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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday May 27, 2022 ~ Parsha: Bechukotai

Preventing Mass Shootings in America

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

*For these, I weep,
My eyes flow with tears:
Far from me is any comforter
Who might revive my spirit;
My children are forlorn,
For the foe has prevailed.
(Lamentations, 1:16)*

How many sermons and articles over the last 26 years have I begun with the words "I want to talk about the terrible shooting at _____ (fill in the blank) that happened this week.

Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, The Mother Emanuel Church, The Tree of Life Synagogue, Poway, Buffalo. Where do I stop? After all, there have been hundreds of mass shootings (defined by the FBI as an incident where more than 4 people are killed or injured) in recent years. Now, sadly, the Robb Elementary School in Uvalde Texas has joined this terrible list.

What's going on in our great nation that makes these shootings an almost uniquely American problem? That is not a rhetorical question. There is actually an answer. What's going on is that we have failed to prioritize the sanctity of human life. We have allowed other values to be elevated in its place, like of gun ownership and access to military grade weapons.

This week's Torah reading of *Bechukotai*, asks an interesting question. How much is a life worth? Now in its proper context, the Torah is actually answering a more practical question. In ancient times, our ancestors would make a donation to the Temple in the amount of the value of a life as an act of religious devotion and piety. As the commentary reminds us, the promising of one's value in silver to the Temple goes back to the actual dedication of oneself or one's child to the Temple service. Pledging the equivalent of one's life according to a scale established by the Priesthood served two important ends. The spirit of the ancient tradition was satisfied, and in practical terms, the sanctuary received necessary funds. Yet Rabbinic commentary reminds of an important truth. When the world at large measures the worth of human beings, rich people are valued more than poor people, economically productive people more than less productive, and the clever and attractive over those less so. Judaism instead

teaches the fundamental equality and identical sacred worth of every human being. Every person is of the same infinite value.

If we really believed that, whether we are Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives, red state or blue state, our policies would reflect that. It's because we don't live as if we really believed this, that we have allowed the proliferation of gun violence, along with a verifiable relaxing of the previous generation's restrictions on certain types of weapons.

So instead of analyzing Tuesday's tragedy through the prism of the Second Amendment, or the poor and ineffective responses to the hundreds -- yes hundreds of similar mass shootings in our country in the recent past (119 school shootings since 2018; 67 killed or injured in school shootings so far in 2022), let's ask a simple question: "What do we need to do to stop this madness?"

Yesterday, Rabbi Avram Kogen sent me an amazing article. Now you should know that Rabbi Kogen sends me lots of interesting things to read on a regular basis. In fact, if I had the time to read all the wonderful things that Rabbi Kogen sent me, I would be as wise as Rabbi Kogen. This article was the most important thing I've read concerning the tragedy in Texas. It's the story about how 26 years ago, a man with a history of mental illness walked into an elementary school in England and killed 15 five and six year-olds along with a teacher. All of Britain was plunged into mourning. The queen herself came and knelt at the school. As the article reminded us, this was three years before Columbine.

Eight days after the shooting, Britain's parliament convened a tribunal to conduct a public inquiry into the shooting. Approximately a month later, the report was submitted to the public. In the report, Lord W. Douglas Cullen, the leader of the tribunal, reported to the nation that he sought to answer two questions:

What were the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the shootings at the Dunblane Primary School on March 13, 1996?

What should I recommend with a view to safeguarding the public against the misuse of firearms and dangers that the investigation brought to light?

In his answer to the questions, Lord Cullen wrote that the safety of the public could be better insured by focusing efforts on the sale and availability of guns rather than the fitness of a potential buyer. In his words, "it is insufficient protection for the public merely to tackle the individual rather than the gun." He followed this with a strong recommendation that if certain guns could not be disabled by their owners or stored in sports clubs when they were not being used, that the government had to consider banning all multi shot weapons.

In other words, (to paraphrase for the American context), background checks and similar measures will not fix the problem.

As the article reminded us, Britain also had a strong gun lobby. Arguably not as strong as the gun lobby in the United States, but strong nonetheless. Indeed, Prince Phillip

publicly railed against such restrictions. But in 1997, the House of Commons voted on legislation that effectively banned such weapons. And as the author reminds us, *since the passing of this legislation, there has been just one mass shooting in England.*

In the 3 days since the shooting, we have heard all kinds of ideas about how to respond to this crisis. Many have focused on mental health issues that plague so many, especially our youth. But as the British example shows, as necessary as it is to deal with the serious mental health crisis in our country, that alone will not prevent the next mass shooting. Nor will background checks. Our priority must be to achieve what Britain achieved. We must severely limit, if not ban, the sale of automatic and semi-automatic weapons, and other military grade hardware. That is how we will prevent mass shootings in America. That may not be where the debate on the issue ends. But it is where the debate must begin. Jewish law demands that authorities limit on the sale of dangerous weapons and items, and forbids their sale to dangerous and unstable people. Why should our great nation behave differently?

Preventing the next mass shooting must be our goal. A nation that truly values human life and recognizes its sacred worth has no other option, and no greater priority.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner