

What We Can Learn from Sandy Hook

January 2013

Over the past five days, we have gathered together and mourned the innocents who were killed at the Sandy Hook Elementary School. We have joined in Shabbat services, in our homes and schools and work places, and in casual meetings on the street, to cry and pray together, and to comfort each other even as this tragedy defies understanding.

We have heard from our President and other political leaders, a new resolve to address the deeper causes of gun violence in our country. That is very welcome news. I want us to move together as a country on this. Generally, I try to keep my mind open to all points of view, but on the matter of gun control, I find it impossible to understand how anyone can support the status quo. The Harvard School of Public Health, in a recent study focusing on 26 developed countries, showed that the more firearms, the more homicides. Conversely, when strict controls were adopted, homicides drop markedly.

The massacre in Newtown has re-invigorated public conversation about gun violence, mental health and public security. This discussion-and more importantly concrete political decisions-are way over due.

We need more aggressive gun controls. To my mind, these should severely limit the amount of weapons an individual may possess, strictly monitor the possession and use of ammunition, require more extensive and lengthy background checks and regular follow-up psychological and medical tests of gun owners, and the storage of many private weapons in locked areas under police supervision. Further, we not only need to remove stigmas from mental health diagnoses and treatment, but as a society institute regular mental health examinations for young people, until age 21, just as we encourage yearly physical exams or check their eyesight and hearing.

But we have to take the discussion deeper. Political reforms will not offer a panacea. Recall that, in the case of Adam Lanza, the guns were legally obtained, properly stored and used in legal, supervised sporting arenas. The Sandy Hook Elementary School had an updated security system, which Adam had to shoot through. While clearly troubled, several friends described Adam as the son of upstanding, respected, generous, affluent parents who apparently had sought treatment for him.

Do I mean to indicate that we should therefore throw up our hands and regard the loss of 26 precious souls as simply the price of our constitutional freedoms? Certainly not.

But we need to take the discussion deeper. That will involve, first, a new discussion about guns and their importance for Americans. Nancy Lanza, like millions of other Americans, seemed to have valued her firearms not only for self-defense but for sport. What does it say about us as a society that lethal weapons are enjoyed so widely for their entertainment value? Israel, as even the casual tourist notices, is a country in which citizens are surrounded by automatic weapons. Many

thousands of Israelis on active duty keep their weapons with them, on and off base. However, in military training, Israelis learn "Tohar Haneshek" (purity of arms), a religious perspective which limits the use of guns only for the defense of life. There are also stringent background checks which limit the private ownership of firearms. As a result, the incidence of gun violence in the civilian sector is low, despite the ubiquity of automatic weapons and despite the fact that Israeli culture is verbally very aggressive.

What does it mean to look deeper for the roots of gun violence?

I would like to share with you excerpts from an article written 41 years ago in the United Synagogue Review (Fall 1971), then the quarterly journal of our Conservative movement:

"Ten or twenty years ago no one would have believed that American boys could have acted in such a way. But they did. Who else is guilty? Who else is to blame?"

"Did our religious leaders not fail to install in our people an absolutely, unconditional sense of horror for murder?"

"Relativity of values, permissiveness, is today a powerful trend in living and thinking. This trend tends to become universal, embracing all thoughts and action. It may also embrace homicide or even genocide. There is one issue in regard to which no permissiveness or relativity must be tolerated and that is murder!...The sense of sanctity for human life is subsiding...."

This comes from an article entitled "Required: A moral Ombudsman" written by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in response to the controversial conviction in military court of Second Lieutenant William Calley, for leading his platoon in the "My Lai Massacre" of hundreds of unarmed South Vietnamese civilians on March 16, 1968.

Heschel then went on to offer a teaching he found in the Prophets of Israel, his now famous distinction between guilt and responsibility.

"Guilt ... implies a connection with or involvement in a misdeed of a grave or serious character, the fact of having committed a breach of conduct, especially such as violates law and involves penalty. ... Responsibility is the capability of being called upon to answer, or to make amends, to someone for something, without necessarily being directly connected with or involved in a criminal act."

We are all innocent of the atrocities of December 14 in Newtown. However, according to Jewish ethics, "he who can forbid his fellow citizens from committing a sin, but does not, is seized for the sins of his fellow citizens" (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 54b). Jewish law and tradition emphasize our responsibility and obligations to each other. In this regard, our conception of community is fundamentally different than the American one, which proclaims that rights are the primary prerogative of being a citizen. Judaism also wants us to have proud, satisfied

personal selves, but believes that we develop and enhance personal identity mostly by being part of the larger reality and fulfilling the moral purpose of a group.

In the context of the discussion about firearms, the Jewish emphasis on shared obligations offers important insights. Firearms must be appreciated for their effect on human life, not on their potential for amusement. We have to have a serious public discussion not primarily about the occasional mass or serial killer but about the thousands of American men and women who murder every year.

What is in their hearts and minds? How did it get there? What relationships have they seen glorified on the screen? on the street? in the school yard? What have been the loudest voices during their youth and maturation? Was it the voice of conscience, of religion? Did they ever follow a serious, influential educational track which taught nonviolence? What outlets were they given to deal with their depression, anger, or alienation? What training or encouragement were they given to be sensitive to the grandeur of G-d's creation, to cultivate a sense of wonder and gratitude for the simple gift of being alive?

As human beings, we have a desire not just to eat, to survive, and to enjoy sexual pleasure. We also have ontological needs to pray, to wonder, to be grateful, and to experience moments of exultation. We need to feel that moments are unique and that we can do great things. To paraphrase Rabbi Heschel, we don't only need tranquilizers and sedatives. We also need stimulants. We are different than animals because we reject living on a level which is shallow and repetitious. We need to fashion our lives around the visionary and the ultimate, not just the practical and utilitarian. If religion will not offer possibilities for exultation, for elevating all aspects of our lives, men and women will turn to drugs, video games, instant pleasures, plagiarized achievements, and "gun-loving."

There is no fairness or justice in the murder of the sacred souls in Newtown. But they will not have died in vain if, moved by this tragedy, we will mobilize to prevent the murder of others, and to actively teach the ways of nonviolence and cooperation.

May their rest be dignified and may their beauty and innocence turn us all to compassion and hope. As the recent Chanukah holiday taught, G-d relies on us to bring moral and spiritual light to our world. In the wake of this tragedy, if each of us can promote practices and policies of caring and understanding, then good will triumph over violence.

A Happy, Peaceful and Healthy New Year to all
Rabbi Sam Weintraub