate the altar, *for if you have wielded your sword over one of the stones, you will have desecrated it*. The entire world in which we live is God's great sanctuary, and oh, how we desecrate the sacred space of creation with the clash of arms and brutality to earth and people. Every community, every neighborhood, every home, every movie theatre, every school, every place where people gather peacefully and innocently, these are the small sanctuaries in which life unfolds. Weapons have no place in the sanctuaries of God. Toward reclaiming the sacred spaces in which we dwell, no more the sound of steel on altar stone, the sound of gunfire in neighborhoods throughout the land. I am proud to share with you a statement on gun violence affirmed by the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis last week as its official position. I wrote the original draft and then it was crafted and shaped through the MBR's Public Policy Committee, which I chair. May we all create together a sanctuary of peace in all the places where people dwell.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis – Statement on Gun Violence

Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor (Lev. 19:16).

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis is horrified by the epidemic of gun violence in our cities, in our state, and throughout the country. We call for action to stop the bloodshed. We are joined in anguished spirit with those whose lives have been shattered. As rabbis called to comfort mourners, we grieve with all the parents of slain children. They are our children, and we pledge not to stand idly by their blood. Upon the sidewalks that lead from house to house, in town squares and city centers, we stand together before impromptu shrines of candle wax and teddy bears, of basketballs and flowers. We are joined by grief for the fallen children, the murdered spouses, students and teachers, moviegoers and worshippers, innocents caught in the crosshairs of madness and hate, ordinary people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Guns in the hands of those who should not have them affect all of us as neighbors across America.

The list of well-publicized mass shootings continues to grow in rapid-fire succession: Columbine, Virginia Tech, Tucson, Aurora, Oak Creek, Sandy Hook. Beyond the horrifying headlines, on a daily basis the

human cost of gun violence remains largely out of sight and out of mind. While guns with high capacity magazines take many lives at once, across the country mass murder takes place every day, one victim at a time. Gun violence takes eighty-three lives daily in the United States, including eight children and teens, with one child killed every three hours (Stop Handgun Violence). Mass shootings and day-to-day gun violence are two parts of an epidemic that threatens the wellbeing of all Americans and the spiritual and social fabric of American life. We call for a collective response to President Obama's question in Newtown, Connecticut: "Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?"

In Boston, the numbers are staggering, averaging one shooting per day with seventy to eighty gun deaths per year (Citizens for Safety, as of 2007). Approximately sixty percent of the guns are trafficked into the city along Interstate 95, known as the "Iron Pipeline" (Citizens for Safety). Most of the deaths are of young people, some the intended victims, many innocent by-standers. They are killed in playgrounds and on basketball courts, in pizza parlors and at bus stops, on the front porches and sidewalks in front of their own homes, some dying in their parents' arms. Painfully earnest, an eight-year old student in Dorchester asked her mother for a bulletproof vest for Christmas (Citizens for Safety). Behind the statistics are human faces, stories of struggle and striving, of hope and heartbreak.

Beyond the urban neighborhoods that are plagued by gun violence, it is very easy to remain unaware and unaffected by the carnage. The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis is concerned by this separation of communities, generally along economic and racial lines. Poor, mostly minority communities face ongoing violence alone, without the support and attention of fellow citizens outside their own neighborhoods.

As rabbis, we accept our own responsibility to act, and we urge the Jewish community of Massachusetts to heed the exhortation of Torah, "Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor/lo ta'amod al dam re'echa" (Lev. 19:16). Commenting on this commandment, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra warns against the complicity of silence and its price, "that one not be joined with people of blood." Concerned for the danger of weapons falling into the wrong hands and to prevent arms trafficking, the ancient rabbis set stringent guidelines not only for the sale of weapons, but also for the sale of material that could be used to make weapons. "We may not sell to them armament nor accessories of armament. Just as it is forbidden to sell weapons to an idol worshipper, so it is forbidden to sell them to a Jewish robber.... We may not sell thick pieces of iron to them. What is the reason? Because they can be flattened out and weapons made from them" (Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 15b-16a).

The rabbis were not afraid to limit the sale of weapons, nor should we be. Today, there are virtually no limits to the weapons and accessories that can be purchased legally. Through on-line sales, the Aurora shooter had purchased an assault rifle, a shotgun, two pistols, a gas mask, body armor, gas canisters, explosives, and six thousand rounds of ammunition (Denver Post, Huffington Post). The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis asks why a private citizen needs such weaponry and why it is possible to amass such an arsenal.

We need to prevent mass murder. We need to close loopholes and insure consistent legislation between federal and state laws. We need to keep guns out of the hands of those who should not have them, such as terrorists, convicted felons, domestic abusers, drug addicts, and those with a history of mental illness. We need to recognize and halt the dual scourge of mass murder, both the random shootings that happen in one horrifying moment and the plague of urban violence that takes lives one bullet at a time, day after day. We need to insure that Federal law requires background checks for all gun sales, including

at gun shows and through on-line and private sales. We need to advocate for far ranging mental health services, identifying early on and helping those at risk of sociopathic lashing out. We need to acknowledge and act on the link between poverty, racism, and urban violence. Whatever the antecedents to violence, we need to take away the tools that allow for the explosion of violence. For the wellbeing of all, we need to find common ground among a broad spectrum of Americans and act out of our shared concern to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. Most deeply, we need to foster a greater inclination to nonviolence in our children. For their sake, we need to hear the urgency in the words of the Talmudic sage, Hillel, "If not now, when?"

The Massachusetts Board of Rabbis calls for decisive and courageous action to stop gun violence in our cities, in our state, in our country. We call on the Jewish community to:

- Support comprehensive and consistent federal gun legislation, urging our legislators to:
 - o Restore public access to crime gun trace data
 - o Require criminal background checks for all guns sold in the U.S.
 - o Limit how many guns someone can buy in one transaction
 - o Renew assault weapons ban
 - o Outlaw high-capacity magazines
 - o Support efforts to close the private sale loophole

- Support the "Where did the gun come from?" campaign of Citizens for Safety.
- Oppose "Stand Your Ground" laws and "Concealed Carry" laws.
- Invite political leaders, mental health experts, and educators to your community to share views and develop action plans to stop gun violence.
- Learn about the daily reality of urban gun violence from such organizations as Citizens for Safety and Stop Handgun Violence.
- Organize adult education programs to learn more about gun violence and what you can do.
- Organize programs for parents and children through Hebrew schools and youth groups to address issues of violence that touch all of us and the choices we can make in our own lives to help create a more nonviolent society.

We recommend the following resources for information and action suggestions concerning gun violence:

www.citizensforsafety.org

<http://www.stophandgunviolence.org/>

<http://www.mayorsagainstillegalguns.org/html/home/home.shtml>

<http://www.bradycampaign.org/>

<http://faithsagainstgunviolence.org/>

<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/clergyagainstbullets/>

<http://www.vpc.org/gunviolence.htm>

<http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/gun-control-resources-leaders-jewish-community?tp=76>

<http://gawker.com/5968818/i-am-adam-lanzas-mother>

http://action.rac.org/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=12360