

Teen Finds a Religious Mandate for Gun Control After Dad's Shooting Death

A disgruntled former employee murdered Sami Rahamim's father, Reuven, last September. But the teen doesn't want to be known for what happened to him. Instead, he wants to be recognized for what he is doing about it.

"One of the things I am working toward is to be known for advocacy, not for the unfortunate circumstance that put me here," said Rahamim, 17, of St. Louis Park, Minn.

As a gun violence prevention advocate, he has testified at the Minnesota State Capitol in St. Paul, spoken to churches, synagogues, youth groups, and penned an editorial in *The Daily Beast*.

On Tuesday, Rahamim was the guest of Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn., at President Obama's State of the Union address. The day after, he was back on Capitol Hill with a group called Mayors Against Illegal Guns. Between shaking hands with Minnesota's congressional delegation, and meeting other survivors of gun violence—including a one-on-one with former Rep. Gabby Giffords—Rahamim said the experience was hugely encouraging.

"We share something extremely powerful," he said of the fellow survivors he met. "These people have the same grief and trauma that nobody else can understand besides someone that has lost a loved one to gun violence."

Rahamim, who is taking a break from his senior year of high school while being tutored at home, said losing his father was akin to "being pushed off a cliff."

The question became “what am I going to cling to, what branch am I going to grab?”

Each morning, he attends synagogue to recite the Kaddish memorial prayer for his father, who was shot dead along with five others by a disgruntled former employee. The elder Rahamim had built a successful business, Accent Signage Systems, and specialized in an innovative method for making signs in Braille.

Like his father, Sami is grounded in faith. His rabbi, Alexander Davis of Beth El Synagogue in St. Louis Park, near Minneapolis, said Sami’s social advocacy springs from religious passion.

“He’s sees what he is doing as an outgrowth of that,” said Davis. “Here’s someone who really gets it.”

But Sami is also grounded in facts, which he rattles off with ease: U.S. homicide rates by guns are 20 times greater than the other top 25 industrialized nations; there are no background checks in 40 percent of gun sales; a U.S. child is 10 times more likely to be unintentionally killed with a gun than children in other developed nations.

“We are just a very real and very scary anomaly among other First World countries,” he said.

The high school senior’s journey to advocacy has been a quick one, but long in coming. His father, who was active in the Twin Cities Jewish community and an ardent supporter of Israel, took him to meetings of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee in 2011 and 2012. The son attended a teen AIPAC advocacy convention in October 2012.

“I always had an aptitude for advocacy, and the tragic circumstance that brought me here have only accelerated what I was going to do anyway,” Sami said.

The day of the mass shootings at **Sandy Hook Elementary School** in Newtown, Conn., last December, Rahamim attended a rally sponsored by Protect Minnesota, an anti-gun violence group. When he told Heather Martens, the group's executive director, he wanted to get involved, he was invited to go to New York with other survivors of gun violence and meet with Mayor Michael Bloomberg as he launched his gun control initiative.

On Feb. 4, Sami sat two seats away from President Obama at a roundtable discussion on gun violence prevention in Minneapolis.

In the short space of two months, he has gone from being a "son of gun violence victim," as he was labeled in New York, to what the Associated Press called a "survivor and committed advocate."

"It is remarkable, how people cope," said Davis, his rabbi. "For some people, the loss is so draining they have no emotional energy. And yet Rahamim wants to go and make a difference. To jump into that fray knowing this is a very difficult political item requires a certain kind of strength of character."

Sami said he continues to feel his father's presence.

"I know my father is watching us on this journey," he said at a recent talk at his synagogue, "to make our community, our state, and our country a safer place."