

*BJ teen leader Abigail Sylvor Greenberg speaks about gun violence in America and what it means to be a young Jewish person in this moment, at Kabbalat Shabbat services at B'nai Jeshurun NYC on March 23, 2018. A [video recording](#) is also available at The Jewish Education Project's website.*

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As I am sure you all know, on February 14th, a gunman wielding an AR-15 rifle opened fire at Marjory Stoneman Douglas high school in Parkland, Florida, killing seventeen students and teachers and wounding many more. This was among 30 events classified as mass shootings this year alone, and among more than 1600 since 26 people were shot by a semiautomatic weapon at Sandy Hook in 2014, according to the Gun Violence Archive. The seventeen killed in Parkland number among 13,000 Americans who are expected to die in gun homicides this year. And the fourteen students number among more than 2500 kids and teens who are killed by guns in an average year. Only several days ago, two students were shot by a gunman at Great Mills High School in Maryland.

Like many my age, I have been deeply affected by the tragedy in Parkland. I have mourned for the lives of my peers and have reeled at the notion that the safety promised by the schools we, as teenagers attend every day can be violated by such violence. Moreover, I have been shocked and outraged that our lawmakers have protected and continue to protect the rights of gun owners, sellers, and buyers, that they have catered to the gun lobby in Washington in exchange for donations and political support, and that many have privileged these allegiances over the defense of our lives. By our lives, I mean my life, the lives of my friends, of students across all fifty states, and of the people of all ages, income brackets, and regions, who have suffered and are likely to suffer because of the ready availability of guns in this country.

It is for this reason that on March fourteenth, I walked out of my math exam and spent seventeen minutes on the East River Promenade. It was both a memorial for Parkland students and a political protest. A statement that high school students are willing to disrupt our own educations



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and risk reprisals from our school administrators to demand protection and safety. Because a breach of the tranquility of any school is a disruption for us all. I will also be marching in tomorrow's March for Our Lives.

I recognize that positionally, this may seem less pertinent or true in New York than elsewhere. We enjoy the benefit of stricter gun regulations than are found in most of the country. Personally, I don't know very many gun owners or NRA supporters. However, this does not exempt me from speaking up. Even in New York, 10.3 percent of the population owns a firearm, and in Albany, lawmakers agree that our gun-control laws need bolstering.

And beyond that, as much as New York City sometimes feels like a country unto itself, we remain called to leverage our privilege and platform, whenever possible, to protect and advocate for our fellow citizens across the nation when their wellbeing is imperiled.

Though the movement for gun control comes in the wake of immeasurable tragedy, it has also generated a lot of hope. This is a singularly exciting, engaging, and meaningful time to be a teenager and a youth activist. We, as teenagers have taken on the problem of gun violence and said, this is our fight, this is our cause. And that is exciting. In the past few weeks, I believe we have proven our skills as change makers, as orators, organizers, lobbyists, educators and more. We have followed in a tradition of youth activism in America. Young people have been pivotal in movements like the civil rights movement in the 1960s and the movement against South African anti-apartheid in the 1980s. And we have added to that tradition using the power afforded by social media and the internet. Platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, though oft bemoaned for their tendency to take us away from the present moment, have really helped us show up and speak up.

In step with the social justice culture of our generation, teens are also trying to create a movement that is inclusive and intersectional. Gun violence affects different communities and populations differently. Black men are 13 times more likely to be shot and killed with guns than



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their white counterparts. In an average month, 50 women are shot to death by intimate partners. No solution to gun violence can succeed without taking the full spectrum of experiences into account. I am hopeful that the students involved in this movement, especially students of privilege, will advocate for all victims of gun violence, not merely members of the white middle class. I am also hopeful that the magnitude of this movement will encompass all forms of gun-related death: suicide, domestic violence, and more, all of which are so important.

My involvement in this movement is rooted in Jewish identity and values. This is partially because Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School's population is 40 percent Jewish and the school is attended by three people from Camp Tel Yehudah, the Jewish sleepaway camp where I spend my summers. But it is also because Judaism has raised me with a brand of activist ideology that seems badly needed in the current climate. Jewish tradition has always had an eye toward the future, toward the world to be inherited by future generations. In the movement for gun control, America's youth are asking for similar considerations.

In a recent text study with rabbi Felicia on this topic, we looked at a variety of relevant talmudic texts. The talmud, without being able to anticipate modern gun-culture or technology, presents a range of opinions about when a weapon may be justifiably carried and used. Though perspectives varied, the vast, vast, majority answered: Not always. Weapons must be used with personal discretion, says Sanhedrin 72a. Weapons cannot be brought into certain holy spaces, says the mishna. It is the responsibility of those who sell weapons to know who they are selling to, and to protect their communities by making sure weapons do not end up in the wrong hands, says Maimonides. Weapons are nothing other than reprehensible, say the rabbis in Shabbat 63a.

In other words, the talmud says weaponry must be controlled. And I agree, which is why I am marching tomorrow.



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