

RA Dover Emet Statement on Gun Violence

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“Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” (*Lev. 19:16*)

“An act of violence is an act of desecration.” (Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 85)

The membership of the Rabbinic Assembly is horrified by the epidemic of gun violence throughout the country. We call for action to stop the bloodshed that each year claims the lives of more than 32,000 people in the US. We are joined in anguished spirit with those whose lives have been shattered. As rabbis called to comfort mourners, we grieve with all the parents of slain children, the children of slain parents, the family members, the murdered, the friends, neighbors and communities of those gunned down. They are all our children, family members, friends and neighbors and we pledge not to stand idly by their blood, crying to us from the earth. Upon the sidewalks that lead from house to house, in town squares and city centers and in far too many homes and church pews, we stand together before impromptu shrines of candle wax and teddy bears, of basketballs and flowers. We are joined by grief for the fallen children, the murdered spouses, students and teachers, concert-goers, moviegoers and worshippers, innocents caught in the crosshairs of madness and hate, ordinary people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Guns in the hands of those who should not have them affect all of us as neighbors across America.

The list of well-publicized mass shootings continues to grow in rapid-fire succession: Columbine, Virginia Tech, Tucson, Fort Hood, Aurora, Oak Creek, Newtown, Washington Navy Yard, Charleston, Umpqua College, Orlando, Las Vegas and South Sutherland, Texas this week and on and on.

Beyond the horrifying headlines, on a daily basis, the human cost of gun violence remains largely out of sight and out of mind, but nothing evades God’s notice. Jewish tradition affirms that God is the One Who remembers the Forgotten. It is the task of rabbis and other faith leaders to testify on behalf of those whom God remembers, those whose lives have been needlessly lost.

And while guns with high capacity magazines take many lives at once, across the country mass murder takes place every day, one victim at a time. Gun violence takes eighty-three lives daily in the United States, including eight children and teens, with one child killed every three hours. Mass shootings and day-to-day gun violence are two parts of a tragic and avoidable epidemic that threatens the wellbeing of all Americans and the spiritual and social fabric of American life. We call for a collective response to President Obama’s question in Newtown, Connecticut five years ago: “Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?”

Beyond the neighborhoods that are plagued by gun violence, we may imagine that we are not touched by this daily carnage. The Rabbinical Assembly is concerned by this separation of communities, generally along economic and racial lines. Poor, mostly minority communities face ongoing violence alone, without the support and attention of fellow citizens outside their own neighborhoods. But of course, this epidemic reaches every corner of the United States as over 20,000 people kill themselves with guns. Our tradition calls this murder and we have not done enough to help prevent these deaths. And guns make domestic violence much deadlier. What are we doing to help people (mostly women and children) in these most vulnerable of situations?

As rabbis, we accept our responsibility to act, and we urge our communities to heed the exhortation of our Torah, “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor/*lo ta’amod al dam rei’akha*” (Lev. 19:16). Commenting on this commandment, Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra warns against the complicity of silence and its price, “that one not be joined with people of blood.” Concerned about the danger of weapons falling into the wrong hands and to prevent arms trafficking, the ancient rabbis set stringent guidelines not only for the sale of weapons, but also for the sale of material that could be used to make weapons. “We may not sell to them armament nor accessories of armament. Just as it is forbidden to sell weapons to an idol worshipper, so it is forbidden to sell them to a Jewish robber.... We may not sell thick pieces of iron to them. What is the reason? Because they can be flattened out and weapons made from them.” (Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 15b-16a)

The rabbis were not afraid to limit the sale of weapons, nor should we be. Today, there are virtually no limits to the weapons and accessories that can be purchased legally in the United States. Through online sales, the Aurora shooter had purchased an assault rifle, a shotgun, two pistols, a gas mask, body armor, gas canisters, explosives, and six thousand rounds of ammunition. We rabbis ask why any private citizen needs such weaponry and why it should be possible in America to legally amass such an arsenal?

We need to prevent mass murder. We need to close loopholes and ensure consistent legislation between federal and state laws. We need to keep guns out of the hands of those who should not have them, such as terrorists, convicted felons, domestic abusers, drug addicts, and those with a history of mental illness. We need to recognize and halt the dual scourge of mass murder, both the random shootings that happen in one horrifying moment and the plague of urban violence that takes lives one bullet at a time, day after day. We must ensure that federal law require background checks for all gun sales, including at gun shows and through online and private sales. We must advocate for far-ranging mental health services, identifying early on and helping those at risk of sociopathic lashing out. We must acknowledge and act on the links among poverty, racism, and urban violence.

Whatever the context, we must make inaccessible the tools that allow for an explosion of violence. For the wellbeing of all, we need to find common ground among a broad spectrum of Americans to act on, not merely voice, our shared concern to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. Public safety is not a partisan issue, and rabbis of all political persuasions affirm the prime Jewish commandment of *Pikuach Nefesh*, saving lives.

Thoughts and prayers offered by civil servants and public figures pale in comparison to the TENS OF THOUSANDS of victims of the American Gun Violence each year. Think of that – close to a hundred murders a day. We are appalled by grotesque acts of violence in schools and places of worship, upon children and adults.

Rabbis are deeply pained that God's Creation has been defiled over and over and over again by the unceasing flow of blood, a uniquely American horror. We are not resigned to this, as we are commanded by our Holy Torah to choose life (Deut. 30:19) every time. We commit to joining other faith-based and civic groups to end the scourge of easily accessible weaponry currently fueled and protected by special interests and their influence on American politics.

We therefore call upon our nation's elected leaders to END THEIR COMPLACENCY and TAKE ACTION! Our tradition teaches us that if we save one life, we save a world. WE CAN DO MORE AND SAVE LIVES! For their sake, we need to hear the urgency in the words of the Talmudic sage, Hillel, “If not now, when?”

The Rabbinical Assembly calls for decisive and courageous action to stop gun violence in our communities, in our states, in our country. As a group of rabbis whose communities span the center of American Judaism and include

people of differing political and social perspectives, we are uniquely positioned to bridge divides in our communities and in our nation. We call on the Jewish community to:

- Support comprehensive and consistent federal gun legislation, urging our legislators to:
 - Restore public access to crime gun trace data
 - Require criminal background checks for all guns sold in the U.S.
 - Promote the research into and use of Smart Gun Technology
 - Limit how many guns one person can buy in one transaction and can own
 - Renew the assault weapons ban
 - Outlaw high-capacity magazines
 - Support efforts to close the private sale loophole
- Support the “Where did the gun come from?” campaign of Citizens for Safety.
- Encourage parents to ask if the homes their children play in have guns – “Is there an unlocked gun in your home?”
- Oppose “Stand Your Ground” laws and “Concealed Carry” laws, especially conceal and carry reciprocity across state lines.
- Invite political leaders, mental health experts, and educators to our communities to share views and develop action plans to stop gun violence.
- Learn about the daily reality of urban gun violence from such organizations as Citizens for Safety and Stop Handgun Violence.
- Organize adult education programs to learn more about gun violence and what you can do.
- Organize programs for parents and children through religious schools, Jewish day schools, and youth groups to address issues of violence that touch all of us and the choices we can make in our own lives to help create a more nonviolent society.
- Dialogue with responsible gun owners so that, together, we can save lives.

We recommend the following resources for information and action suggestions concerning gun violence:

<https://ragvtest.weebly.com/> (Rabbis Against Gun Violence)

<http://faithsagainstgunviolence.org/> (Faiths United Against Gun Violence)

<https://everytown.org> (Everytown for Gun Safety)

<http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/clergyagainstbullets/> (Clergy Against Bullets)

<http://donotstandidlyby.org/> (The Do Not Stand Idly By Campaign))

<http://www.vpc.org/> (The Violence Policy Center)

<http://www.stophandgunviolence.org/> (Stop Handgun Violence)

<http://www.bradycampaign.org/> (The Brady Campaign)

<https://www.thetrace.org/>

<http://www.askingsaveskids.org/>

<https://www.thetrace.org/2016/08/15-facts-that-show-how-guns-make-domestic-violence-even-deadlier/>

This document was written by Rabbis David G. Lerner and Menachem Creditor, utilizing a Public Policy Statement of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis written by RA member, Rabbi Victor Reinstein, as well as these previous Rabbinical Assembly resolutions:

- RA 2014 - <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/resolution-sensible-gun-control-united-states>
- RA 2013 - <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/resolution-against-gun-violence-united-states-0?tp=491>

- RA 2011 - <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/resolution-high-capacity-ammunition-magazines?tp=212>
- RA 1995 - https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/social_action/resolutions/reolution-violence-and-gun-control-1995.pdf
- RA 1990 - https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/social_action/resolutions/omnibus-resolution-reaffirmation-1990.pdf