

Sensible Gun Control and the Jews – a Personal Point of View. By Jeffrey Ellis

As I pondered whether to join the nascent Temple Isaiah Gun Legislation Advocacy Committee, I found myself grappling with the question, what is “Jewish” about gun control? What elevates it to a priority issue in our Isaiah community above the many other urgent and pressing social issues we face every day? Certainly the Sandy Hook/Newton massacre horrified me and stirred my deepest painful emotions. But was this one incident – even in its unparalleled enormity – enough to merit such singular devotion and energy?

While a graduate student at Hebrew Union College, I to examine *halacha* -- Torah, Talmud and Rabbinic law -- for rules and commentary to help form and *inform* our sensibilities on important contemporary legal and moral issues. So, what does tradition tells us about our responsibility for preventing gun violence through personal and

community action? Nothing directly, as guns did not exist to any significant degree in society until the 18th century, and not in mass production until the 19th. Yet, even the earliest Jewish communities needed to address issues of the distribution and deployment of deadly weaponry; public safety and personal responsibility; and the rights and responsibilities associated with personal protection against criminals.

A great overarching principle that guides our Jewish social justice principles comes from the Talmud: “*Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world.*”- (*Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Babylonian Talmud Tractate Sanhedrin 37a*). As we apply this tenet to issues of gun violence, we understand that we are obligated to take reasonable positive action to save lives – even a single life. As Jews, it is our collective mission to save and repair the world. We know that we may need to employ violence – including the use of guns – to defend the innocent and save lives. But, as Jewish tradition teaches us, such actions are not without clear limits and restrictions. Maimonides wrote “*It is forbidden to sell heathens weapons of war... or any object which can endanger the public*” (*Mishnah Torah, Laws of a Murderer 12:12*). We are likely more familiar with this from the Shulchan Aruch (Jewish Legal Code): *And for every stumbling block that threatens lives, one must remove it, protect oneself from it, and be exceedingly careful in its regard; as it says: "You shall guard and protect your lives," (Deuteronomy 4:9). And if the stumbling block is not removed and is placed in front of those who come to danger, one has violated a positive commandment. (Choshen Mishpat, 427:8)*. In contemporary terms, we see laws requiring full background checks; circumscribing weapons and accessories that increase the capacity and likelihood for a single individual to engage in mass murder and mayhem; and increasing penalties for breaking such laws, as part of our halachic tradition.

While federal legislation to create stricter background checks, heavier penalties for gun trafficking, and a ban on high capacity ammunition magazines has been stalled, our California state legislature is moving forward, and appears certain to pass a comprehensive package of eight laws known as the LIFE Act. It has already cleared the senate.

In coming issues of the Isaian and through our email blasts, the GLAC, under the leadership of Karen Sloane, will issue calls to action. We believe Temple Isaiah and our membership can play a vital role within the Jewish community and our coalition partnerships. We must not stand idly by as the almost weekly reports of heinous gun murders continues, whether in Newton, Aurora, or next door in Santa Monica. We must take meaningful measures to decrease senseless gun violence by enacting sensible legislation to keep all of us – especially our children – safer in our homes, schools, synagogues and public gathering places. If not now, when?