

## Try Speaking to the Rock—An Idea for Breaking the Deadlock on Guns—2022-5782

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It's been only four days since the shooting at the July 4th parade in Highland Park, IL.

In some ways, it feels like a long time ago. The news moves so fast these days. These shootings have become so commonplace. It's amazing how quickly and easily the world moves on.

But, of course, for the people of Highland Park and the surrounding communities, the tragedy remains very raw, and the horrific images, and memories, and stories of that day are still so vivid—and will probably never fade entirely. They include:

- Aiden McCarthy, the 2-year-old boy wandering the streets looking for his parents, Kevin and Irina, who were both murdered, asking when they're coming home.
- And my friend's college roommate Tommy Brooks, who had heroically thrown himself on top of Aiden to shield him from the gunfire, saving his life.
- Eight-year-old Cooper Roberts, whose spine was severed, paralyzing him from the waist down.
- And Jacki Sundheim, who worked with my friends at North Shore Congregation Israel, a nearby Reform synagogue, and was killed instantly.

This is Cantor Adam's home community: He grew up in Deerfield, a next-door village which flows seamlessly into Highland Park. I was a rabbi in Deerfield for nine years. Both Cantor and I know people who were marching in the parade that day and somehow escaped physically, though surely not emotionally.

I will say: It really hits home when it hits *home*.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's words from the 1950s ring prophetic today.

*"The mark of Cain in the face of man has come to overshadow the likeness of God. There has never been so much guilt and distress, agony, and terror. At no time has the earth been so soaked with blood. ...Ashamed and dismayed, we ask: Who is responsible?"*

I think you know that before I became a rabbi, I worked in politics.

I was an upper middle-class suburban kid from Houston, and here I was exposed to a culture very different from my own—a culture where people not only *own* guns, but *love* them and collect them from the time they're young, the way I loved baseball cards and transformers.

In my first campaign job, I worked with a guy named Whit from southern Illinois.

He grew up on a farm and chewed tobacco. The Second Amendment was like sacred scripture to him. That's why he got into politics.

It's easy to demonize people like Whit: easy to call them crazy gun nuts or rednecks; easy to rail about guys like him on social media and blame them for tragedies like Highland Park, and Uvalde, and Buffalo, and Sandy Hook.

And you know what? They probably *are* to blame—at least, indirectly.

In my view, the devotion to absolute gun rights in some quarters of America is a modern form of idolatry.

Somewhere along the way, the political strategists decided to sell the message that to give even a single inch on gun control would create a slippery slope that would inevitably lead to the end of the Second Amendment.

So, they elevated the right to own a gun, *any* gun, above everything else and made it *ultimate*—transforming a work of human hands into an idol that demands total, uncompromising loyalty.

There's a powerful story about idolatry in the Talmud. One of the sages says:

*"In the town where I live, there is a temple of idolatry. Whenever the farmers of the town needs rain, the idol appears to the priest in a vision and says, 'Sacrifice a man to me and I will bring rain.' So, they sacrifice a man to the idol, and rain really does come."*

This is the fundamental error of idolatry: It's an error of cause and effect, based on a distorted view of the world.

Obviously, it's going to rain anyway, whether the farmer makes a human sacrifice or not.

But the farmer's view of the world is narrow and self-centered: The only thing he sees—the only thing that *matters*—is that his crops need rain.

He can't just wait for it to rain because that would mean he doesn't have the power to take care of the problem himself.

What he needs is *control*. So, when the idol promises that the farmer can *do* something to make it rain, he willingly believes it.

It doesn't matter that it means sacrificing another human being, just as long as the farmer gets what *he* needs.

The idolatry of guns is no different. Narrow self-interest—the absolute, uncompromising right to bear arms in defense of home, family, and property—demands a terrifyingly high price: the sacrifice of innocent schoolchildren, and grocery shoppers, and parade-goers.

But here's the thing: People like my friend Whit may be absolutists, but they are *not* stupid, and they're *not* inherently bad people. They don't *want* innocent kids to be murdered in school.

This may be hard for us to believe in our intensely polarized culture, but they *are*, in fact, *human beings*.

Actually, in my experience, many of them are quite *nice* human beings: They're friendly, they care about their communities and their families and their children, and they want what's best for them.

If we don't *know* that, it's probably because we don't know *them*.

We might *think* we do because we see them on TV and read about them online; but, really, all we know is a *caricature* of them.

Caricature, says the legal scholar James Boyd White, "pares away all that can be said about a person's life until nothing is left except the...label. ...We never hear [the person's] own voice."<sup>1</sup>

What if we changed that? What if we decided to hear the gun-lover's own voice—and really *listen* to it?

What if a group of suburban New Yorkers who despise guns and think they should all be banned sat down with a group of rural upstate gun lovers who think the Second Amendment is absolute—and broke bread together, and tried to understand each other's perspectives?

What do you think that conversation would be like?

If the idea makes your stomach turn, it might be time to think about what we mean when we say how open-minded we are.

If some of them are caught up in an idolatry of absolutism, then maybe some of us are, too.

If you think this idea is just too far-fetched, well...that would be understandable.

Because as someone once said, there are two Americas—and these two Americas don't *speak* to each other, and they don't *know* each other at all.

Whenever there is a shooting—and it's happening so horrifically often nowadays—we take to Facebook and rail against the NRA, and the Whits of the world, and proclaim how right we are, and how easily we could solve this problem if only *they* wouldn't be so immovable and would come around to our way of thinking.

We're like Moses in this week's parashah: When the people complain for the gazillionth time that they're thirsty in the desert and need water, Moses takes his staff and hits the rock with it.

Why? Because that's what he did the last time. And probably the time before that, too.

But here's the thing: *This* time, God didn't tell Moses to hit the rock. God told Moses to *speak* to the rock.

But for one reason or another, Moses missed that part. He just reflexively did what he always did.

And because of that, God decided that Moses would never enter the Promised Land.

We're like Moses. We just keep hitting the same dang rock over and over again.

"These gun nuts! They're crazy!" "They're evil!" "They're corrupt!"

But guess what: That hasn't gotten the job done, and it's not going to.

Because people like my friend Whit, they're human beings.

And hitting them ferociously, and relentlessly, again and again isn't going to draw water from the rock, and it isn't going to get us to the Promised Land.

"Ashamed and dismayed, we ask: Who is responsible?"

Maybe it's time for us to take some responsibility for breaking the deadlock by doing something different.

Maybe it's time to stop hitting and try *speaking* for once.

Shabbat Shalom!

