

Safeguarding Lives and Mending the World: A Jewish Response to Gun Violence Prevention

Lesson plan and handouts by Rabbi David Strauss and Rabbi Eric Mollo

Lesson Plan Objectives:

- To ground our actions and understanding of gun violence prevention in Jewish text and tradition.
- To understanding the current legislative agenda.
- To introduce CeasefirePA and Heeding God's Call.
- To introduce and suggest action steps.

Duration: 1 hour

Materials needed: Copies of handouts (see lesson handout and gun violence prevention text references below). Whiteboard. Pens for notetaking. Zoom (if virtual).

Detailed Plan:

1. Introduction (5 minutes)

- Briefly introduce the topic, explaining the relevance and importance of gun violence prevention in today's world, especially in the context of protecting the community and children.

2. Icebreaker (5 minutes)

- Initiate a brief discussion on participants' understanding of gun violence, its effects on society, and the importance of our role in mitigating it. Record responses on a whiteboard.

3. Jewish Values and Gun Violence Prevention (20 minutes)

- Ask participants to share Jewish values that align with GVP. Examples below:
 - Tikkun Olam (Repairing the World): We are obligated to make our world safer and healthier. Gun violence prevention is a direct expression of this commandment.
 - Pikuach Nefesh (Saving a Life): Jewish law places the highest value on preserving human life. This extends to taking actions that prevent harm and promote safety in our communities.
 - Shmirat HaGuf (Guarding the Body): We have a responsibility to protect our bodies and the bodies of others. Advocacy for gun violence prevention safeguards physical health and well-being.
- Share and study key texts from Jewish tradition that underscore how Jewish values align with GVP.
 - **SEE TEXT REFERENCE SHEET**
- Discuss how these texts can inform our attitudes towards gun violence prevention.

4. Case Study: The Common Agenda (10 minutes)

- Briefly explain the mission and work of Ceasefire PA and Heeding God's Call, highlighting how they are working towards reducing gun violence.
- Discuss their policies such as the promotion of background checks for all gun buyers, reporting lost and stolen guns, etc. Relate these policies to previously discussed Jewish texts and values.

The Common Agenda:

HB 338 - mandates the reporting of lost and stolen guns.

- Lost or Stolen Gun Reporting requires gun owners to report the loss or theft of a firearm within three days of discovering the firearm is gone. This would reduce community violence by giving police an essential tracking tool to help them disrupt the flow of illegal guns into communities most susceptible to violence.

HB 714 - requires a background check for every gun sale.

- Requiring background checks on the private sales of long guns would close a loophole that currently allows individuals with a history of violence and those identified as potential threats to purchase military-style rifles — the weapon of choice for mass shootings — from a private/non-licensed seller without oversight.

HB 731 - requires the safe storage of firearms.

- Safe Storage legislation would require firearm owners to be responsible and securely store their weapons in the home when not in use. This has been shown to prevent school shootings, unintentional shootings, and suicides, especially by preventing children from accessing weapons.

HB 1018, which establishes extreme risk protection orders (red flag laws).

- This mechanism empowers family members and law enforcement to petition a judge to temporarily remove guns from a loved one in crisis, without subjecting them to an involuntary mental-health commitment. Nearly 80% of Pennsylvanians support the concept, and states have found massive reductions in suicides after enacting ERPO laws.

5. Group Activity: Applying Jewish Values to Gun Violence Prevention (10 minutes)

- Divide participants into small groups (or breakout rooms for virtual sessions). Discuss how participants can support or replicate these efforts within their own community.

6. Sharing and Discussion (5 minutes)

- Ask each group to share their proposals. Encourage comments and suggestions from several participants.

7. Conclusion and Next Steps (5 minutes)

- Recap the main points of the session, emphasizing the potential of Jewish values and teachings in preventing gun violence and creating safer communities.

Safeguarding Lives and Mending the World: A Jewish Response to Gun Violence Prevention

Jewish Values & Gun Violence Prevention: Which Jewish values best exemplify the goals of saving lives, reducing violence, and creating safer communities?

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Application to Our Communities:

It is crucial that we apply the Jewish principles we identified to our own communities. This can be achieved by:

1. Education: Teaching our community members about the importance of gun safety and violence prevention.
2. Advocacy: Using our platforms to support policies that aim to reduce gun violence.
3. Action: Forming community task forces to address this issue locally and work towards solutions.

<https://www.ceasefirepa.org/>

<https://www.heedinggodscall.org/>

<https://rac.org/take-action/rac-your-state/rac-pa>

<https://diocesecpa.org/leadership-news/a-pastoral-letter-from-the-pennsylvania-bishops/>

"He who saves a single life, it is as if he has saved the entire world" (Sanhedrin 37a)



Gun Violence Prevention Text Reference Sheet

1. Why do you think lessening gun violence is a "Jewish" issue? How do these texts define what makes an issue of "Jewish" concern? And, at this time of year (the High Holidays), do you feel more particular or universal in outlook?

Pirkei Avot 1:14

(14) He [also] used to say: If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am for my own self [only], what am I? And if not now, when?

משנה אבות א'י"ד

(יד) הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי. וְאִם לֹא עַכְשָׁיו, אִימָתָי:

Sifra, Kedoshim, Chapter 4 12

12) "You shall not take revenge and you shall not bear a grudge against the children of your people": You may take revenge of and bear a grudge against others (idolators). **"And you shall love your neighbor as yourself": R. Akiva says: This is an all-embracing principle in the Torah. Ben Azzai says: (Bereshith 5:1) "This is the numeration of the generations of Adam" — This is an even greater principle.**

ספרא, קדושים, פרק ד י"ב

[יב] "לא תקם ולא תטר את בני עמך" – נוקם אתה ונוטר לעכו"ם. "ואהבת לרעך כמוך" – רבי עקיבא אומר זה כלל גדול בתורה. בן עזאי אומר "זה ספר תולדות אדם" – זה כלל גדול מזה.

When Mazon was being created, there was a debate about the tagline: should it be Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger or Mazon: A Response to Jewish Hunger. What is the difference, and which are you most comfortable with?

And where would you put the accent:

Jewish Community Relations Council or Jewish **Community Relations** Council?

Likutei Moharan 5:1:2

Nachman of Brostlav, Chasidut, early 19th c)
Now, each person must say: "The entire world was created only for my sake" (Sanhedrin 37a). Consequently, because the world was created for my sake, I must constantly look into and consider ways of making the world better; to provide what is missing in the world and pray on its behalf.

ליקוטי מוהר"ן ה'א'ב'

א כִּי צָרִיךְ כָּל אָדָם לֹמַר: כָּל הָעוֹלָם לֹא נִבְרָא אֶלָּא בְּשִׁבְלִי (סנהדרין לז). נִמְצָא, כְּשֶׁהָעוֹלָם נִבְרָא בְּשִׁבְלִי, צָרִיךְ אֲנִי לִרְאוֹת וּלְעֵין בְּכָל עֵת בְּתַקוּן הָעוֹלָם, וּלְמַלְאוֹת חֶסֶד וְחַסְדֵּי הָעוֹלָם, וּלְהַתְפַּלֵּל בְּעִבְרוֹם.

Deuteronomy 22:1-8

(1) If you see your fellow Israelite's ox or sheep gone astray, do not ignore it; you must take it back to your peer. (2) If your fellow Israelite does not live near you or you do not know who [the owner] is, you shall bring it home and it shall remain with you until your peer claims it; then you shall give it back. (3) You shall do the same with that person's ass; you shall do the same with that person's garment; and so too shall you do with anything that your fellow Israelite loses and you find: you must not remain indifferent. (4) If you see your fellow Israelite's ass or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it; you must raise it together. (5) A woman must not put on man's apparel, nor shall a man wear woman's clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to your God (6) יהוה. If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. (7) Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life. (8) When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it.

Leviticus 19:16

(16) Do not deal basely with* *deal basely with Others* "go about as a talebearer among"; meaning of Heb. idiom *halakh rakhil be-uncertain*. members of your people. Do not profit by* *profit by* Lit. "stand upon"; precise meaning of Heb. idiom 'amad 'al uncertain. the blood of your fellow [Israelite]: I am יהוה.

דברים כ"ב:א'-ח'

(א) לֹא-תִרְאֶה אֶת-שׁוֹר אֲחִיךָ אוֹ אֶת-שֵׂי
נִדְחִים וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֲשִׁב תְּשִׁיבָם
לְאֲחִיךָ: (ב) וְאִם-לֹא קָרֹב אֲחִיךָ אֵלֶיךָ
וְלֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְאִסְפָּתוּ אֶל-תּוֹךְ בֵּיתְךָ וְהָיָה
עִמָּךְ עַד דָּרַשׁ אֲחִיךָ אֹתוֹ וְהִשְׁבֹּתוּ לוֹ: (ג)
וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְחֹמְרוֹ וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְשִׁמְלֹתָו
וְכֵן תַּעֲשֶׂה לְכָל-אֲבֵדֹת אֲחִיךָ אֲשֶׁר-תֵּאֱבֹד
מִמֶּנּוּ וּמִצָּאָתָהּ לֹא תִוָּכַל
לְהִתְעַלֵּם: {ס} (ד) לֹא-תִרְאֶה
אֶת-חֹמֶר אֲחִיךָ אוֹ שׁוֹרוֹ נִפְלִים בְּדֶרֶךְ
וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֵקֵם תִּקֵּים
עִמּוֹ: {ס} (ה) לֹא-יִהְיֶה כְּלִי-גִבּוֹר
עַל-אִשָּׁה וְלֹא-יִלְבַּשׁ גִּבּוֹר שְׂמֹלֶת אִשָּׁה כִּי
תֹעֲבָת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל-עֲשֵׂה אֵלֶּה: {פ}
(ו) כִּי יִקְרָא * (בספרי תימן קן בקרו"ף
גדולה אן צפור | לִפְנֵיךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּכָל-עֵץ | אוֹ
עַל-הָאָרֶץ אֲפֻרְחִים אוֹ בִּיצִים וְהָאֵם
רֹבֶצֶת עַל-הָאֲפֻרְחִים אוֹ עַל-הַבִּיצִים
לֹא-תִקַּח הָאֵם עִלְהִבָּנִים: (ז) שְׁלַח
תְּשַׁלַּח אֶת-הָאֵם וְאֶת-הַבָּנִים תִּקַּח-לָךְ
לְמַעַן יֵיטֵב לָךְ וְהִאֲרַכְתָּ יָמִים: {ס}
(ח) כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חֹדֶשׁ וְעָשִׂיתָ מַעֲקֶה
לְגִגֶּךָ וְלֹא-תָשִׂים דָּמִים בְּבֵיתְךָ כִּי-יִפֹּל
הַנֶּפֶל מִמֶּנּוּ:

ויקרא י"ט:ט"ז

(טז) לֹא-תִלְוֶה רֵכִיל בְּעַמִּיךָ לֹא תַעֲמֹד
עַל-דָּם רֵעֶךָ אֲנִי יְהוָה:

Rabbinic Texts on Gun Violence Prevention

How would you relate the Torah's principle of "You shall not bring blood on your house" to guns in a home today?

Please note, the Torah did not forbid the making of flat roofs, dogs or ladders: it forbade dangerous ones. Do you think that distinction applies to guns? Why or why not?

Bava Kamma 46a

Rabbi Natan says: From where is it derived that one may not raise a vicious dog in their house, and that one may not set up an unstable ladder in their home? As it is stated: "You shall not bring blood on your house" (Deuteronomy 22:8), which means that one may not allow a hazardous situation to remain in his house.

Mishneh Torah, Murderer and the Preservation of Life 11:4

(4) There is no difference between a roof or anything else that is dangerous and likely to cause death to a person who might stumble. If, for instance, one has a well or a pit in his courtyard — he must build an enclosing ring ten handbreadths high, or put a cover over it, so that a person should not fall into it and die. So too, any obstruction that is a danger to life must be removed as a matter of positive duty and extremely necessary caution.

בבא קמא מ"ו א

ר' נתן אומר מניין שלא יגדל אדם כלב רע בתוך ביתו ואל יעמיד סולם רעוע בתוך ביתו שנאמר (דברים כב, ח) ולא תשים דמים בביתך:

משנה תורה, הלכות רוצח ושמירת נפש י"א:ד'

(ד) אחד הגג ואחד כל דבר שיש בו סכנה וראוי שיכשל בה אדם וימות. כגון שהיתה לו באר או בור בחצרו בין שיש בו מים בין שאין בו מים חייב לעשות חליא גבוהה עשרה טפחים. או לעשות לה כסוי כדי שלא יפל בה אדם וימות. וכן כל מכשול שיש בו סכנת נפשות מצות עשה להסירו ולהשמר ממנו ולהזהר בדבר יפה יפה. שנאמר (דברים ז ט) "השמר לך ושמר נפשך". ואם לא הסיר והניח המכשולות המביאין לידי סכנה בטל מצות עשה ועבר ב(דברים כב ח) "לא תשים דמים":

The Talmud does not forbid weapons, but it does forbid selling weapons and their accessories to certain people. How might this relate to gun violence prevention today? What might be considered modern "auxiliary equipment?"

Avodah Zarah 15b

And furthermore, it is taught in a *baraita*: One may not sell weapons to gentiles or the auxiliary equipment of weapons, and one may not sharpen weapons for them. And one may not sell them stocks used for fastening the feet of prisoners, **or iron neck chains [*kolarin*], or foot chains, or iron chains.** This prohibition applies equally to **both a gentile and a Samaritan.**

עבודה זרה ט"ו ב

ועוד תניא אין מוכרין להם לא זיין ולא כלי זיין ואין משחזין להן את הזיין ואין מוכרין להן לא סדן ולא קולרין ולא כבלים ולא שלשלאות של ברזל אחד עובד כוכבים ואחד כותי

Avodah Zarah 15b

Abaye analyzes this *baraita*: **What is the reason** for the prohibition against selling these items to Samaritans? **If we say that they are suspected of bloodshed**, that is difficult: **But are they suspected** of this? **Didn't you say that one may seclude oneself with them**, which indicates that they are not suspected of bloodshed? **Rather**, it is prohibited to sell these items to Samaritans **because they will come to sell them to a gentile.** According to this reasoning, it should likewise be prohibited to sell a donkey to a Jew who is suspected of selling animals to gentiles.

עבודה זרה ט"ו ב

מ"ט אי נימא דחשידי אשפיכות דמים ומי חשידי האמרת ומייחדין עמהן אלא משום דאתי לזבונה לעובד כוכבים

According to this text, what is the general attitude of the majority of rabbis toward weapons? Why?

Shabbat 63a

MISHNA: Just as it is prohibited for a woman to carry out certain items unique to a woman into the public domain, the Sages said that **a man may neither go out on Shabbat with a sword, nor with a bow, nor with a shield [teris], nor with an alla, nor with a spear. And if he unwittingly went out with one of these weapons to the public domain he is liable to bring a sin-offering. Rabbi Eliezer says: These weapons are ornaments for him; just as a man is permitted to go out into the public domain with other ornaments, he is permitted to go out with weapons. And the Rabbis say: They are nothing other than reprehensible and in the future they will be eliminated, as it is written: "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not raise sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore"** (Isaiah 2:4).

שבת ס"ג א

מִתְּנִי' לֹא יֵצֵא הָאִישׁ לֹא בְּסִיף וְלֹא
בְּקֶשֶׁת וְלֹא בְּתַרְסִים וְלֹא בְּאַלָּה וְלֹא
בְּרוֹמַח. וְאִם יֵצֵא — חַיִּיב חֲטָאת. רַבִּי
אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר: תִּכְשִׁיטִין הֵן לוֹ. וְחֻכָּמִים
אוֹמְרִים: אֵינָן אֶלָּא לְגִנָּא, שְׁנֵאמַר:
"וְכִתְּנוּ חֲרָבוֹתֶם לְאַתִּים וְחֲנִיתוֹתֵיהֶם
לְמִזְמֵרוֹת וְלֹא יִשָּׂא גּוֹי אֶל גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא
יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה".

