

## Shabbat Shuvah: Who By Bullet and Who By Negligence?<sup>1</sup>

On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we recite the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer containing provocative questions, “Who shall live and who shall die? Who by fire and who by water.”

This prayer affirms our fragility and how much is beyond our control.

With this acknowledgement, it is all the more mind-boggling when we have the power to avoid dangers but stand idly by.

For me, the most needless danger we tolerate is gun violence.

My colleague, Rabbi Joseph Meszler,

affirms that we could easily amend the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer of 2016 with:

“Who by bullet and who by negligence?

Who by semi-automatic weapon and who by unlicensed handgun?

Who by lack of background check and who by accident.”

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-joseph-meszler/who-by-bullet-a-message-f\\_b\\_8137462.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/rabbi-joseph-meszler/who-by-bullet-a-message-f_b_8137462.html)

As a society, we are responsible for the appalling lack of safety controls.

The tragic death toll from both criminal and accidental gun violence can be avoided, but we are not doing enough. //

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The Jewish response to gun control is quite nuanced.

We are not a pacifist religion.

Jewish tradition says we are entitled to defend ourselves and even take a life to save our own or someone else.

Talmud teaches, “If someone comes to kill you, kill them first.”<sup>2</sup>

However, Jewish tradition also recognizes the danger of negligent possession of a weapon or a weapon in the wrong hands.

The Talmud teaches: “One should not sell [those with criminal intentions] either weapons or accessories of weapons, nor should one make any weapon for them.”<sup>3</sup>

Dangerous objects are to be kept away from those who threaten harm to themselves or others.

People have the right to own a gun for self-defense, according to the Second Amendment.

However, every effort should be made to deny guns to dangerous people and not to create a hazard in the home,

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<sup>2</sup> *Berachot* 58a.

<sup>3</sup> *Avodah Zarah* 15b.

which necessitates a comprehensive system of background checks, safety requirements and education.

And, in direct conflict with much of American culture, Jewish tradition doesn't see weapons as part of recreation or sport.

Studies show that states with more gun control have less gun violence, and states with less gun control have more gun violence.<sup>4</sup>

Connecticut enacted permit-to-purchase laws in 1995, and the state experienced a 40% reduction in firearm homicides over the following decade.

These laws solely required a background check to determine if the purchaser was a violent criminal or mentally unstable.

Some argue that new legislation would not prevent the major gun massacres.

They also like to use the slogan,

“Guns don't kill people, people kill people.

We don't blame a pencil for spelling mistakes or a car for traffic accidents;

why should we blame a gun for shootings?”

The difference is that a pencil is made for writing and a car is made for taking people from one place to another.

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An assault weapon is only made for killing a lot of people at once.<sup>5</sup>

We must have background checks at gun shows, the same as at gun stores.

The sale of assault weapons also adds an undue hazard.

We must develop and promote available smart gun technology which recognizes fingerprints in order to fire so a child cannot shoot another child.

So what can we do?

First, support universal background checks, including for private internet sales.

Second, encourage legislators to address the larger problem:

easy access to handguns that are either stolen, bought on the black market, or acquired privately and legally without a background check.

Third, we need greater education: are we really safer having a gun in your home?

Important legislation is on the ballot this November.

I urge us to vote "yes" for I-1491, Extreme Risk Protection Orders.

Extreme Risk Protection Orders will allow families and law enforcement to petition a court to temporarily suspend a person's access to firearms if there is documented evidence that an individual is threatening harm to themselves or others.

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That person must surrender their guns to police and will not be able to buy, sell, or possess other firearms for up to one year.

Congregation Beth Shalom in Seattle

will be hosting phone banking every Thursday night starting Sept 22nd until election day.

The Washington Alliance for Gun Responsibility can also support phone banking at

TBO. Please let me know if you'd like to help organize this. //

“Who shall live and who shall die?

Who by bullet and who by negligence?”

It is our ethical obligation to do better.

Shabbat Shalom.