

## **Blot Out the Memory of Parkland; Do Not Forget!**

### ***Shabbat Zachor 5778***

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Amalek is considered to be the father of all who have persecuted our Jewish people throughout history. We read this passage on *Shabbat Zachor*, in preparation for Purim, because the Book of Esther identifies the wicked Haman as an “Agagite,”<sup>i</sup> Agag being an Amalekite king.<sup>ii</sup>

Even if he had not sired later oppressors, Amalek is worthy of our opprobrium for his own wickedness. Describing the passage we just read, my teacher, Yehuda Kurtzer, writes, “The verses recall Amalek’s treachery in attacking us from behind during our moment of weakness and vulnerability;”<sup>iii</sup> in the years of the Israelites’ desert wanderings.

Thus, our people is paradoxically commanded to wipe out Amalek so completely that he is forgotten, and never to forget.<sup>iv</sup>

Last week, America was viciously attacked at our point of greatest vulnerability. On this *Shabbat Zachor*, let us identify the wickedness that took the lives of seventeen students and teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Let us utterly blot out that evil. Then, let us never forget. After all, *Shabbat Zachor* means, “Shabbat of remembrance.”

The students and faculty in Parkland were vulnerable: A school is a place for learning, not an armed camp. Yes, they had a security guard, NRA leader Wayne LaPierre’s heralded “good guy with a gun;”<sup>v</sup> but he failed.

The teens and adults at Stoneman Douglass were vulnerable: Gun-obsessed America has left all discretion at the altar of an extreme interpretation of the Second Amendment, putting a killing machine in the hands of a troubled youth.

The victims in south Florida were vulnerable: Mental health care is sorely lacking in our society. Inadequate funding means that only the most acutely ill and/or able to pay can access treatment. Moreover, our society places a stigma on mental illness, dissuading many from availing themselves of the care they sorely need.

The students and teachers at Stoneman Douglass High were vulnerable: Americans believe we are utterly powerless to impact legislation that may make a

difference. We perceive that the National Rifle Association owns our government, and that perception is not groundless. According to Open Secrets, the Center for Responsive Politics, “The National Rifle Association allocated 96 percent of its total 2016 election spending – at least \$50.3M – to the presidential race and six Senate contests.” Its candidates prevailed in all but one.<sup>vi</sup> All of our Arkansas Senators and Representatives in Washington have received NRA support – albeit not lavish.<sup>vii</sup>

So, what must we do, as an American society, to shore up these vulnerabilities, to make meaning of remembering the souls lost to this world in Florida last week – if not to blot out the memory of Parkland, at least to make it a distant horror story from our nation’s past?

Shall we arm our teachers? Common sense might suggest that teachers, trained to protect their students with concealed handguns, might have stopped the Parkland shooter, reducing the carnage. Just as logically, we may wonder if more guns in school wouldn’t lead to more gun violence, even in trained civilian hands. We may ask whether we want to provide a financial incentive, such as the bonuses the President suggested, to teachers who take the training and carry weapons. Would the money encourage some to carry against their better judgment? Would schools be pressured to give preferential hiring and promotion treatment to teachers who carry, disadvantaging outstanding teachers who see their job as teaching? Admittedly, my own moral sensibilities do not suggest that teachers ought to be urged to pull double duty as armed guards.

Nevertheless, after the Parkland tragedy, I was willing at least to entertain any possibility that might save lives. I searched for facts. In 2015, the *Washington Post* documented “at least eight cases where armed civilians ... appear to have prevented mass shootings since 2007,” which the *Post* journalist acknowledges “is probably an under-count: some would-be active shooters may have been stopped in their tracks by a brandished weapon before the body count got too high.” “On the other hand,” the *Post* continues, “the Violence Policy Center has documented 29 mass shootings of three or more people since 2007 where the perpetrator was himself a concealed carry permit holder.”<sup>viii</sup> Arming our teachers would not make our children safer.

Could some changes make schools safer? I think of Williams Magnet Elementary School, where I go to tutor every Wednesday. It has a single point of entry. I have to be buzzed in – twice, for good measure – before I can enter an area with students. Rather than an appropriation to arm teachers, infrastructure

spending to retrofit larger schools with fewer and more secure points of entry would help, as would grants to enable schools to hire armed security, even if that proved not to be effective last week.

We must also enhance mental health care in our nation. According to Mental Health America, nearly 56% “of adults with a mental illness received no past year treatment, and for those seeking treatment, 20.1% continue to report unmet mental treatment needs” Nearly 15% “(over 6.3 million) of adults with a mental illness remain uninsured.”<sup>ix</sup> Moreover, “Multiple studies have found that the stigma associated with mental illness often prevents people from accessing treatment.”<sup>x</sup> In my service as a rabbi, I often refer folks to therapy or psychiatric care. Jewish people are more open to mental health care than the population at large. Still, many ask me if I think they’re “crazy,” when I suggest that they may need professional help. We need to stop using words like that, even when referring to a mentally ill murderer. Mental illness is a malady like every other: It’s treatable, and it’s not the fault of the person who’s suffering.

If the last ten days teach us anything, it should be that the time has come to talk about sensible gun control legislation. I was surprised twice in the last five years, when members of our Confirmation class chose to lobby our Washington representatives on gun violence. I say “surprised,” because the students who selected that topic are all the children of gun owners. In my first Confirmation class here at B’nai Israel, Spencer Storthz articulated her concern as a hunter: If people can buy guns without any background checks, and lots of people get killed as a result, her family’s rights as responsible gun owners will eventually be taken away. In other words, one need not oppose gun rights, hunting, or the Second Amendment itself to advocate for laws that may reduce the epidemic of gun deaths.

The United States had an Assault Rifle ban, signed into law by President Clinton in 1994. In a compromise necessary to secure the congressional votes to adopt the law, the ban was limited to ten years. We might ask: “Did it work?” The evidenced is mixed. “Gun crimes involving assault weapons declined. However, that decline was ‘offset throughout at least the late 1990s by steady or rising use of other guns equipped with [large-capacity magazines].”<sup>xi</sup> Gun manufacturers developed new products or modifications of old ones to circumvent the ban. I suspect that sophisticated organizations like the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence could come up with a definition of assault rifles that would endure. Alternatively, we might seek a ban instead of large-capacity magazines that permit semi-

automatic weapons to discharge scores of bullets every minute. No ban would necessarily prevent gun deaths; the goal would be to lower the death toll.

Zoe Turner is the Social Action Vice-President of the North American Federation of Temple Youth's Southern Tropical Region. This week, she accompanied students from Stoneman Douglass High School and my colleague, Rabbi Bradd Boxman, to Tallahassee, to lobby for gun control. Turner reports that one State Senator, Renee Garcia, said, "I don't believe that banning ARs is the solution. They're just going to change the name and sell them some other way," as happened the last time we had a ban. Young Ms. Turner responded: "There's a saying in Judaism: 'You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.'<sup>xii</sup> It's true that this piece of legislation isn't a total solution, and it's true that we have so much work left to do. But Senator, this is a step. ... We are determined to do something, anything, that will save just one life. And then we will keep going – until we have saved them all."<sup>xiii</sup>

Other sensible gun proposals have not been given the attention they deserve.

Did you know that "[a]ccording to some of the most recent research and statistics available from the ATF [in 2014], just 1% of gun dealers account for nearly 60% of crime guns."<sup>xiv</sup> The Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence argues: "To make a real and lasting difference in gun violence across the U.S, this small group of dealers has to agree to reform their business practices or be put out of business."<sup>xv</sup>

My colleague, Rabbi Joel Mosbacher, whose father's life was taken by gun violence, is among a coalition called "Do Not Stand Idly By," based on the biblical verse, "You shall not stand idly by while your neighbor bleeds."<sup>xvi</sup> That organization calls upon gun manufacturers to police gun dealers. Another of the group's initiatives is most creative: smart gun technology. The expertise exists to produce guns that will be responsive only to authorized users, identified using biometrics. Do Not Stand Idly By asks that government weapons procurement – for the military and police, for example, making governments our nation's most significant gun buyers with considerable power in the market --- phase in a requirement that all guns they purchase utilize smart gun technology.

And of course, we should raise the legal age to purchase semi-automatic weapons. And of course, every single gun sale should require a background check and waiting period. And of course, our law enforcement agencies must do a

better job than they did in stopping the Parkland murderer. And of course, every lapse in the background check system we do have must be repaired. And of course, we should have gun purchase restraining orders for people shown to be mentally ill or otherwise unsafe with a weapon, especially domestic abusers. And of course, the Centers for Disease Control should not be legally barred from researching gun violence as a public health issue. And of course gun manufacturers shouldn't be uniquely exempt from lawsuits that keep every other industry in check.

None of these changes will come to our laws as long as the NRA is in charge. Perhaps more to the point, Americans will despair of making changes as long as we believe that our elected officials are in the pocket of the NRA. On national television this week, Sen. Rubio argued persuasively that the NRA supports his agenda, rather than the other way around. Still, he was roundly booed. The perception that our elected officials are in the employ of the NRA is pernicious. Americans will not believe that gun laws are being addressed fairly until our representatives in Washington and in state capitols decline NRA financial support.

One phenomenon of the last week has been most hopeful. Zoe Turner is only one of thousands of young people, in Florida and elsewhere, energetically motivated to end the American carnage of gun violence. Like the young Jewish children many of them once were, they seek to blot out gun violence with the energy they once mustered to raise their voices and shake their graggers to drown out Haman's name on Purim's past.

Now, they seek to honor the memories of their fallen classmates and teachers – or, for most, of peers and adults they never met. Let us join our voices to theirs. Let us make Parkland and Sandy Hook and Charleston and Aurora and Columbine relics of a horrible, distant American past.

Then, let our faithful observance of *Shabbat Zachor* be rewarded with a joyous Purim. As Mordechai decreed, let us then celebrate with the blessings: *ora v'simcha v'sasson v'ikar*: "light and joy and honor and gladness."<sup>xvii</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Esther 3:1.

<sup>ii</sup> I Samuel 15:8. However, the claim that Haman descended from Agag is difficult to reconcile with I Samuel, in which all the Amalekites, eventually including Agag, are killed.

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<sup>iii</sup> Yehuda Kurtzer, “Jewish Memory Week: A Tale in Three Parts,” *Huffington Post Blog*, March 12, 2014, updated December 6, 2017. Accessed on February 23, 2018 at [www.huffingtonpost.com/yehuda-kurtzer/jewish-memory-week\\_b\\_4948694.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/yehuda-kurtzer/jewish-memory-week_b_4948694.html).

<sup>iv</sup> Deuteronomy 25:19.

<sup>v</sup> “Only ‘A Good Guy With A Gun’ Can Stop School Shootings, NRA Says,” *NPR*, December 21, 2012. Accessed on February 23, 2018 at <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2012/12/21/167785169/live-blog-nra-news-conference>.

<sup>vi</sup> Mike Spies and Ashley Balcerzak, “The NRA Placed Big Bets on the 2016 Election, and Won Almost All of Them,” *OpenSecrets.org*, Center for Responsive Politics, November 9, 2016. Accessed on February 23, 2018 at <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2016/11/the-nra-placed-big-bets-on-the-2016-election-and-won-almost-all-of-them/>.

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/recips.php?id=D0000000082&type=P&state=AR&sort=A&cycle+2014> and <https://www.opensecrets.org/orgs/recips.php?id=D000000082&type+P&cycle=2016&sort=A&state=Ar>, both accessed on February 23, 2018.

<sup>viii</sup> Christopher Ingraham, “People with concealed carry permits have committed at least 29 mass shootings since 2007,” *Wonkblog*, *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2015, accessed on February 23, 2018 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/10/26-people-with-concealed-carry-permits-have-committed-at-least-29-mass-shootings-since-2007/>.

<sup>ix</sup> “Mental Health in America – Access to Care Data,” accessed on February 23, 2018 at <https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/issues/mental-health-america-access-care-data>.

<sup>x</sup> “Top 5 Barriers to Mental Healthcare Access,” *Social Solutions*, accessed February 23, 2018 at [www.socialsolutions.com/blog/barriers-to-mental-healthcare-access/](http://www.socialsolutions.com/blog/barriers-to-mental-healthcare-access/).

<sup>xi</sup> Robert Farley, “Did the 1994 Assault Weapons Ban Work?” *The Wire*, February 1, 2013, accessed on February 23, 2018 at <https://www.factcheck.org/2013/02/did-the-1994-assault-weapons-ban-work/>.

<sup>xii</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:21.

<sup>xiii</sup> Zoe Turner, “Jewish Teens Made History in Tallahassee – and We’re Not Done Yet,” *reformjudaism.org*, February 22, 2018, accessed February 23, 2018 at <https://reformjudaism.org/blog/2018/02/22/jewish-teens-made-history-tallahassee-and-were-not-done-yet>.

<sup>xiv</sup> “60% of all crime guns from 1% of gun dealers,” *Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence*, September 4, 2014, accessed on February 23, 2018 at [www.bradycampaign.org/our-impact/resources/60-of-all-crime-guns-from-1-of-gun-dealers](http://www.bradycampaign.org/our-impact/resources/60-of-all-crime-guns-from-1-of-gun-dealers).

<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvi</sup> Leviticus 19:16.

<sup>xvii</sup> Esther 8:16.