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A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday May 12, 2023 ~ Parsha: Behar-Bechukotai

Dear JCCP/CBT family,

210 Is A Number That Should Frighten You

Sadly, my Shabbat message this week will not be as upbeat as my previous several messages.

As I have shared with the community in the past, I spend a lot of time reading different newspapers, magazines, and journals so I can stay on top of news and events in both the Jewish world, and the world at large. Many reading this Shabbat message do the same. But when I read, I'm also considering whether any of this important information has sermonic value. If I determine that something would make for an interesting, sermon, article, class, or message, I either start writing notes to myself immediately, or save it for future use. As you might imagine, I have saved thousands of such articles. There is only so much I can use (and so much you can take!).

On February 15th, I saved the following article from USA Today: [*There Have Been 71 Mass Shootings in the US this Year - In Just 6 Weeks.*](#)

The number shocked me. Only 45 days into the year, we were on a pace to exceed the total mass shootings of previous years, which have risen steadily in recent years, especially since the pandemic began in March 2020. I should probably remind you that a mass shooting is generally defined as 4 or more people killed or injured as a result of a gun. At the time I had wanted to say something about this horrible statistic, but there were other important subjects to address and I have certainly talked about guns and gun violence in the past.

Fast forward to this week. [*The Gun Violence Archive*](#), has reported that as of May 11th, (yesterday), there have been 210 mass shootings this year alone.

Let's break down that number: since my Shabbat message last week, there have been 19 such shootings.

As of February 15, there were an average of 1.57 mass shooting a day in the US. As of yesterday, that shocking number was 1.6. In other words, the frequency of mass shootings in America *increased* since February 15!

On May 10, five wounded in Denver, Colorado.

May 7, there were eight different mass shooting incidents including one in Newark, NJ.

There were three mass shooting last Shabbat, including the horrific incident at a mall in Allen, Texas which claimed eight lives, and injured seven more.

Imagine that: 19 such events and only 1 made the national news. These shootings happen in rural areas, the suburbs, and the big cities. They happen in states that are known for their strict gun control laws, like New York and New Jersey, and in states that have chosen a much less restrictive approach, like Texas and Mississippi.

As you might imagine, I don't have any grand solution to this national epidemic. Like you, I am horrified by these statistics, and astounded at how our nation's leaders have allowed this problem to grow.

But what I can do is share some traditional Jewish legal sources regarding guns and gun ownership which I hope that you will consider as you think about the issue of guns and gun violence in our great nation.

1. Guns were originally created for the purpose of killing other people in war. Since 1364 (the first recorded use of a firearm) until the present time, every advancement in firearm technology has been for the purpose of making firearms more effective in killing. That's what guns do. They kill people.

For 200 years, Rabbinic law, has addressed the question of how dangerous items and products should be regulated for the benefit of society. From the time of the Talmud to the modern era, Rabbis and Rabbinic organizations have ruled that dangerous items like guns must be regulated.

For example: there must be restrictions on how they can be sold and to whom they may be sold. (*Avodah Zarah* 15B)

2. In the United States, the Second Amendment as well as recent court rulings ([Columbia v. Heller](#) 2008) guarantees each individual a right to bear arms.

Jewish law does not agree. Jewish law does not guarantee anyone's right to bear arms and such a right plays no role in Jewish legal thought. Whereas in the United States, the issue of gun ownership is usually a matter of people asserting their rights, I want you to understand that Jewish law is primarily interested in preserving society, and thus demands that public policy keep people safe. In America, in the hierarchy of values, individual rights will be prioritized over public safety. In Judaism, the opposite is true. American law favors individual rights, Jewish law prioritizes responsibility.

3. In Judaism, safety is a religious concern. So, for example, the Bible demands (meaning it is one of the 613 mitzvot) that a roof be properly gated in order to prevent people from falling off. ([Deut. 22:8](#)) This commandment is understood as a general directive to remove any safety hazard. In general, safety regulations are treated with far greater stringency than any other section of Halacha (Jewish law). Any Jewish view regarding guns and gun control would place a high value on public safety and prioritize that over the proliferation of weapons ([Mishneh Torah](#), Murderer and the Preservation of Life 11:4).

4. Jewish law prohibits selling offensive weapons to those who would be suspected of harming the Jewish community as well as suspected criminals. Recognizing that a gun is a dangerous object which is designed for one purpose only, Jewish law requires that

owners as well as vendors of guns take all possible precautions to prevent their guns from causing harm. And they are liable for harm they cause.

I could go on and on with examples of Jewish legal principles that offer wisdom that might address the horror of gun violence in general and mass shootings in particular. Our elected officials do not listen to the words and wisdom of our Rabbis and sacred texts. But they do listen to you. I urge you to make sure that your elected officials know your feelings about this national disgrace. 210 mass shooting this year is a number that should frighten you. And perhaps, God willing, spur elected officials of both parties into action.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Arthur D. Weiner