

SHABBAT SERMON
Sukkot
5778

What concerns me the most about the massacre in Las Vegas and its aftermath is the helplessness that so many people feel. Excellent commentaries by writers of all political stripes have decried the routine of a mass killing: the expression of thoughts and prayers; the excuses for nothing being done. But nothing being done is only half the story.

Something has been done. Since the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary five years ago, more than two dozen states have passed new gun legislation. In almost all cases, they have made it easier to obtain a weapon.

- Wisconsin eliminated its 48-hour waiting period to purchase a handgun.
- Ohio allowed concealed weapons to be brought into day care centers and airports.

- Florida modified the Stand Your Ground law to make it harder to prosecute gun owners.

We may want to blame all this on the NRA. That is only part of the story. More important is that gun owning is very popular in America – and **that** is a recent change.

- In 2000, 29% of Americans supported greater gun rights with 67% supporting more gun control.
- In 2016, 52% of Americans supported greater gun rights and 46% supported more gun control.

It is disgusting and terrifying that this great nation, the beacon of freedom around the world, has come to a point where the homicide rates are five times higher than they are in Europe. It is disgusting that our political leaders put their heads in the sand and do nothing more than utter empty expressions of consolation.

Most of the commentators write about the need for new gun control legislation. If you support this, **you are not powerless. I have said this before: If you don't like the way things are in this country, get involved and do something about it.** Call your political party. Work for your cause. Mobilize your neighborhood. Make phone calls. Go to town hall meetings. Show up with questions and comments. THERE IS NO VICARIOUS CITIZENSHIP. Our local communities, our political parties, are aching for us to be involved. We can do so much more than show up at the ballot box. In America, we are not powerless.

But stronger gun legislation is only part of the problem. David Brooks wrote that the growth of gun ownership and violence is symptomatic of the great economic and social upheaval that we are now going through. I agree. We ARE going through a great upheaval – and last year's election was not the **cause** of the upheaval but rather its **out-growth.**

- It is now routine to talk about the breakdown of volunteerism and community involvement.
- It is routine to talk about the contemporary absorption with the self.

It is less routine to talk about – though we must – the great economic change that is taking place right now.

- If you read the book “Homo Deus” by the Israeli historian Yuval Harari, you will learn that driverless cars are not that far away – and with the common use of Uber and other car services that we order from our phone, you’ll understand how the career of taxi driver and bus driver and even truck driver will soon be non-existent.
- You’ll understand that, however many people it took to build an automobile 20 years ago, it takes a small fraction of that number today.

We are in the middle of a new industrial revolution right now. The jobs of the past are going away. People are disconnected from community. They see the breakdown of traditional social values – especially American values that hard work and loyalty will get you somewhere - and they are terrified - about their and their children’s futures.

We are in the middle of a great societal change – and once again we are not helpless. As I said on Yom Kippur, my prescription is to intensify our efforts to build community. We can be joiners and we can reach out to others to join with us.

I believe that greater social cohesion will lower the incidence of gun violence and opioid drug use. I believe it will give people a greater sense of well-being.

- The journalist Studs Turkel told the story of a family being evicted from its apartment during the Depression – with all its belongings being put on the street and the utilities being turned off. When

the neighbors saw that, they moved all the belongings back in for that family and figured out how to turn the utilities back on.

People took care of each other – and America was better for it.

The evening prayer, Hashkiveinu, asks God to protect us – to spread over us His ‘sukkah of peace’ – to protect us from “enemies, pestilence, sword, starvation, and sorrow,” namely from all those things we worry about when we turn off the lights at night. But the sukkah is, by design, a fragile shelter. **There is no shelter that can give us total protection from all those “forces that go thump in the night.”** And prayer may give us some comfort – that is the very purpose of prayer – but it cannot ward off those forces of evil. Only we can do that. Only our action can bring about real change.

I have been honored several times to speak at a conference on post-Holocaust Jewish thought. I will do so again next June. And I will say that it is time to stop talking and time to get moving – feeding the hun-

gry, building shelter for the homeless, building interfaith organizations in our local communities. It is time to get off our *tucheses* and DO something.

We are not helpless. We must do more than utter platitudes of thoughts and prayers. If we don't like the way things are, then it is time – every one of us – to get more involved and work for change. I still believe in America. We have a government of the people. The people just need to show up. Oh, does America need us to do that.