

Samantha G's Human Rights Speech: Gun Violence and School Shootings

Your son gets up in the morning, brushes his teeth, puts on his favorite outfit, eats his favorite cereal and is off to school, excited for a day of fun and learning. At 11:00 am you get a call saying there has been a mass shooting at your child's school. The police have found 12 bodies, but they have not been identified yet. You rush to the school, desperate to know if the unimaginable has happened. You wait at the front of the school, pacing, wondering if your son's little heart is still beating. You see kids running to their parents as a police officer comes up to you with pity and sorrow in his eyes. You crumble to the floor, knowing that your worst fears have come true. You will never see your son again, never see his beautiful smile, never cuddle him in your arms or see the amazing man he will become. This is what families in America have to worry about every day when they send their children to school, and this needs to change.

Hi. I am Samantha Goldstein and I am here to speak to you about the epidemic of school shootings in the US and the need for more gun control to prevent these tragedies from happening in the future.

Gun violence threatens our most basic human right, the right to live. According to the Jewish concept of Pikuach Nefesh, human life is holy and almost any commandment can be broken in order to save a life. *In the book of Leviticus, the Torah states:*

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת-חֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה אִתְּם הָאָדָם וְתִי בְּהֵם אֲנִי יְהוָה:

God says you should keep my commandments and live by them. Rabbi Akiva teaches that to “live by them” means that you shouldn’t “die by them” - in other words, saving a

human life is more important than any mitzvot. However, in the U.S. gun violence is now the number one cause of death for children. More kids die from shootings than from car accidents, diseases, or illness. Gun violence has led to more than 39,000 men, women and children being killed each year in the US. While this number includes all types of gun violence, it's particularly horrible to see guns being used in places where children learn. This year alone, there have been 77 incidents of gunfire on school grounds in the United States. These incidents have killed 35 people and wounded dozens more.

Listening to all of these statistics can make this issue feel like just another news story, but it's important that we remember that each of the victims is someone's sister, brother, son, daughter, best friend or parent. As an example, one of the teachers who was killed in Uvalde Texas on May 24 was Irma Garcia, a mother of four children. She was found hugging her students, trying to protect their lives. After visiting her memorial, Irma's husband of 24 years suffered a fatal heart attack - he literally died of a broken heart. Now their four children's lives have been turned upside down as they are left with no parents. This is just one story of the countless lives that have ended or been traumatized because of senseless gun violence.

One of the biggest obstacles in protecting children in America from gun violence is the easy access to firearms. 42% of households in the U.S. own guns. An estimated 4.6 million American children live in a home where at least one gun is kept loaded and unlocked. There are more guns than people in the U.S. - for every 100 people, there are 120.5 guns. In the U.S., you can buy a gun before you are allowed to buy an alcoholic drink. You can just walk into a Walmart, and without a background check or a gun license, you can buy a gun in many states. Of the 50 states in the US, only 14 of them

require a background check for the purchase of a firearm. This means that in most states, you can be mentally ill or have a history of violence, and still be allowed to purchase a gun. In the states that do require background checks, people with bad motives can still easily access a gun, either by going out of state, taking the gun from someone else, or buying it illegally on the black market. In 2012, for example, a mentally-disturbed, twenty-year old man named Adam Lanza took an assault rifle, two semi-automatic pistols and a shotgun that his mother had legally purchased, and committed one of the worst school shootings in American history. He killed his mother, and then went to Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, where he killed 20 first graders and 6 teachers. In the 9½ years since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, there have been 948 school shootings in the U.S.

School shootings are not specific to the U.S. In 1996, 15 children and one teacher were killed in a mass shooting in Scotland. The population of the United Kingdom was so outraged that within months, laws in the UK were changed and it became illegal to bear arms. In the 26 years since this tragedy, there have been no school shootings in the U.K. This proves that changing laws DOES have a huge impact on school shootings and gun violence in general.

Unlike in other countries, where there is widespread support for gun control, in the US, the population is split; many Americans believe that gun restrictions would be taking away a constitutional right, the right to bear arms. The Second Amendment of the United States Constitution reads: "the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." But nowhere in the constitution does it say that people should be able to buy semi-automatic assault rifles that can kill many people in a short amount of time,

or buy guns without a background check at a young age before they have the maturity to know how to use them responsibly. The National Rifle Association, or the NRA, has had a lot of influence in how the 2nd amendment has been interpreted. The NRA is one of the most powerful lobby groups in the US. In 2020, the NRA spent about \$250 million dollars on influencing gun laws and popularizing their brand so that more people would buy and use guns. This has affected the way that Americans elect politicians and also the way in which law-makers vote on gun bills in government. In order to reduce school shootings and save children's lives, the U.S. needs to follow the example of the U.K. and prevent the NRA from influencing gun laws.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, "Few are guilty, but all are responsible." This means that the few people who participate in gun violence are clearly guilty, but there are so many people who are responsible for not making the necessary changes to gun laws to prevent such tragedies from occurring again and again. The NRA, governments, and individual citizens all have a responsibility to protect children's lives. We can demonstrate and organize petitions calling for stricter gun laws such as higher age requirements for purchasing guns, banning semi-automatic weapons and requiring background checks. We can donate to organizations that are working to end gun violence and make them even more powerful than the NRA. We can push for Red Flag Laws in more states, which takes away guns from those who pose a threat to the public. We can use our voices to protect our most basic human right: the right to live.

Your son gets up in the morning, brushes his teeth, puts on his favorite outfit, eats his favorite cereal and is off to school, excited for a day of fun and learning. You feel comfort knowing that he is entering a safe environment, now that new laws prevent dangerous people from posing a threat in schools. Your son comes home, and tells you

about his day during dinner, then he brushes his teeth and puts on his favorite pajamas before he goes to bed. This is how a day should look for children and their families in America. And we can help make this possible.