

Do Not Stand Idly By

Yom Kippur, 5775

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The morning of December 14, 2012 started out normally, as these kinds of mornings always do. But then, sometime in the late morning, I noticed a few, troubling messages on my Facebook wall. A few of my friends who still live back where I grew up started wondering what was going on with all the sirens, and all of the police cars and ambulances rushing by, lights flashing. They were all hoping it was nothing too serious, but the size of the response made that seem unlikely. It wasn't long before we started to hear what was happening. Before we all started to hear.

I grew up in a small town in Connecticut. New Fairfield, my hometown, is considered part of the Danbury area, as is Newtown, home of the Sandy Hook elementary school. I'm sure that on that morning, almost 2 years ago, few of you had heard of Newtown, and probably none of you had heard of Sandy Hook. But, you probably recognize those names now, as it was the site of one of the deadliest, and most horrific tragedies of our time.

It's a strange little quirk of human nature that relatively minor connections can draw us in, emotionally, to major events. A plane crash overseas will make the news. But, if just one of the victims lived here in Tampa, we'd all pay much closer attention, and feel the tragedy more keenly. That's how I felt, that's how I feel, about Newtown. Newtown wasn't where I lived, but it was my home. I had friends from there, I attended youth group events there, and I have a few friends who have kids in that school system, and in nearby schools, today. I spent a lot of time holding my breath that morning.

There was a feeling in the wake of that horrific day that something had to be done. We all know how terribly difficult the gun issue is. We know the political difficulty of passing any legislation which regulates gun ownership, on any level. And we also know the difficulty of crafting regulations which, even if passed, could actually make an impact on the gun violence which touches so many in this country. But, the consensus — or, at least it seemed like a consensus to me, at the time — was that it was time to do something. Something.

But we didn't. Nothing happened, more or less. 5 states passed minor gun control laws. 10 passed laws protecting the rights of gun owners. And the national government shamefully passed nothing at all, not even the widely supported implementation of universal background checks. All of that momentum just dissipated, or hit a brick wall. And so, consciously and deliberately, many who support greater restrictions on firearms gave up. Or, to be more precise, they gave up on the legislative option. As my colleague,

Rabbi Joel Mosbacher, said to me, if we can't pass gun regulations in the wake of Sandy Hook, then we can't pass gun regulations. There's no use in trying.

Rabbi Mosbacher has his own, deeper connection to gun violence. In 1999 he lost his father to it. His father, Lester, was shot dead — murdered — during a petty robbery at his small business in Chicago. In the years between his father's murder and now, Rabbi Mosbacher has spoken about gun violence and gun control a few times, but it was never high on his rabbinic agenda. Obviously, he had strong feelings about the issue, but he always realized how difficult, and possibly futile, it was to try to address. But, in the wake of Sandy Hook, and of the complete failure of the gun-control advocates which followed, Robert Mosbacher began to work with some others on a different path. Using a Community Organizing model, they formed a plan which was not aimed at gun control and legislation, but rather at gun safety, and manufacture.

Gun manufacturers have the capability of making their products safer than they are today. It's obvious that no gun will ever be 100% safe. But, safer than today is, without a doubt, possible. Technology exists to micro-stamp the casings of bullets as they are fired, giving the police a powerful tool in connecting bullets with the gun which fired them. Smart gun technology, which guarantees that the gun can only be fired by its owner, or by a select few people, is already deep in development, and more or less ready for market. And, the gun manufacturers have a natural, strong relationship with the gun dealers, and can use that relationship to make it harder for straw buyers — people who buy guns with the express intent of turning around and selling them to those who can't legally buy them in stores. Gun manufacturers have the capability of doing all of this, and more. What they haven't had is the motivation.

Rabbi Mosbacher's idea is to use the purchasing power of the public sector to influence the gun manufacturers. Through the military and police forces, our government is responsible for 40% of all firearm purchases in this country. What if the government, or large swathes of it, could be convinced to include gun safety and responsible citizenry as some of the criteria which they use when they purchase guns? What if they asked the gun companies not only to prove the accuracy and reliability of their weapons, but also their willingness to develop new and better safety features? What if they were asked not only about their guns' manufacturing tolerances, but about their tolerance for clearly irresponsible dealers? Might it create a market for safer weapons? Might it create a world in which weapons were, at least marginally, safer?

Mosbacher is turning to other rabbis and asking them to get involved. He's asking them to meet with the decision-makers in their communities — mayors, police chiefs and the like. And he's asking those rabbis to ask those leaders to sign on to a pledge to do exactly this — to simply start asking about gun safety and civic responsibility, and to consider the answers, when purchasing their weapons.

When I heard about this, I deeply, passionately wanted to get involved. But, I'm not naïve. I know the danger of even dipping my toe into these waters. As reasonable, as fundamentally unobjectionable as this idea is, there are those who will nonetheless object. Vehemently. Passionately. Angrily. So, I sat with a few of our Social Action leaders here at the synagogue, and we talked through this issue. They agreed with the principle—again, it's hard to imagine anyone objecting to trying to make guns safer without even touching on people's basic rights. But, they also agreed that, whatever our logic might say, this is an emotional, deeply controversial topic. For better or for worse, our synagogue has a history of avoiding divisive, contentious political issues. Getting involved with this issue was, to put it bluntly, not worth it. And, reluctantly, I agreed. I got ready to call Rabbi Mosbacher and tell him that, with my apologies, I couldn't get involved.

And then, I was reminded of the name of his initiative. Do Not Stand Idly By.

It's a quote taken from the book of Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 16. "Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor." Do not stand idly by. When your neighbor is bleeding, there is but one imperative. We must do something. Anything. Anything except standing, twiddling our collective thumbs. And so, I won't. I will listen to Isaiah, and I will take his exhortation seriously. I will use the contacts and connections that I have, and I'll try to get those meetings. And I'll try to get those leaders to sign on to our pledge. I'm going to try to make our world safer. I'm going to try to make a difference.

I'm going to ask everyone here to carefully listen to what I am, and what I am not saying. Because, I am sure that I'm going to be misunderstood, and misrepresented. The moment I mentioned the Sandy Hook massacre, some people here assumed that I was going to be talking about gun control. And some of you probably tuned out. So, if that was you, please listen to me. Because, if you thought I was talking about gun control, then you were wrong by two degrees. First of all, this is not about gun control. And this is not about legislation. This is not about limiting, in reasonable or unreasonable ways, anyone's Second Amendment rights. This is about trying to find ways to get gun manufacturers to willingly and voluntarily make their weapons safer. Not gun control. Gun safety.

But, more importantly, ultimately, this isn't about guns at all. This is about Isaiah. This is about "do not stand idly by."

The honest truth is that I don't really expect to succeed. I don't expect that, even if I'm successful in my meetings, and I'm not sure I will be, even if every police force in the area decides to follow what dozens of other police forces in this country have already agreed to, I don't expect it to make a world of difference. I don't think that this is the solution to the problem. Not to the entire problem, anyway. And I'm not 100% sure that it's a solution to any part of the problem. But, that's okay. I am willing to fail. I am willing to try something that doesn't work. I'm willing to try something that can't work.

What I'm no longer willing to do is to not try anything, at all. I'm not willing to stand idly by the blood of my neighbor. Not anymore.

And, you can't, either. You must not stand idly by.

There is a very good reason that the Haftarah this morning came from the book of Isaiah. Because no one in the Bible, possibly no one in the history of Judaism, has better captured the meaning of this day.

Is this the fast I look for? A day of self affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to Adonai? Isn't this the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Isn't it to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide yourself from your own kin?

To sit here on Yom Kippur and to fast, and to reflect, and to admit, and to atone, while not committing, in a serious and binding way, to making our world a better place is not a fast at all. It is not a day which is acceptable to our God. It is a sacrilege. It is an abomination. It is not religion; it is a travesty of religion. The imperative which comes out of this day is actually quite simple: do something. Do anything. Find a shackle of injustice, and then look for a key or a hack saw to unlock it. Find someone who is oppressed, and work to set them free. Find a person who is hungry or naked, and feed or clothe them. Or, at the very least, try. It is not a sin to fail. It is the gravest of sins to not even try. Do not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds.

Find a cause. Any cause. Talk to one of our Social Action leaders, and see which causes we're already tackling here in our congregation. See if one of those speaks to you. If not, find another. It won't be hard. Watch the news or pay attention to your own Facebook wall. Read a paper or just take a walk down the street. If you can't find someone in need of your help, if you can't find a cause which is worthy of your attention, then you simply aren't looking. There is, tragically, no end to the causes which call out to us. No one person can work on them all, and no one person can fix even one of them, by him or herself. That's okay. That's why we have a community; that's why we have each other. As Rabbi Tarfon taught, 2000 years ago, you are not obligated to finish the work, but you are not free to avoid it, either. But, can you imagine what would happen if we all actually took this seriously? Can you imagine what would happen if each and every person sitting here today were to commit to doing something in this next year to help make our world better? If each and every one of us would bind ourselves to the task of not standing idly by? Can you imagine, can you dream for even an instant what would happen if every single person in this city, in this state, in this country, in this world would so commit? Can you imagine what we could accomplish, together?

I have little to no patience left for the cynics and naysayers. I know that this — whichever “this” we’re talking about — won’t solve the problem. Rather than tell me why I’m wasting my time, why don’t you try something else, as well? I know that there are other causes which are calling out, and which I am ignoring while I focus my attention over here. Rather than shame someone who’s making an imperfect effort, why not be inspired by them to make an effort of our own?

Lo Alecha HaMelacha Ligmor, v’lo atah ben horim lehivateil mimena—you are not obligated to finish the work, but you are not free to avoid it, either. Our obligation today, our obligation each and every day, is to try. To strive. To hope. To dream. To build. To come together and, with each other, to work towards the repair of our world. Our obligation, today, and every day, is to not stand idly by.