



PASSOVER

Passover Day 2

Gun Control, Schools and The Seder:

What Passover Teaches Us About The Right To Bear Arms

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GUN CONTROL, SCHOOLS AND THE SEDER: WHAT PASSOVER TEACHES US ABOUT THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS

ABSTRACT

When a school becomes a killing field you know there's a problem. When a place that's meant to educate and inspire – and shape lives – becomes a place where lives are destroyed, we need to look deeply into the state of our society.

Weapons have existed from the times of the Garden of Eden, when Cain slew his brother Abel with a weapon.

But there is one weapon stronger than all weapons, a weapon that could transform all weapons into instruments of peace, turn swords into plowshares and guns into factory machines bettering society instead of worsening it.

The Egyptians had many weapons at their disposal. But we had one stronger. The proof is simple: 3330 years later we are here and they are not.

Passover teaches us that we have a stronger weapon than weapons. The Seder tells us that have greater ammunition than bullets.

1. Swords Into Plowshares

Ksenia Svetlova is a Russian-born member of the Israeli Knesset. Her paternal grandfather, Konstantin Dmitrievich Valerius, was the chief of metallurgy production of the USSR and recipient of the Order of Lenin, before he was executed by Josef Stalin in 1938 and posthumously rehabilitated by Nikita Khrushchev in 1958.

Her paternal grandmother remarried a man by the name of Yevgeny Viktorovich Vuchetich, a world famous sculptor. In 1957, Vuchetich sculpted a bronze statue that is displayed until this day in the United Nations garden in New York City. A gift from the Soviet Union, the sculpture represents the figure of a man hammering a sword into the shape of a plowshare. *It is called Let Us Beat Swords into Plowshares.*

This concept is taken from the words of the prophet Isaiah:

And he shall judge between the nations and reprove many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift the sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.¹

¹ Isaiah 2:4. Cf. Joel 4:10; Micah 4:3.

This messianic dream speaks of using all matter for positive and productive means. Iron could be turned into a sword, used to harm, or into plowshares, used to work the field and produce. Imagine, says the prophet, a world where ever molecule of matter, every physical element, is used for positivity and to better humanity – is this not a world of complete freedom and symbiosis?

The ideal of beating swords into plowshares – or guns into medical devices – is today more pertinent than ever. In the aftershocks of Parkland (and the Las Vegas shooting and the Texas bombings, and every atrocity perpetrated with gun and weapon), we have to wonder what will it take to beat all weapons into implements of peace, all tools of war into tools of peace?

As we sit at the Seder, questioning everything, discussing slavery and freedom, telling the story to our children and ourselves, conveying the divine ideal by which we live, what message do we wish to tell a world roiling from school shootings, terrorism, technological warfare, and, sadly and frighteningly, the ever-present threat of weapons of mass destruction?

2. Weapon of Choice

Weapons have existed since the beginning of civilization. Right after the banishment from the Garden of Eden, Cain slew his brother Abel.² The Midrash³ relates that Abel was physically stronger than Cain. Cain could not slay his brother with his bare hands. Cain required a weapon.

The Midrash discusses the weapon that Cain used. A few verses later, the Torah relates, *For I have slain a man by wounding and a child by bruising.*⁴ The rabbis derive from this the weapon of Cain's choice. According to R' Shimon ben Gamliel, Cain slew Abel with a wooden bludgeon, which bruises without piercing and bloodletting, as the verse states *a child by bruising*. According to the sages, Cain slew Abel with a sharp stone, which wounds and cuts and causes bleeding, for the verse states *a man by wounding*.

One opinion holds it was blunt force trauma that killed Abel, and the other holds it was a laceration and blood loss.

This Midrash teaches us that weapons are potentially everywhere. A tree, a thing of life and fruit, could tragically be turned into a weapon; branch, instead of dangling with fruit, could be used to bruise and kill. An innocent stone too could be used to harm another.

Fire could be used to burn, water to drown, wind to tear apart, earth to bury. With the creation of matter is born the potential of the creation of weaponry.

² Genesis 4:8.

³ Genesis Rabba 22:18 with Matnat Kehunah and Etz Yosef ad loc.

⁴ Genesis 4:23.

With progress, weapons become more sophisticated and the potential to harm much more severe. A stick of stone could break a bone, but a bomb can wipe out a city, G-d forbid.

3. Where Did Cain Learn To Kill?

How indeed did Cain know to use a weapon? Where did he learn this? How did he know that blunt force with a bludgeon or cutting with a stone would take life?

The Midrash continues and answers: Cain studied and dissected how his father Adam offered animal sacrifices to G-d, ritually slaughtering them, and figured if an animal could thus be slaughtered and offered so too can one kill a human.

Bringing a grain, produce or animal offering to G-d is a holy and righteous thing. Indeed, this is what Cain and Abel were fighting over. Similarly, using a knife to cut Challah on Shabbat or to slaughter an animal in a Kosher way is a Mitzvah.

The human being however could look at that same knife and use it for the exact opposite: the terrible taking of human life.

Cain learned to destroy by studying something sacred – an offering to G-d – and copying it in a profane and demented way.

This in itself is a monumental lesson: how careful must we be around our children. Children see all and learn from everything around them. They learn how to live and react from their parents, teachers, and environments. They learn how to act and behave from the atmosphere they are in.

When they see that their parents, educators and all the other factors in society that shape children in their formative years – use the material world as tools for growth, instead of weapons, they learn to do the same.

Of course it's not so simple: a child could grow up in a perfectly healthy environment and still, somehow or another, grow into an unhealthy adult – just as a child growing up in an unhealthy environment can, with work and effort, grow into a healthy adult.

But we learn one thing from Cain: a child watches his parents. In this unpredictable world where nothing is guaranteed, the more light our children see emanate from us the better the odds of our children emanating light as well.

4. Passover: Education Is Our Secret Unweapon

Weapons are manufactured from raw and innocent material. A tree branch can become a club, a stone a knife, metal can be used to make a gun and bullets, steel can be shaped into a sword.

And to a more severe degree: atoms can become atom bombs, hydrogen, hydrogen bombs, nuclear energy could be turned into nuclear weapons.

Pharaoh and the Egyptian had chariots and war horses, weapons of war, whips and spears – arsenals and ammunition much stronger than anything the Israelites had. Lording over us with their power, the Egyptians fashioned the matter of Egypt into a force for enslaving innocent people, and, ultimately, into killing machines, slaughtering Jewish children wholesale. And, for thousands of years hence, our enemies have emulated the Egyptians, in function if not in form. Most recently, the Nazis turned gas, a product of the earth, into gas chambers annihilating millions, they took fire, the source of warmth and light, and grotesquely used it in their horrific crematoria.

Today machine and technological ability is profoundly more powerful and destructive than in the times of Cain and Abel, or even of Egyptian slavery.

But if today's weapons are stronger, so are today's possibilities. If the negative is more, how much more so the positive.

The answer to the dangers of weaponry is found in Passover. The Haggadah, the “telling,” infusing our children with spiritual “weapons” – with the most profound light, with signs and wonders that are more powerful than any weapon.

They worked in Egypt and they work today.

“And you shall tell your child,”⁵ is a Mitzvah.

The next verse is: “And it shall be to you as a sign upon your hand and as a remembrance between your eyes.” Armor and weaponry protect a soldier. The sign on our arm and between our eyes protects us.⁶

And He donned righteousness like a coat of mail, and a helmet of salvation is upon His head, and He donned garments of vengeance as His attire, and He was clad with zeal as a cloak. As a soldier dons his uniform and protective gear so does G-d don His. And we, the followers of G-d, our Commander in Chief, follow suit.

A weapon is taking raw material and turning into a negative force. Judaism, a Mitzvah, is taking raw material and turning it into a spiritual “weapon” of G-dly light and compassionate virtue to dispel and illuminate the dark world.

⁵ Exodus 13:8.

⁶ Deuteronomy 28:10. Isaiah 59:17. See meaningful sermon Ki Tavo 2016 at length.

The enemies of light – Pharaoh, Egypt, Hitler, Stalin – took metals, tools, plowshares and turned them into swords and life-takers. The Jew does the exact opposite: he takes metal, weapons, swords, and turns them into Mitzvoth, productive and life-affirming tools which refine and elevate everyone and everything.

Our “weapon” of choice is light and beauty. We do not fight hate with hate, destruction with destruction. Obviously, we need strong armies to defend (or serve as a deterrent) against any enemies. But our “weapons” of choice are soulful ones and the battles we wage are spiritual ones.

This is the story we tell our children on Passover. This is our tradition. And this what education is all about.

5. Neshek, Weapons of Light

The Hebrew word for ammunition is *Neshek*. *Neshek* is also an acronym for *Nerot Shel Shabbat*, Shabbat Candles.

By now it is a universal custom to hold candlelight vigils in honor of those who have been taken from us.

Perhaps this custom is rooted in the Jewish Mitzvah to light candles on Shabbat and Yom Tov, as well as the custom to light Yartzeit candles in memory of those who have passed away.

Light – *Neshek* – is the greatest ammunition of all. As a rabbi whose domain is Torah and Mitzvoth, I profess no expertise in the second amendment. What I do know is that for 3330 years, we have educated our children to be candles, to light *Neshek*, to combat the dark forces with the light of life – with the light of the soul (which is called “the “lamp of G-d”) and the candle of a mitzvah and the light of Torah, *ner mitzvah v'Torah obr*.

I remember once hearing something very profound from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. It is a Mitzvah to light Shabbat candles every Friday and Yom Tov eve. Many light a candle for each member of the household. So the mother of a family of two parents and six children would light eight candles, one light for each family member.

Rabbi Telushkin explained the psychological power of this custom: When, as an impressionable child, he would see his mother light a candle for each child it told him something so beautiful: his mother was saying, your existence makes the world a more illuminated place.

Imagine if every single child in every single school was educated that he or she is a candle of light, a divine being whose very existence illuminates the world.

Fire is a powerful force, one that could be used for good or bad. Fire could light up the world, or could be turned into gunfire; fire could warm a person or scold them; fire could illuminate a home or, G-d forbid, burn it down to the ground.

G-d gave us fire to make light. Lighting Shabbat and Yom Tov candles, as we did last night, is fulfilling a Mitz-

vah and fulfilling positive potential of fire.

6. Conclusion: The New York Times Predicts The Future

To conclude with a story that captures the eternity of our “light artillery.”

In 1975 the Lubavitcher Rebbe launched a global *Neshbek* campaign (*mitzva neshbek*) to encourage women and girls to light Shabbat and holiday candles. A few years after the campaign’s launch, at his annual talk to the international conference of Chabad women and girls, the Rebbe spoke about the campaign with great emphasis.

Upon exiting the shul after the talk, the Rebbe stopped to speak with Mrs. Sternberg, who was directing the *neshbek*/candle lighting campaign. The Rebbe instructed her to “see to it that a prominent advertisement be printed in The New York Times with the correct candle lighting times.”

Indeed, an advertisement was immediately placed in *The New York Times* along with other leading newspapers. Eventually, a weekly advertisement ran on the bottom of the first page of the New York Times every Friday (the only advertisement to run on the front page!) stating the candle lighting times in the New York area, and leaving a number to call for other locations. With this small but prominent advertisement, virtually the entire world was reading about the mitzvah entrusted to women and girls to illuminate the world.

In celebrating the new millennium in the secular year 2000, *The New York Times* marked the historic milestone by featuring a fictional front page, presuming what may be the front-page news in the year 2100.

The imagined front-page reported of robots demanding equality, of politicians misusing weather-controlling satellites, and of sports games not yet played. But there, on the bottom right corner, was a small advertisement notifying Jewish women and girls of the candle lighting time in the New York area, instructing to “tap here” for times in other locations!

Mrs. Sternberg was pleasantly surprised to see this advertisement, as she had not paid for such an impressive ad! Upon contacting the management of *The New York Times*, she was told that a chosen group of the Times staff met to discuss this fictional front page. Everyone had a different opinion as to what to report about. But all in the room agreed on one thing: While no one can truly know what may be making world news in 2100, all agreed that Jewish women and girls will still be lighting the Shabbos candles on Friday eve!⁷

⁷ Derher, Tishrei 5775, pp. 45-46.

Yes, holy light is our ultimate and eternal “weapon,” which has and will always vanquish any adversary, and illuminate the world with its warm and powerful divine glow.

Let us all embrace this mitzvah and message – to spread light everywhere we go and be a light unto nations,⁸ leading the world to a state when “G-d will be your eternal light,”⁹ “and nations will walk by your light.”¹⁰

Happy Passover and Chag Kosher v'Sameach!

Sources: Igros Kodesh Admur MehuRayatz vol. 3 p. Sefer HaSichos 5702 p. 122. 5703 p. 169. Degel Machne Efraim Parshas Yisro.

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⁸ Isaiah 42:6.

⁹ Isaiah 60:19.

¹⁰ Isaiah 60:3