

Yitro 5771- Clergy Against Bullets  
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom.

Let me tell you about my wonderful baby-sitter, Lillie Frazier. Lillie joined us just before I was born, having worked for friends who moved to Newton. Lillie was a warm and wonderful, dignified and responsible African-American woman who was with my family for over a quarter-century as a part-time housekeeper, baby-sitter, and trusted friend.

Since my father was a congregational rabbi and my mother worked full time on the faculty of the Jewish Theological Seminary, they needed someone to help with the child rearing and all of the home responsibilities. Lillie was the perfect person, trustworthy, loving, responsible and wonderful. Wherever we lived – Manhattan, Long Island or Northern New Jersey, she was there.

Over the years, Lillie became totally integrated into our home – she knew everything about keeping kosher and took great care of my younger sister and me. Until this day, we still socialize together, invite her for barbecues and other happy occasions. She was an honored guest at my bar mitzvah and my sister's bat mitzvah, attended our weddings, and I visited her church in Harlem on several occasions.

As an African-American woman in the middle of the twentieth century, she had endured many hardships. Growing up in the South Carolina, she suffered under segregation and the racist laws that were in place in that part of the country. Even when her family settled in the large black community of Harlem in upper Manhattan, she continued to endure travails and difficulties.

I still remember learning of her son's murder by gun violence in 1978. This was a chilling reminder of the violence of guns. His death was like an ominous cloud reminding me of the dangerous world we live in and how we need laws to protect us from guns.

That said, guns still held a powerful allure for me, a boy who was not allowed to have a toy gun and could watch only PBS television. To guarantee that, my parents removed the knob from the small nine-inch black and white TV we had so it was stuck on public television.

I do have to admit that some days before my parents got home from work, I would sneak into the garage to find a pair of pliers to turn the television to another station so I could watch more exciting and, quite frankly, more violent afternoon cartoons on other channels. I tried to carefully turn the dial back before my parents got home.

Eventually I tore off so much of the plastic that this little 9" black and white TV's channel knob could not be turned at all. But that's another sad story.

As a child, I was attracted to guns. There were no guns in the house. There were no water guns; there were no toys guns. My parents were virulently anti-gun.

My mother, in 1971, wrote an op-ed for the New York Times entitled, "Make Mine Semi-Automatic." When I was in college, I wrote my own article against guns in the Columbia Daily Spectator.

It is fascinating to reflect on these moments: forty years ago, twenty years ago, and today, so little progress has been made. It's like one of those cartoon characters like Scooby-Doo, where their feet are moving quickly, but there is no forward progress. The wheels have been slipping and spinning and sliding backwards.

Thanks to the destructive efforts of the strongest lobbying group in American history, the NRA, the National Rifle Association, our laws do not protect us from dangerous guns, from dangerous bullets. We have been plagued with disasters like Columbine, like the Virginia Tech shootings, and now the terrible tragedy in Tucson just two weeks ago.

As we all now know, a young man was able to walk into a Walmart and buy a semi-automatic clip that holds some 30 bullets, so he did not have to reload during his rampage of killing, maiming, and wounding. Even though he had been stopped by the police earlier in the day, he still went on to commit this horrific act.

The Talmud says, "*Shtikah K'hoda'ah dami* - Silence is equivalent to acceptance." By our not speaking out vociferously enough in previous instances of gun violence, we are all guilty of not acting. The time has come for action.

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Our *parashah* this week, *Parashat Yitro*, as Elisha beautifully explained in her d'var Torah, is a parashah with some big ideas, and her insights opened us up to many of them. Here we have the Ten Utterances, the ten primary commands that Moshe is given on Mt. Sinai. This is the core of the Torah, the core of the 613 commandments.

The second group of commandments guides us in building a moral and ethical society. The Sixth Commandment states *Lo Tirtzah* "Don't murder." Note that it does not say "don't kill."

What is the difference between murder and killing? Murder is killing someone unethically. Killing is a terrible tragedy that should be avoided at almost all costs, but in certain circumstances can be justified. There are a number of situations where the tradition allows for killing. For example, if someone comes to kill you, you are not only allowed, but you must defend yourself, and in the act of self defense, while it is better not to hurt the person, nor God forbid, even kill him, if the only way to stop him is to take his life, that is permitted.

Our tradition values human life over everything else. Human life takes precedence over all animal life, and saving a human life takes precedence over all other mitzvot.

The Mishnah teaches that while we were all stamped by the same signet ring, the same source, *nivra adam yihidi* - every person was created individually, and therefore every person is of ultimate worth. Each of us is created *b'tzelem Elohim* - in the image of God.

That's why the Mishnah states that if you take one life, it is as if you have destroyed an entire world, because you have not only taken that one life that is of ultimate worth, but you have destroyed all the future progeny and all the future wisdom coming from that life. You have destroyed an infinite number of people of infinite value. Conversely, if you have saved one life, it is as if you have saved the whole world.

There is one other major idea from the Ten Commandments that relates to the events of two weeks ago in Tucson. Hateful acts come out of hateful words. It seems clear that this particular individual in Tucson was suffering from serious untreated mental illness, something that sadly our government does not do enough to help with, as we see with disastrous results time and time again. While that is true, he also imbibed the culture of vitriolic words and hatred.

We find a culture of violence not only in our media and in our violent video games, but also in our venerable institutions like Congress itself where more and more hatred and vitriol are used to score political points.

It is clear in my mind that Sarah Palin's website, putting Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords' district in crosshairs as someone who was being targeted, could easily be taken by people such as this murderer and others to be encouragement to act. Hateful words lead to hateful actions.

That's one of the important lessons of the Third Commandment. The Torah teaches that you should not take God's name in vain. This is a commandment with which I have struggled ever since I was a young child. I wondered, what's the big deal? God is God – God can handle taking God's name in vain.

There are a number of ways to approach this mitzvah. One that I have always loved is that it speaks to the power of words.

After all, it is divine speech that created the world; God speaks the world into existence. While I don't assume that God's speech was anything like human speech, it does remind us of the power of words. Thus, the Third Commandment is a commandment complementary to the beginning of the Torah. God creates the world through words, and the world can be destroyed through words. This is a reminder that words are incredibly powerful. Hate-filled speech and vitriol do cause people to act. We can use our words to bring more love and hope and healing and harmony and peace into the world, or we can use our words to bring more hatred, divisiveness, antagonism, anger, destruction and violence into the world.

The Holocaust didn't simply happen one day; it was built up over centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, culminating in hateful words like Hitler's *Mein Kampf* that led people to act.

Now we can all work to stamp out hateful words in the world and in our country, but since there is a First Amendment which guarantees free speech, this can be exceedingly challenging. Nonetheless we must not give up those efforts, but we must combine them with efforts to get rid of weapons and instruments of hate.

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Last weekend my family and I took a little much needed vacation. On Sunday we had a few hours of downtime. Sharon and I were talking about the events of the past week, and we realized that we needed to take some action. It was then that I decided to start an organization called "Clergy Against Bullets." The idea is that the tragedy in Tucson could have been prevented from being as terrible as it was had a 30-clip cartridge not been available for purchase at Walmart.

Why would anyone need a 30-bullet cartridge if not to kill the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of? Animals are not hunted with 30-bullet clips. No one needs this for recreational shooting. There is simply no reason for this.

And so my organization calls for us to have laws that restrict the sale of bullets without background checks, and it endorses Long Island Congresswoman Carolyn McCarthy's bill which prohibits the sale of such bullet cartridges. Let me note that this bill has already been introduced in our Congress, but did not make it up for a vote, given the strength and power of the NRA. But now it is time for

clergy people of all faiths to bind together and to speak out against gun violence and bullets.

I encourage you after Shabbat, to visit [www.clergyagainstabullets.org](http://www.clergyagainstabullets.org), and if you know any clergy members of any faith to encourage them to go to our website and to sign the petition. It is time for each of us to take a stand to preserve life. It is time for each of us to do the right thing. It is time for a moral and religious stance in this country against gun violence, against the sale of automatic weapons cartridges.

We need to get this done. When we do, we will be living up to the values of the Ten Commandments revealed to our people thousands of years ago at Sinai and still relevant as the basic code for how to build a moral and ethical society. It is time for us to live up to those goals and ideals of thousands of years ago.

Shabbat Shalom.

May the peace of this Shabbat and every Shabbat to come not be shattered by bullets and gunfire. And let us say Amen.