

B'chukotai 5782

On September 1st, 2001, I delivered a d'var Torah from my congregation's bima as I became a bat mitzvah. My d'var Torah was about the mass school shooting in Columbine, a devastating event that shook our country just two and a half years before on April 20, 1999. Never in a million years did I think that almost 21 years later, I would be giving another d'var Torah from a different bima in a different state as an adult, as a Rabbi, still talking about a mass school shooting.

Since 2009, there have been 274 mass shootings – which is defined by Everytown Research where I got my information, as “any incident in which four or more people are shot and killed, excluding the shooter.” From those 274 mass shootings, 1536 people were shot and killed and 983 people were shot and wounded. These numbers don't include the gun deaths or injuries from non-mass shootings.¹ In 2022, which, I remind you, we are not even 6 months into, we have already surpassed 200 mass shootings at 214 so far. In 2022's shootings – mass or not, 142 children ages 0-11 have been killed and 516 teens ages 12-17 have been killed.² Some of these numbers come from the 27 school shootings that resulted in injuries or death just in these less than 6 months of 2022. In those 27 school shootings, 83 people were killed or injured – 24 children killed.³

I, like Steve Kerr, head coach of the NBA's Golden State Warriors and a former Chicago Bull, “[am] fed up. I've had enough. We can't get numb to this. We can't sit here and just read about it and say let's have a moment of silence.”⁴ But we do that. Over and over again. We are devastated, and then move on, until the next horrific killing that shakes us to our core – the way I felt that Columbine did, the way I thought this could never happen again. We all think this should be the last time, and then it comes back again. Another shooting. More horrific deaths of innocent people.

On Tuesday morning before the shooter, who I will not glorify by naming him, shot his grandmother and entered Robb Elementary School, I proudly went to a polling location and voted. I knew it was important that I express my vote and knew I had to go get it done. On my way out, I took an “I voted” sticker, because that's important, but I also took two more stickers that said “Future Voter” for my boys. Later that day as news broke about Uvalde, I couldn't stop thinking about the stickers and what it really meant. My boys and all of the children you know and love are our future. We need to be making change for them. Showing them that we care about them and their future. That we want them to live to see that future.

¹ <https://everytownresearch.org/maps/mass-shootings-in-america/>

² <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/>

³ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/school-shootings-this-year-how-many-and-where/2022/01>

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/25/politics/steve-kerr-uvalde-texas-school-shooting-gun-control/index.html>

I am not a politician, and I am not here to talk about policy changes and legislation. Frankly, I don't have all the answers – I have ideas, but not answers. I'll share those ideas with my elected officials, hoping that my voice is heard. Tonight is about community and connection.

I fear that we are too closed off from one another to hear each other. It is human to lash out and be angry about the state of our society and the deaths of 32 people in two weeks, from all areas of the country; Buffalo, NY; Laguna Woods, California; and Uvalde, Texas. I'm so furious that I search for someone or something to blame. And, at the same time, I recognize the warning in this week's Torah portion of *Bechukotai*, which is mainly comprised of blessings and curses with the caveat that if you do everything God says, you will be blessed and if not, you will be cursed. According to our Torah portion, when we disregard God's commandments, harsh punishments follow.

But I can't believe that innocent lives have been taken as punishment because someone, somewhere wasn't following God's commandments. Rabbi Nathan, in this week's announcements, expressed this very idea. But I would like to focus on a different way to confront the idea of blessings and curses. I would like to think about how we can see each other more clearly and compassionately to bring more blessing and less curses into all of our lives. This feels more important than ever, especially in light of the past two weeks.

In the first line of curses, the Hebrew says (Leviticus 26:16)

אֶפְשָׁהּ-זֹאת לָכֶם וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם בְּהֵלָה...

“I in turn will do this to you: I will wreak misery upon you...” The word *beh'hala*, misery, has been translated in many ways; “terror, panic or shock.” As Rabbi Noah Arnow explains, according to Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, “It has the sense of being scared, suddenly, without knowing what to do.... This terror and confusion makes it hard to understand, to listen, to heed, adds Rabbi Moshe Alshich (Turkey, 1507-1593). When we're scared, our fight-or-flight response kicks in. We may freeze or run or lash out, but when we're scared, we're bad listeners. We can rarely even understand what's going on around us and inside us.... This curse is about feeling helpless, dominated, and lacking self-confidence, [Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch] explains.”⁵

All of this makes perfect sense to me. This is the human response that when misery, panic, terror, or shock impacts us; we have many different reactions, but, in all of them, we are unable to stop from reeling. This fear and anxiety keeps us from being able to say anything comprehensible in a calm, collected way that can actually make an impact.

⁵ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/anxiety-a-jewish-telegram/>

We are in a time, I would argue more than ever before, when people are just not listening to one another. I feel like I am yelling into a void, that sometimes my voice doesn't matter to the people who can make a change happen. It feels futile. But *yelling* into the void isn't going to help. As Rabbi Noah Arnow says, "The drift and momentum will continue to push us further down this path, onward toward the next curse. Maybe though, with some effort, some focus, and attention, and crucially, some slowing down, individually and collectively, we can start moving in the other direction, toward blessings."⁶ I feel strongly, that calm conversation, impassioned testimonies, concrete solutions, and face to face dialogue are what we need to truly bring about change.

This is not to say we shouldn't fight for what we believe in or not vote or lobby or contact our elected officials. We should do all of those things. My point is that if we don't come from a place of holiness and justice but of fear and anxiety, we will never get anywhere. We will constantly throw up our hands and say "I can't even talk to that person" when they don't believe exactly what we believe. We will just make that rift even deeper.

This Torah portion serves, in a way, as God's reminder to recognize the little things and appreciate what is around us, especially and even more so in times that make no sense. When we are jarringly thrust into fear and anxiety, we must strive to put everything back into perspective. We need to put holiness in everything we do to really make a difference.

What does this look like? Frank, open, and honest conversation. But it can't just be conversation with some random person you've never met before. It needs to be someone who you trust, have respect for, maybe even love, AND who has different views than you. It needs to be a face-to-face conversation. These conditions are because we tend to talk in a void – with people who are like minded. We tend to think that those who think differently than us are horrible people or are ignorant. We tend to think that if the conversation is done online, we can easily block, unfriend, delete, or close the computer – shutting down a conversation that may have potential to bridge a gap. These are things that not just us in this room or streaming services need to do, but our elected officials. If we are going to do anything legislatively, these kinds of conversations need to happen to create a bipartisan bill of any kind. But none of that is going to happen without getting to know one another outside of their political affiliation.

We can point fingers all day, but as I remind people all the time, that's three pointing back at yourself. We have to do the hard work too. We cannot just expect it to be done for us. Fear and anxiety have the power to shut us down, to not work towards holiness. Now is the time to do that. It is up to us.

⁶ Ibid.

I offer this prayer from our *Gates of Prayer*, a former Reform prayer book. The universe whispers that all things are intertwined. Yet at times we hear the loud cry of discord. To which voice shall we listen? Although we long for harmony, we cannot close our ears to the noise of war, the rasp of hate. How dare we speak of concord, when the fact and symbol of our age is Auschwitz? The intelligent heart does not deny reality. We must not forget the grief of yesterday, nor ignore the pain of today. But yesterday is past. It cannot tell us what tomorrow will bring.

If there is goodness at the heart of life, then its power, like the power of evil, is real. Which shall prevail? Moment by moment we choose between them. If we choose rightly and often enough, the broken fragments of our world will be restored to wholeness. For this we need strength and help. We turn and hope, therefore, to power beyond us. The Eternal has many names, but is One. Creating, sustaining, loving, inspiring us with the hope that we can make ourselves one as God is One.⁷

Let us make ourselves one – one country, one people, one humanity – all connected in seeking to make this world a better place – surely for us and right now, but definitely for our future generations. May it be **our** will.

⁷ *Gates of Prayer*