



Parshat Devarim, Erev Tisha B'av
Sending Thoughts and Prayers
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by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

Whenever there is a mass shooting in our country, including last Saturday in El Paso and Dayton, there is this civic ritual where leaders of both parties say that they *are sending thoughts and prayers to the victims and their families*. How are we to understand this? Is this helpful?

There is a cynical read. We send thoughts and prayers *in lieu of action*. We send thoughts and prayers *in lieu of fixing the problem*, which is why the nightmare of mass shootings in our country continually recurs. I get the cynical read. It has a certain plausibility.

But this morning I want to try to make the case for a non-cynical read. I want to try to make the case that thoughts and prayers are not only helpful, but essential.

There are two things that are both true, and in obvious tension with one another, which frame why thoughts and prayers are indispensable.

One, all healthy and sane people of goodwill, of all parties, decry this scourge of violence, and believe that the fact that these mass shootings keep happening not only means the lives of innocent human beings are senselessly snuffed out, and their family's lives are destroyed, but that something is deeply wrong, deeply amiss in our country.

Two, despite the fact that we all decry it, denounce it, lament it, mass shootings keep happening. We have not yet figured out how to fix this blight in our land.

Why is that? Why can we not fix a problem that we all agree is a problem and that is literally a matter of life and death—on a massive scale.

As I was marinating on this question, one morning, at 3:00 in the morning, I woke up with a start and went to one of my kids' rooms to find a child's book that I used to read many

moons ago that felt, and feels, so relevant. It is a child's book with an adult lesson. It is called *The Blind Mice and the Elephant*.

There are six blind mice who cannot agree on what the elephant is that stands before them. Each blind mouse feels a part of the elephant, and each swears that the elephant is what they feel. One mouse feels the sturdy trunk and says the elephant is a thick snake. Another mouse feels the tusk and says the elephant is a spear. A third feels the side of the elephant and says it is a house. A fourth feels the leg of the elephant and says it is a tree. Each blind mouse captured an aspect of the elephant's reality. No one mouse captured the elephant in its totality.

There is a sense in which the contemporary debate about gun violence evokes the legend of the blind mice and the elephant. Here are five explanations, each of which captures an important aspect.

There are too many guns. America is off the charts in terms of the quantity, the deadliness and the availability of guns. Some argue that that is a symptom of a deeper problem: our nation's unhealthy infatuation with guns. The biblical category of *avodah zarah*, idol worship, obtains. Americans have made an idol of guns. Possessing assault rifles, or possessing 20 or 30 guns, is not about legitimate self-defense. No other nation has this much gun violence because no other nation has this many guns, or this adoration of guns.

There is an epidemic of mental illness. Loneliness, depression, suicidal ideation are all epically high. The perpetrators of gun violence by definition have a mental illness.

There is the deterioration of organizations that provide social capital, relationships and friendship that get us through life. In sociologist Robert Putnam's classic phrase, people are bowling alone. We need a renaissance of church and synagogue and masons and Kiwanis and other local organizations that provide deep human connection for the ups and downs of life.

There is too much hatred of the other. Hatred of people who do not look like us is increasingly normalized.

Our political process is sick because it is riven by partisan politics and because of the hold that special interests, including but not limited to the NRA, have on our politicians.

Five different explanations. Too many guns and an unhealthy worship of guns. Too much mental illness. Too little church or community connection. Too much hatred of the other. Sick politics because of political division and special interest groups. Each explanation has something to say here.

In other words, the problem of gun violence is a complex systems problem, not a simple technical problem. If you have a common headache, you take two Tylenol, and you feel better. That is a technical fix for a technical problem. Gun violence in America is the opposite end of the spectrum, complex, multi-layered, systemic. That is why the *Blind Mouse and the Elephant* is a helpful parable.

The tusk is real, but it is not the whole elephant. The trunk is real, but it is not the whole elephant. The leg is real, but it is not the whole elephant.

So too, there are too many guns, but that is not the whole problem. There is too much mental illness and too little treatment, but that is not the whole problem. There is the deterioration of faith and community organizations, but that is not the whole problem. There is too much hatred of the other, but that is not the whole problem. Our politics are riven with poisoned partisanship and special interests, but that is not the whole problem.

If gun violence is a complex systems problem, and if there is no one elegant solution, why do we need thoughts and prayer?

We need thoughts and prayer for one simple reason: so that *you* can think, and pray, about what *you* will do to be helpful in making America a better version of itself. *It does not matter which of the five explanations you personally subscribe to. Each is partly correct. None is wholly correct. Let your thoughts and your prayers inspire you to act on your convictions and make a difference. After prayerful reflection, pick the explanation that you believe in, and act on it.*

That is the central message of today, Tisha B'av. If the quintessential Jewish response to national disaster can be distilled into a single sentence, it would be this: *mipnei chateinu galinu m'artzeinu*. Because of our sins we were exiled from our land. The Talmud eschews the easy explanations. It does not say that the First Temple was destroyed because the Babylonian army was so much stronger than the Jewish army. It does not say that the Second Temple was destroyed because the Roman army was so much stronger than the Jewish army. No, the Talmud does the much harder move, demanding that each generation of Jews take personal responsibility for the moral quality of the society in which they live. There are multiple explanations for the destruction of our temples, and they are all right. They also all map onto our current reality. The First Temple was destroyed because of idolatry, adultery, violence and bloodshed. The Second Temple was destroyed because of internecine hatred. Different groups could not work together. It was for these sins that we lost our homes in Jerusalem.

It is for these sins that we are losing our home today. Making an idol of guns? Check. Violence and bloodshed? Check. Hatred gone amuck? Check. Inability to work together to solve problems? Check. What killed out two Temples is killing our country now. Tisha B'av begs us to take personal responsibility for the moral quality of our beloved but tormented country.

Last Saturday, when the shooting in El Paso broke out, there was a couple that happened to be in El Paso named Manuel and Patricia Oliver. Their son Joaquin Oliver was murdered in the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida. Last Saturday would have been his 19th birthday. To mark that moment, Joaquin's father Manuel was painting a mural of his son in El Paso pleading with our world to stem gun violence and to show decency and respect to immigrants. The El Paso mural was the 30th one he has painted of his son in various cities throughout our land. He just happened to have been in El Paso that day. When asked why he was doing it, he said his son's voice was stilled. He wants to give voice to his son who no longer has a voice.

The voice of Manuel Oliver for his son Joaquin is personal, emotional, and raw.

We do not have that voice. We have not been personally seared in that way. But we are all living in a country that is now tormented. And our country needs *our* voice. Now.

What is our voice? What can we do that is helpful?

May our thoughts and prayers help us answer these questions and act.

May our thoughts and prayers help us not be indifferent to our nation that is so desperately broken right now. For if our country is to be fixed—*this* is the message of Tisha B'av—it is on us to fix it. Shabbat shalom.