

GUNS, GAYS, GOD: THE POLITICS OF SPIRITUAL CONNECTEDNESS

ROSH HASHANAH, DAY ONE

The Jewish way to enter the new year is to stop everything and look back. Marvel at the achievements of the past year, face the failures. Celebrate the fluid nature of the human spirit, acknowledge mistakes and make commitments to try harder and do better in coming year. We do this personally and we do this more broadly, as a nation and as a people.

Every year holds successes and failures, triumphs and struggles. This year began with a hurricane that shook the east coast to the core, reminding us all of our inescapable vulnerability and profound dependence on cell phone chargers. We had a national election, which many in this room fought hard for – dedicating creative, intellectual and financial resources - as well as a pretty significant mayoral election right here at home. A year of war, and now renewed possibilities of peace between Israelis and Palestinians. A year of global unrest, with Syria and Egypt vying for most egregious and contemptible state actors. The great hopes of Tahrir Square devolving into mass killing of protesters and retaliations destabilizing the entire country. And, after 2 years of brutality and more than 2,000,000 refugees, reports last month from Damascus of more than 1,400 dead from chemical weapons. Now we stand on the threshold of what could likely be either a regional religious war or World War III. It was a year of women – from Malala to Ann Marie-Slaughter, Sheryl Sandberg and Marissa Meyer, a year in which women in Israel were arrested for saying *shema* out loud at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and women in the US refused to stand silently by the rampant and unrepentant sexual violence in the military. It was a year of backsliding on voting rights and a false start on immigration reform, a year of *Stand Your Ground* and *Stop and Frisk*, of Edward Snowden and Carlos Danger.

But today I want us to enter into an annual spiritual state of the union focusing on two outstanding story arcs of the year. One, a story of shameful failure and the other, a remarkable triumph. I believe that at the heart of our country's political intransigencies is a very profound spiritual problem, and embedded in the narrative of the year is an equally compelling spiritual solution.

Arc #1: Guns. We are now 217 days from the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary, when time stood still as the whole country watched 5, 6, 7 year old children holding hands being led by heroic teachers through the school parking lot. Following the shooting, we heard the clarion call that our country's gun laws MUST be rectified, that our children's lives depended on it. And yet, despite the deep emotionality and the intensive political wrangling, despite the pleas of teary and bleary eyed parents, not only did Congress fail to reinstate an assault weapons ban, but they refused to require background checks that would have denied easy gun access to terrorists, domestic abusers and those struggling with mental illness.

Against all reason, the gun lobby prevailed once again this year. And we – the most empowered people on this earth – resigned ourselves to utter disempowerment in the face of their inexhaustible coffers and distorted logic, which recklessly insists on dissociating access to guns and gun violence. And

meanwhile, more than 22,000 people in this country have been killed by guns in the nine months since Newtown.¹

Who will live and who will die?

We recite these words every year as though our fate is out of our hands. It's inevitable. Of course there will always be unforeseen tragedies with no financial, spiritual or medical remedy. But to hide behind the mantle of inevitability is a gross abdication of human responsibility. We can't stop gun deaths – but we can surely minimize them. Like they did in Scotland in the 90s, after 16 children and a teacher were shot in a primary school in Dunblane. One of the victims was a 5 year old girl named Sophie, an only child whose mother died from cancer 2 years earlier. In his grief, Sophie's father co-authored the Snowdrop Petition (named after the only flower in bloom that end-of-winter day), which drew such strong national support that it led to a *total ban* on private ownership of handguns and semiautomatic weapons in the UK. Now, nearly 20 years later, the UK has a small fraction of the gun deaths that the US has each year. That same spring a mass shooting in Australia leaving 35 dead led to similarly strict gun control legislation. In the 18 years before the massacre there were 13 mass shootings (killing 4+ people) in Australia, whereas there have been literally NONE in the 18 years since.

But in the US, the land of liberty and justice for all – where nobody on the national stage has come close to proposing a ban on private gun ownership, we can't even stipulate the need to develop gun safety technology – the equivalent of entering a passcode on our iPhones – without being accused of stripping away 2nd Amendment rights. I recently met Loren Leib, whose 6 year old son was shot by a neo-Nazi in the North Valley JCC in 1999. She suggested that I read about federal government recalls on consumer products considered threats to public safety (<http://www.cpsc.gov/Recalls/>). Of particular interest: boy's long sleeve hooded jackets were recalled in 2011 by *federal regulation* because drawstrings at the neck area were considered a strangulation hazard to children. As a parent of a mischievous little boy, I have to commend them for their admirable commitment to child safety, particularly because there were *no* injuries or incidents reported, prompting the recall. But the irony is profound. There is *no* federal agency working to ensure safety standards on guns, despite the fact that 3,000 children are shot and killed every year.²

There is an epidemic of gun violence in our country. An *epidemic*. There have been 78 public mass shootings in the US since 1983,³ seven of which took place just last year. And aside from the highly publicized mass shootings, there are hundreds of homicides in South LA and the South Side of Chicago and urban neighborhoods across the country every year. There's Leroy Bryant, the 16-year-old kid who was shot seven times as he walked out of an award ceremony and championship basketball game last month, and the 14-year-old girl and 49-year-old man who happened to be standing nearby. No suspects, no arrests, the story barely made the news. There are the hundreds of children who shoot themselves or someone else when they get their hands on a loaded weapon (shootings that some refer to as "accidents" and others call "entirely predictable consequences of a lax, lazy attitude toward firearm safety..."⁴) – like the 3 year old boy in Tacoma who – when his mom's boyfriend stepped out of

¹http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2012/12/gun_death_tally_every_american_gun_death_since_newtown_sandy_hook_shooting.html

²<http://www.childrensdefense.org/child-research-data-publications/data/protect-children-not-guns-2012.pdf>

³<http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43004.pdf>

⁴http://www.slate.com/blogs/crime/2013/08/06/negligent_child_shootings_t_b_scearce_hooray_for_the_small_t_own_cop_who.html

the car to pump gas - unbuckled his seatbelt, reached for the gun and unwittingly shot himself in the head. There are the women around the country who live in terror that their husband or boyfriend's rage will turn from scary to deadly when he owns a gun. There are our friends and loved ones who, in a moment of despair, take their own lives with guns - thousands and thousands of lives wasted and families shattered each year.

What is going on here? The heart of the challenge – beyond even the age-old disagreement over how to interpret the 2nd Amendment – is a shameful lack of political will, the result of a shortage of empathic attunement and alignment with victims of gun violence. It's not that we don't care. It's just that we don't fundamentally believe that it's our problem. American citizenry is fraught and fragmented, hardly naturally disposed to notions of mutual obligation and responsibility. And that essential truth nullifies the organizing power of even the most persuasive speeches and the most devastating broadcast funerals. Even the well-intentioned quiet majority – those who are shaken to the core by these incidents, have proven unwilling to invest in the struggle for the long-haul. At the end of the day, if we really felt that the tragedy of Sandy Hook was our shared tragedy, if we felt that the tens of thousands of Americans who are injured or die each year from gun related deaths – homicides, suicides, accidents – if we really felt that it was *our* problem, we'd be on our feet right now shouting HELL NO! And we'd mean it. We'd stay in the fight until something real was done about it. We'd refuse to sleep as long as guns are easier to purchase than Sudafed in this country.⁵ This may well be the great shame of our generation. Our children and grandchildren will wonder how we could abide such reckless abandonment of the common good.

But instead, we live in a culture intoxicated by the myth of radical individualism, which has deeply and perhaps irreversibly penetrated our hearts. Our response to human tragedy is to cry a little, callous, install better alarm systems, build higher walls and pray to God it doesn't come any closer to home.

Now *that* is more than a political problem – it's a spiritual problem. It's a problem of devastating proportions and dire consequences. This is a problem that must be addressed in our synagogues, mosques and churches, in our homes and in our schools. It is a spiritual anorexia that is corroding our country from the inside.

We don't know what happened between Cain and Abel that terrible day when two brothers went out into the field together and only one came home alive. We can only imagine what transpired between them, predisposed (as siblings often are) both to compete with and to protect one another. What we know is that when God confronted Cain to ask where his younger brother had gone, Cain replied, famously "*Ha-shomer ahi anokhi - Am I my brother's keeper?*" God doesn't answer him, but leaves that question to subsequent generations to answer. Tragically, shamefully, in story after story throughout the Book we see the failure to answer Cain's question in the affirmative. Ishmael and Isaac can't live together, Jacob deceives Esav, the brothers oscillate between wanting to kill Joseph or sell him into slavery. It's as if the narrative arc of Genesis answers Cain's unanswered question with: *No. You need not care for and keep your brother. Every man for himself.*

But just as Genesis winds down – generations after Cain and Abel - famine ravages Canaan. Jacob's sons, driven by hunger and hopelessness, have no choice but to go down to Egypt and beg for food. On their second trip, long-lost brother Joseph, dressed as viceroy of Egypt, plants a stolen goblet in his

⁵ <http://www.fda.gov/drugs/drugsafety/informationbydrugclass/ucm072423.htm>

youngest brother Benjamin's sack and insists that all the other brothers return home, but Benjamin stay as his slave.

Joseph: *Alu l'shalom el avikhem* -- return to your father *in peace* (44:17).

This is a defining moment in Torah. These brothers, deceivers and descendents of deceivers, brothers, sons and grandsons of men who have staked their lives on the flagrant disregard of fraternal responsibility, break script. How can there be peace for me, says brave Judah, if there is no peace for my brother? If Benjamin stays, I too will stay. We're all in this together (Gen 44:34).

After many generations and too much pain, Israel has finally learned how to answer the underlying question of Genesis and the great question of human existence – *hashomer ahi anohi?* Am I my brother's keeper? And the answer is a deep, irrepressible, undeniable affirmation of the essential connectedness between one person and another. So why didn't God just answer Cain generations earlier, weeping over the spilled blood of Abel? Because we needed to come to this realization ourselves. Each one of us, a child of God – bound together by a soul force both ineluctable and inexplicable... this was a conclusion we needed to come to in our own time and of our own free will. With his answer, Judah makes a *tikkun* – reparation for the sin of Cain, for the offenses committed and the poison spread throughout Genesis. In an instant, the Jewish script shifts from one of alienation and radical aloneness to one of love and shared responsibility. *That* is our story, cries out the book of Genesis. Like it or not, comfortable or not, convenient or not – your story is my story, your pain IS my problem, your destiny is my sacred responsibility.

This past winter, Rabbis Alexander and Tsadok and I went to City of Refuge Church in Gardena, just west of Compton, where the crowd of 4000 people was asked how many had family or close friends who were victims of gun violence. Nearly 70% raised their hands. 70%! I stood up and preached that our Torah insists that with shared humanity comes shared responsibility. That as Jews we reject the myth of radical disconnect that is so definitional in American culture. That mothers in West LA will not abandon mothers in South LA to cry sacred tears over their children, shot down cruelly and unnecessarily. That this struggle is a shared struggle – and we are *all* in this together. But even as I preached, in my heart I wondered – what will it take for us to truly realize how irretrievably and inextricably connected we are to one another?

But lest we enter the New Year in despair, I began by promising that though we suffer from a profound spiritual illness, embedded in the narrative of the year is a deeply compelling spiritual solution.

Arc #2: Gays. Remember how hard it was to get any kind of verbal nod to LGBT equality on the national stage, until very recently? Look at this arc:

In the fall of 2011, the President was asked in an interview about his position on gay marriage: "Well-- you know-- I probably won't-- make news right now... you know... I-- I'm-- I'm-- still working on it."

One year later, the President, taking the Oath of Office for a second term, stood on steps of Capitol and uttered the words:

We, the people, declare today that the most evident of truths—that all of us are created equal—is the star that guides us still, just as it guided our forebears through Seneca Falls, and

Selma, and Stonewall, just as it guided all those men and women, sung and unsung, who left footprints along this great Mall, to hear a preacher say that we cannot walk alone, to hear a King proclaim that our individual freedom is inextricably bound to the freedom of every soul on Earth.

Stonewall – in an inauguration speech? Half the country wept and cheered, the other half googled “Seneca Falls” and “Stonewall.” But what we all realized - by the president referencing the bar in Greenwich Village considered to be the birthplace of the gay rights movement in 1969 – was that after more than 40 years, the LGBT struggle for equality and justice had truly moved from marginal to mainstream.

Six months later, the Supreme Court struck down the Defense of Marriage Act, giving same sex couples federal benefits and backing same sex marriage in California, and just last week a Supreme Court Justice officiated her first gay wedding. Just to be clear: we’re not there yet, but we’ve come a long way, baby. It has been a triumphant year for equal rights for gays and lesbians.

How are we to understand the devastating failure to create political consensus around guns, the same year as the remarkable movement on LGBT rights? What’s different in these two narratives? And why do I think it’s absolutely *essential* that we talk about this on Rosh Hashanah, the holiest of days?

Years ago, after decades of fighting for LGBT rights with too little traction, the common wisdom emerged that equality would only come with a widespread shift in perception and culture. When people know people and see them not as abominous or even anomalous - but simply as people, their attitudes will change. Go out, this wisdom dictated, and talk to your neighbors, your parents, fellow church goers. Invite them for tea.

Many criticized this approach as too passive, too patient. The suicide rate among gay teens is skyrocketing; too many partners are kept from the bedside when their loved ones are hospitalized. We don’t have time for a culture shift!

But tea was drunk. And Will and Grace was broadcast – and every Thursday night for 8 years, a couple of hilarious, unthreatening and devastatingly handsome gay men sat in millions of Americans’ homes. And little by little, perceptions began to change. Then, in March of this year, a Republican Senator who had consistently opposed gay marriage declared that “if two people are prepared to make a lifetime commitment to love and care for each other in good times and in bad, the government shouldn't deny them the opportunity to get married.” What changed? His son came out of the closet, giving the father a new perspective – that of “a dad who loves his son a lot and wants him to have the same opportunities that his brother and sister would have” – to marry and make a family.

The theory that you need to change hearts in order to change minds proved true. The *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* found a dramatic shift in attitudes toward marriage equality over the past decade. In 2001 only 35% of Americans supported same-sex marriage. By 2013 there was more support for same-sex marriage than opposition to it. In a country of over 300 million people, that is *astounding* change.

“This happened the right way,” wrote Andrew Sullivan:

From the ground up, with argument, with lawsuits, with cultural change, with individual courage. I remember being told in the very early 1990s that America was far too bigoted a place to allow marriage equality – just as I was told in 2007 that America was far too bigoted a place to elect a black president. I believed neither proposition, perhaps because I love this country so much I knew it would eventually get there. I trusted the system. And it worked...

Well I, too, love this country and I, too, know that we'll eventually get there. I believe that we can mirror the achievements of the movement for marriage equality this past year and come together as a nation to declare that there is a way forward on gun violence prevention that stands at the intersection of reason and compassion. That honors right and responsibility, freedom and the sanctity of life, the individual and the public good.

But for us to get there, we'll need to engage in a pretty serious spiritual reorientation.

In those awful days following the shooting last December, I'll never forget the words of Francine Wheeler, the mother of 6 year old Ben - a boy with deep brown eyes who wanted to be an architect and a paleontologist. 'I remember Ben's grandfather saying, *Ben is going to do amazing things*. I just didn't know it was going to be in his death,' she said. 'I thought it was going to be in his life.' 'Please help us do something before our tragedy becomes your tragedy,' she pleaded with the country. This mother, in her devastation, articulated the crux of the choice before us. We're all sympathetic, of course! But if we *really* saw her tragedy as our own – we wouldn't leave the heavy lifting to the next group of bereaved parents. This is the choice before us: we can continue, business as usual, and pray that the next Newtown is no closer to home. Or we can finally step forward and affirm the lesson that Judah learned back in Egypt years ago: that we *are* our brothers' keepers. We are our sisters' keepers. We are the keepers of our daughters and sons, and YOURS. We are, as King said, *caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly*.

We are joined today by Carmen Taylor Jones, our friend and guest. The day before Carmen's 45th birthday, her daughter, Breon - 15 years old, was at a friend's birthday party in Long Beach. A car drove by and gunmen sprayed the room full of teenagers with gunfire. Breon and a 17-year-old boy were killed. The gunmen were 16 and 19 years old. "At that moment, in the twinkling of an eye, everyone's lives... their destinies - interrupted," Carmen said. This happened five years ago. Since then, Carmen has dedicated every waking hour to building a ministry of non-violence, healing, and understanding. Like Ben's parents and all the parents who have lost children, she knows that her child's life was cut short – and feels that absence every day – nothing can take that away. But, with God's help, Carmen is doing everything in her power to make sure we all feel the reverberations of Breon's life, even in her death. "The only way we're going to get through this is with love. There's been enough hate," Carmen likes to say. There has been enough hate.

We're here for a reason today: we are brought together by a sacred urge to make sense of the chaos of our lives so we can live more meaningfully, more aligned with our purpose in the world – as Jews and as human beings. Some of us are hoping to catch a glimpse of God's great dreams for us – as individuals, as a community, as Jews and as human beings. We will find the answers we're looking for through singing and crying and dancing and *acting* - together - to build the society we actually want to live in. Let this be a watershed moment. Let the tears of this year pull us back to the sacred lesson of empathic attunement, essential to social change. As long as one parent fears sending her child to school, as long as one teen wonders if he'll be shot on the way out of basketball championships or on the way home

from 7-11 with Skittles and an iced tea, as long as one teacher wonders which kids will show up alive when school resumes after summer break, none of us is safe. Not one. That is the sacred calling between human beings. I am your keeper and you are mine. This is our challenge this year. Let us rise up to meet it.

Ken yehi ratzon.