



Tashlikh 2016

**“THE SCOURGE OF GUN VIOLENCE”
by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

There’s a very old custom associated with *Rosh Hashanah*. It’s called *tashlikh*, a practice in which Jews shake crumbs into streams and rivers. It’s a way of symbolically casting off sins. Traditions change and over the years we have chosen to alter the *tashlikh* practice using new ideas, new readings, and new practices. For example, instead of casting our individual sins into waters, we can talk about casting away indifference to injustice, and pledging to take on a commitment to change.

This year I want to talk about a different subject than I have in the past. When I was in seventh or eighth grade I went to Washington DC with a school group. One of the memorable sites for me was the FBI, which, since 9/11, no longer offers tours. One of the things I remember was seeing a poster that listed how often crimes were being committed. The numbers were mind-boggling.

My recent research yielded some examples.

On average, a home is burglarized every 13 seconds.

A car is stolen every 30 seconds.

And about every sixteen minutes someone dies of a gunshot.

Which means that in the time it takes us to hold this service another nine people will have died because of a shooting.

On an average day, 91 Americans are killed by guns. Of these, 7 are children or teens. 5 of them are murdered and 2 kill themselves.

In an average month, 51 women are shot to death by a current or former husband or boyfriend.

Unbelievably, there is also data citing 58 toddler-involved shootings in 2015. Of these, 19 shot and killed themselves, and two other toddlers shot and killed others.

Each year, a little over 400 people have been killed by the police, an on-going crisis that demands its own discussion. The number of police who have been killed by gunfire in the line of duty over the last several years is not an epidemic as some would have us believe, but has been as few as 31 one year and as high as 68.

Add it all up and you've probably heard the statistic that approximately 33,000 people die each year from gun violence.

But we're not always told in the next sentence that nearly two-thirds of those deaths, or about 20,000 people, are suicides, and that white males account for seven out of ten of those deaths.

And we're not also told that besides the 33,000 who are killed annually by guns, there are an additional 75,000 or so who are shot each year and survive, some with minor injuries, and others with life-altering ones. And most unbelievable of all, of those survivors, 16,000 got shot unintentionally. They were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And let's not forget that the number of family members who are touched by gunfire ratchets up the devastation even more.

Now I'm not a prognosticator, but I am willing to bet that all sorts of common sense gun laws and common sense gun practice, can get those numbers down dramatically.

But until then I can also predict with a certainty that the numbers will just keep growing. Go to gunviolencearchive.org and you can get a detailed account of each new incident in the last 72 hours.

Numbers, of course, don't tell the story about individual lives. Reciting their names, as the victims' families remind us, isn't enough either. Nor is a moment of silence, especially among politicians, who somehow think that is all the response that is needed.

What we really need is specific action. That will protect and save lives. That will save us from ourselves.

Some of the key groups that are working on these issues are bradycampaign.org, everytown.org, americansforresponsiblesolutions.org, and momsdemandaction.org.

Just google "organizations supporting common sense gun control" and you'll learn about concrete steps they are taking and how you can support them.

We have a responsibility to speak up for the value of human life. As it says in the book of Leviticus (19:16), *Lo ta'a-mode al dam r'e-cha*. Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.

In the spirit of Tashlikh, let us do everything we can to cast out the scourge of gun violence in our midst.