

Rabbi Lewis' Message for January, 2013

One day some years ago when my kids were in Valley View Middle School in Watchung, I went to pick them up with a friend who had come to visit. We walked right into the side door and down the hall to their classrooms. My friend marveled at the ease of entry and the friendliness of the kids and teachers. Her son attended a large middle school in Rhode Island. Due to its strict security procedures, you couldn't just walk in casually the way we had.

That world is gone now. Long before the shootings at Newtown, that world had disappeared due to increasing awareness of needing to protect our children. We couldn't rely naively on living in communities that simply felt safe; we had to do things to insure safety. So we locked the outside doors to the school and restricted access to everyone, even to well-meaning parents. Does that prevent a deranged gunman from getting into the school by breaking a window? Of course it doesn't. But that possibility also doesn't justify the NRA's solution of arming teachers and school guards.

We can debate the intention of those who drafted the 2nd Amendment just as we can debate what the ancient rabbis would have said about all this. We can wonder if the Holocaust would have been less destructive if Jews had owned guns and we can debate whether it could happen here. We can point out that Israeli schools have armed guards outside the school and we can argue that we are not a country at war as Israel is. We can point out that the Reform and Conservative movements in this country support gun control legislation while the mainstream Orthodox community has been largely silent.

All of this is instructive and interesting but for me it begs the point. The drafters of the U.S. Constitution did the best that those leaders could do and gave us a framework that has accommodated change. The ancient rabbis lived then and there, not here and now. Both those legislators and the rabbis understood that laws and religious tradition need to be resilient to remain relevant. As a serious Reform Jew, I believe both in the wisdom of the sages and also in the wisdom that emanates from leaders and scholars of our own time. I believe that revelation wasn't frozen once for all time but continues to inform us as our times change. And I have no doubt that gun control is at least a part of the answer. Last week, Rabbi David Saperstein of the [Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism](#), convened a meeting in Washington of interfaith religious leaders. This is a part of what he said in his remarks:

“Is the need for sensible gun-control a religious issue?”

You bet it is.

The indiscriminate distribution of guns is an offense against God and humanity.

Our gun-flooded, violence-prone society has turned weapons into idols. And the appropriate religious response to idolatry is sustained moral outrage.

What manner of nation are we that in the face of overwhelming support for stronger gun control, we can bring ourselves to legislate only the most anemic controls for the bloodiest problem we face? What manner of people are we that we can accept that we have lost more people to gun violence on our streets and in our homes than we have to all the wars in the history of our nation, more children every year than our brothers and sisters who perished on 9/11? The victims of violence overwhelm our emergency rooms, requiring the costliest of care, erode confidence in our communal institutions, and undermine our political, educational and civic institutions.

It doesn't have to be that way."

I agree completely with Rabbi Saperstein. Yes, there are other things we need to do in addition to drafting gun control legislation. There is serious work to be done in providing access to good healthcare for all, including mental health. And yes, Anne Curry's inspiration via Twitter that we should perform 26 acts of kindness in memory of those killed in Newtown is an idea no one can argue with. In the face of evil, we strive to do good.

But what happened in Newtown reminds us that good deeds done by good people are not enough. Life is too precious to leave it up to good will.

Between Hurricane Sandy and Newtown, we have lived through a sobering few months. As we enter this secular new year of 2013, I am ever more grateful for the love of this community. May this new year bring a new era of caring and of peace for us all.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis