

Temple Emanu-El Social Justice Council

Congregational Advocacy Proposal: Gun Violence Prevention

In the wake of the heart-breaking shooting of twenty first-graders and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School, people of faith across America have come together to seek commonsense solutions to end the tragedy of gun violence in our communities and our nation. The horrific events in Newtown have served as a wake-up call, and have cast bright light on not only the mass shootings that make headlines, but the staggering fact that 30,000 of our fellow Americans are killed by guns every year. We weep with the families of these victims. We reach out to comfort and console. We pray for healing and strength for all those who grieve. We have wept. We have reached out. We have prayed. But more than that; we have resolved. We have resolved that this time can be different, and that the time has come to raise our voices to demand action. It is within our power to create a safer, more just society, with fewer deaths from gun violence. The Social Justice Council believes that Temple Emanu-El should formally adopt an advocacy position that seeks to reduce gun violence.

OUR RIGHTS AND RESPECT FOR DIVERSITY OF OPINION

For thousands of years, Jewish tradition has recognized the use of weapons as a means for self-defense. The Babylonian Talmud, in tractates Sanhedrin and Brachot, explain the right to defend our lives and property.¹ In the United States, Jews have thrived because of the liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. The rights of the First and Second Amendments are not absolute. Indeed, our legal system enshrines reasonable limitations on the right to free speech, as it already includes limitations on the right to buy and bear arms, when such limitations advance the greater good of a just, stable, and secure society. There is a diversity of opinion within our congregation and among people of faith throughout the country about specific policy proposals that would help limit gun violence. As congregational leaders, we recognize that issues-based advocacy position may appear to be consistent with a partisan position of a political party. However, we cannot legally and will not ethically support a specific political party. We believe that it essential for Temple Emanu-El to be a place of open dialogue and discussion, where people with differing opinions can talk openly and safely about the important issues affecting society. The Social Justice Council recommends specific issues-based advocacy positions that represent broadly held and deeply felt beliefs from within our community. Thus, we want Temple to support issues-based positions that uphold the Second Amendment and the rights to protect oneself, while also advancing policies which will help to reduce gun violence.

OUR JEWISH VALUES

ברוך אתה יי אלהינו מלך העולם, שעשני בצלם אלהים.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has made me b'tzelem Elohim, in the image of God. ~ Nisim B'Chol Yom — Daily Blessings Our tradition teaches that every morning, we praise and thank God for being created b'tzelem Elohim, in God's own image. When we fully acknowledge that we ourselves are made in the image of God, we also recognize that every other human life is sacred and deserving of blessing.

לא תלך רכיל בעמך לא תעמד על דם רעך אני יהוה:

Do not deal basely with your countrymen. Do not stand by the blood of your fellow: I am Adonai. ~ Leviticus 19:16

Rashi taught that we should understand this verse from the Holiness Code to mean that we cannot stand by and watch another's death, when we are able to intervene to save a human life. (BT Sanhedrin 73a).

לֹא-יִשָּׂא גֹי אֶל-גּוֹי חֶרֶב וְלֹא-יִלְמְדוּ עוֹד מִלְחָמָה:

They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. ~ Isaiah 2:4

The prophet Isaiah calls us to relentlessly pursue peace. Although our Torah acknowledges the existence of weapons, and perhaps even their necessity, our greatest hope is always for a day when they are no longer needed.

JEWISH AND INTERFAITH SUPPORT

There is significant Jewish institutional and interfaith support for common-sense solutions to reduce gun violence. Since 1975 and as recently as 1999, the major organs of our Reform Movement (CCAR and URJ) have passed resolutions supporting sensible gun control laws. The Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA), the national umbrella organization for Jewish communal agencies, is currently collecting signatures for a national petition to end gun violence. The Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC) continues to advocate for legislative solutions, and has partnered with dozens of denominations across the religious spectrum, via Faiths Calling, to call on members of Congress to act. The following Jewish and interfaith organizations have signed on to the RAC's Faiths Calling Movement:

- Bend the Arc
- Catholic Health Association
- Central Conference of American Rabbis
- Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence
- Franciscan Action Network
- Hindu American Foundation
- The Interfaith Alliance
- Jewish Council on Public Affairs
- Jewish Women International
- National Council of Churches
- National Council of Jewish Women
- National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference
- National Latino Evangelical Coalition
- NETWORK, a National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
- Orthodox Union (Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America)
- PICO National Network
- Presbyterian Church (USA)
- Progressive National Baptist Convention
- Rabbinical Assembly
- Reconstructionist Rabbinic Assembly
- Sikh Council on Religion and Education
- Sojourners
- U.S. Episcopal Church
- The Islamic Society of North America
- Union for Reform Judaism
- Unitarian Universalist Association
- United Church of Christ
- United Methodist General Board of Church and Society
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

- United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
- Washington National Cathedral
- Women of Reform Judaism

ADVOCACY PROPOSAL

We believe that the following positions are solidly within the mainstream of current Jewish thinking on the issue of gun violence, and that by advocating for legislation that includes them, we have a genuine opportunity to influence public policy in keeping with Jewish values:

UNIVERSAL, MEANINGFUL BACKGROUND CHECKS.

Every person who buys a gun should pass a criminal background check, whether the sale happens at registered dealers, online, at gun shows, or through private sales. Preventing dangerous people from having access to firearms will save lives, and we should advocate for universal background checks via the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) on every gun sale.

A BAN ON ASSAULT WEAPONS AND HIGH-CAPACITY MAGAZINES

Military-style, high-capacity weapons and magazines are not needed for hunting or self-defense. Their combat features are appropriate to military, not civilian settings. We should advocate for our elected officials to reinstate and update the Federal Assault Weapons Ban.

IMPROVED ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

We recognize that many of the perpetrators of mass killings have suffered from mental illness. Even when it does not result in these highly-publicized tragedies, the combination of poor mental health and guns is a dangerous one. We also recognize that in our own community, Texas ranks 49th in mental health spending. We should advocate for adequate funding to ensure that as a society, we provide access to quality mental health care for every person in need.

The Social Justice Council fully supports the advocacy positions outlined in this Proposal. Pursuant to the procedures set forth in the Social Justice Task-Force Report, the Social Justice Council recommends its adoption by the Temple Emanu-El Board of Trustees. If approved, our advocacy efforts would be developed by a congregational leadership team appointed by the Social Justice Council and may include such actions, among others, as:

- Communicate advocacy opportunities through Temple vehicles (Window, website, etc.)
- Build Coalition with Dallas Area Interfaith partners or other like-minded congregations and organizations in the area
- Circulate petitions, and notify congregants of opportunities to sign other organization's petitions (e.g. RAC and JCPA)
- Work with clergy and leaders to provide educational opportunities for congregants on relevant issues related to reducing gun violence (e.g. availability of mental healthservices, treatment of violence in media, etc.)
- Post card, email, or phone drive

Our tradition teaches us that “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 take seriously the imperative to turn our grief and our anger into meaningful change that can save lives. We ask the Board for a motion to adopt the proposal presented by the Social Justice Council to advocate as a Congregation for these common-sense gun violence prevention positions, and to work to bring awareness to, and community support of, these policies.