

I want to begin my remarks this Rosh ha-Shanah by noting that as we welcome the New Year here this morning, I am also beginning my tenth year of service as rabbi at Or Hadash. It has been an honor to serve this community for so long and to welcome the New Year together so many times as your rabbi, and with that comes the tremendous privilege of standing before you to offer my reflections on the occasion. It is a privilege – and responsibility – that I take very seriously, and a great deal of time and thought goes into the words and messages that I share each year at the Holidays. Those of you who have heard me speak over the past ten years know how important it is for me to keep my focus squarely on the themes and core messages of this High Holiday season. This, by the way, is in contrast with my own childhood experience, where my rabbi invariably used the Holidays as a forum for making grand pronouncements on a range of domestic political issues and on America's foreign policy. When I became a rabbi I promised myself for a host of reasons that I would not indulge in politics from the bimah; and I hope you will agree at the end of these remarks that I have kept my promise. I do not view or intend this morning's sermon to be political; instead it is connected on the deepest level with what these Holidays are all about: a day on which life and death are laid before us, where we are invited to take serious account of our actions in this world and toward our fellow human beings, and the personal responsibility each of us holds to shape this coming year for goodness.

Last December, our nation was horrified by the unimaginable, incomprehensible, news coming to us out of Newtown, Connecticut: a gunman, armed with an arsenal of semi-automatic weapons, had shot his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School and then methodically proceeded to murder six adults and *twenty* children, many executed at point-blank range. Just recalling this now the memories still feel fresh and raw: We, this country, all of us were simultaneously stunned and sickened – how could such a thing happen? Who could even contemplate such a brutal and senseless act? Twenty-six people were shot that morning in Newtown, twenty-seven if you include the gunman's mother whom he shot before going to the school, twenty-eight if you care to include the gunman himself; and a nation mourned with the grief-stricken families and demanded action. There was anguished soul searching and a broad call for common-sense gun regulations from nearly all corners of the country. Yet our government rejected a renewal of the assault weapons ban that had expired in 2004, rejected limiting magazine sizes to ten bullets apiece, and rejected closing the gun show loophole to regular background checks, a measure that was supported by 92% of Americans. In Pennsylvania, where 1,300 citizens are killed by guns every year, the House of Representatives has been mobilizing *just in case* any additional Federal regulations were to be passed, preemptively declaring such regulations illegal here and making any enforcement of these laws a felony. *This* is the action we have gotten from those who are supposed to represent us. *This* is the response to the terrifying epidemic of gun violence sweeping our country. *This* is shameful.

A few statistics: Firearms are far and away the leading cause of violent death in the United States. The rate of firearms deaths in the U.S. is *twenty times* higher than the average of all other developed countries. Of those deaths somewhat more than half are suicides – particularly relevant because the fatality rate for suicide attempts with firearms is roughly 90% as compared to 5% by all other methods, and 80% of those who attempt suicide and fail do not try again, meaning if it weren't so easy to get our hands on guns there would be many, many fewer suicides. The rest were street crime, domestic disputes, drug-related violence, accidental shootings – including very young children getting their hands on loaded firearms and shooting other children – and so forth. Very few of those deaths were part of mass-shooting incidents like Newtown – those that get the media coverage and draw our

horror-struck attention. In fact, *since* that horrific morning nine months ago when twenty-seven people were murdered, the CDC estimates that 23,181 people have been killed by guns in the United States. That's equivalent to the entire population of Fort Washington, Maple Glen, Dresher, and Oreland, put together.

There is an epidemic of handgun violence sweeping this country. Its causes are not simple and its solution is not simple. Some facts, however, are both simple and incontrovertible: There are currently more than 320 million non-military firearms in the United States, more than one for every man, woman, and child in the country. These weapons are increasingly powerful and increasingly cheap. Gaping loopholes to background checks and weak waiting periods or limits on the number of guns purchased at one time make it easier than ever for guns to get into the hands of criminals or those with a history of violent mental illness. Thanks to conceal-carry laws which now exist in one form or another in every state of the nation, they are easier to carry around undetected than ever – on the street, at work, in the supermarket, at church or synagogue. This is not what our framers had in mind when they guaranteed the right to keep and bear arms.

There are some who argue that the proliferation of guns is a good thing, that more gun ownership means less crime because each armed citizen becomes part of a *de facto* police force that can intervene whenever necessary; as we have been told so many times, “The only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is with a good guy with a gun.” The fact is that there is no evidence to back up this claim and plenty of evidence, both statistical and anecdotal, to be deeply suspicious of the idea that more guns equals less violence – just ask Trayvon Martin, bleeding to death in a Florida subdivision clutching his Skittles and ice tea. The fact is that it has become impossible to even ask the question of what steps might be taken to reduce gun violence in this country because an ideologically driven segment of the population, eagerly enabled by cynically motivated politicians, has turned this issue into a firestorm and made sane and reasonable discourse impossible. As I said at the outset, none of what I'm saying this morning should be viewed as political, except the whole issue of gun violence has become so politicized and polarized that it becomes necessary to make the disclaimer.

It shouldn't have to be this way. It shouldn't be controversial to take a stand against a scourge that claims more than 25,000 American lives each year, including more than 3000 children. The Torah tells us – in fact, Abbe Goldstein will chant for us next week on Yom Kippur afternoon – “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.” (Lev. 19:16) Judaism is a religion that affirms the preciousness of life and the obligation we all have of working to sustain and ennoble it. As the Talmud famously teaches us, “Whoever destroys a life, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.” (B. Sanhedrin 37a) While acknowledging the importance and legitimacy of self-defense, Jewish law and tradition has generally been deeply suspicious of guns and weapons. Jewish law instructs that it is forbidden to sell weapons to someone who may reasonably be suspected of having criminal intentions. (B. Avodah Zarah 15b) The book of Genesis contrasts Jacob, the ancestor of all Jews and the namesake of Israel, with his brother Esau, who is depicted as a violent man and a hunter. (Gen. 25:27) It should be noted that Jewish tradition takes a dim view of hunting since it is forbidden to engage in pursuits where we gain pleasure and satisfaction while causing others pain; in a number of classical haggadot, the *rasha*, the evil son, is depicted as a hunter.

None of this is intended to demonize guns per se. There are many Jewish sources as well that uphold the legitimacy of having a weapon for self defense. But Jewish tradition is equally adamant about the obligation of practical, common-sense measures designed to limit the harm these weapons can cause. One, for example, may keep a fierce dog in one's home, but only if one lives in a dangerous area and even then only if the dog is kept chained. (B. Bava Kamma 46a, 83) The Torah tells us that when we build a home we must construct a parapet around the roof to prevent someone from accidentally falling off (Deut. 22:8). In modern times this idea has been extended to similar hazards, such as building a fence around a swimming pool: we are called upon to acknowledge and take responsibility for those things that can cause harm to others, even inadvertently. Common sense and Jewish law therefore both dictate that guns in homes should be kept locked up and stored separately from ammunition – the moral equivalent of building the parapet or fence, and which virtually eliminates the kind of tragic accident we read about all-too-often where a toddler gets her hands on a gun and shoots herself, or a child finds his parents' gun and brings it to school. In Israel, guns are ubiquitous: when we were living there two years ago our children rapidly adjusted, after an initial period of discomfort, to the sight of soldiers, police, and civilians walking around with semiautomatic weapons slung over their shoulders. But in Israel there are also strict licensing requirements for civilians to have guns and all guns are registered and have identifying marks so the Ministry of the Interior can trace them. The rate of homicide by firearm in Israel is .1 out of every 100,000 people – the corresponding rate in the U.S. is *thirty-two* times higher.

We are literally destroying ourselves with guns. We are living out the heartbreaking words of the prophet Jeremiah, words that Alisa Belzer will read as part of our Haftarah for tomorrow, when he captures a nation mourning for so many innocent dead: "Thus proclaims the God of Zion: 'A voice is sounded in Ramah, a wailing, bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.'" (Jer. 31:14) Who are these 'children'? Who are the people who are being shot and killed in our own backyard every day? They're children like David Cook, aged 27, murdered in West Oak Lane in June for the cash he brought with him to buy new bicycles for his own children, ages 8 and 5. They're children like Violeta Isackov, age 45, shot three times in the chest at point-blank range with a shotgun in Feasterville by her ex-husband as she sat in the car in April with her own young daughter sitting beside her. They're the twenty-four children ranging in age from 18 to 57 who were shot in the Philadelphia area over this past Labor Day weekend, leaving two dead and several more in critical condition. They're children like Janiya McFarlane and Gabriella Morris, ages five and two, both shot in the face last week when an argument in a Wilkes-Barre apartment about a cell-phone charger turned violent. Like Rachel, we look at the needless destruction around us and we weep. We weep for our children, young and old. All through these Days of Awe we ask, "Who shall live in the coming year, and who shall die? Whose death is timely, and whose is not? Who dies by fire and who shall be drowned, who by sword and who by beast? And we ask also: "Who by shotgun and who by revolver, who by semi-automatic and who by assault rifle? Who at the movies and who in the mall, who in their home and who in their school?"

There is a major problem in this country – a constant and tragic scourge of gun violence, but we only acknowledge it, only pay it attention when some terrible rampage – some Newtown, some Aurora, some Fort Hood, some Virginia Tech, some Columbine – some massacre breaks through the background noise and captures our attention. Following these mass tragedies, only then, do we engage in periods of

collective soul searching about the rampant availability of guns in our country and the terrifying ease with which we are willing to turn them on each other and on ourselves. Well the time for soul searching isn't only in the wake of a brutal shooting; the time for soul searching is *today*, Rosh ha-Shanah, the Day of Judgment, the day when all of us are called to account before our Creator, the day for which we can only prepare by a genuine and honest period of *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, of *soul searching*.

If we are honest with ourselves, what do we find? We find a society where gun violence prevents far, far too many people from being written into the Book of Life each year. We find a society that remains far too indifferent to the epidemic of gun violence, which disproportionately affects young black men in the inner city and other populations that are often for many of us in this room out of sight, out of mind. We find a society that too often cries out a reflexive assertion of 'rights' and 'liberty' that can bear no regulation or restriction, entirely indifferent to the terrible costs of our assertion of personal freedoms. We find a society that simply accepts and tolerates the fact that tens of thousands of Americans are killed each year by firearms, that lives young and old are snuffed out in an instant and families are torn apart forever. We find – if we are *truly* honest – that we must *all* bear responsibility for our nation's failings to stem the tide of gun violence, for this Holiday teaches with stark clarity that we all collectively bear the guilt for the sins of the society of which we are a part. This is why throughout these holidays we confess collectively, acknowledging our shared culpability in sins we may not have personally committed and taking on ourselves responsibility to stand against them. *Chattanu lifanecha*, we say: We have sinned before you.

*Chattanu lifanecha...* Have we done enough to fight for responsible gun laws and regulations? *Chattanu lifanecha*, have we done enough to educate ourselves and one another about the epidemic of gun violence in this country? *Chattanu lifanecha*, have we taken a stand against a culture that glorifies guns and violence in our video games, on television, in the movies? *Chattanu lifanecha*, have we pushed for proper funding and care for people suffering from forms of mental illness that can make them dangers to themselves and others? *Chattanu lifanecha*, have we bought into defeatist attitudes that the political forces opposing common-sense gun regulations are too strong to push back against? *Chattanu lifanecha*, are we willing to stand before our Creator on this day of judgment and say there was nothing more we could do?

Rosh ha-Shanah is a new day, a new opening, a new possibility. A chance to break the cycles that bind us, personally and collectively. A chance to confront and acknowledge the places where we have failed to live up to our responsibilities as members of this society and strive to do better. Over the coming months, Or Hadash will be presenting a number of programs designed to educate us and help us become advocates against gun violence in our country and our communities, including a planned panel with representatives of the group Ceasefire PA, a visit in October from State Representative Stephen McCarter to talk about current developments with gun laws in Pennsylvania, and an upcoming gun buyback program we are creating with State Representative Madeline Dean to purchase and destroy unwanted firearms. I encourage you to speak to me or the co-chairs of our SATO committee if you are interested in getting involved in these efforts. This will be the year where we can say we did not stand idly by while our neighbor bled, where we took seriously the dictum that he who saves a life saves the entire world, where we sought to comfort Rachel crying for her children by ensuring that fewer of them will fall victim to gun violence. This will be the year where we recognize the critical role our own

*teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* play in helping more sons, more daughters, more sisters, brothers, neighbors, classmates, and friends be written into the Book of Life in the New Year.