

*Congregation Anshai Torah's Rabbi Michael Kushnick's dvar Torah, a graduate of Stoneman Douglas High School he shared these words with our congregation this past Shabbat, Feb. 17, 2018. All of us hurting, all of us praying.*

Wednesday afternoon I was out doing some errands when I received a call from a friend asking if I heard about my high school. I graduated a number of years ago and I don't routinely think about high school. He said there is a shooting at the school. Of course, I did not think it was true. Not at my school. It was in a good neighborhood and was so safe. He must have heard the wrong name or location. But when I looked it up on my phone it was true. Then I called my parents who live about a quarter of a mile from the school. My mother had been told to shelter in place because the shooter was on the loose. At the same time, I thought about the numerous teachers who I know in the school, both my teachers from high school and friends I graduated with who now teach at Stoneman Douglas. I waited for those I know to post that they were safe. School shootings are always scary but now happening in the backyard of where I grew up it is terrifying and it is affecting my family and friends.

I have been in shock more or less since Wednesday afternoon. Turning on the television and seeing every national news station report from my childhood home and my high school is eerie. Watching students run out of the building and remembering what classes I had in the specific hallways being shown gives me the chills. All these years later I still know that school like the back of my hand. I walked each and every hallway during my four years at school and have been in many of the classrooms shown over and over.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas was an incredible place in my life. I am who I am today because of many of the experiences in the school. My freshman English teacher, Mr. Chandler, taught me how to truly write, and Mr. Jeter first helped me unlock my love of physics. While I have not thought about my high school experience in many years, it all came flooding back to me this past week. The classes, the friends, the silly things that happen in high school, and the strange rules that I still do not understand. It is a school that I entered every day for four years without any fear but now I do not understand how any student could enter that building again.

This week we read Parsha Terumah, which describes the building of the mishkan, the tabernacle. The Tabernacle is holy because it is God's portable dwelling place in the desert. The tabernacle has become symbolic of other holy spaces. Two locations are at the top of my list of holy places -- houses of worship and schools. Unfortunately both have become the scenes of way too much violence.

Very little is holier in life than a school. A place that we send our children to be with other young people to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to become contributing adults in society. A school is holy because it is a place we want to, and need to, send our children to develop into who we want them to become.

Judaism demands that as adults we are obligated to educate our children and provide them with the most basic needs of food, clothing and protection. On Wednesday so many in my hometown sent their children to school fulfilling all of these commandments but we as society failed to protect our children once again. Parents around this country send children to school every day and as a society we continually do nothing to protect them. As I sent my children off to school on Thursday morning, I had tears in my eyes as I gave them both an extra kiss and told them "I love you". At home I can protect them; why at school should any child be unsafe? Our children deserve better from us, the adults. It is our responsibility to protect them.

After every mass shooting, we hear the refrain let the families mourn and then we can talk about how we can fix the problem. At that point, our society has moved on to another issue and protecting our children is ignored. Many of the survivors from Douglas have told individuals who share those sentiments "don't tell us that we can't talk about how to move forward, we were the ones hiding in closets for hours and heard the gunfire." They are demanding that school violence cannot continue, and something must be done before it affects another community.

On Thursday, it moved from my childhood backyard to my current backyard as three students in North Texas brought guns to school, including to Plano West, just across the street from here. This is not supposed to happen; schools are holy spaces for our youth.

What are we going to do? We must do something. Sending thoughts and prayers is nice, but it fails to address the issue; and frankly it does nothing. In other areas of life we ridicule those who do nothing and let the status quo continue; yet with school shootings doing nothing is considered acceptable. We all must stop saying there is nothing to do. There are many things we can do to protect our children. This is our responsibility as adults and we must choose to address it one way or another. We may not ever fully stop school shootings but we must take steps to reduce the frequency.

The Torah tells us that we shall be a kingdom of priests. Priests are leaders, individuals who stand up and take a position of action, even when it is not popular because they believe in their heart it is correct. We all know in our heart what must be done. It is time to be one of the leaders advocating for what we know to be right. It is clear that figuring out a way to prevent future gun violence is not popular, but please listen to the students and the families from my high school, from my hometown; now is the time to figure out ways to protect our children. Each and every one of us must serve as a kingdom of priests and push and push and continue pushing for change that will make our world safer and protect our children.

This cannot continue to be the norm.