

Guns as the price for freedom?

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[President Obama's speech in Newtown](#) on December 17 included this pivotal question: "Are we prepared to say that such violence visited on our children year after year after year is somehow the price of our freedom?" The president is bristling here at the way our political discourse reflexively leaps to claims about individual rights and freedoms. Issues become defined as the tragic clash of competing freedoms: Your freedom to do X is pitted against my freedom to do Y. The "price" of my freedom then is the loss of your freedom.

Rights talk can be an important resource for defending human dignity, but by itself rights talk is often morally obtuse, a way of sidestepping an issue. As Obama suggests, such is the case when it comes to thinking about gun violence and gun laws.

Consider how the discussion changes when the central question is not, "What should I be free to do?" but "What should I do to keep my neighbors safe?" That, of course, is the fundamental ethical question posed in the biblical tradition.

A rabbi friend of mine noted recently that there's very little in Jewish teaching specifically about the use of weapons. The tradition assumes that regulating weapons is matter of common sense—you just do what you need to do to keep people safe.

He cited two texts, one being Deuteronomy 22:8: "When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof; otherwise you might have bloodguilt if anyone should fall from it." The point is simple: the things you build and own shouldn't be hazardous to the lives of others, and if they are, you need to take steps to eliminate the danger.

The other text is from Maimonides, the Jewish scholar of the 12th century: "Just as it is forbidden to sell idolaters articles that assist them in idol worship, it is forbidden to sell them articles that can cause harm to many people—for example, bears, lions, weapons, fetters and chains." Again the point is clear: don't encourage or allow people to do harm to themselves or others.

Don't those ancient practical injunctions provide pretty much all we need for a sensible gun policy?