

Gun Violence in America
Beth Haverim Shir Shalom
Yom Kippur 5774

Am I my brother's keeper?

When Cain committed the first murder in the Bible, God asked him, "Where is your brother, Abel?" Cain's answer is, to me, the clarion call of our faith in the form of what Cain THOUGHT was a rhetorical question. Cain asks: Am I my brother's keeper?

The Jewish answer to that question is: yes. We are our brother's keeper—our sister's keeper. In Bible times, the world of our brothers and sisters was very small—we were responsible to and for all the people we knew—those in a very small geographic area. Those were our brothers and sisters, and beyond those boundaries was a world we didn't know about, had never visited, could barely imagine.

What was true in the Torah is true today, except that the world of our brothers is much more vast and expansive in 5774. We can no longer say that we don't know what's happening outside our narrow borders, and so the obligation we must feel is commensurately much bigger.

We are our brother's keeper. We are our brother's keeper in Israel on this, the 40th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War. We are our sister's keeper in this community of faith. As Jews—the ultimate wanderers, we are our brother's keeper abroad, wherever stateless people seek a home. And we are our sister's keeper here at home, where 11 million people live in the shadows, almost all seeking nothing but home and safety and productivity for themselves and their families. We are our sister's keeper abroad, wherever thousands of innocent people are dying in war, and, we are our brother's keeper at home, where 30,000 people die by gun each year.

Cain thought his question – Am I my brother's keeper-- was rhetorical. But God answers the question. God says, "Hark-- Your brother's bloods-- interestingly, plural: bloods-- cry out to me from the ground."

Cain's question should agitate us. In our world today, we are often challenged to ask the same question. Are we our brother's keeper? Like Cain, sometimes it seems to us a rhetorical question even when it should not be. We learn from God's response that when our brother's bloods cry out to us from the ground, we must hearken.

In each situation where we find ourselves as our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper, though, we must decide if we have the power to act in such a way that we will get the reaction we need. One hundred thousand people have died in Syria in the past 2 years. Do we have the power to stop that killing, and install a regime that will be good for the Syrian people, good for Israel, and good for democracy everywhere? I have no idea. If we do as a nation, I believe that we have an obligation to act.

11 million undocumented people now live in this country. Do we have the power as a nation to bring them out of the shadows and gradually into citizenship all while protecting our borders? I believe we do, and I invite you to join us at the afternoon service at 3:45, where 3 members of our congregation will share their immigration stories and their thoughts on this question.

23,000 Americans have died by gun since December 14, 2012. 23,000 dead in this country in the 275 days since the tragedy in Newtown, CT.

This violence cannot go unchecked. It goes against everything we stand for as a nation. Our brother's bloods cry out to us from the ground.

Our nation was built on the promise of life, liberty, pursuit of happiness, IN THAT ORDER. The founders of our nation put our freedom to be alive before our liberty to own a gun, and they didn't do so accidentally. Do we have the power to act to reduce gun violence? Today, I submit to you, we absolutely do, and I want to tell you how.

We know that the issue of gun violence is complicated. There's no one quick solution that will fix the problem. But knotty problems haven't prevented Americans from doing hard things in the past. It seems to me that the only question that matters is: Does the humanitarian CRISIS of gun violence in America worry us ENOUGH to want to act powerfully together on this issue with peoples of faith across the country?

30,000 Americans died by gun in 2012- -- a number too hard to truly imagine.

Too often in recent American history, we've been witnesses to gun massacres. When those tragedies happen, we get scared; we get mad; we get to know the faces/names of the victims. In those moments, our elected leaders resolve to address this plague. In those moments, we understand intuitively that we are our brother's keeper—our sister's keeper.

On this Yom Kippur, we can beat our chests with an alphabet of woe: Aurora. Binghamton. Columbine. Dekalb, Garden City. And on to Killeen, Newtown. Oakcreek. Tucson, Virginia Tech. Watkins Glen- Tragedies, all. May the memories of those who died be a blessing.

And yet, most of the 30,000 Americans who died by gun in 2012 didn't die in massacres.

-Most of the 23,000 who've died since Newtown didn't interrupt your regularly scheduled programming.

-Likely FEW of those who die today and tomorrow will make your phone buzz with breaking news alerts.

Each time the news cycle turns, we seem to forget our vow—that this time we'll learn, that this time, we'll be our sister's keeper, our daughter's keeper, our father's keeper.

Let me tell you about my father, Lester—a story some of you have heard me tell in the past few months as I've spoken out on this issue around the country.

My father was always on time for work- he always arrived at 7:45 a.m. sharp to his business in Chicago.

I only wish my father would have been late to work on January 19, 1999. Instead, he arrived right on time, one day short of his 53rd birthday, and was murdered—killed by a man with a handgun. All he did was drive to work, as he had done for 35 years, and he was stolen from his brothers, wife, his children and grandchildren. I've carried this story with me, this anger, every day for almost 15 years.

In the past 9 months since Newtown, since I've begun to speak out on this issue, I have met families of every race, every faith, every socio-economic background that have been affected by this scourge of gun violence. All of us—victims and survivors--have been asking ourselves the same question: How many more? How many more deaths until the people in the most powerful country in the world resolve to use their power to stop this bloodletting?

Here's the hard truth: It's been 275 days since Newtown, and nothing has fundamentally changed for the better when it comes to gun violence.

We brought comfort to each other in those cold days of December. We prayed a lot for the victims and their families. We sent paper angels to the people of Newtown, CT. We all *shrayed* a terrified *gevalt*. We locked the doors at the synagogue.

Some of us lobbied our legislators. And then—well, and then nothing, really.

Congress abrogated its responsibility to act, even though 900 mayors and millions of average Americans demanded a plan.

And then the news cycle turned. We were glued to the news for information about a meteor explosion over the Russian city of Chelyabinsk, the horrors of the Boston bombing, the birth of George Alexander Louis Prince of Cambridge, the second coup in Egypt, and the escalating terror in Syria. The 24 hour news cycle overwhelmed us with stories of our brothers and sisters at home and abroad, and we forget so easily the terror and anxiety that 5 minutes in a Connecticut elementary school created in us.

I know that it's not that we don't care about gun violence; I know that it's not that we've forgotten, really. The challenge, when confronted with these memories, with this concern, is, what can we possibly do?

What to do?

We can join other coalitions in learning from the example of New York state- to ensure that the governor of New Jersey signs the common sense bills that the New Jersey legislature passed, like one that would ban 50 caliber ammunition.

We can join those coalitions in holding Congress accountable to play its role in passing universal background checks, basic gun trafficking laws, and other common sense gun legislation.

For sure, we need to insist that our government enforce existing gun laws, and the way to do that is to ensure that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms is fully funded and staffed.

But I won't make news when I tell you Congress's plan seems to be to do nothing at all. No more funding for the agency that could enforce existing gun laws- no more sensible gun laws at all, it seems.

One response to Newtown -- legislation -- was pursued with much fanfare. It didn't work. Does that mean we should give up? Are lawmakers the only people in society who can act? Is Congress the only institution who can make an impact on this issue?

In our community organizing work, we began to ask ourselves: when we only focus on legislators and legislation when it comes to gun violence, who are we letting off the hook?

And the answer is in two parts:

1. The companies that manufacture guns
2. The institutions in American life who purchase the most guns- the mayors, police chiefs, governors, military leaders, and federal officials who buy guns – in enormous quantities – to outfit our police and military.

We need to create a covenant among leaders in all of these sectors to be our brother's keeper. We need our elected representatives, of course, but not only them.

We need a commitment from all those who can make an impact on gun violence-- that we will all be accountable citizens who cherish human life above profit, above political affiliation.

This covenant is based on our research and our discussions in New York and New Jersey as well as in other states. It's based on our conversations with mayors, police chiefs, legislators and many others.

No one institution can solve this problem alone. And yet, if we all acted together, we could go a long way to reducing the bloodshed.

Gun manufacturers have a hugely productive role to play. They can create more responsible distribution systems for their products, just as drug companies do, so that guns and ammunition are sold only through retailers committed to high standards of security and record-keeping.

Manufacturers have the money and the know-how to invest in research and development for safer gun technology- like guns that can only be fired by their owner. Gun makers could create responsible gun buyback programs and other measures to reduce the number of second-hand guns sold in America, reducing gun trafficking.

They could take specific measures to keep military-grade products out of the hands of civilians, and guns in general out of the hands of people who shouldn't have them.

Not one of these steps is onerous or prohibitively expensive- not one violates the Constitution. But neither do we expect the gun industry to rush to adopt them.

And who are WE, you might ask, to demand that gun manufacturers play their part in reducing the bloodshed their product is designed for?

The institutions with the greatest power to persuade the gun manufacturers to adopt these steps are their largest customers: the nation's military and police departments, who purchase 40% of all the guns in this country. And since those guns are purchased with our tax money, our current focus is to build relationships with these customers – mayors, police chiefs, military personnel, governors, executive branch officials at all levels – and to work with them to initiate productive discussions with gun manufacturers.

A dozen leaders and hundreds of members of our congregation have already been involved in this campaign locally, together with our faith partners in New Jersey Together, a community organization consisting of 35 communities of faith from all over our area. New Jersey Together, in turn, is a part of a national network of similar organizations across the country called the Industrial Areas Foundation, known as the IAF that works on many issues of common concern.

New Jersey Together has taken the lead in this campaign, and we're working with partners in New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, California, Minnesota, Ohio, Illinois, and Washington, DC.

Over the last several months, we have initiated meetings with local mayors/police chiefs in many of the towns our congregation serves; leaders of New Jersey Together have also had meetings on this strategy with mayors/police in Paterson, Newark, New Brunswick, East Brunswick. Bill DeBlasio has committed to working with us on this campaign should he be elected mayor of New York City. On Monday, I will be in Washington, DC with IAF leaders from across the country to meet with the head of the International Association of Chiefs of Police.

We are engaging small, medium, and large city mayors and police chiefs to build a powerful and unlikely coalition of religious, police, and military leaders that gun manufacturers will be unable to ignore. In short, we are the customers. And we want better customer service. We want a better, safer product from gun manufacturers. We want them to play their part in meaningful and creative way to keep our streets safer.

The response to these ideas has been overwhelmingly positive. Mayors and police chiefs tell us they're fascinated by our unique strategy, which they recognize isn't about taking guns away from law-abiding citizens, but instead about holding all the players accountable for keeping guns out of the hands of those who shouldn't have them.

On the issue of gun violence, like so many issues we face as a nation, we are our brother's keeper; we are our sister's keeper. The audacious case I make before you today is that, on the issue of gun violence, we have real power to act to prevent blood from being shed.

Join our community organizing team for strategy meeting on September 24 at 7:30 p.m. There we'll share insight into how local mayors and police chiefs have responded to this strategy, and we'll strategize about how to follow up with those officials. We invite you to think about and bring to the table the relationships you have w/mayors, police, the governor's office, and military/ex-military personnel- in short, unlikely folks who might stand with us. Learn how to develop relationships with your local officials, and help us connect with the institutions with the most power to affect change-- the makers and buyers of guns. If we engage constructively with them, we and they can make a real impact on the issue of gun violence.

Now nothing we do today will bring my father back to my mother, my wife and I; nothing will bring him back to his grandchildren. Nothing will bring those victims of Sandy Hook or the victims of gun violence on the streets of cities all across the country back to us.

But we hear their bloods calling out to us from the ground. We hear the blood of the 400,000 American victims of gun violence in the 15 years since my father's death.

Today, let us affirm that we are our brother's keeper- our sister's keeper. Today, let us rededicate ourselves to bringing light into a broken world. Today, in Rockland and Bergen counties, and across the country, let us commit ourselves to hearing the bloods of our brothers crying out to us. Today, let us hearken to that cry. Today, let us move from prayer and lament to powerful action.

Gmar chatima tova. May we be sealed for blessing in the book of life.

Amen.