

A Message from Rabbi Rosenbloom about the Mass Shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT

Monday, December 17, 2012

To Members of the AJ Community:

for all that remains of the children,
their eyes,
staring at us, amazed to see
the extraordinary evil in
ordinary men.

Debbie Miner showed me this quote from a 1987 poem by Lucille Clifton entitled *sorrow song*. How poignantly it captures the overwhelming emotion that has gripped us since the news of the Friday mass shooting at Sandy Hook Middle School in Newtown, Connecticut, a town most of us had never before heard of, but a name that is now seared forever in our collective conscience. “Their eyes ... staring ... amazed ... the extraordinary evil in ordinary men.”

On Shabbat morning, as we *davened* the *Hallel* Service, the Psalms of Thanksgiving for our *Hanukkah* holiday, I was brought up short by the last verse in Psalm 113, “God transforms the forlorn, childless woman into a joyful mother of children.” The day before, joyful mothers and fathers of precious young children were transformed into forlorn, bereaved, and inconsolable mothers and fathers of slaughtered children!

This has been a year in which the monstrous evil of mass shootings has come to a religious temple in Wisconsin, a movie theater in Colorado, a shopping mall in Oregon, and now an elementary school in Connecticut. At each one we are horrified beyond words. At each one we search for “answers” and “reasons” and “motives”. At each one we recoil in horror.

We hold vigils and prayer services. For a few days the most heinous of them dominate the daily news cycle. There are make-shift memorials. Candles, flowers, and teddy bears.

Our emotions are of sorrow and regret and remorse.

But that is not enough this time.

It is time for there to be anger as well about the scourge of gun violence in America.

I, for one, am tired of candles and teddy bears, prayers and explanations. I am tired of our lack of collective will to deal forthrightly with the plague of gun violence. I am tired of our politicians who cower in front of the gun lobby, and who hide behind the second amendment.

I listen to people in all the communities where mass shootings have occurred and to the one they all say the same thing. This is not the kind of place where this sort of thing happens. This kind of thing is not supposed to happen here.

Well, why not? Is there any place in American where this cannot happen? It has happened in every kind of public forum, civilian and military, against tiny children and a member of Congress. Why not here, there, anywhere, everywhere?

These mass shootings do not take place in the inner city, but in the very areas where we thought we could relocate to escape violence induced by poverty and privation. But a new kind of violence has followed us.

This tragic massacre, these reprehensible mass shootings, are only the tip of the iceberg of societal gun violence. Every day almost one hundred people lose their lives in firearm incidents. Tens of thousands a year, killed or maimed. If this kind of devastation were the work of a foreign assailant or an aggressor with a political agenda we would recognize it for what it is. Terrorism. And we would leave no stone unturned to fight this abomination.

I am tired of the shibboleths: “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people.” or “If guns are made criminal, only criminals will have guns.” This is nonsense. It is the American love affair with the gun that makes this level of violence not only possible but likely.

Just look at the incident on the Philadelphia subway last week. An argument over a basketball game. And one of the parties just takes out a gun and shoots the other. Over a basketball game!

I do not understand our society’s obsession with guns. I do not believe that we are safer with public citizens carrying concealed weapons or having arsenals in their homes. I suspect that there are few instances in which a citizen bearing arms leads to a successful intervention to stop a crime. And that there are far more instances of accidental shootings from lapses of gun security at home by legal users.

But I can understand even less why responsible people who feel they must have guns, either for safety or sport, would oppose responsible rules regulating gun possession. They too are mothers and fathers, they are shoppers and worshipers, they are movie patrons and workers. Why would they not want to lessen the danger to society by supporting responsible and reasonable gun control? That I simply cannot understand!

A Hasidic Rebbe was once asked by a disciple, “Rebbe, is there a purpose for everything God has created in the world?” The Rebbe replied, “Certainly.”

“But Rebbe,” the disciple continued, “why did God create atheism?”

The Rebbe thought for a moment and responded, “When someone sees a problem, another person in trouble, one should never say ‘God will take care of it.’ One should act as if there is no God, and go take care of the problem, one human being to another.”

This is a time for us to demand action of our political leaders. This is a time to say “Enough.” Enough violence. Enough looking the other way. Enough moving on ... knowing that it will only happen again.

Enough submitting to terrorism. For surely, the uncertainty with which we step into every public place because of the potential of gun violence is, itself, a form of terrorism.

As it says in Psalm 119 “This is the time to act, for God’s sake!”

This is the time to act. For Society's sake.

It is time to write to our elected officials.

It is time to support organizations that are working to reduce gun violence in America. Our member Shira Goodman is the executive director of *CeaseFirePA*. Go online to <http://www.ceasefirepa.org> and find out how you can be involved.

We at AJ will be working with Shira and others to develop a meaningful public response and initiative.

I hope you will join us and help make a difference.

Let us not allow this sacred moment to recede from our consciousness without resolving to change ourselves, and make a personal commitment to working toward diminishing gun violence in society. For the sake of the children. For the sake of our families. For the sake of our neighbors.

For our sake.

In this week's Torah Portion, Judah speaks of the bond between his father Jacob and his brother Benjamin and describes it as "One soul, linked to the soul of another."

We are all linked souls. One to another. That is what being human is all about. That is what being American is all about.

The eyes of the dead children stare at us.

They wait to see what we will do.

Faithfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Seymour Rosenbloom', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rabbi Seymour Rosenbloom