

Massacre Of The Innocents

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

What the heck is it going to take to get an America to do something about its guns? For all that, I far prefer living in this dysfunctional society than I ever did in Europe. Still there is something sick and decadent in this country (yes, I agree, everywhere else too, mutatis mutandis).

It used to be said that every great society passes from barbarism to civilization and then decadence. The USA, the Europeans loved to say, was an example of going from barbarism to decadence without the intervening stage of civilization. Of course that's unfair and wrong. The USA has achieved in most spheres far more than the old civilizations of Europe. But the way in which it has succeeded is different. America has done well, and badly, through a fighting pioneer spirit and a disregard for logic! It has conflicting values and freedoms. Religion and atheism, capitalism and unionism, legal indulgence and legislative restriction all thrive in a free society with rival ethnic communities, languages, and cultural norms.

America is no longer a predominantly white, religious society but it retains a quasi-religious belief in the right to carry guns even when it conflicts with logic and utilitarianism. Three hundred years ago in there was no proper police force, FBI, National Guard, or army on the American continent. People needed to defend themselves. They got around to banning witch-hunts in the seventeenth century, after all. Just because it was part of American life then, it didn't have to be forever.

The awful killings at the elementary school in Sandy Hook, one more in the terrible list of successive massacres of innocents just continues the insane litany of irrational and preventable gun deaths. It is silly to say "guns do not kill, only people kill". Of course! People kill with whatever tools are readily available. Americans are addicted to guns. They are everywhere. So people kill with guns. In Japan and China guns are all but unavailable. The day before the Sandy Hook massacre, a man walked into a school in China and stabbed eighteen children. Not one fatality. Can you imagine if he had had a gun?

There are nearly 300 million privately-owned guns in the USA, the highest concentration of private gun ownership in the world. Most are guns designed not for hunting but for killing humans. The per capita rate for murder by gun in America is nearly 100 times that of the United Kingdom. Each year in America, guns are used in approximately 70% of the 17,000 murders, and nearly 19,000 people commit suicide by shooting themselves to death. Almost half of all US households have a gun, and half of those households do not keep their guns locked up.

Children find guns at home and kill other children. Most gun deaths occur in homes and within families. Children die from gunfire in the United States at a rate 25 times higher than that of the 20 next largest industrial countries

in the world combined. Since the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King in 1968, well over a million Americans, children and adults, have died from gunshots, and this continues at a rate 80 people per day, including those simply caught in gang warfare crossfire.

There are dangerous, sick, violent people everywhere. No country can claim a monopoly on them. But if you leave guns around they will use guns. And guns, the average American may be surprised to learn, do more damage than knives. Yet America refuses to act to restrict possession and usage. Neither Obama nor Romney campaigned for gun control. The Supreme Court regularly knocks down attempts to limit guns. The mayor of New York City and the governor of New York both plead for new laws, but Washington simply doesn't care. Why? Is it THAT corrupt? People complain about the Jewish lobby. Some joke. Complain about the gun lobby instead.

After the Dunblane massacre in Scotland in 1996, Britain tightened up on its gun laws (and indeed carrying knives in public) and there has been no repeat. But in the USA after Columbine, even with Michael Moore's attempt to link it with the National Rifle Association, nothing changed. Nor did it after the Red Lake massacre, the Virginia Tech massacre, the Batman massacre, the Sikh temple massacre, the Oregon Mall massacre, and it won't change with Sandy Hook, despite Obama's crocodile tears. He can push through Obamacare, go off a cliff, but he hasn't had the guts so far to deal with guns. The outcry is such that now for the first time he is calling for a restriction on assault weapons with large magazines and for stricter tests. I guess now that he doesn't have to face an election he can afford to. But will he really fight for this against the gun lobby, and indeed the Supreme Court? He will as usual say the right things, but actually do something? I have my doubts and I hope I'm wrong.

In Israel there is a justification for carrying guns. The country is still at war with those who continue to call for its destruction. Most men serve in the army and then in the reserves. There is a constant chance of terrorists blowing up children on buses, at cafes, and in their beds. There are indeed examples of guns used in domestic violence, but nothing to compare with the USA. In Israel guns are a necessary evil not a romantic necessity.

We Jews do indeed believe in self-defense, but we also realize how terrible weapons can be. There is a tradition of covering knives at the Shabbat table. The Temple and its altar were built without metal to remind us that tools of war have no place in a spiritual center. It was the role of the Shoter, the police force, to protect society. We also have a principle of "Lifnei Iver" (Leviticus 19) "Do not put a stumbling block in front of the blind." We take this to mean that we should not facilitate crime, accidents, or lunacy by making objects or actions that might facilitate them easily accessible.

In rational, sane countries it is the job of these agencies to protect people, not a gun in every child's hand! You can only allow a weapon to someone who knows and understands its destructive powers. But America stumbles blindly forward in a river of blood fed by a constant supply of tools of death. Not even the assassinations of presidents, of great leaders, seem able to bring them to their senses.

It's not sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, it is sex, drugs, and firing guns that is the preoccupation and favored pastime of much of American life. No wonder religion flourishes here too. When madness is all around you, only the supernatural gives hope for the future.

Happy Holidays. I'm sure Herod would agree.