

# RABBIS AGAINST GUN VIOLENCE



PASSOVER SEDER SUPPLEMENT

2016 / 5776



## INTRODUCTION

*The more one expands upon the telling of the story of the departure from Egypt,  
the more praiseworthy that person*

At the Passover seder, we are told to see ourselves as having personally left the “narrow places” of Egypt/Mitzrayim and to expand upon the story. It is a remarkable opportunity to remember our ancient liberation from slavery as well as to explore, engage, and wrestle with contemporary issues of injustice and oppression. It urges us to ask how we will make not just this night, but also the year ahead, different from all others.

In this spirit, we offer the Rabbis Against Gun Violence 2016/5776 Passover Seder Supplement. With nearly 33,000 Americans killed by guns each year – an unimaginable 90 lives a day – we feel a fierce moral imperative to speak and to act. We believe in the inherent dignity and sacredness of every human life and believe that every gun death – whether from urban violence, suicide, domestic violence, unintended shootings, or mass shootings – diminishes and oppresses us all.

Each selection in this supplement is of a different style and offers a different approach to considering the issue of gun violence. Feel free to use one, some, or all of the selections, or adapt them as you see fit. We hope these readings will inspire and move those who gather at your seder table and lead you to join with us in raising awareness and advocating for common sense solutions to help reduce the scourge of gun violence plaguing our communities.

Many thanks to all who contributed to this Seder Supplement with their powerfully heartfelt writings and to Rabbi Sheldon Lewis for compiling and editing the collection – all within a very short time frame.

Eileen Soffer  
National Coordinator  
Rabbis Against Gun Violence



## I Before Karpas

A  
Rabbi Jill Jacobs

"If a person eats a lot of maror (bitter herbs), his/her innards become swollen and crushed, and eating karpas is the remedy. We eat the karpas before the maror as a reminder that God sends the remedy before the injury. The redemption of Israel was already prepared before the people went down to Mitzrayim and entered into slavery." (*Haggadat Yalkut Tor, Rabbi Eliyahu Ki Tor*)

In the midst of the bitterness of this plague of gun violence, we may struggle to believe in redemption. But perhaps the remedy for the maror lies before us. How can we find the strength to move beyond our cries of pain to seeking redemptive solutions?

What are some responses to gun violence that might move us toward redemption?

## B Karpas-Protecting Our Homes, Our Lives Shelly Lewis

Some understand that dipping a green vegetable into salt water reminds us that our people in Egypt once dipped hyssop into the blood of the paschal lamb to spread on their doorposts. They created a dramatic sign that would protect their homes from danger in the time of the tenth plague.

Tonight we dwell on the karpas because our homes, our neighborhoods, our communities are again in great peril and in need of security.

On the streets in our cities and in our homes are hundreds of millions of guns, many in the hands of those who should not have them. Some of these weapons were made only to be used in war. We rise each morning fearing that the next news bulletin will announce still one more massacre, one more deadly accident, one more victim of violent crime, one more suicide using a lethal weapon. Almost 90 men, women, and children die every day in our country from guns.

Guns can protect. Guns can rob us of protection when they are in the wrong hands.

Our country must do better. May we seek wisdom together to keep us safe on this Passover night, during every night and day.

As we dip our greens, we seek our personal commitment to deepen and enlarge the signs of safety on every doorpost, on every street, in every city, in every corner of our land.



## II

### The Four Questions

#### On All Other Nights - *Including This Night* Eileen Soffer

##### **Why is this night different from all other nights?**

Tonight, roughly 90 people will not be coming home, having been killed by guns in our country, leaving behind family and friends shattered by grief and loss. And yet, this is NOT different from any other night in the United States. It happens each and every day with about 33,000 Americans killed by guns each year.

**On all other nights** – *including this night* - young black men, especially those in impoverished, dense urban areas, will be especially vulnerable. Constituting just 6% of the US population, black men account for more than 50% of all gun homicides each year. Firearm homicide is the leading cause of death for black males ages 15–34.

Despite these troubling statistics there is good news. Strategic intervention programs have been developed that successfully reduce gun violence in the most impacted communities.

**On all other nights** – *including this night* – women in abusive relationships will find themselves at risk of being killed by a gun. Every 16 hours between 2006 and 2014, an American woman was fatally shot by a current or former romantic partner, totaling 544 deaths annually.

We can help keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers and save the lives of women by expanding our background check laws and closing the loophole that does not include abusive dating partners or stalkers as prohibited purchases of guns.

**On all other nights** – *including this night* – unintentional shootings will claim too many lives, including those of the youngest among us. These are not accidents, but acts of negligence when firearms are left unsecured and easily available. In 2015, on average, a toddler in America shot someone once a week. Between 2007 and 2011, an average of 62 children age 14 and under died each year in reported unintentional shootings. But strong evidence shows that the actual count is a shocking 61% higher.

Fortunately, we know there are ways to help reduce these unintended gun deaths and injuries, including safe gun storage requirements and the adoption of smart guns technologies. →



**On all other nights** – *including this night* – we will lose too many souls who, in deep despair or a moment of crisis, commit suicide with a gun. Suicides account for more than 2/3 of all gun death in the U.S. People who live in homes with guns have three to five times the risk of dying by suicide compared to people who live in homes without guns. When a firearm is used in a suicide attempt, there's an 85 percent chance of it being successful, which makes it 42 times more effective than suicides by overdose or poisoning.

The good news is that studies show that if you can prolong the time between the (often impulsive) decision to commit suicide and access to a gun, you can greatly decrease the chance of the attempt. And, of those people who attempt suicide and survive, only about 10 percent end up dying from suicide. So, preventing the attempted suicides – in this case by limiting access to guns by keeping them unloaded, locked, or out of the house – can save lives.

**So, why is this night different from all other nights?**

*This night is different* because when we ask ourselves why we allow this plague of gun violence to continue in our country, we begin a conversation that raises awareness and can lead us to act. This night is different because we begin to see that there are steps we can take to save lives and create safer homes and communities.

Sources:

<http://smartgunlaws.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Healing-Communities-in-Crisis-2.pdf>

<http://www.thetrace.org/2016/02/woman-shot-killed-frequency-domestic-violence/>

<http://www.thetrace.org/2015/12/gun-violence-stats-2015/>

[http://everytownresearch.org/reports/innocents\\_lost/](http://everytownresearch.org/reports/innocents_lost/)

<http://www.thetrace.org/2016/03/guns-suicide-risk-factor-harvard-study/>

<http://www.thetrace.org/2015/11/gun-suicides-mental-illness-statistics/>



### III

*The following selection, imagining a world without violence, can be used at the outset of the seder.  
Alternatively it can be inserted before or after the rabbinic interpretation of  
“kol y'mai chayecha” which some sages understand as a reference to Messianic times.*

#### Aryeh Cohen

Thirty thousand people are killed each year by gun violence.

There is also “collateral damage” to the culture in this country from the prevalence of guns and the absolutist belief in the right to bear arms.

At heart is the question: what place should guns have in our culture? In our self-conception? This is not a new question. The Mishnah raises this question in the context of figuring out the religio-legal boundaries of the Shabbat. May one carry weapons on Shabbat from private to public domain? The Rabbis differ. One Rabbi, Eliezer, says that weapons are a man’s adornments. (“Man’s adornment” is intentional, the rabbis see weapons as gendered male. This too is reflected in current discourse. Men are overwhelmingly the shooters. Women, in domestic disputes, are overwhelmingly the victims of intimate gun violence.) “Sages,” the collective voice of the rest of the rabbis push back, saying that “they are nothing but shame,” and then, as a proof text, quoting this famous verse from Isaiah 2: And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks: a nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. The Shabbat, goes the thinking, is a performance of the world to come, the ideal world. In that world there will be no guns, therefore bringing guns into Shabbat is shameful, degrading, both to the arms bearer and to the Shabbat.

The outlines of this debate are not that different from the current debate. A weaponized society is not a subtle society. A gun stops discourse. The NRA folks like to say that “an armed society is a polite society.” This may or may not be true. (It could easily be a society of constant gun battles, with body counts even higher than today’s.) However, it is not a “polite” society that we want or need. Democracy, for it to work, needs to be boisterous not quiet. The shooting of nineteen year old Jordan Davis in a gas station by a man who thought his music was too loud, or the shooting of a father of a three year old in a movie for inappropriate talking on a cell-phone, gives us a glimpse of what the “polite” society might look like. An intimidated society is not a polite society. It is a society in which everybody lives in fear.

The real violence of guns also makes its way into the halls of power. There is a connection, I would suggest, between the violence of the gun rhetoric (“stand your ground” “opposing tyranny” “take my gun from my cold dead hand”) and the violence of some of our foreign policy debates. When a gun is your tool of choice, every situation seems ripe for a martial solution. →



We can gradually walk ourselves back from the brink. Common sense gun regulations, regulations which rise above the ineffectual but won't scare politicians too much, can and do make a difference. The most basic of these is making background checks obligatory in all gun sales. There is convincing evidence that this works. In those states in which background checks are the law in all handgun sales, there are fewer women killed with a gun by an intimate partner, there are fewer suicides with a gun, there are fewer police officers murdered with a handgun that was not their own. It is a small step but a step in the right direction.

This is how redemption happens. One step at a time. Never losing hope. Next year in the Promised Land.

## IV

### **The Four Children**

The Child Who Cannot Ask  
Rabbi Joshua Hammerman

Gun violence is about teen gangs and angry husbands, it's about homicide and suicide, it's about household accidents with make-believe cowboys and it's about dangerously mentally ill young adults armed to the teeth. Until Aurora and Newtown, most in suburbia paid little heed to the massacres occurring every day in America's inner cities. Now we are feeling their pain too – for just as God feels the pain of all children equally, so should we weep not only for those innocent victims in Newtown, but for 15 year old Hadiya Pendleton, who was shot a mile from the President's Chicago residence the week after seeing him sworn in as a majorette in her school band. And we weep with Shirley Chambers, the Chicago mother who lost all four of her children to gun violence. All human life is of equal value. Let those four Chambers children now become the fourth child at our Seders this year, along with the Newtown 20 and all the children, everywhere, who have fallen victim to our society's gun-sanity: they are the "Child Who Cannot Ask," because we allowed them to be killed on our watch.



## V

### The Ten Plagues

Eileen Soffer

With each plague, Pharaoh was frightened and promised to do the right thing – to free the Israelite slaves. But when the plague ended, he changed his mind, and with hardened heart, continued to enslave the people, to prolong their misery, and to profit from their suffering.

With every mass shooting - in schools, military bases, movie theaters, city corners, even first grade classrooms and places of worship – Americans find themselves horrified, heartbroken and angry. They vow that something must be done to end the carnage and suffering. But with hardened hearts, the forces pushing back claim “it is too soon;” they fight against common sense measures that evidence shows can save lives and create safer communities while they continue to reap profits and maintain their power.

The plagues continue. We spill a drop of wine in sorrow as we remember just 10 of the many mass shootings.

1. Columbine
2. Virginia Tech
3. Fort Hood
4. Aurora
5. Tucson
6. Sandy Hook
7. Washington Navy Yard
8. UC Santa Barbara
9. Charleston
10. San Bernardino

These mass shootings capture the headlines and rightly appall us, but account for less than 2 percent of annual gun deaths. It's the shootings that don't get much attention – the ones taking place in parking lots, bedrooms, and street corners across America - that are responsible for the vast majority of injuries and deaths from guns. With our eyes and hearts opened to the loss of life and the suffering caused by gun violence – whether it makes the headlines or not – may we be moved and motivated to raise our voice and act to help end this scourge plaguing our country.



## VI

### Chad Gadya

Evil Shall Have No Power, Nor Shall Death: A Chad Gadya of Rage  
From the collection: 'And Yet We Love: Poems'

Rabbi Menachem Creditor

One sacrificial offering,  
one little kid.  
Our Founders bought  
with their blood.

Then came inventors  
who dreamed noble dreams  
and brought them  
to those in power  
to build a better world  
our Founders bought  
for their little kids  
with their blood.

Then those with power  
forgot to dream of anything  
besides power.  
They bit and burned  
the inventors  
turned noble dreams  
into monetized weapons,  
sold each other's kids' blood,  
that drowned out  
the power to build a better world  
our Founders bought  
for their little kids  
with their blood.

Then the Angel of Death  
came to the Holy Blessed One, saying,  
"I have no need of all these souls,

sent to me faster and faster,  
by your children  
who dream only of power.  
Quench their thirst  
so that they might dream big dreams  
and reclaim the nobility  
of pursuing a better world."

And God wept, saying,  
"My children,  
you've vanquished Me,  
you've vanquished Me.  
Only your strength,  
your hope,  
your deeds,  
can end the cycle of death."

And so God's children,  
one by one,  
answered the prayers  
of both God and the Angel of Death,  
and channeled their rage,  
and built a new world,  
birthed new inventors  
to end the nightmares  
and reteach us to dream,  
and learn to see again  
the better world  
our Founders bought  
for their little kids,  
every one of us,  
with their blood.