

Shattered Shards

Gun Violence – A Change is Coming

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The funeral for the young man was shattering. People from all over the city, politicians and church-goers, wept together. The cavernous hall of the sanctuary was filled. The gleaming white coffin sat in the front below the church pulpit. The fact that the deceased was the step-son of a prominent Black pastor in town raised the visibility of this funeral. That preacher is a man I call “Brother” and he has spoken from this pulpit. It was lost on no one that Pastor J.W. Matt Hennessee has long been an outspoken activist advocating against gun violence in our city, working at interrupting gang activity, and lobbying the police for greater visibility and understanding of the Black community. There he was, officiating for the funeral of his own step-son, murdered by random gun violence. We were in a borrowed church space because the pastor’s home church could not hold the large crowd. The music was sorrowful but contained a hint of the joyful gospel music from every Sunday morning church service. This 33 year old man, this father of 2, a carpenter’s apprentice, was shot in broad daylight near a food cart pod in Northeast Portland while several people were going to pick up dinner. Jalon Yoakum’s murder in May of last year was the 31st homicide in Portland in 2021.¹ The year would end with a record 92 killings, shattering the city’s previous high of 66 set more than three decades ago.² As of this past weekend, there have been a reported 76 homicides in the city; at least 61 from shootings,^{3,4} putting us on track to exceed the previous year’s record. And that does not include suicides and accidental shootings. Gun violence touches us all.

Is there anything positive that can come from such pain? It is hard to imagine. But, sometimes the greatest creativity can come from the greatest disruption. Shattering can lead to healing.

The greatest disruption in Jewish History between the Destruction of the Second Temple and the Holocaust was the 15th century expulsion of Jews from Spain. Something unexpected arose from it. For thousands of years Jews had lived at peace in Spain. Some of our greatest writers and philosophers emerged during the so-called “Golden Age” where Jews, Muslims and Christians lived a mostly peaceful co-existence on the Iberian peninsula. The new Queen Isabella of Spain shattered that peace by persecuting Jews and Muslims. On the very day that Columbus sailed on his first voyage to the Americas, the Jewish expulsion order went into effect, disbursing Spain’s large and long-settled Jewish community to far-flung reaches of the

¹ <https://www.oregonlive.com/portland/2021/05/victim-in-ne-portland-shooting-identified-as-stepson-of-anti-gun-violence-advocate.html>

² <https://www.opb.org/article/2022/01/15/2021-was-a-record-year-for-homicides-in-portland/>

³ <https://www.kxl.com/portlands-homicides-of-2022/>

⁴ <https://www.oregonlive.com/crime/2022/10/these-tragedies-compound-portland-sees-4-homicides-in-24-hours.html>

globe. The Spanish expulsion was the most cataclysmic event to the world-wide Jewish community in 1500 years.

Among those Jewish exiles were scholars and mystics who fled to the Land of Israel. Some of the most mystically minded found their way to the mountainous city of Safed. There they absorbed and expanded the teachings of a local Kabbalistic teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria⁵. Luria had created a form of Jewish mysticism which the exiles enhanced and spread. What became known as “Lurianic Kabbalah” was centuries later popularized by the Chasidic movement in Europe. Although Jewish mysticism has been around for thousands of years, when we talk about Kabbalah today we are talking about Lurianic Kabbalah.

Luria’s mysticism was founded on the idea of shattering vessels. In his telling, the pure divine essence of G-d, known as the *Ein Sof* – the Endless – chose to withdraw in order to create space for the universe to exist. Some elements of that divinity remained behind in order for the creative force to imbue the universe. These elements were contained in sacred vessels which poured the divine essence one to another. But the force was so great, Luria taught, that the vessels shattered leaving tiny shards scattered throughout creation. The human task is to gather these sacred remnants and return them to the Source. This is done through a process defined as *Tikkun Olam* “repairing the world.” Fulfilling mitzvot – Jewish commandments – and doing acts of charity and justice bring those shards back to their rightful place as containers of holiness.

It is not surprising that the mystic scholars who had experienced a shattering of their home, their sense of place in the world; that these exiles would hold onto a kabbalah of shattering. They, themselves, were like the scattered remnants of the divine vessels. And now they saw their exile not as a punishment, but as an opportunity to gather what had been lost. To return the world to a holy state.

The Reform movement has long refashioned the Kabbalistic idea of “Tikkun Olam” to mean “Social Justice.” Like our Christian brothers and sisters, we have absorbed the concept that our religious teachings compel us to work against injustice in the world and to join together to create a better world. We take what is broken and commit ourselves to its repair. As I like to phrase the theory underlying Jewish mysticism: Human actions have Cosmic consequences.

I have been thinking of this concept that a shattered past can be used to build a different future, as we in the 21st century are emerging from the pandemic. The past few years have shattered many of our norms – and they have allowed us to rethink the kind of world we want to build. There is a strong impulse to return to the way things were. As COVID restrictions are lifted, we talk more and more about “being back;” about returning to our pre-pandemic habits and experiences.

But something has been shattered. Something is different. We are different.

⁵ 1534 - 1572 CE

In the Torah we read:

רַק הַשְּׂמֶר לָךְ וּשְׂמֵר נַפְשְׁךָ מְאֹד פֶּן־תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת־הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר־רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ
וּפְנֵי־סוּרוֹ מִלְּבַבְךָ כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ וְהוֹדַעְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וּלְבְנֵי בָנֶיךָ:

But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children. (Deut. 4:9)

Do not forget what you have seen, Torah tells us. Let it inspire you to make the change.

Undoubtedly it will take us a long time to understand what we have all experienced, what we have seen with our own eyes, over the course of the past few years. Few could have predicted the changes we have witnessed, and the effects of the pandemic shutdown will likely ripple for many years.

But as we are beginning to return – as we are redefining “normal” – there are things we can say we have learned. Out of our shattered past we want to build a better world for our children and our children's children.

If anything, the pandemic forced us to see things many of us could comfortably ignore. The grave inequities for our culture – the ways we force those who are often the least compensated to make the greatest risks. “Essential Workers” is a term many of us had not heard before. And here we were cheering on delivery drivers and grocery store clerks and many others who continued their work even when it meant more contact with others. We honored nurses and teachers for their creativity and commitment – with song and memes, but usually not with more compensation or better working conditions. Coming out of pandemic we are seeing that the nature of work is changing – that workers who were often taken for granted are able to demand more safe working environments and more fair pay. “Dignity of work” – usually code for accepting sub-standard working conditions - is evolving as worker rights and unions are gaining power, allowing workers to live in the dignity we all deserve.

We are also beginning to see changes in our assumptions about government and our tolerance for inaction. For many years now, as you may know, I have been working on the issue of gun violence prevention. I have been appalled at the rising number of gun deaths and injuries in our communities. With every school shooting, with every mass murder at grocery stores, shopping malls, movie theatres, parades, music festivals and nightclubs I have seen the despair as nothing seems to change. Although there has been political progress, although some laws were added, it did not feel like it was enough. But coming through the pandemic and the isolation we experienced, I feel something has changed. Somehow we have emerged with more of a sense of responsibility for each other. Somehow we have decided not to stand idly by.

As we began to collect signatures for what has become Ballot Measure 114, I was overwhelmed by the number of people who volunteered. From just a handful of church and synagogue members, ultimately some 1600 people all across the state gave their time and energy to the

cause. They are still at it. What they reported is that people were grateful for the opportunity to sign. They felt they were doing something which could make a difference. We needed to gather about 100,000 signatures by the July deadline in order to get on the November ballot. We had hoped to gather 120,000 signatures, to be safe. On the day of the deadline, we submitted not 100, not 120 but over 160,000 signatures of Oregon voters. Out of the shattering times of isolation and fear, a new sense of activism and participation is emerging. When I speak about this interfaith effort publicly, I note that I and other clergy leaders are motivated by the biblical command not to stand idly by while our neighbor bleeds.⁶ It doesn't have to be about crowds of people marching – although that is wonderful and uplifting. It can be about individuals quietly doing what they can to make a difference. It is *tikkun olam*.

I am engaged in this issue not only because of the traditional command of פְּקוּדַי נַפְשׁוֹ⁷ the responsibility to save lives, but because I believe we are at a cultural tipping point on gun violence. I remember when there were fierce arguments against seatbelts and helmets even though the research was clear that thousands of lives could be saved with these simple tools. Now few think twice when buckling up. My rabbinic thesis 28 years ago was on whether cigarette smoking should be forbidden under Jewish law. At that time the culture wars were exploding around the subject even as cigarettes were killing millions. Only a few decades later, cigarette smoking has all but disappeared in popular culture. Just a few years ago marriage equality was being hotly fought over. Our congregation was on the forefront of this fight here in Oregon and until the courts intervened, we were preparing for legislative victory in our state. Today it seems likely that even if the Supreme Court were to try to take away this right it would be protected by new laws. What seemed impossible to imagine a few years ago is now the norm: conservative legislators, facing mid-term elections, are public about protecting same sex marriage.

These changes happen not because a handful of elites get together in the halls of academia and deem it so. They change because people see the effects on their own family and friends. Compassion for others won over cultural fears. I believe we are at a similar tipping point regarding a culture which tolerates – and even glorifies – guns and gun violence. We have had enough. I believe in the near future easy access to guns, especially weapons of war, will no longer be part our culture.

I want to be part of that change.

The gun lobby, as an arm of the industry of gun manufactures and sellers, has promoted a vision of fear, suspicion and terror which has brutalized our country. They have sold a perverse vision that “more guns makes us safer” – a slogan which stands in defiance of our own experience and of academic research.⁸ States with easy access to guns have higher rates of gun violence. States with greater restrictions, like permits to purchase, have shown significant

⁶ Lev. 19:16. The literal meaning of the Hebrew is even more stark: לֹא תַעֲמִיד עַל-דַּם רֵעֶךָ “do not stand on the blood of your friend.”

⁷ B. Talmud *Yoma* 85b

⁸ <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/news/hsph-in-the-news/do-guns-make-us-safer-science-suggests-no/>

reductions in gun violence⁹ and lives saved. It is intuitively true. Weapons of war belong on the battlefield. On our streets they have created a culture of fear and brutal consequences.

When my father was a young man, he fought for the independence of his homeland, Israel, against the imperialism of the British Empire. Although he was an officer in the Irgun, the underground movement led by Menachem Begin, my father was very proud of the fact that he never fired his weapon – even in war. He would have, if it had become necessary. But he believed in an ideal which respected human life, even in extreme circumstances. He became known in that time for a series of lectures he gave to his fellow combatants on a principle known as טוהר הנשק – “purity of arms.”¹⁰ Soldiers, he taught, even in wartime should use their weapons only in the fulfillment of missions and to the minimum extent needed, in order to maintain their own humanity. Civilian life, even that of an enemy, was to be protected. This principle was eventually adopted as an articulated value of the Israeli Defense Forces and remains so to this day. That is not to say that every soldier operates with such lofty and pure actions. But the principles my father taught then remain an ideal today. And if that is true during war, how much the more so during peace and at home. Guns are not to be made into objects of worship, possessions to be coveted. Violence is not to be glorified. But today, in our country, gun makers have used the power of advertising to pervert this ideal. Guns of war are marketed to exploit vulnerable and insecure young men’s desire for acceptance. Just as cigarettes were a generation ago.¹¹ One famous ad for an AR-15, for example, declared over an image of the war-like weapon “Consider your Man Card Reissued.” The campaign was ended shortly after a young man in Newtown, Connecticut used one of these advertised rifles to kill 20 children and six staff at Sandy Hook Elementary. The same model rifle was used 20 years later to kill 10 Black people at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York.¹²

It does not have to be this way. And it won’t be for long. We can be the change. Out of our shattered past we can rebuild a more compassionate society.

The culture of putting “gun rights” over the lives of our children is going to change. It is changing in part because too many people have felt the direct effects of gun violence on themselves or on the people they love. The funeral of a young father taken from his family by a random act of gun violence, shattered his family, including my friend. The funeral of this young man brought together people of every culture and background. His family’s pain and loss were all too easy for each of us to imagine.

And many of us have seen our children and grandchildren practice active shooter drills in their classrooms. We know the stories of accidental shootings in the home because a child found an

⁹ <https://hub.jhu.edu/2018/06/01/permit-to-purchase-laws-linked-to-firearm-homicide-decrease/>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purity_of_arms

¹¹ Kluger, Richard *Ashes to Ashes: America’s Hundred-Year Cigarette War, the Public Health, and the Unabashed Triumph of Philip Morris*; New York: Vintage Books, 1997

¹² Busse, Ryan “The Gun Industry Created a New Consumer. Now It’s Killing Us.” *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2022 (updated July 29, 2022) <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/firearms-industry-marketing-mass-shooter/670621/>

unsecured gun. We all know people touched in some way by gun violence. We are all affected. This is not the way we should live. We want to be part of the change.

Our congregation has long been known for its social activism and I am proud that we are carrying on that tradition. Just as we fought for Marriage Equality, we continue to work for Reproductive Justice, Racial Justice and the right to Vote. We are working on Houselessness and Hunger and protecting people and the environment against the continued reality of Climate Change. We know our immigration system is broken and we are fed up with both political stunts and congressional inaction to fix what is broken. Asylum seekers, many of whom have suffered and sacrificed to be here, can and should be treated with compassion, not used to score points. And, our Social Action Committee is working hard to pass Ballot Measure 114 in November, to help reduce gun violence in our state and help us be a model for the country.

We face great challenges. We Jews see a rising and deadly anti-Semitism at home and around the world. It is part of a growing embrace of authoritarianism. White supremacy and election denial are eroding our institutions and putting Democracy itself at risk. We cannot be blind to the dangers. But there is hope as well.

While the experience of the pandemic was a difficult one to endure, I believe we are emerging more compassionate. We have seen with our own eyes what indifference, rejection of science and shutting down compassion can do. We have experienced a world-wide shattering – a recognition of both our human vulnerability and our ability to harness our tools to save human lives. It will take us a while, but we will come to see that our shared vulnerability unites us - that a simple virus cares not at all about our political persuasions or ideology. We are united because we are human. Our only way forward is to recognize our shared humanity and work to keep each other safe. The signs are not obvious – and human progress is never only linear. We step backwards into tribalism, suspicion and fear as easily as we step forward to mutual respect, understanding and compassion. But we can help encourage the more embracing and caring future that is coming. One that celebrates our diversity and our shared humanity. That puts protecting the life of people above protecting unlimited access to weapons of destruction. We can be part of that change.

As I sat in Jalon Yoakum's funeral, saw his broken family, I wondered how we can rebuild from the shattering reality that gun violence brings. I realized that like our ancestors we can take what is broken and use it to forge a new, more compassionate reality. We will not forget what we have seen with our own eyes. We don't have to stand idly by. We can find in the shattered shards of our world, sparks of holiness to be reunited into a sacred wholeness. From the shattering, we can create the change. In the memory of so many lost, let us not forget what we have seen. Let us build a better world for our children and our children's children. Amen.