

# Yes This Is A Sermon About Gun Control – December 21, 2012

by Rabbi Audrey R. Korotkin

“Thus says the Eternal; A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping: Rachel, weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, for her children were no more.”

In the past week, since twenty young children and six adults were slaughtered in Newtown, Connecticut, we have all started moving through the stages of grief: Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance? Not yet, not so fast.

Me, I'm still in the anger stage. Anger at the cowardice of the people who are supposed to lead this country but are not. Anger that a small group of zealots has the money and thus the power to put profits over people. Anger that, with all the mass murders that have taken place over the past several years, it takes the deaths of innocent six- and seven-year-olds to finally elicit more than just murmurings of sympathy.

I'm angry. And before I start bargaining away that anger, I'm going to use it to speak tonight. So, yes, this is a sermon about gun control.

Now, I come by my abhorrence of guns naturally. Yes, I'm a child of the suburbs – and the word 'gun' just wasn't part of our vocabulary when we were growing up. But I also grew up with a grandfather who was a cop in inner-city Philadelphia. Grandpop Mike carried a gun. If he used it, he never said. Shooting someone wasn't something to be proud of, something to brag about. It was a last resort when all else failed. We knew he had the gun. We knew where he hid the gun in the house. And we knew never, ever to go near it. Guns and civilians didn't mix. Guns and kids, especially, did not mix.

And I also grew up around the military, because my dad was a military contractor for many years. The men and women who carried guns – and who sometimes were forced by circumstances to use them – were skilled, highly trained, and understood the guns had a specific purpose. Here, too, guns and civilians did not mix. Guns and kids, especially, did not mix.

So yes, I'll admit I did not grow up in a culture like we have here in central Pennsylvania. Lots of people hunt, so lots of people have guns. Don's cousins all have guns, they all go hunting for bear and deer. They use real hunting weapons. They use shotguns. They don't use this (show pic 1) or this (pic 2) or even this (pic3) – the Glock, the Sig Sauer, and the Bushmaster used to slaughter those children at Sandy Hook Elementary School a week ago. Yes, the mother of the killer bought these, and many more, perfectly legally – apparently oblivious to the fact that high-capacity weapons of mass murder and mentally ill adolescents don't mix, either. And the fact that the purchases *were* perfectly legal – most guns used in mass killings in the last twenty years have been – this is what really scares me. Not one of these guns has a role in hunting sports. Not one of these guns has any civilian purpose.

Look, I know all the second-amendment arguments, all the slippery-slope arguments. I just don't buy any of them. And while I don't expect all of you here to agree with me – and maybe most of you won't – I'm going to just point out a few actual facts.

Fact One: There is no slippery slope. Nobody – *nobody!* – is talking about confiscating all the guns of all Americans. That's simply not going to happen. There are nearly as many guns in America as there are Americans – about nine out of ten. They're not going to go away. Banning the manufacture and sale of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines – those responsible for the slaughters in Tucson and Aurora, Colorado, and at Virginia Tech before this week – are *not* the start of any insidious plot. The law being proposed in Congress bans magazines that carry more than ten rounds. That's it. As its sponsor, Diana DeGette of Colorado, said, "I'm not so naïve as to think that we can pass some law that will stop a deranged person from taking a gun and shooting people. What I am interested in is making it as difficult as possible for that deranged person to shoot as many people as possible."

Fact Two: Having more guns does not make us safe. The US has the highest gun ownership rate in the world and by far the most deaths by firearms. Seven out of the top 10 states with the strongest gun laws also have the lowest rates of gun deaths.

Fact Three: The Second Amendment is not only ambiguous, it is also not absolute. Even justice Antonin Scalia, who wrote the Supreme Court opinion striking down Washington DC's handgun ban and essentially defining the Second Amendment as an individual right to bear arms – even Scalia acknowledged this. The Court said this ruling was not to be understood as conferring "a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose." The court presumed some laws would be perfectly legal – such as laws that ban gun possession by felons and by the mentally ill, laws that ban guns in sensitive places like schools and government buildings, and laws that impose conditions on commercial gun sales, and laws that ban dangerous and unusual weapons suited to military purposes.

Fact Four: The National Rifle Association takes absolutist stands that even its own members disagree with. Here are some statistics compiled by Frank Luntz, a right-wing pollster and frequently contributor to Fox News:

74 percent of NRA members support criminal background checks for *anyone* purchasing a gun.

75 percent of NRA members say concealed-carry permits should be given only to those who have not committed any violent misdemeanors, including assault.

68 percent of NRA members think permits should be granted only to those with no prior arrests for domestic violence.

The vast majority of NRA members support two specific measures strongly opposed by the NRA itself: laws banning people on the terror watch list from buying any guns, and laws requiring gun owners to alert police if a gun is lost or stolen.

As Rachel Maddow suggested on a show this week, maybe this is where to start – this list. Start with the laws that even a majority of NRA members support, even if their leadership does not. And don't forget: most of the NRA's money does *not* come from hunters and sportsmen. It comes from gun manufacturers and gun sellers. Its so-called "Ring of Freedom" – its biggest corporate donors, added as much as \$39 million to the NRA's coffers between 2005 and 2011.

They include 22 different gun-makers including Smith and Wesson, Beretta USA, SIGARMS, and Sturm, Ruger and Company, all of which produce high-capacity assault weapons.

Newspaper columns and radio and TV airwaves have been filled this week with shock and horror and revulsion over the Sandy Hook murders, and the pictures of the innocent, beautiful children and their brave teachers who are being laid to rest this week. There have been calls for increased attention and financing of mental-illness treatment, especially for identifying and treating mental illness in teens and young adults. And yes, we need to do that. We cannot think that the massive cuts in mental-health programs we have made over the past decade have no effect. Entertainment companies have been accused of glorifying gun violence on television, in movies, and especially in video-games. And that's true too.

But mostly, the conversation is where it should be – about guns. Joe Scarborough, an avid NRA supporter during his years as a Republican congressman, said last Friday had changed everything for him: Our Bill of Rights, he said, “does not guarantee gun manufacturers the absolute right to sell military-style, high-caliber, semi-automatic combat assault rifles with high-capacity magazines to whoever the hell they want.”

Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, a gun-rights supporter who has gotten scores of “A” from the NRA, said simply, “the status quo isn't acceptable. I've got three daughters. And they asked me Friday evening, ‘Dad, what are you going to do about this?’ There's got to be a way to put reasonable restrictions, particularly as we look at assault weapons, as we look at these fast clips of ammunition.”

West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin, an avid hunter and lifelong member of the NRA, announced this week he agrees with New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg –who most certainly is none of these things – in calling for a ban in the sale of assault weapons.

Nicholas Kristof of the New York Times, who grew up on a farm in Oregon where his dad gave him a hunting rifle for his 12<sup>th</sup> birthday, noted that we regulate toy guns more strictly than we regulate real guns. “I understand: shooting is fun!” he wrote, “But so is driving, and we accept that we must wear seat belts, use headlights at night, and fill out forms to buy a car. Why can't we be equally adult about regulating guns?”

That “shooting is fun” argument is important to a lot of people. I get that. But I was so taken aback when I read the comments of an NRA leader in Virginia. There are some guns that are more fun than others, he said, and this Bushmaster semi-automatic – the one that put multiple bullets into all those children – is just a blast to shoot. He said, it's like the difference between having a big flat-screen TV and an old boxy one. One is just a lot cooler than the other.

Folks, I'm sorry, but if that's the mentality we're dealing with, then we as a nation have to seriously reflect on exactly how we view guns in our culture. Guns are not toys. Guns are not household appliances. And guns are not supposed to be used as the first-resort to resolve our differences. Guns do not solve domestic strife, as when a distraught NFL player kills the mother of his child and then turns the gun on himself. Guns do not resolve disputes between neighbors, as when a young man is shot and killed for playing his stereo too loud.

Over the years, we have come to accept guns as part of life. But there's a difference between a sporting and hunting culture – where the use of guns is limited, licensed and regulated – and a gun culture, where the distribution of weapons of mass murder can be bought, sold, and traded

with little oversight, with patchwork regulation, and with an over-riding fear that we will be accused of somehow violating the rights of citizens when we ask common-sense to prevail. I dare anyone to tell me to my face that the right to carry any weapons, anywhere, any time, bears more weight than the right of our children to be safe. I dare you. And I dare the people who are supposed to be leading our country to make that argument too.

The leaders of our Reform movement are joining many other Jewish groups this week, rallying support for strengthening the nation's gun laws. Rabbi David Saperstein of our Religious Action Center is calling on all of us to use our voices, to organize in the pews. So that's what I'm doing. And I am appealing to you tonight because this is a Jewish issue. Because Judaism places preservation of life over everything else. Because the Torah teaches us, "You shall not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor." I could not keep silent tonight.

My teacher and colleague Rabbi Judith Abrams, who is a Talmudic scholar, shared this thought with us this week: "The Talmud teaches that Jerusalem was destroyed because the schoolchildren were interrupted in their studies." If we cannot commit to at least protecting the youngest and most vulnerable among us, what future do we have as a society, as a nation?

There are so many opinions, so much heated rhetoric. I know that those of you who disagree with me will have a whole host of arguments and statistics that you can bring to bear for why I am absolutely wrong. I could give you dozens and dozens more why I'm right. But right now, I'll give you 26:

- **Charlotte Bacon**
- **Daniel Barden**
- **Rachel Davino**
- **Olivia Engel**
- **Josephine Gay**
- **Ana M. Marquez-Greene**
- **Dylan Hockley**
- **Dawn Hochsprung**
- **Madeleine F. Hsu**
- **Catherine V. Hubbard**
- **Chase Kowalski**
- **Jesse Lewis**
- **James Mattioli**
- **Grace McDonnell**
- **Anne Marie Murphy**
- **Emilie Parker**
- **Jack Pinto**
- **Noah Pozner**
- **Caroline Previdi**
- **Jessica Rekos**
- **Avielle Richman**
- **Lauren Rousseau**
- **Mary Sherlach**
- **Victoria Soto**
- **Benjamin Wheeler**
- **Allison N. Wyatt**

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### **About Audrey Korotkin**

Rabbi Audrey Korotkin has been spiritual leader of Temple Beth Israel since the summer of 2010. She came with a wealth of experience gleaned from years of service to Reform congregations in Piqua, Ohio; Skokie, Illinois; and St. Joseph, Missouri, as well as work in nursing homes and assisted-living facilities in Louisville, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Since her arrival, Temple Beth Israel has re-invigorated its worship experience with the adoption of a new prayer book and contemporary Jewish liturgical music; expanded its adult-learning opportunities; embraced a host of young families with young children seeking a nurturing spiritual home; and reaffirmed its position as a leader in the interfaith community. Nationally, she is a member of the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Responsa Committee and the Solomon Freehof Institute for Progressive Halakhah, and she is among a handful of Reform rabbis selected to help create the new High Holy Day prayer book to replace Gates of Repentance. A second-career rabbi – following twenty years as a broadcast journalist and public-relations specialist – Rabbi Korotkin and her husband, award-winning journalist Don Clippinger, live in Tyrone with their rescued canines Marlee, Tobey, Sophie, and Artie.