



## **Gun Violence Shabbat Guide 2023**

### **Contents**

Gun Violence Prevention (GVP) Shabbat .....	1
Introduction: Gun Violence in North America.....	2
Take Action.....	3
Supplements for Shabbat Service .....	4
Text Study.....	11
For Further Study, Prayer, and Reflection .....	13

### **Gun Violence Prevention (GVP) Shabbat**

December 14, 2023 marks the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Sandy Hook tragedy. The Union for Reform Judaism (URJ) is a partner of the [National Vigil for All Victims of Gun Violence](#), organized by [Newtown Action Alliance](#). In partnership and solidarity, the URJ is observing Gun Violence Prevention Shabbat in early December. For congregations and communities who wish to take part in this observance for erev Shabbat Friday, December 1<sup>st</sup> or Friday, December 8<sup>th</sup>, the Religious Action Center (RAC) prepared the following guide with accompanying text study.

On this Shabbat, we remember all people who have been impacted by gun violence: those who died or were injured, those who have lost loved ones, and those whose pain is mourned quietly in anonymity or in public view.

On Shabbat, we take time to rest and reflect, but for those whose lives have been forever marred by gun violence, we remember that this respite is temporary. The grief that someone feels because of a loved one taken by a gun does not rest on Shabbat. The work that advocates and grassroots activists do does not rest on Shabbat. The toll that gun violence has on our society does not rest on Shabbat.

On this Shabbat, we invite congregations and communities to explore our responsibility as Jews to ourselves, to one another, and to our communities. We bear responsibility to repair the brokenness of the world and hope this text inspires guidance to heal communities and advance a more whole, just, and compassionate world.

## Introduction: Gun Violence in North America

As the Reform Jewish community, it is our responsibility to stand up and fight to end gun violence. Together, we will enact change and hold our legislators accountable until there are no more shootings.

In the United States, we see the impact of gun violence at a higher rate than in any other country with similar socioeconomic status. It has always been and will continue to always be unacceptable. We see time and time again: shootings happen, survivors call for action, but then the cameras leave, and the rest of the country is somehow able to forget. But each day, the survivors, their families, and the families of the victims must continue to fight and live with the grief. It is not enough that we pay attention for a moment after crisis when this is an ongoing, unresolved crisis. Other countries such as Canada and Australia have eradicated this epidemic of gun violence – and so can the United States. This is not an issue of politics, mental health, or religion: it is a matter of protecting people in the United States, and working to ensure the next generation does not experience the toll that gun violence has taken on so many people in the United States.

### *Key Statistics*

The following statistics from Statistics Canada, an agency of the Government of Canada, provide a snapshot of gun violence in Canada:

- In 2022, there were 342 homicide victims from gun violence, an increase for a fourth consecutive year.
- 2 in 5 homicides are firearm-related.
- In 2022, there were 9,198 victims of violent crime where a firearm was present, a 10% increase from 2021.
- Canada has the fifth highest rate of gun ownership in the world, according to the most recent [Small Arms Survey](#).

The following statistics from [Everytown Center for Gun Safety](#) and [Giffords Law Center](#) demonstrate the magnitude of gun violence in the United States.

- In 2022, there were over 48,000 gun-related deaths in the United States
- People in the United States are 26 times more likely to be killed in a gun homicide than those in other high-income countries.
- On average, 23 children and teens (1-17) are shot each day in the United States.

- In 2020, guns became the leading cause of death for Americans aged 0-19 years old.
- Black Americans are 12 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide. Black children and teens are 17 times more likely than white children and teens to die by gun homicide.
- Nearly 60 percent of all gun homicides in the U.S. are suicides. Access to a gun triples suicide risk.
- Domestic violence victims are five times more likely to be killed when the abuser has access to a gun.
- There are over 393,000,000 guns in the U.S. today – more than one per American.

## Take Action

Until we unite and commit to making meaningful change, families will mourn the loss of their loved ones day after day. As people of faith, we are tired of sending thoughts and prayers: they will never be enough. Gun violence will continue to be a threat to all of our lives, the lives of our loved ones, and those who we have not met yet until we are able to hold our legislators accountable and demand accountability, safety, and justice.

*Before December 7, 2023*, urge the Biden administration to expand the definition of who must be licensed to sell firearms and conduct background checks: [RAC.org/ATF](https://www.rac.org/atf)

Urge Congress to support universal background checks: [RAC.org/BackgroundChecks](https://www.rac.org/backgroundchecks)

Urge Congress to support the Assault Weapons Ban: [RAC.org/BanAssaultWeapons](https://www.rac.org/banassaultweapons)

Urge your Congress to support Ethan's Law and mandate safe storage of guns in residences where minors reside: [RAC.org/KeepKidsSafe](https://www.rac.org/keepkidsafe)

Tell Congress to take immediate action to prevent gun violence by: passing universal background checks and closing deadly loopholes such as the intimate partner, Charleston, and private sale loopholes; increasing funding for gun violence research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and National Institutes of Health; and funding community-based gun violence prevention strategies to stop interpersonal gun violence:

[RAC.org/StopGunViolence](https://www.rac.org/stopgunviolence)

To learn more about gun violence prevention and ways for you and your congregation to get involved, please visit [RAC.org/GVP](https://www.rac.org/gvp)

## Supplements for Shabbat Service

Consider these prayers to raise awareness and honor all victims of gun violence.

### *Introductory Prayer*

*Adapted from [Opening Prayer for Colorado State House In The Aftermath of Tragedy](#)*

By Rabbi Joe Black

Our God and God of all people,

God of the rich and God of the poor.

God of the teacher and God of the student.

God of the families who wait in horror.

God of the dispatcher who hears screams of terror from under bloodied desks.

God of the first responder who bravely creeps through ravaged hallways.

God of the doctor who treats the wounded.

God of the rabbi, pastor, imam, or priest who seeks words of comfort but comes up empty.

God of the young boy who sees his classmates die in front of him.

God of the weeping, raging, inconsolable mother who screams at the sight of her child's lifeless body. God of the shattered communities torn apart by senseless violence.

God of the legislators paralyzed by fear, partisanship, money, and undue influence.

God of the Right.

God of the Left.

God hears our prayers.

God who does not answer.

On this day when we remember all the victims of gun violence.

Our prayers have not stopped the bullets. Our prayers have changed nothing.

Once again, a disturbed man with easy access to guns has squinted through the sights of a weapon, aimed, squeezed a trigger, and taken out his depraved anger, pain, and frustration on innocents: pure souls. Students and teachers. Brothers and sisters. Mothers and fathers- are cut down immediately by the power of hatred and technology.

We are guilty, O God.

We are guilty of inaction.

We are guilty of complacency.  
We are guilty of allowing ourselves to be paralyzed by politics.  
The blood of our children cries out from the ground.  
The blood of police officers cut down in the line of duty flows through our streets.  
I do not appeal to You on this terrible morning to change us.  
We can only do that ourselves.  
Our enemies do not come only from far away places.  
The monsters we fear live among us.  
May those in this room who have the power to make change find the courage to seek a pathway to sanity and hope.  
May we hold ourselves and our leaders accountable.  
Only then will our prayers be worthy of an answer.  
AMEN

### *Before the Shema*

Time and time again, we watch news stories about senseless acts of gun violence. We feel pain for those directly impacted by gun violence, our nation, and for ourselves. We feel pain for those who have been attacked, and sorrow for the friends and families affected. As we recite the Shema together, we affirm that we are one people and feel the pain of all people together.

### *A Prayer for Preventing Gun Violence*

וְדַרְשׁוּ אֶת-שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגְלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם לְשִׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בְעַדָּהּ אֶל-יְהוָה כִּי בְשְׁלוֹמָהּ יִהְיֶה לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם:

*V'dirshu et sh'lom ha-ir, asher higleiti etchem shama, v'hitpal'lu va-adah, el Adonai. Ki vish'lomah, yihyeh lachem shalom.*

And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried, and pray for it; for in her peace shall you have peace. - Jeremiah 29:7

***Guardian of life, liberty, and the promise of peace, may our nation always merit Your protection.***

We recognize that gun freedoms in our nation have resulted in too many losing the freedom to full lives We know that peace anywhere might be shattered in a moment,

but we know, too, that many in this nation rarely experience the safety some of us take for granted.

***Help us to recall, as the prophet Jeremiah taught, that we must “seek the peace of the city,” recognizing how our own peace is tied up in that of the city where we find ourselves.***

The words of Isaiah remind us to share our bread, clothe the naked, and unlock the fetters of wickedness in this community and in our nation (Isaiah 58:6-10).

Among us are those for whom gun violence is a policy issue

***Grant our advocates light and wisdom, and help us all to support their efforts***

Among us are those for whom gun violence is a real and present if occasional, danger

***Grant the fearful Your sheltering presence, and help us all to understand and address this burden***

Among us are healers and others who deal directly with the aftermath of gun violence

***Grant the responders strength in turmoil, and help us all to support their work***

Among us are those who mourn victims of gun violence

***Grant the mourners comfort, and help us all to better support them in their grief and cries for justice***

Among us are those who have experienced gun violence

***Grant the shattered healing, and help us all to recognize this trauma and its cost***

Keep us ever aware of the wonder of humanity and of threats to the sanctity of human life.

Teach us to recognize the effect of gun violence on so many of our nation's children

***May we never be lazy in the work of peace or complacent in our relative safety***

May we honor those who have died in defense of our ideals

***And may we acknowledge threats, some of our own making, to those ideals***

***Grant our leaders wisdom and forbearance***

May they govern with justice, compassion, and clear knowledge of the cost of gun violence

***Help us all to appreciate one another, and the variety of viewpoints in this community and beyond, and teach us to respect the many ways we may serve You***

Then, we've been taught, shall our light rise in the darkness, and this gloom be as the noon-day (Isaiah 58:10)

***Shine Your light through the gloom. Heal us and our local, national, and global communities.***

***Lead us toward homes free of affliction and strife, bodies and spirits untrammled by gun violence. Help us to be the change we hope to see. Soon and in our lifetimes. – Amen.***

### *Before the Mi Shebeirach*

In the Mi Shebeirach, we pray for a *r'fuah shleimah* (a complete recovery). This includes *r'fuat hanefesh ur'fuat haguf* (a healing of the soul and the body). This prayer reminds us that Judaism considers mental and physical health equally important and provides an opportunity to consider the nuanced intersection between gun violence and mental health.

Mental illness is often stigmatized during conversations about gun violence, particularly in the aftermath of mass shootings. People with mental illness are not more likely to perpetuate violence against others or commit mass shootings; rather, they are more likely to be victims of violent crime, self-injury, and suicide. The majority of firearm deaths are suicides, and firearms are the most common method for suicide. We also recognize that gun violence (and fear of gun violence) can cause trauma and stress that may in turn contribute to mental illness.

As we pray for those in need of healing of body and soul, we acknowledge the complexity of gun violence and mental illness. We pray for those experiencing mental illness – that they may find empathy, compassion, and healing. We pray for an end to the stigmatization of mental illness. We pray that mental illness is never misused to shame those in need of healing or justify acts of violence and hatred against others.

*For more information about the intersection between gun violence and mental health, visit [Mental Health America](#) and the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#). For a list of Jewish and secular mental health hotlines and resources, visit [RAC.org/MentalHealthResources](http://RAC.org/MentalHealthResources).*

### *Before the Mourner's Kaddish*

As we read 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 siblings 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 loss in solitude.

## Additional Prayers

### After a Trauma

*Psalm 34:18-19*

אָזעקו ויהוה שְׁמַע וּמְפֹלֵצָרוּתָם הַצִּילָם:

קָרוֹב יְהוָה לְנַשְׁבְּרֵי־לֵב וְאֶת־דַּפְאֵי־רוּחַ יוֹשִׁיעַ:

The Eternal is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Eternal delivers from them all.

### A Time of Anxiety

*Psalm 31:9, 14-16*

וְלֹא הִסְגַּרְתָּנִי בְּיַד־אוֹיְבֵי הָעֲמֻדָּת בְּמִרְחַב רַגְלִי:

כִּי שָׁמַעְתָּי דְבַת רַבִּים מְגֹרֵם מִסָּבִיב בְּהִנְסָדָם יָחַד עָלַי לְקַחַת נַפְשִׁי זָמְמוּ:

וְנֹאֲגִי וְעָלִיד בְּטַחַתִּי יְהוָה אֲמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהֵי אֶתָּה:

בְּיַדְךָ עֲתָתִי הַצִּילָנִי מִיַּד־אוֹיְבֵי וּמִרַדְפֵי:

Be merciful to me, God, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and body with grief. [...] But I trust in you, Adonai; I say, 'You are my God.' My times are in your hands.

### A Prayer for Loss

*We Remember Them* by Sylvan Kamens & Rabbi Jack Riemer

In the rising of the sun, and in its going down,  
we remember them.

From the moment I wake till I fall asleep,  
all that I do is remember them.

In the blowing of the wind and the chill of winter,  
we remember them.

On the frigid days of winter and the moments, I breathe the cold air,  
I warm myself with their embrace and remember them.

In the opening of buds and the rebirth of spring,



we remember them.

As the days grow longer and the outside becomes warmer,  
I am more awake and I remember them.

### *Concluding Prayer*

*The Time Is Now* by Cantor Sally Neff

The call came again for thoughts and prayer.  
But, that is not the only way we can show we care.  
It was not the first time, why can't it be the last?  
It's time to make these stories a thing of the past.  
I will stand, and I will cry out.  
I will dedicate myself, I will scream and shout.  
Thoughts and prayers are not enough  
It's past time for getting tough.  
I will stand. Stand with those kids  
The time is now.  
The children cower in schools, yet the guns can play free.  
People fear to walk the streets, and the leaders only flee.  
We will now stand up for the children in their need,  
Or will we sit in silence and let them lay and bleed?  
No, I will  
Now you might ask about politics and laws.  
Children die while grown-ups challenge every clause.  
It's up to us to bring this nightmare to an end.  
You know what message we must send!  
I will stand, and I will cry out.  
I will dedicate myself, I will scream and shout.  
Thoughts and prayers are not enough  
It's past time for getting tough.

I will stand. Stand with those kids

The time is now.

### *Sermon Starters*

The texts below are meant to help write a sermon connecting gun violence prevention to Jewish tradition.

- In Jewish tradition, we are taught the value that human life has, and the importance of us all to protect that. As we are commanded by the Torah, “Thou shall not murder” (Exodus 20:13).
- It will never be enough, just to say that we are not the ones picking up the gun and taking innocent lives. We are taught, “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). We are all responsible for protecting the lives of others.
- Jewish tradition teaches us, “Do not stand idly by while your neighbor’s blood is shed” (Leviticus 19:16). When we have the power to make a difference, and still choose to do nothing, we are partly responsible for the epidemic of gun violence that is going on around us.
- Each life has value, regardless of how similar or different we are from one another: “And a wolf shall live with a lamb...They shall neither harm nor destroy on all My holy mount, for the land shall be full of the knowledge of the Eternal as water covers the sea” (Isaiah 11:6-9). We are all human, and we must protect the sanctity of all life.
- Jewish scripture encourages the 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 are commanded to turn weapons of destruction into tools for the great good of society. The following text from the Bereshit Rabbah (21:13) further idealizes the land free of weapons, “The Rabbis, commenting on the words: ‘He placed at the East of the Garden of Eden the Cherubim and the flaming sword’ say: ‘At the East of the Garden of Eden at the very spot where stood the Cherubim with the flaming sword - there was Gehenna created.’
- [Gun Violence and Judaism](#) source sheet by Rabbi Joel Mosbacher

## Text Study

This resource is adapted from a [Shavuot text study](#) developed by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and Rabbi Andrew Terkel.

### *Gun Safety*

*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. - [Deuteronomy 22:8](#)*

From where is it derived that one may not raise a vicious dog in his house, and that one may not set up an unstable ladder in his house? As it is stated: “You shall not bring blood into your house” (Deuteronomy 22:8), which means that one may not allow a hazardous situation to remain in his house. Similarly, a person should not keep a forewarned ox in his possession, as it is dangerous. This is why Rabbi Eliezer rules that no level of safeguarding is sufficient for it; the ox should be slaughtered so that it will not cause damage.

— Bava Kama 46a commenting on Deut. 22:8

- What is our responsibility to keep others safe with our property?
- Based on these texts, what firearm laws do you think the Torah would have included that mirrors Torah laws on how our homes are designed and animals are watched?

## *Gun Violence Prevention Activism*

*You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it. – [Pirkei Avot 2:21](#)*

For many of us, the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs praying. — [Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)

- Do any of these texts speak to you? If so, which ones? How can we take on being part of the change without feeling the entire burden fall on our shoulders?
- Some people find it very easy to talk about the effects of gun violence. For many, its terrible consequences on people, especially Communities of Color, are undeniable. Yet legislation that would protect people – such as the assault weapons ban and comprehensive background checks – are considered politically impossible to pass. How can we apply our Jewish texts to this impasse?
- How can we balance the successes we accomplish together and the knowledge that more work still needs to be done?

## *Gun Access*

We don't sell to them [idolaters] a weapon or the housings [or accessories] of a weapon, nor do we sharpen a blade for them. Not stocks, neck chains, fetters, chains of bronze-- neither to an idolater nor to a Cuthean (Samaritans who were responsible for postponing the building of the 2nd temple). — [Avodah Zarah 15b](#)

- Why were idolaters banned from purchasing weapons?
- We have restrictions on who should be able to purchase firearms, including convicted felons and domestic abusers. How do our categories of banned purchasers match and differ from this law?
- Who do you think should be able to purchase firearms, and who should be banned?

## *Gun Violence Prevention*

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 a sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4). — [Shabbat 63a](#)

Tosefet Lachazon Hashalom - An Appendix to the Vision of Peace by Yehuda Amichai

Don't stop after beating the swords  
into plowshares, don't stop!  
Go on beating  
and make musical instruments out of them.  
Whoever wants to make war again  
will have to turn them into plowshares first.

- Why do we have laws about carrying weapons specifically on Shabbat?
- What does Shabbat represent, and why do you think we are set up to have a break from dangerous items?
- We have a right to protect ourselves. What is the solution when one person's way of protecting themselves (firearms) can also make other people feel less safe?

### **For Further Study, Prayer, and Reflection**

- [Resources for Engaging in the National Vigil and December Sabbath](#) (Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence)
- [Collection of sources](#) updated regularly with sermons and other writings on gun violence (Rabbis Against Gun Violence)
- [Interfaith Toolkit to Engage the Faith Community on Gun Violence Prevention](#) (DC Area Interfaith Gun Violence Prevention Network)

*All Jewish text citations are from Sefaria.*