

THE PLAGUE OF GUN VIOLENCE
THE PEOPLE'S ACTION ASSEMBLY
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Remarks by Rabbi David Wirschafter

One of the fun things about being Jewish is that it is acceptable to make Jewish jokes. Here's one of my favorites: "*Why do you Jews always reply to a question with a question?*" "*Why do you ask?*" So it comes as no surprise that the Passover Hagaddah, which we read at our seders at this time of year begins with a question: *Ma nishta na ha laylah ha'zeh?* "What makes this night *different* from all other nights?"

So, I'll begin by applying that question to our purpose here today. What made the shooting of Reuven Rachamim and his colleagues at Accent Signage different from other all other shootings? In keeping with what prior speakers have said today, it was a shooting that did not fall into the gun lobby's stereotypes. It was not about race. It was not about gangs. It was not about drugs. It was not about robbery. Violence was not used as a *means* by which to achieve another goal. Violence was the goal. As to revenge, it explains one of the murders, that of Reuven Rachamim, but not the three others. There is no point in talking about the aggrieved families receiving justice, or the consolation that comes from locking up the shooter and throwing away the key. We cannot speak of consequences that will serve as an example, a warning and a deterrent to others. The shooter committed suicide in the basement of the very business where he killed his former employer, Reuven Rachamim, and three others. Some of the wounded survived. But to say that their lives and those of their families will never be the same is to engage in understatement.

When it comes to guns we can no longer afford to be understated. If we cannot end the violence by being Minnesota nice, then perhaps it is time to stop being Minnesota nice. Gun control is a Jewish problem, a Christian problem, a Muslim problem, a Hindu problem, a secular problem and an atheist problem. Stopping gun violence is a civic duty for Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, and every other person regardless of their background. Ending this epidemic is a civilian obligation, a law enforcement obligation, a Republican obligation and a Democratic obligation. Stopping gun violence is an *American* obligation. When Mr. Nichols called gun violence a "scourge" he was being too nice, too understated. Gun violence is a plague.

For the Pharaoh of the Exodus story, it is not until the plagues touch his *own* family with the same irreversible and fatal force experienced by his subjects that the ruler finally relents and changes course. What is it going to take for our leaders to see the pain of gun violence as an existential threat to our lives and our way of life? Apparently the killing of presidents and other leaders aren't enough. Apparently, the deaths of innocent bystanders aren't enough.

Apparently the deaths of movie-goers, shoppers, students, children, mothers and fathers aren't enough. We know what Pharaoh's breaking point was. What will be ours?

Ma nishtana ha' layla hazeh? What made this shooting different from all other shootings? Well for me, this shooting was different because I knew the victim and his family. Sami Rachamim, Reuven's son was my student at the Amos and Celia Heilicher Minneapolis Jewish Day School. Six years ago, the Rachamim family gathered from around the country and around the world to celebrate in their synagogue as Sami was called to the Torah as a bar-mitzvah, the ceremony where a young person reads from the Torah, our scripture, for the first time. Four years later Sami ascended the pulpit of his synagogue again. This time, however, the mitzvah, the obligation before him, was that of eulogizing his father. It really shouldn't take personalizing the issue to make people see the depths of the crisis, but if that is what it takes to get people to listen then personalizing gun violence is what we'll do. So here's the emotional, manipulative, and all too true diatribe.

Sami didn't get to have his father in attendance when he graduated from high school last spring. Nor will Reuven be there when his son graduates from college or grad school. Sami won't get to call his dad and say that he is writing for his college newspaper, has landed a job or fallen in love, is engaged to be married or soon to become a father. He won't be able to call his father because he simply wants to talk. And *the reason* for that is because our country is prepared to pay an obscene price to preserve the right to bear arms over the right to live and work, attend school, go shopping, attend our houses of worship, or see a movie in safety.

Consider the price we pay for people to have such ready access to guns? We don't *intend* to value the rights of murderers more than those of their victims. But our policies and practices have the *impact* of doing precisely that. From a social, legal, economic, and ethical reading of the situation, we must confess that no matter how noble our intentions, how legitimate our concerns, or how sincere our condolences, the fact remains that the status quo enables and empowers the breadth and depth of the problem. To say that there is nothing on the books to prevent the next shooting is both utterly depressing and painfully obvious, another understatement we cannot afford. While the gun manufacturing and selling lobby should remember that Leviticus *forbids us to profit from the blood of our neighbor*. The rest of us should recall that it also *forbids standing idly by while our neighbor bleeds*.

There's a folk legend told by the rabbis about the parting of the waters of the Sea of Reeds that we commemorate each year at Passover. The angels saw the Israelites singing and dancing for joy when God delivered them from Pharaoh's army. So, naturally, they got in on the act, hooting, hollering, jumping up and down, until God said: "Knock it off!" "Master", they replied, "your children are saved from destruction, can't we rejoice with them?" "The Egyptians are also my children," God replies, "and you're singing songs of joy as they drown." So it is that when we come to the second cup of wine in our Passover meal,

we take ten drops out of our cup to signify that our joy is diminished by the death of others, no matter if it was justified. We take out ten drops of wine to recall the plagues upon Egypt, because the suffering of others saddens us all.

Passover takes its name from the passing over of Hebrew households by the Angel of Death, sparing us from the plague of that took the lives of Egypt's first born. So, in gratitude to God and in sympathy for the loss of life, tradition instituted a "fast of the first born" that takes place just before the Passover festival. Here's what I want you to do. Borrowing the convention of my Christian brothers and sisters, we're going to pass the plate now. If you're a first born, or the parent of a first born, I want you to donate the money you would spend on one day of food to *Protect Minnesota* or other gun safety organizations. My fourteen year old son, my first born, can easily put away twenty dollars of food a day, so that's what I'm donating right now.

Thank you, and God Bless you.

Let's bring peace and safety to Minnesota and to our entire nation, by ending the plague of gun violence.