

Rabbi's Message June 2022

Dear Friends,

In June of 2021, a 17-year-old white male in Endicott, NY, was ordered by NY State Police to undergo psychiatric evaluation after having made threatening statements at school about murder-suicide. After less than two days in the hospital, he was released with no further restrictions.

And then, a few weeks ago, I'm not sure **when** exactly, that same white male, now 18 years old, entered Vintage Firearms, a gun shop near where he lived, to purchase a Bushmaster assault weapon, which, as I understand it, is similar to the more commonly known AR-15 assault rifle. After passing the necessary instant background check, the young man made a legal purchase, and exited Vintage Firearms, his new rifle in hand.

On Saturday morning, May 14, he woke up in his parents' home, hopped into his car, and drove 200 miles, all the way to Buffalo, NY. With him along for the ride in the car were a shotgun and two rifles, one of them being his new Bushmaster.

At approximately 2:30 pm, he arrived at Tops Supermarket, the only large grocery store on Buffalo's predominantly African American East Side, exited his car and, protected by military style body armor, proceeded to shoot 13 helpless innocent human beings, first outside and then inside the building, all the while broadcasting his carnage over the internet as if it were no more than a video game. Within moments, he had injured three and murdered 10. Two of the injured were white. Every one of the 11 others, including the 10 murdered, was black, which was no accident. His entire reason for choosing Tops Supermarket in the first place was **precisely** because it is an important community resource in a predominantly black neighborhood. This white supremacist wanted to let black people **everywhere** know that they would be safe **nowhere**. In fact, reports indicate that he can even be seen on the video of his murderous rampage aiming his gun at a potential victim, only to then put it down with an apology when he realized the individual was white. If purer evil exists, it's hard to imagine what it looks like.

In September of 2021, 1,700 miles away in Uvalde, Texas, a 17-year-old boy pleaded with his older sister to purchase a gun for him because he was not yet old enough to buy it on his own. She refused.

On February 28, 2022, this same 17-year-old shared in a group chat with three others on Instagram about his intrigue with the idea of becoming a school shooter. The next day, also on Instagram, he chatted with three others about buying a gun. Two days later (March 3), he claimed, yet again on Instagram, actually to have bought a gun. Eleven days after that (March 14), he took to Instagram once again to whet the appetites of his followers with the ominous statement, "10 more days," leading one of his chat partners to ask, "Are you going to shoot up a school or something?" Six days

later (March 20), unable to live peacefully with his mom at home, the 17-year-old moved in with his maternal grandmother.

And then came May 16, which was all-important, because it was on this day that, according to legal definitions, the 17-year-old boy became an 18-year-old man. As such, it was also on this day that he finally became legally eligible to enter his local gun store, choose the semiautomatic assault-style rifle of his choice, commit himself to a quick background check (that showed nothing unusual since he had no record of mental illness or illegal activity), and then walk out that same day, armed with a weapon capable of outrageous and lightning quick mass destruction. Yes, May 16 was the day he became eligible, but as much as he had dreamed of this opportunity, he didn't actually do it that day, because on that day, his 18th birthday, his mom apparently went to spend time with him and gave him a stuffed Snoopy and birthday card. No, it wouldn't be until the next day (May 17) that the newly minted "man" bought his rifle as a birthday present to himself. The next day (May 18), he bought 375 rounds of ammunition. Two days later (May 20), he returned to the same federally licensed gun store to buy a second semiautomatic assault-style rifle. And then what did he do? He posted a picture of his new toys on Instagram.

Four days following his second rifle purchase (May 24), the now 18-year-old sent three separate messages to a 16-year-old girl in Germany whom he had recently befriended on-line. The first said he was going to shoot his grandmother. The second said he had done it. The third said he was going to a local elementary school to kill children. The 16-year-old says she never actually saw the messages until the shots had all been fired, but even if she had, we imagine it wouldn't have changed the course of events since she was just a random kid all the way across the world in Germany who had never even met the gunman in person.

Sure enough, though, the gunman had been telling the truth in his messages, because that morning, he did shoot his grandmother in the face., after which he stole her pick-up truck and raced to Robb Elementary School. Sickeningly, you already know what happened next.

31 innocent people mowed down over the course of just ten days by two 18-year-olds with semi-automatic assault style rifles. The first 10 victims were killed for no reason other than the color of their skin. So far as the next 21 are concerned, we may never know why, because before succumbing to bullets from a law enforcement gun, he never bothered to share his motivations, not in person, on-line, or in a hand-written note.

While I am tempted to call these cold-blooded assassinations "unimaginable," the fact of the matter is that since we've all seen it happen too many times before, it most certainly is imaginable that we might see such carnage in our streets and schools. I won't bother rattling off the names of familiar towns – familiar for no reason other than the seemingly endless list of innocent lives stolen there by gun violence – because, frankly, that's just too painful a reminder for me to bear right now. This has been going on for too many years.

This must stop.

Surely, we imagine, America should have figured out an effective response by now. Surely we should have cared enough about the lives of innocent babies, innocent parents, innocent grandparents, innocent bystanders, innocent friends and classmates and neighbors and teammates and co-workers. Surely we should have.

But we haven't. To be honest, I'm really not sure whether we haven't cared enough, or whether we haven't been smart enough, but either way, it remains that in 2020, the most recent year for which we have reliable statistics, more than 45,000 of our countrymates – more than 123 each and every day – lost their lives to gun violence. Some were shot by others, and some turned their own guns on themselves, but however it happened, the fact remains that roughly 1.65 million American civilians have died by gunshot since 1968.

This cannot continue.

We cannot allow ourselves to allow mass murder or mass suicide ever feel “normal.”

To be sure, people of good will who find themselves at different points across the political spectrum will have different ideas on how best to address the situation. I won't bother going through the list, because you've heard them all plenty of times already. I will say, however, that while some of the standard “solutions” are complimentary, and others are incompatible, so long as we continue doing nothing new to address the pandemic of gun violence, nothing new can possibly happen. So long as continue walking the path we've been walking, far more than 100 of us will continue dying by gunshot every single day.

We need to change course, and we need to do it now.

I suppose each of us has our own ideas on how to address the issue of gun violence – I certainly do – but I also know that unless we can all find some area of common ground with those sitting on the opposite side of the political spectrum, our chances for success in reversing the tide of gun violence will remain slim to none.

Each of us, I imagine, is as sure as sure can be that if only our solutions were to be implemented in their totality, we would find ourselves on the most promising path towards saving the most lives. But I know also that unless solutions receive buy-in from across the political spectrum, the status quo will do nothing more than linger on. Nothing will ever change, because nothing will ever be tried.

On the other hand, I also know in my heart of hearts that if the clear majority were to support just a tiny minority of the solutions being proposed, thousands of lives would be saved each and every year. Putting a complete stop to gun violence, of course, would be ideal. But I am also a realist. As fervently as I pray for the coming of the Messianic Era, tragically, I also know that zero American gun deaths per year is hardly likely. And that is why the best thing we can do is keep Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 in mind, which teaches that when “one saves a life, it is as though they have saved the universe.” It may not be *perfect* that no matter what we do, at least for now, thousands of us will continue to die by gunshot for the foreseeable future, but we can hardly argue against the idea that saving even a single person is undoubtedly *good*. And, as the familiar phrase goes, we cannot allow perfection to be the enemy of the good. Mind you, I am not suggesting we should ever be satisfied with “good” when “better” is still out there, but if we don't start with “good,” “better” will likely never materialize. No matter what we do, we have to do *something*, and we have to do it *now*, because, as Leviticus 19:16 makes clear, we must never “stand by idly while our neighbor's blood is shed.”

Enough blood has been shed. It is time to leave behind our pursuit of perfection and instead start celebrating every last victory we can actually achieve. It is time to start finding common ground and attacking the challenge. It is time to start saving lives.

If not now, when?

L'Shalom,
Rabbi Dubin