

Good Morning, my name is Claire Cohen and this is Dahvi Cohen and we are representing the congregation of Temple Beth Sholom in Santa Ana, CA. Thank you so much for giving us your time and attention today. It means a lot. We are here in Washington DC with hundreds of other reform Jewish teens as participants of the L'taken seminar. The L'taken seminar is a four-day program focusing on Jewish values as well as social justice. We are sponsored by the Religious Action Center, a legislative office of the Union for Reform Judaism. Among the different issues our fellow L'taken representatives will be talking about today, we would like to specifically talk to you about gun violence prevention.

Over the past few years, there have been a multitude of shootings across the United States such as the 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, the 2013 Navy Yard shooting here in DC, the 2015 shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon, as well as the one just an hour away from where I live, the shooting in San Bernardino, California. Over 30,000 people are killed by guns each year, and the rate of gun violence in the US is up to 20 times more than other developed countries. 40% of guns sold in the US are sold

through unlicensed sellers at places such as gun shows or online, where background checks are not required to buy a gun. This is a clear issue in our country today as it shows just how easy it is for guns to be put in the hands of the wrong people who in turn use these weapons for violence. Without background checks in play, there is no stopping a criminal from obtaining a gun and using it to cause terror in our country.

The Talmud teaches us that “he who takes one life it is as though he has destroyed the universe and he who saves one life it is as though he has saved the universe” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5). By supporting gun violence prevention, you are saving lives, and in Judaism that is the most important thing someone can do. In an increasingly impersonal and alienating society, the dehumanizing of the human being and the carelessness with which human life is taken stand in direct violation of these affirmations of our tradition.

Additionally, Leviticus 19:16 tells us, “do not stand idly by while your neighbor’s blood is shed.” We, as Reform Jews, cannot stand idly by and watch as thousands of people are impacted by gun violence each year. Because of the many times the Jewish people have been targeted throughout history, we feel especially responsible for standing up for the safety of others when their lives are threatened.

Therefore, we are here speaking to you today on behalf of the thousands of victims of gun violence whose lives were cut short simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Just a year and a half ago, my school, Irvine High School, suffered a terrible loss. The night of the first day of my sophomore year, Tyler Kirkland ended his life with a gun he found in his house. Tyler was in my grade and had been in a few of my classes, and while I didn't know him personally, everyone at our school was directly affected by his death. In addition to grief, we as students were also faced with the concern that if Tyler had not been able to obtain the gun that night, or even if it had been made more difficult for him to do so, he might still be with us today. Additionally, as a result of my high school originally being built as a community college, we have a very open campus, which is for the most part largely beneficial to the students. However, our open campus also makes it more possible for a shooter to be able to walk on campus and take the lives of innocent students. Claire attends the Jewish private school, Tarbut v'Torah, in Orange County, where they have monthly shooter drills in order to prepare both the students and the staff for a possible campus shooter. For both of our schools, and for schools across America, the possibility of a campus shooter is not only feared, it has come to be expected. This is a sad truth that you have the opportunity to change by supporting legislation making background

checks for gun purchases universal, thus making it more difficult for these campus shooters threatening the lives of students everywhere to obtain a gun. While we understand that many Americans are concerned about the government infringing on their Second Amendment right to bear arms, it is important to note that this right is already being infringed upon with every act of gun violence that could have been prevented by requiring background checks for all gun purchases. If the individuals committing these acts of gun violence are put to a stop by this legislation, not only will thousands of lives be saved, but responsible gun owners will not be at risk of having their Second Amendment right revoked.

Senate: We urge you to cosponsor the Fix Gun Checks Act (H.R.3411) when introduced.

House of Representatives: We urge you to cosponsor the Fix Gun Checks Act of 2015 (H.R.3411).

This legislation would expand the Brady Background Checks to all gun sales to keep guns out of the possession of dangerous people such as felons, fugitives, domestic abusers, and anyone deemed unfit to own a gun. This would also improve the reporting of prohibited purchases to the National Criminal Instant Check System as well as require gun owners to report their lost or stolen firearms.

Unfortunately, gun violence is a terrifying yet prevalent issue that needs to be addressed. For Tyler, for the children of Newtown, for Americans everywhere who are killed because of the lack of background checks prohibiting irresponsible individuals from obtaining guns, support this legislation and reassure students like Dahvi and myself that we are safe in our communities.