

THE BATTLE FOR GUN CONTROL – WE ARE BETTER THAN THAT

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“Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4)

It is the prophetic vision; the prophetic vision of a world no longer at war. Not the world that was seen, but the world that was yet to be seen. But this vision of the prophet was not about *deux ex machina*. It was not about some messianic figure coming down and changing the world for us. We know that from the first part of the prophet's statement: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”

How will we create this world without war, how will we create this idolized vision of a world at peace? Not by sitting around and hoping and praying that someone is going to do it for us. Not by dreaming and dreaming and dreaming. But by taking those swords and beating them into plowshares.

We can imagine what that dream was like for those who heard it. The sword - an incredibly mighty weapon. It could take an ordinary person - an ordinary human being, maybe bigger and stronger than someone else, but not necessarily so. And he could wield massive destruction around him, with a flick of the hand. And what about that weapon of the spear? Which could strike a person at a great distance, and cause death and destruction. What a mighty and terrible weapon it must have been to those who had not seen it. And the prophet said, take those mighty weapons - take those weapons of destruction and turn them into implements of farming. Take them from sowing death to sowing life.

A powerful, powerful vision. And a vision that has yet to be. We are, perhaps, not yet worthy of a world which does not know war. We are not there yet. But it doesn't mean that we can't keep trying.

There are many different kinds of war. There is defense of nations. There is even fighting against terrorism - or terrorists, you can't have a war against a means. But there are also culture wars in our nation, and they divide us. And they separate us along many different kinds

of ideologies. But there is one culture war in our nation which has deadly, deadly consequences.

And it is time for us not to be passive about this war. It is time for us not to sit idly by. It is time for us to say that we will take these swords and turn them into plowshares, and those spears into pruning hooks.

It has been a week since the terrible events in Newtown, Connecticut. Which happened just a little while after the deadly shooting right in our own backyard. Which happened not so long after the event in Colorado. And on and on and on. We are in a world in which there is terrible mental illness. And a very small minority of those who are cursed with mental illness have violent tendencies. And we have to do far more to help those people with mental illness in all their different realms and all their different ranges. Not relegate them to the fringes of our society and tell them to gain a little bit more self-control. Not to make them embarrassed as so many are so that they don't share their symptoms with anyone else out of fear of being pushed aside or being thought of as being different and 'other'. We have far more that we need to do on that subject.

But.

We are a society that allows that tiny minority to be super-empowered; to take their rare but deadly violent tendencies and turn them into actions that our ancestors could not have imagined. The destructive power that is in the hands of ordinary citizens today - unimaginable in years past. Beating a sword into a plowshare is nothing. Taking a weapon of mass destruction: available to you now over the internet, in easily customizable ways; in ways that you can take an element that might be an ordinary weapon and with no skills at all by ordering from column A and a little bit of something from column B turn it into a weapon that soldiers around the world would wish they would have in their own hands.

And ammunition clips that are readily available over the internet that can turn that weapon into a weapon of mass destruction. And we have allowed it. We have allowed it to take place.

In our nation - at least we know in years past -30,000 people in a year were killed by guns. That was in 2004. We don't actually know the number (beyond then), because the CDC which compiled the data in years past is no longer allowed to keep track of gun deaths in our nation. And so we can pull it together from various pieces of information. Maybe, and its probably true that gun deaths have gone down over the past several years in our nation, maybe it is a low as

10,000 in a year. 10,000 people, killed in our nation through the easy availability of the guns that we have. If only that number - it is far, far too many.

Armed assaults have increased. Weapons being used in aggravated ways continue. We tolerate it. We say there is nothing that can be done.

But we are better than that.

The events of these past few weeks, which have shocked and horrified us, have renewed in our nation the call to make a difference. To say that we are better than that. To say that we are not a culture that dreams of being armed, that dreams of being toy soldiers each one of us. That dreams that the only way we can protect ourselves from the vast evils that are out there is to be better armed than anyone else. To say that we have to be a soldier in order to protect ourselves. We do not need weapons of war in our homes. We do not need weapons of mass destruction to be around us. They do not make us safer.

No matter what the NRA may have said today - the answer to more weapons in our nation is not to arm more people. To put guards, armed guards, into schools is the answer to school shootings? Makes about as much sense as saying that the answer to unemployment in our nation is to fire more people. Oh yeah, they did that too.

We are better than that. We should be better than that.

This week I crafted a letter which I sent to our congressional delegation. It spoke of Jewish values. Because I am reminded that religious institutions have always been the ones that have made a difference in culture, that have made a difference on issues of morality in our nation. Religious institutions have taken the forefront on this issue. Our own movement, the Reform Movement, has taken a stand on sensible gun control for a long time: I found a resolution which was written in 1972 which called for sensible gun control in our nation. I don't know if that was the earliest.

But if only then, we have been talking about this issue: not about disarming our entire nation, but of saying there have to be sensible limits, there has to be something that separates weapons of war from ordinary weapons of protection. There has to be some way of marking this distinction and saying we are better than that, and we can stand for it.

I sent a letter to our congressional delegation on Monday and I said I am calling on our leaders, our Senators from our state, our Congresspeople from our region, to stand for three things:

1. a renewal of the Assault Weapons ban
2. a limit on large magazines of ammunition
3. a closing of (gun show) loopholes that allow people to buy and sell guns without having the (national) register checked for people who should not be receiving guns

These are three simple and commonsense ideas. This should be groundbreaking. This should not be something that we don't have the political will to accomplish. They are simple, they are sensible. And they are right for our nation.

I am very pleased to share with you today that last night the Board of Trustees for Congregation Beth Israel endorsed the letter that I wrote, as is now part of our official policy. And I am sending this letter once again to our Congressional delegation, to the President of the United States, to Vice-President Joe Biden who now has responsibility for crafting some of this legislation (with that endorsement). I want our Temple to be known as standing up for what is right in our community.

But don't leave it to the Board of Trustees. And, please, please don't leave it to me. The [letter](#) that I wrote is now on the [Temple's web site](#). You are welcome, please, to take a look at it. You are welcome, please, to share it with others, you are welcome, please to copy it and send it to your own congresspeople. You are welcome please to sign petitions. There is a [petition](#) that has been put out by the Federation nationally (JCPA). Last time I looked at it there were over 12,000 signatures. The Jewish statement of this important issue. The statement of protecting our people. We are taught that one who saves a life - it is if they have saved an entire world. Every one of us has infinite potential. Every one of us is almost an entire world. If we can help to reduce from that 30,000 or 10,000 or whatever number it is. To reduce those deaths, to reduce senseless violence; to honor the memories of those 20 infinite potentials who were slain by that one madman with a semi-automatic weapon. Isn't it worth it? Isn't it worthwhile?

Our Jewish teachings tell us that it is.

Weapons of war do not belong in our hands. We are not soldiers fighting a battle on our home front.

In the Mishnah (Shabbat 6:4) there is a conversation about Shabbat: the beauty and the holiness of Shabbat. And, of course, one of the issues about Shabbat traditionally is what one

carries: what one is permitted to carry in public realms or not. One of the rabbis talks about swords and shields and armor. Is that permissible to be worn out in public on Shabbat? The rabbi says: well, you know - they are not really using it. It's just an ornament. Ornamentation, of course, is permissible to be worn on Shabbat. The sages disagreed. The sages say that to wear a sword on Shabbat, to carry about a weapon of mass destruction to spit in the face of the prophetic vision that: "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks."

We are better than that, the sages tell us.

We can make a difference. The rabbis call it "shameful" because we stand for something far more important. "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation. "And even at home "neither shall they learn war anymore."

kain yehi ratzon - may it be G-d's will.