

Resource  
Guide

# Gun Violence Prevention



“The time is always  
right to do what is  
right” – Dr. King

**Religious  
Action  
Center**  
of Reform Judaism



# Real People. Real Stories.

*"14 years ago... my father was murdered at his place of business – killed by a man with a firearm. A world ended that day. And yet, the murder of my father, Lester Mosbacher, didn't make it onto CNN. Neither FOX nor MSNBC broke into their regularly scheduled programming to cover the end of a world.*

*In fact, most of the names of the tens of thousands of people whose lives are ended with a gun in this country each year are anonymous to us, unless we are the husband, the wife, the child, the grandchild, or the friend."*

*- Rabbi Joel Mosbacher*

*"By our readiness to allow arms to be purchased at will and fired at whim, by allowing our movie and television screens to teach our children that the hero is one who masters the art of shooting and the technique of killing, by allowing all these developments, we have created an atmosphere in which violence and hatred have become popular pastimes."*

*- Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

# Staggering Statistics

## On average more than:

- **30,000** Americans are killed by firearms each year
- **12,000** Americans are murdered by firearms each year
- **30** Americans are murdered each day
- **200** others are wounded each day

Every two years,  
more Americans  
are killed with  
firearms than  
were killed in the  
entire Vietnam  
War

**With 88 guns per 100 people, the United States has the highest rate of gun ownership in the world.**



Yemen, the number two country, has 55 guns per 100 people.

By comparison, Israel has 7 guns per 100 people.

"We have cracked down on library books, cell phone calls, fertilizer purchases and wearing shoes in the airport, but we have done almost nothing at the state level to make it harder for either a terrorist or garden variety armed robber, or young person to get their hands on a handgun." – **Sarah Brady**

# A Religious Issue

## Prepared Statement of Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, at the National Religious Leaders Press Conference in Remembrance of the Newtown tragedy.

"With different religious beliefs and differing attitudes on the policy issues before us, we stand before one of America's great institutions of religious life, united in our response to the question: Is the need for sensible gun-control a religious issue?

You bet it is.

The indiscriminate distribution of guns is an offense against God and humanity.

Our gun-flooded, violence-prone society has turned weapons into idols. And the appropriate religious response to idolatry is sustained moral outrage.

What manner of nation are we that in the face of overwhelming support for stronger gun control, we can bring ourselves to legislate only the most anemic controls for the bloodiest problem we

face? What manner of people are we that we can accept that we have lost more people to gun violence on our streets and in our homes than we have to all the wars in the history of our nation, more children every year than our brothers and sisters who perished on 9/11? The victims of violence overwhelm our emergency rooms, requiring the costliest of care, erode confidence in our communal institutions, and undermine our political, educational and civic institutions.

It doesn't have to be that way.

Twenty years ago, our legislators had the moral vision and political courage to pass an assault weapons ban. It wasn't perfect; some criminals were still able to procure such weapons but it was significantly harder and the number of

crimes linked to assault weapons decreased more than 66 percent. How many innocent lives were saved during this ten year ban, we ask, citing a line found in several of our traditions: The ones who save even a single life, it is as though they have saved the whole world?

Our legislators and the gun lobby want to blame everyone but themselves. The problem, they say, is mental illness. On the one hand, tautologically, mass murderers are emotionally disturbed. On the other, the compelling evidence testifies that the overwhelming percentage of those with mental illness are not violent and those who are violent are far more often a danger to themselves than to others. More compellingly, in Canada and Japan, there are people with the same mental illnesses as here in America but they don't pick up their mother's

legally obtained Bushmaster and randomly shoot people.

And as the past president of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, pointed out at the Million Mom March: our legislators and gun lobby too often blame our violent culture and violence in the media: violent action films, gory horror movies, violent computer games. And this is a deeply troubling problem. Yes, there is far too much violent entertainment, and it corrodes our children's souls. But in the U.K. and Germany, children watch the same movies and play the same computer games, and they don't kill anyone afterward.

The children in Germany, Japan, the U.K. and Canada - and so many other nations across the globe - with far less gun violence than we, are not more religious than our children, and their parents are not better parents than we are. What distinguishes us from them is the prevalence of our guns, and the reticence of our leaders to act with

courage on this issue.

We come here with one voice, loud and strong, to challenge the common wisdom that the forces of the status quo are too formidable, that the American people are too complacent, that our leadership is too reticent.

We are here to say it is time to help take assault weapons and semi-automatic weapons off our streets;

We are here to say it is time to enforce background checks that really work.

We are here to say we must ban high capacity ammunition clips.

We are here to call on the millions of parents in our pews to demand action to protect their children.

We are here to ask our clergy to preach from their pulpits on this issue between now and February 5th and send their sermons to their senators and congresspersons, the congregations and their local media.

We are here to announce that we will ask our clergy and social justice leaders to mobilize scores of thousands of telephone calls to flood Congress on February 5th with the demand that effective action towards sensible gun control be taken now.

We stand here, on Dec. 21st, the darkest day of the year, to bring the light of our moral insights to our nation's public discourse.

We are here today, as we will be here in the future, for one reason above all - that the children of Newtown will not be forgotten by our lawmakers and that hope and some good might yet come from this national tragedy."

# Service Additions

## **Before the Mourner's Kaddish, consider adding:**

*As we read the Mourner's Kaddish, let us remember to include in our prayers all of those who have been killed by senseless gun violence. Let us remember the parents who will not see their children grow up; let us remember the children who will never grow up; Let us remember the brothers and sisters for whom an empty seat reminds us of their absence, the friend who no longer calls; and let us remember those for whom there is no one left to say Kaddish. We are taught never to grieve alone for we are made stronger by the bonds of our community. It is our charge to share in the grief of those around us so that none of us must suffer with loss in solitude.*

## **Before the Mi Shebeirach, consider adding:**

As we pray for those members of our community who are in need of healing of the body or soul, let our thoughts also include those who suffer silently from mental illness.

## **Before the Shema, consider adding:**

When we watch the news after each senseless act of violence, we feel pain as though we ourselves were the victims. Every time someone is murdered, we ourselves are offended; God is offended, for we are all inextricably linked. We are one. As we recite the Shema, we raise our voice and collectively affirm this oneness.

# Education

There are myriad ways that your congregation can educate its members on the need to combat gun violence. While educational programming is not akin to direct action, it can be an important first step in allowing your community to understand the perils of gun violence and motivating members in your community to take action.

## **Invite a speaker to address your congregation:**

### **Invite a victim or victim's family**

There is nothing more powerful than the story of someone who has experienced the pain of gun violence. By personalizing what can often be a contentious political issue, victims and victim families offer a human element in a discussion often dominated by statistics. Need help finding a local speaker? Ask your local gun violence prevention coalition for a recommended speaker.

### **Invite your U.S. Congressmen, or State Legislators**

Wondering what the status of gun violence prevention legislation is in Congress or in your state? The best way to learn about the legislative process as it relates to gun violence is to invite your legislators to come and speak at your congregation.

## **Screen an educational film and host a post-film discussion:**

Movie screenings can serve as an impetus for dialogue and action.

Consider screening [Living for 32](#) – A 40 minute film about Colin Goddard, who survived the Virginia Tech shooting and who now works with the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

# Programs

## Interfaith Initiative Against Gun Violence

The synagogue worked with other inter-faith religious groups to educate and speak out about gun control.

**Community Contact Information:** Chicago Sinai Congregation Chicago, IL  
[www.chicagosinai.org](http://www.chicagosinai.org)

### Goals:

- Educate the community about the importance of responsible gun control.
- Strengthen relations between local faith communities.
- Establish a unified interfaith voice on gun control.

**Overview:** Each year, more than 30,000 Americans die due to gun violence, including about 4,000 children and teenagers. Our Jewish tradition demands that we continue to act for prudent gun regulation. By speaking to our children about guns, by mobilizing our congregations around the persistent threat of gun violence, and by doggedly demanding that Congress follow the will of the public rather than pursue gun lobby dollars, we may well see a reversal in the tide of gun violence. But unless we speak out, all that remains is the silence of victims punctuated by gun blasts.

*Preparation:* The congregation set a goal of establishing a unified religious voice in the city about gun control, through the creation of the Interfaith Initiative Against Gun Violence. The synagogue recruited several influential congregations of various faiths to join the initiative.

*Project Implementation:* In their efforts to respond to gun violence and create positive change, the organizers of the initiative:

- provided clergy to lead opening and closing prayers at the local **Million Mom March** and other gun violence rallies held in the area.
- **signed an Amicus Brief** in support of the city's lawsuit against gun manufacturers and dealers in the suburbs surrounding the city. The lawsuit holds manufacturers and dealers responsible for knowingly and illegally providing firearms. This lawsuit was dismissed and the state circuit court level, and is currently before an Illinois Appellate Court. The Amicus Brief is in support of the city's appeal.
- called a **town hall meeting**, as part of a nation-wide effort, on the issue of gun violence. The keynote speaker was a prominent local doctor and activist, who addressed gun violence as a public health issue. The Initiative also helped organize town hall meetings on this day in two inner city communities.
- held a day-long **"teach-in"**, featuring distinguished guests from the medical community and local government officials.
- participated with an inner city faith group and a rural Mennonite community in a **prayer vigil** at a local gun shop cited by the federal government as the nation's second worst offender in providing guns used in crime.

*Results:* The initiative succeeded at raising awareness in the community about the importance of gun regulation. The local faith communities developed strong bonds and have continued to work together both in advocacy and community-building activities.



## **ASK: Asking Saves Kids**

Initiative to educate community about issues of gun control, safety measures and awareness.

# Programs

**Community Contact Information:** Monmouth Reform Temple Tinton Falls, NJ  
[www.monmouth.com/~mrt/](http://www.monmouth.com/~mrt/)

### **Goals:**

- Educating the congregation and community-at-large about gun control and safety.
- Engaging members of the congregation in public advocacy.

**Overview:** A.S.K. Asking Saves Kids is based on the Talmud's teaching that to save a life is to save the world. This program began when the congregation presented a gun safety and awareness forum featuring the founders of PAX (Real Solutions to Gun Violence), U.S. Senator Jon Corzine, and a family in the congregation whose child was shot at a neighbor's house. As a result of the overwhelming response to this forum, the Social Action Committee decided to train over fifty volunteers in advocacy techniques. The congregation creatively partnered with a national not-for-profit alliance, PAX, to start this grassroots advocacy effort.

**Preparation:** Identify an issue of public safety that affects the community and the congregation. Organize a training session for members of the congregation and the community-at-large about advocacy techniques relating to the chosen topic. Invite local legislators, public officials, and public advocates from advocacy networks related to your field of interest to participate in and speak to members of the training. After the training, create a network of educators who can speak to local groups about the importance of public safety.

**Project Implementation:** In order to facilitate community involvement, the congregation sought people to speak at Parent-Teacher Associations. Three middle school students became early spokespersons, introducing the A.S.K. campaign to parent-teacher groups at four local schools. Since these initial presentations, members of the congregation have given similar talks at a nursery school, a drug and alcohol alliance, and another Jewish congregation. The volunteers continued to spread their message by giving workshops at two URJ Regional Biennials, where they distributed information and offered to coach other groups seeking to start their own A.S.K. community action programs. Further, committee members volunteered at A.S.K. events in the community and urge parents to make informed decisions about where their children play.

In order to decrease the visibility of guns of any kind in their neighborhood, the temple organized a toy exchange where children exchanged their toy guns for nonviolent toys. Congregants made a sculpture, using the collected toy guns, spelling out the words "Please Ask!" which has been an effective publicity tool for their efforts. The congregation has also supported PAX through fund-raising, so that other communities can have the materials necessary to become involved in this cause. Overall, this program encourages educators to speak at local public forums, such as schools and neighboring congregations about gun control.

**Results:** This multi-year effort has already educated over 1,000 people on the importance of open and honest communication about guns in order to ensure the safety of children. It presented the issue of gun violence from a nonpartisan, public health standpoint. Because of this, the congregation and larger community is better informed about public safety concerns and better able to engage in advocacy work which positively impacts the local community. The congregation's admirable diligence in this campaign serves as a role model for congregations that hope to educate others on issues of public concern.

# Text Study

And they shall beat their swords into  
plowshares<sup>b</sup>  
And their spears into pruning hooks:  
Nation shall not take up  
Sword against nation;  
They shall never again know war.

וְהִכְיָה לְעַמִּים רְבִים  
וְכָתְבוּ חֶרְבוֹתָם לְאֵתִים  
וְחִנְיֹתֵיהֶם לְמִזְמְרוֹת  
לֹא-יִשָּׂא גּוֹי  
אֶל-גּוֹי חֶרֶב  
וְלֹא-יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה: פ

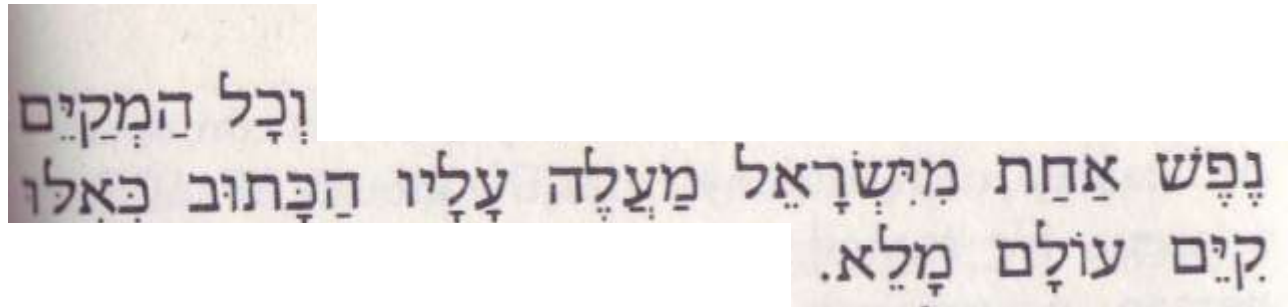
- *Isaiah 2:4*

## Conversation starters:

- What are today's swords?
- How can we turn weapons of destruction into tools for the greater good of humanity?
- Can we, as a society, redirect anger and aggression into a more noble cause?

I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent. – **Mahatma Gandhi**

# Text Study



*He who takes one life, it is as though he has destroyed the universe, and he who saves one life, it is as though he has saved the universe. - **Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5***

## Conversation Starters:

- What effect does gun violence have on the universe?
- Whose responsibility is it to prevent gun violence, and is desisting from violence itself enough?
- Can one passively save the universe?
- What might this reading teach us about the ethical importance of sensible gun violence prevention measures?

"Each time a man or woman stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, they send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those tiny ripples can build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance." – **Robert Kennedy**

# Text Study

saw how good it was. 26] God now said, "Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness; and let them hold sway over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky, over the beasts, over all the earth, over all that creeps upon the earth." 27] So God created the human beings in [the divine] image, creating [them] in the image of God, creating them male and female. 28] God then blessed them, and

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ  
כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְהִי בְדִגְתַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם  
וּבְבְהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הַרְמֹשׁ הַרְמֹשׁ  
עַל־הָאָרֶץ: 27 וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם  
בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּעֵלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר  
וּתְקֵהָ בָרָא אֹתָם: 28 וַיְבָרֶךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים

## Genesis 1:26-27

### Conversation Starters:

- Is the taking of human life an attack on God?
- What does God give human beings sway over? Does God grant humans sway over other humans?
- If there is that of God within each of us, how might we cater our discussion of gun violence prevention and caring for the mentally ill without stigmatizing those in need?

"Non-cooperation with evil is a sacred duty." - **Mahatma Gandhi**

# Text Study

your kin fairly. 16] Do not deal basely with members of your people. Do not profit by the blood of your fellow [Israelite]: I am the Eternal.

17] You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kin but incur no guilt on their account. 18] You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people. Love your fellow [Israelite] as yourself: I am the Eternal.

עֲמִיתְךָ: 16 לֹא־תִלְךָ רְכִיל בְּעַמִּיךָ לֹא  
תַעֲמֹד עַל־דַּם רַעַף אֲנִי יְהוָה:  
17 לֹא־תִשְׁנֵא אֶת־אֲחִיךָ בְּלִבְּךָ הוֹכַח  
תּוֹכִיחַ אֶת־עַמִּיתְךָ וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא עָלָיו חָטָא:  
18 לֹא־תִקֵּם וְלֹא־תִטּוֹר אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמֶּךָ  
וְאָהַבְתָּ לְרַעַף כַּמּוֹף אֲנִי יְהוָה:

– *Leviticus 19:16-18*

## Conversation Starters:

- What might this reading teach us about the need to privilege human life over the corporate interests of weapons manufacturers?
- Is gun violence a form of hate? And is hate ever justified?
- Look at the commandment to “not take vengeance or bear a grudge against members of your people.” Does gun violence violate this?

“Gun Control? We need bullet control! I think every bullet should cost \$5,000. Because if a bullet cost \$5,000, we wouldn't have any innocent bystanders.” – **Chris Rock**

# Text Study

*Mishnah 3.* He used to say: Despise no man,<sup>232</sup> and deem nothing impossible, for there is not a man that has not his hour,<sup>233</sup> and there is not a thing that has not its place.<sup>234</sup>

משנה ג. הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר: אַל תִּהְיֶה בּוֹ לְכֹל אָדָם, וְאַל תִּהְיֶה מִפְּלִיג  
לְכֹל דְּבָר, שְׂאִין לָךְ אָדָם שְׂאִין לוֹ שְׂעָה, וְאִין לָךְ דְּבָר שְׂאִין לוֹ מְקוֹם.

## Pirke Avot 4:3

### Conversation Starters:

- Do we ever treat others unjustly because we are too busy to care?
- How might our own activity affect the attitudes of others?
- Might we be ignoring the clues sent out by those in need of help?
- Can we, as a society, treat others more fairly and welcome all more fully into our communities?

“Gun control laws safeguard liberty, rather than restrict it... Democracy can only flourish when the government is permitted to protect its citizens from harm.” – **Jeffrey Sinensky**

# Text Study

*Mishnah 15.* Rabbi Eleazar of Modin<sup>178</sup> (Modiim) said: He who profanes sacred objects,<sup>179</sup> and despises the Festivals,<sup>178</sup> and puts his fellow man to shame in public,<sup>179</sup> and makes void the covenant of Abraham our father,<sup>180</sup> and he who interprets the Torah not in accordance with the Halakah,<sup>181</sup> even though he possesses a knowledge of the Torah and good deeds, he has no share in the world to come.

משנה טו. רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר: המחליל את הקדושים, והמבזה את המועדות, והמלביין פני חברו ברבים, והמפר בריתו של אברהם אבינו, והמגלה פנים בתורה שלא כהלכה, אף על פי שיש בידו תורה ומעשים טובים, אין לו חלק לעולם הבא.

## Conversation Starters:

- What place does one who dehumanizes another human being have in the world to come?
- Can we view gun violence as the public shaming of a fellow human?

Every act of love is a work of peace, no matter how small. – **Mother Theresa**

# Sermons

The following are excerpts from sermons that have been delivered on gun violence. To access the full sermons, Rabbis may log into the [Rabbis page of the Religious Action Center's webpage](#). If you are a Rabbi affiliated with the URJ, and if you do not remember the log in information, feel free to contact us.

*"May each of us and all of us Vayigash approach the seat of power in our society as a true child of Judah and speak out for the 20 children and their teachers whose voices have been silenced by the sound of guns and by the silence of our society"* – **Rabbi Neal Borovitz**

"I remember a story of a father who wanted to entertain his little daughter so he could have some private time. He cut out pieces of the world from a newspaper and gave her the pieces to put together. "It's like a jigsaw puzzle," he told her, and he figured it would keep her busy for a while so he could sit and read the rest of the paper. But, in only a few moments, she proudly brought it to him all put together. "How did you get it together so quickly?" he asked. "Well," said the little one, "on the other side of the picture of the world was a picture of a person. All I had to do was put the person back together and the world took care of itself." – **Rabbi David A. Lipper**

"I anticipate what some of you may be thinking: Rabbi Lauren, even these actions will not truly alleviate the crisis in our city and our nation. This problem is too complicated, too entrenched for us to really make an impact. I definitely understand this concern. And I feel that fatigue that comes when looking at problems that seem beyond what I can do to fix.

But, in the face of the enormity and intractability of injustice and inequality, I take comfort and inspiration from the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, of blessed memory, who said: "Daily we should take account and ask: what have I done today to alleviate the anguish, to mitigate the evil, to prevent humiliation?..." – **Rabbi Lauren Grabelle Herrmann**

"We know better. We who are heir to the Jewish prophetic tradition, we who know Isaiah's message of beating swords and spears into ploughshares and pruning hooks, we know better. That's why we as Jews ought to stop being shocked by the frequency of gun violence, and we'd do well to stop calling such attacks "unbelievable." With the anguish our nation has faced at the hands of aggressors, we know that violent attacks are perfectly believable and as Jews, we know that pogroms are all the worse when the enemy is armed." – **Rabbi Robert Nosanchuk**

"Our gun-flooded, violence-prone society has turned weapons into idols. And the appropriate religious response to idolatry is sustained moral outrage." – **Rabbi David Saperstein**





## FAITHS UNITED TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE

### **SOME DO's and DON'Ts WHEN SPEAKING ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE**

Establishing a connection with your audience and creating contrast with opponents are key to effective communication.

**DO: START WITH "PEOPLE" AND NOT LAWS.** Tell the stories, remind people of the personal stories of gun violence so that is always the frame. Laws matter because they can help keep people safe.

**DO: TELL STORIES.** Reference personal situations that bring it home in very direct and visual ways. This is our core advantage and we should reinforce it at every opportunity. If you have personal experience counseling grieving families, losing members of your congregation to gun violence, or presiding over funerals or memorial services for victims of gun violence, share your experiences.

**DON'T: MAKE THE FRAME INTELLECTUAL OR LEGISLATIVE.** Facts are needed, but they are not the central frame for the debate.

**DON'T: MAKE THIS A POLITICAL FIGHT BETWEEN INTEREST GROUPS.** The NRA has a place in our message, but they are not the central frame and should not get in the way of defining this issue in terms of human consequences and moral principles.

**DO: SPEAK FROM YOUR FAITH.** Gun violence isn't just a political issue, it's a life and death issue that is clearly addressed in Scripture. When delivering your message, connecting it to your faith can establish your unique voice.

**DON'T: GO INTO COMPLEX THEOLOGY.** The general public and lawmakers don't have background knowledge about or the attention span for lengthy religious explanations. Layman's terms only!

**DO: INCLUDE SOME SIMPLE KEY FACTS.** The scope and human toll of our gun violence is staggering. Using a couple of easy- to- understand, concrete figures can illustrate that individual shootings are not isolated incidents.

**DON'T: LEAD YOUR MESSAGE WITH FACTS,** use too many facts, or use abstract statistics.

# Take Action

Call the Capitol Switchboard at 202.224.3121 and ask for your elected representatives!

## The Ask

It is imperative that President Obama and Congress:

- Require universal background checks for all gun purchases
- Ban semi-automatic assault weapons and high-capacity magazines
- Make gun trafficking a federal crime
- Improve access to mental health services

## Background

Over 30,000 Americans die each year as a result of gun violence. The number and severity of violent shootings in recent years can only be described as an epidemic. It is imperative that President Obama and Congress take action to advance sensible gun control laws, including taking assault weapons off of our streets and improving our system of background checks.

As if the United States needed one more reminder about the epidemic nature of gun violence, we have seen more than 60 mass shootings since Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and others were shot in Tucson, Arizona in 2011. Most recently, we witnessed the tragic shooting of 20 young children and eight adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Each year, more than 30,000 Americans die from gun violence. Each day, more than 80 fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, children, family, and friends are killed as a result of our inability to advance common-sense regulations.

As we continue to mourn the lives of those murdered, it is our collective responsibility to advance sensible gun-laws aimed at curbing future violence and Congress must act swiftly.

## Jewish Values

Jewish tradition emphasizes the sanctity and primary value of human life. The Torah commands us, "Thou shalt not murder" (Exodus 20:13). The Talmud teaches us that "he who takes one life it is as though he has destroyed the universe and he who saves one life it is as though he has saved the universe" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5).

Scripture encourages peaceful pursuit of our mutual welfare. Isaiah exhorts the people of the earth to "beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isaiah 2:4). We also are commanded to turn weapons of destruction into tools for the greater good of society.