


Mindy Finkelstein, a 26-year-old gun-violence survivor, works to promote common sense gun legislation by volunteering with the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence as well as Women Against Gun Violence, and recently organized Victory Over Violence, a race to benefit other survivors like herself.

hospital and was denied entrance. He was so sick that the Aryan Nations kicked him out for being “a threat to their cause.” But all this did not prevent him from legally purchasing a semi-automatic weapon at a gun show. I’m convinced that — just as a car is to drive from one point to another — the sole purpose of a gun is to kill. Having a license to operate one should be regulated.

According to the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, the “current federal law requires criminal background checks only for guns sold through licensed firearm dealers.” The “loophole in the law allows individuals [criminal, mentally disturbed, and everyday citizens alike] not engaged in the business of selling firearms to sell guns without a license and without processing any paperwork.” This is how Furrow

obtained the weapon he used against me. This so-called loophole needs to be closed so people like Furrow cannot attempt to commit such heinous acts with ease.

I have devoted much time over the past years to work for common sense gun laws. My goal in life is to prevent others from experiencing gun violence. I’ve accepted this responsibility on behalf of the people who weren’t as lucky as I was — people like Joseph Iletto. Parents of murdered children have told me that I can represent their children, children who no longer have voices. Though I will never bring their children’s voices back to life, I can draw on my experiences, my face, and my voice to show how gun violence destroys. Hopefully, that might create something positive from the bullets that ripped through my leg ten years ago. 

Guns, Gun Control, and American Jews

T O M D I A Z

I know a Jewish scholar who works at a think tank and keeps a handgun in his suburban home. I work with Jewish advocates who favor the most stringent regulation of firearms. I watched a Hassidic rabbi banter with his pro-gun gentile peers at a national gun industry convention, lamenting the designs of liberals on their “rights.” And the scientist father of one of my child’s classmates in a Jewish day school wouldn’t own a gun but has no problem with those who do.

So, what do Jews in America think about guns and gun control? The question reflects our broad sociopolitical spectrum. And it is talmudic; an exquisitely ambiguous Second Amendment text demands explication. The obvious answers turn out to be touchstones for more questions. There are conflicting opinions on everything.

Although the use of firearms raises interesting halakhic issues about self-defense and hunting, Jews in America are not divided over guns by religious dogma. To the extent that they are divided, it is because of social and political views, held by some with the intensity and certainty of religious conviction.

These convictions are grounded in the urban orientation of most Jews, which conflicts sometimes with the views of American Jews in the western and southern states. The most comprehensive recent exploration of the landscape of Jews in America — the American Jewish Com-

mittee’s 2005 publication, *Jewish Distinctiveness in America: A Statistical Portrait* — noted that Jews are “heavily concentrated in large metropolitan areas...[and] are the group most fearful of walking alone at night and among the least likely to own a gun or hunt.” Jews are also said to have “the greatest support for gun control.”

Moreover, Jews are “solidly Democratic in party identification and presidential voting and self-identifying as liberal.” Jews have voted overwhelmingly Democratic in every presidential election since 1968, with the exception of the 1980 contest between Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and John Anderson.

On the other hand, Democrats in Congress have run away from gun control ever since their loss of the House of Representatives in 1994, a disaster conventional wisdom blames on the passage of an assault weapons ban. Voting Democratic today does not mean voting for gun control. The issue has a low priority, shunned to give political breathing room to other issues, such as health care. Jewish legislators who were once leaders in gun control are now conspicuously silent. It is not clear whether American Jews as a whole have made the same calculation. But it is difficult to discern a Jewish tidal wave of gun-control activism.

At the same time, Jews strongly support civil liberties, even for “various socially and/or politically suspect groups.” Jews believe in the very American concept of inalienable rights, the

Tom Diaz, author of *Making a Killing: The Business of Guns in America* (The New Press), is a senior policy analyst at the Violence Policy Center in Washington, D.C. His most recent book is *No Boundaries: Transnational Latino Gangs and American Law Enforcement* (University of Michigan Press).

foundation of what some have called our “civic religion.” It is not clear how Jewish support for gun control reconciles itself with gun rights. For that matter, it is not clear what exactly “gun rights” are.


What precisely does this grammatically fractured congeries of words mean? “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” The great houses of constitutional interpretation have been split for nearly a century between the view that these words articulate an individual right and the view that they protect only a collective right to arm state militias. The difference is eminently practical, defining the limits of state regulation.

There is no “Jewish” interpretation. American Jews, constitutional scholars, lawyers, and individual activists, have advocated on both sides. The Supreme Court recently ruled that the right to bear arms is personal. Yet it left room

for gloss. The keeping and bearing of arms may not be wholly denied, but it may be reasonably regulated. Some gun control is still allowed, but how much and of what kind?

Exactly what form of gun control do Jews favor? Banning all firearms? Banning only handguns? Would they allow “concealed carry,” if the carriers were strictly trained and licensed? There are dozens of similar questions lurking in the miasma of gun control. There is no discernible Jewish answer to these questions.

That can be said with confidence. And the abstract right to keep and bear arms is made manifest by the ritual, part intellectual, part gut feeling, of risk assessment. Like other Americans, Jews ask themselves, given my “right,” do I feel safer with or without a gun?

More than any other ethnic or religious group in America, Jews would rather not pack a gun. But their answer as to what others may or should do might be less predictable than one might think or hope. 



S H M A . C O M

The Flow of Guns

JARED FELDMAN

Here in Washington, guns have a funny way of leaking into other issues. Since the 111th Congress convened just a few months ago, guns have infected the health care debate, thwarted voting rights legislation, complicated credit card reform, and threatened to derail the Defense Department Authorization Bill. Since our nation’s founding, guns have presented a continual politically potent issue. However, the constant attention from Congress and the president coupled with Washington’s omnipresent force — political expediency — means the specifics of firearm regulations continually ebb and flow. In the past 20 years, we have seen a tidal shift. Peaking in the mid-1990s with the passage of the Brady Bill and the Assault Weapons Ban, the movement for meaningful gun safety policies has since been in dramatic retreat.

The National Rifle Association (NRA) is one of Washington’s most powerful lobbies. Advocating for a broad interpretation of the Second Amendment and for lax gun regulations, the NRA isn’t simply a beltway phenomenon. Rather, it’s an organized grassroots political movement. With about four million members, the NRA, its affiliates, and its allies, have sowed a deep-rooted change in America and harnessed

true grassroots support. National support for gun safety legislation has plummeted in the past few years. In 2007, a CNN poll found that 50 percent of Americans thought gun laws should be made “more strict.” In April of this year, a similar CNN poll found that the number had decreased to 39 percent. Clearly, the organizing strategy of the gun rights advocates, exemplified by overly simplistic mantras like “Guns don’t kill people, people kill people,” is working. The NRA’s greatest success though, has been its ability to convert this grassroots momentum into discrete policy changes. Their approach has been strategic, incremental, and incredibly effective.

In contrast to the big bills that characterized the gun safety movement, gun rights advocates have focused on moving smaller, discrete pieces of legislation. The most conspicuous example is the expiration of the federal Assault Weapons Ban. During the 2004 debate to reauthorize this legislation, John McCain put it best: “On this [the assault weapons ban], the NRA rules.” Approved a decade earlier as a component of the 1994 Omnibus Crime Bill, the Assault Weapons Ban limited the sale of nineteen high-powered dangerous weapons such as Uzis, AK-47s and TEC-9s. The original legislation included a ten-year sunset provision that required the

Jared Feldman is the senior policy associate for the Jewish Council for Public Affairs in Washington, D.C.