

High Holy Days 5768 Sermon on Gun Control
By Hazzan Sunny Schnitzer

Some of you may have noticed that today I am dressed just a bit more colorfully than customary for the Days of Awe. Usually on the High Holidays I wear a new bright white shirt. But today, I am wearing maroon and orange in solidarity with my extended Virginia Tech family. Our daughter Samantha is a student there and a few weeks ago we returned to campus for the start of her junior year.

When we arrived, we didn't know what to expect. The tragic events of April 16 occurred just a few weeks before the end of the previous school year. The remainder of that year was filled with tears and recurring cycles of shock and grief. There were memorial services and convocations, a heartwarming outpouring of support from the town of Blacksburg, and the entire world.

But, what will academic life be like now for Samantha, her friends and associates? Samantha's best friend Rochelle lost her roommate Kaitlin Hammaran. Most days she and everyone else at V Tech will walk into their apartments, dormitories, and classrooms and see the faces of the missing. Hear again the cries of fear and grief, as they walk past Norris Hall and the West Ambler Johnston dormitory.

There is no normalcy for these children, their past and future are indelibly marked.

This generation has been through so much. From 9-11 to Columbine, to the DC sniper, through Code Reds, Orange, and Blue, and now this. For our children there is no sense of safety to be found anywhere. And for those of us who grew up in an era of unlocked doors, where we stayed out playing and riding our bikes from sun-up to sundown never causing our parents any worry as long as we called home if we were going to be late for dinner, something precious has been lost. I doubt that we will ever get it back, but that doesn't mean that we should sit back, sigh, and do nothing.

We must find a way to honor those we have lost and those who must carry on. We owe them that much.

It's not a Jewish response, to say I'm not responsible. We have to think about what we are doing and not doing to create a safe and comfortable environment for every kid. Of course, it's easier said than done.

But there are things that can and must be done. Even with death around you, life prevails. We who have suffered repeated persecution and death know that better than most. The Jewish response is that we are obligated to choose life, *uvachartah vachayim*, to embrace life."

It is time for the clear majority in this country who favor stricter gun control laws and an end to the culture of violence promoted by television and film, to speak as one voice. It is the only way to counteract the well funded and well organized pro gun lobbies such as

the National Rifle Association or the more extreme Gun Owners of America who promote gun culture as a normal way of life that must be protected.

I was shocked and angered when only 24 hours after the carnage at my daughter's school, there on MSNBC I witnessed a member of the later organization saying with all seriousness, that what happened at Virginia Tech was a direct result of the university declaring itself a "gun free zone" and had the students or teachers in the classroom been armed, perhaps the number of deaths would be lower because someone would have had the wherewithal to take the shooter out.

The idea that if we are armed and have free access to arms we are safer from evil and evil doers is a huge lie. The people who believe this are flat out wrong. Let no one tell you differently. Here are the facts.

- ✧ Remember this number, 50 to 1. According to the FBI, for every justifiable homicide in self defense in this country there are fifty handgun murders.
- ✧ Here are another set of numbers to remember 43-1.
- ✧ According to a study published in the New England Journal of Medicine, guns kept in the home are 43 times more likely to kill a family member, friend, or acquaintance than an intruder.
- ✧ Since 1968, the year of the murders of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, well over a million Americans have been killed by firearms in the United States. That's more people than the combined combat deaths in all of the wars in our history. It makes handguns the number three cause of death in the United States after automobile fatalities and cancer.

Our children are dying because of the obsessions of groups of macho men who feel that they must own a gun to bolster their manhood. Children in the states with the highest rates of gun ownership are sixteen times more likely to die from an accidental gunshot wound than children in states with the lowest rates of gun ownership, nearly seven times as likely to commit suicide, and more than three times as likely to be murdered.

And for those who say a madman like the Virginia Tech shooter who wants to kill will find a way to get guns or a bomb or some other weapon to carry out his evil plans, I say, we still don't have to make it easy for them to do so.

There is a misconception that a sizeable number of Americans want to maintain the status quo when it comes to gun control laws. This is another lie promoted by the anti gun control crowd. The facts again are something quite different.

According to a poll on behalf off Mayors Against Illegal Guns, in January 2007, and please take note that this poll was released before the Virginia Tech massacre, more than eight in ten (84 percent) say that they are concerned about gun violence, including 58 percent who say they are very concerned. This places gun violence right along side of the price of gas (59 percent very concerned) and the quality of public schools (56 percent very concerned) in the public's mind as a top issue. Concern about gun violence crosses

partisan lines (Democrats 90 percent very/somewhat concerned, Independents 89 percent, Republicans 83 percent) and exists in big cities (83 percent) as well as rural areas (85 percent).

Additionally, large majorities of voters support common sense initiatives to prohibit dangerous people from carrying guns.

Eighty-six percent favor prohibiting people on the terrorist watch list from purchasing guns (including 88 percent of gun owners). In spite of this, improvements to the so called "Brady Bill", the NICS Improvement Act, that would install such checks and passed the House in June, has stalled in the Senate. They're checking your shoes in the airport security lines, but right now if you're on the no-fly list, you can still buy a gun.

The will of the people here should be clear, but our elected representatives cannot seem to do the right thing and instead succumb to the pressure of the pro gun lobbyists. The U.S. House of Representatives in June did a grave disservice to law enforcement when it failed to remove the 'Tiahrt Restrictions' on the sharing of trace data on gun purchasers by police departments from the Federal Appropriations Bill funding the ATF.

"More than 200 individual police chiefs, 11 national police organizations, 21 state and regional police organizations, along with more than 230 mayors, have repeatedly urged Congress to repeal these restrictions. We know that gun crime trace data is critical to law enforcement.

Actions which favor the gun lobby and the small minority of corrupt gun dealers over the needs of police are deeply troubling. Congress and the Bush Administration should be acting to help police fight gun crime, not hinder their efforts. That this provision was upheld in the wake of the Virginia Tech massacre is inexcusable.

We can and must change this culture of death. And if the politicians are too cowardly to do so, because it is too controversial a subject to tackle in an election year, then we're going to have to do it ourselves. Just like the impetus to confront global warming has come from the grassroots not the government, so too will the impetus to change our gun culture.

It has been seven years since the Million Mom March for sane gun control laws. In the wake of that historic rally, congress passed a few improvements to existing gun laws. But most of the provisions passed as a reaction to the rally have expired including the assault weapons ban and the limit on the number of rounds in a gun magazine. The expiration of that law enabled the Virginia Tech killer to purchase large ammo clips, making him into a more efficient machine of murder.

But the public memory is short. Two weeks ago there was a gun control rally by the local chapter of the Million Mom March and the Brady Campaign to End Gun Violence at a gun shop in Prince Georges County. Sadly less than 100 people showed up, probably because the publicity was virtually nonexistent. According to the Brady Campaign, of the

top ten shops with the most gun sales traced to crime, three of them are in Maryland and Virginia. Yet only a handful of people in our area seem to care. Perhaps the inertia is due to the fact that Maryland has some of the strongest gun control laws in the country and people in our area feel as if we've done all that we can. But still a gun shop in Forestville sold guns that were used in almost 1200 crimes last year. There is more to do to bring some sanity to the situation.

This struggle for cultural change is a long process especially when it runs up against what others perceive as a "right" to bear arms under the second amendment to the US Constitution. But it can be done.

Once upon a time the right to own slaves was also understood as a constitutional right, but eventually and after a vicious struggle, the culture changed. One hundred and forty years after the Civil War almost no one believes that slavery is a right or even acceptable.

We must rally around and lend real support to those lobbying organizations pushing for meaningful changes in the gun culture that is a part of so much of our nation. For starters we must insist that the assault weapons ban that expired in 2004 is re-enacted by this congress and that existing laws are stringently enforced. Please contact your Senators and ask that they support H.R. 2640 the bill to improve the National Instant Background Check System.

From a Jewish perspective, placing weapons in the hands of people who are mentally ill or for other reasons cannot be trusted to bear arms is strictly prohibited. The book of Leviticus makes the essential point when it says, "You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind" (19:14). Obviously the verse isn't meant literally. Do we really need to be warned against tormenting the handicapped?

No, our Torah is telling us to take into account the weaknesses of a person in our dealings with him. We don't pour liquor for someone with a propensity to drink and drive. We don't give a bottle of whiskey to an alcoholic for a Chanukah gift.

There are certain circumstances-metaphorically speaking, conditions of "blindness"- where a society should remove temptations and causes for stumbling from before people who are likely to stumble.

The great medieval rabbi - Nachman ben Maimon also known as Maimonides, codifies this as practical law in his Mishneh Torah (Laws of Murder and the Guarding of Life,), forbidding the sale by Jews of "all weapons of war" or any "object that poses a threat to the public," citing Leviticus 19:14. He makes an exception for selling armaments to the nation's military (or presumably its local police units).

That would appear to seal the matter. From the perspective of Jewish law, there seems to be very solid ground for restricting weapon sales. The only point of ambiguity arises from the fact that the precedent found for these laws in the Talmud are found in tractate Avodah Zarah meaning literally, "Foreign Worship."

The tractate is concerned primarily with "idolaters." I think that we can say without question that a person who glorifies violence, who worships warrior culture, is one who is worshipping an idol, not God.

All of this is going to take some time. The situation will not change until after years of concerted effort. Just as those directly affected by the shootings at Virginia Tech still have a hard time waking up in the morning to say, 'It's great to be alive. Some days they will wake up and feel better, some days will be worse. Time doesn't heal, but healing takes time.'

And so today I'm going to ask you join together as we pray for the souls of those lost because of the actions of a madman, and we pray for those whose lives have been senselessly ended in Iraq, Israel, and the rest of the Middle East, in Darfur, and throughout the world.

We also pray for those students and their friends and families who, though not wounded physically, have been traumatized by this senseless act of carnage in their lives. Help them to overcome their fear. Strengthen them to face the springtime of their lives with a wounded but still intact hope.

Heal, we also pray, all the parents and protectors of all the children who are sent off to all the schools in all the mornings of our lives. Help them to let their children go to school with a smile and a kiss and not a tug and a tear. We know that we must let them go, but many days we do not want to let them go. We only want to hold them close. Help us all to live with the terrifying challenge of freedom and fate.

Rabbi Marc Gellman teaches; In Exodus 19:4 we read that God took us out of Egypt on eagle's wings. The symbolism of this is lost to many of us who do not know the way of eagles. Those who watch eagles know that they teach their young to fly by pushing them out of their nests built upon high cliffs and then flying close to them as their chicks fall and flap their untested young wings.

When their young fall too far, the eagle parents swoop down, catch their young on their pinion feathers, and flip them upward into the sky to save them from the rocks below and to give them another chance to reach the sky. Eagle parents do catch most of their eagle fledglings. We know this because there are still eagles in the sky. Still, we know that they do not-they cannot-catch them all. Nor can we.

Oh dear God, heal us from our grief at the sight of our fallen eagles. Help us and them to find a way to believe that springtime and the blue sky still beckons.