

The Tree of Life

As a Jewish teenager, the lack of gun control has had a profound effect on my daily life over the last few years. Gun violence has always been a part of my life. It's like a looming cloud; you don't always notice it, but it's always there. But the first time I truly remember gun violence affecting me was the Pittsburgh Tree of Life shooting. I was in sixth grade, at a Jewish Day school, when my teacher stood up in front of the class to explain in the most "child friendly" way what had happened—as if there is any child friendly way to explain the death of 11 Jews in their place of worship. I remember sitting with four other Jewish girls, whom I had known since preschool, all of us thinking, "what if we're next?" That is the reality I have to live with as a Jewish teenager in America—that I am at risk of being shot not just daily at school, but because of my religion.

The Tree of Life massacre continues to haunt me. On September 21, 2022, NBC Philadelphia¹ reported that the trial for the Tree of Life massacre will take place on April 24, 2023. By that date the massacre will have passed its fourth anniversary. Four years of Robert Bowers, the shooter, claiming innocence. Four years of kids like me living in fear, wondering if we're next. During those four years, I left my Jewish school that I had attended since preschool, I had my bat mitzvah, and I began avoiding going to synagogue. It's not that I don't want to go to synagogue; that is, after all, where I spent every weekend as a child. The truth is that I am scared. I'm scared to walk through those doors because, in my mind, the big bad man with the gun will follow minutes later; I know others feel the same way. I see it in my parents' eyes when a door slams, and I see it in the way I am not the only one looking for an exit, a planned escape, just in case I need it.

You don't have to look very hard to see how gun violence has changed the Jewish community. The Cleveland Jewish Federation alone put an estimated \$1.1 million into security in 2022². Our synagogue installed bullet "resistant" glass (whatever that means) in the sanctuary. My rabbi announced the other day that we would be participating in a "Run, Fight, Hide" drill, just in case. I learned just this year that my friends are greeted by a pastor when they walk into church; I'm greeted by two armed guards at my temple. I hadn't known that it wasn't normal to see armed vehicles and officers every Saturday, and that it's even less normal to have to need them at all. I realized at a young age that I have to be on higher alert solely because of who I am.

¹<https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/national-international/accused-killer-in-tree-of-life-synagogue-massacre-finally-gets-trial-date/3368552/>

²https://www.jewishcleveland.org/news/blog/federation_allocates_more_than_31m_from_campaign/#:~:text=This%20is%20an%20increase%20of,million%20will%20go%20toward%20security.

These anxieties have only increased as of late. There have been about 1,000 school shootings in the U.S since 2012 according to data gathered by Statista³. During that time, I would have started kindergarten, learned how to read, witnessed a global pandemic, and been to three different schools. In sixth grade, I was diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, and though I have been working hard since to manage it, the rise of school shootings has just fed the fire. A study by the Pew Research Center found that 57% of teens surveyed are very worried about the threat of a school shooter⁴. While that study was done in 2018, I can assume that percentage would be even higher today.

Looking back, I don't remember a specific time when school shootings didn't occupy at least a small part of my mind. The Sandy Hook massacre happened when I was in kindergarten, and though I did not know it at the time, that would be the first of many shootings that would happen during my life as a student. Now that I'm older, I've come to realize that these incidents, though they may not affect me directly, leave a lasting impact on my life today. Until now I thought it was normal to flinch when a door opens, or freeze when a textbook is dropped too hard. I subconsciously plan an escape route for every class I'm in, and active shooter drills have become just as common as those for fires and tornadoes. In 8th grade I was put on medication for my anxiety because the simple task of sitting in a classroom led to near daily panic attacks about the possibility of a shooter.

I once read a letter that founding father George Washington wrote to the first Jewish congregation in America. He closed the letter with a vision that all Americans "shall sit in safety under [their] own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make [them] afraid"⁵. Until there is effective gun control, it's difficult to imagine that vision being fulfilled, even two centuries later.

³<https://www.statista.com/statistics/971473/number-k-12-school-shootings-us/>

⁴<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/18/a-majority-of-u-s-teens-fear-a-shooting-could-happen-at-their-school-and-most-parents-share-their-concern/>

⁵<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-06-02-0135>