

Inside Gun Control

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Few Jews are publicly associated in this country with the National Rifle Association; nearly all of us support some form of gun control. True, the use of guns in the U. S. remains casually — many would say negligently — regulated, but this issue isn't a matter that especially divides Jewish opinion. The issue of guns becomes far murkier for Jews when the State of Israel is brought up. On the one hand, few would question the legitimate right of a sovereign state to protect itself with the use of its arms. But is Israel's role in the international sale of arms outsized, even inappropriate? Is it troubling that older images of the reluctant Israeli warrior have given way to the altogether different ones of Adam Sandler's "Zohan" or Steven Spielberg's "Munich"? Israel and weapons are nearly as intimately linked as once were Jaffa and oranges, and to the extent to which such images are modeled on reality, what does this turn mean? —SB

The Legacy of Gun Violence

MINDY FINKELSTEIN

On August 10, 1999, I was a carefree sixteen-year-old working as a counselor at a day camp. I could never have anticipated what would happen that day and I will never forget the details of that morning. At 9:45 AM a self-proclaimed Neo-Nazi walked into the North Valley Jewish Community Center (outside Los Angeles) and shot over 70 rounds of ammunition. I was shot, along with four others (including three children). We were the targets of a senseless act of hatred; the crime, according to the shooter, Bufford Furrow, was "a wake-up call for America to kill Jews." All five of the victims survived. Ironically, we were the lucky ones. Joseph Iletto, a Filipino postal worker shot later that day by Bufford Furrow, was not so fortunate.

I remember the details of that day precisely. I recall, as though it were yesterday, how the detectives spoke with me. Beyond concern about the crime, they were sensitive about how it would affect me, given that as a sixteen-year-old, I was perhaps more impressionable. But more than anything, it was being attacked as a Jew that most devastated me.

For about a year after I was shot, I did what any normal sixteen-year-old would do; I basked in my glory. I took advantage of the attention it brought me: I met the president and the first

lady; my house overflowed every day with visitors, providing a surreal sense of a continuous party in my honor. But the attention soon faded and the reality — that I had been shot and someone tried to kill me — set in. I was left alone with my fears and my memories, haunted by the sounds of helicopters, sirens,

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hammering, and the sight of guns. I experienced such emotional trauma that after my first freshman week when some students on the dorm floor were playing with a nerf gun, my parents had to come and move me back home. I needed to heal and I couldn't do so in a new place where I felt unsafe.

People rarely understand that although someone survives gun violence, it does not mean that they return to living a normal life. A part of me was robbed, not to ever, probably, be redeemed. The shooting will affect me for the rest of my life. Though time might make the memories fade, they won't disappear. Ten years later, I still remember every detail of that day.

At the time of the shooting, Bufford Furrow was out on parole from the state of Washington; by all measures, he was criminally insane. He tried to have himself committed to a mental

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

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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

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congress to act again or the legislation would expire. In 2004, the University of Pennsylvania National Annenberg Election Survey found that 68 percent of those polled wanted the Assault Weapons Ban renewed. President Bush supported the renewal legislation and announced that if presented to him, he would sign the bill. Senator John Kerry, then the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, returned to Washington to vote in favor of the renewal. The NRA's goal, on the other hand, was simply to prevent congressional action on the issue.

The Transportation and Housing Appropriations Bill included an amendment to allow individuals to check firearms in their luggage on Amtrak trains.

Because of the sunset provision, inaction would drown the Assault Weapons Ban (AWB). In the face of public opinion and evidence of decreased violent crime, the NRA convinced the then House Speaker Dennis Hastert and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay to not schedule a time for the House of Representatives to vote on the renewal. They never did, and on September 19, 2004, the federal Assault Weapons Ban expired.

The NRA's strategy of focusing on seemingly small and discrete measures that would have a large cumulative effect is fully evident this legislative season. As Congress pushed forward new credit card regulations, the NRA's congressional allies offered an amendment to the bill that would allow loaded guns in national parks. By itself, this amendment would simply make a Bush-era policy the law. A few weeks later, NRA allies again offered an amendment to an unrelated bill, this time the D.C. Voting Rights Act, which would give residents of the nation's capital representation in Congress. During recent debate on this legislation, Senator John Ensign attached a provision that would override all D.C. local gun laws and replace them with new federal standards that are substantially weaker than the current set of locally specific regulations. The Ensign provisions would effectively legalize semi-automatic weapons in D.C. and remove handgun registration requirements. During a House hearing the previous year, representatives of the Secret Service and the metropolitan police force expressed deep concern about the impact of this legislation. To date, the addition of the gun amendment has stopped all progress on the D.C. Voting Rights Bill. Again during the debate in the Senate on the Transportation and Housing Appropriations Bill, an amendment

was approved to allow individuals to check firearms in their luggage on Amtrak trains. While these provisions would have a significant public policy effect, more important is the impact they would have on setting new precedents; the total impact would be exponential.

Undoubtedly, the NRA is the most powerful force on gun issues. However, there are some preliminary signs that the tides may again begin to turn. The most recent NRA-backed provision, sponsored by Senator John Thune, which would have required all states to respect gun permits issued by other states, was defeated in the Senate. Mayors Against Illegal Guns, a new gun-safety advocacy organization, takes a different tack than the NRA. This is a "grasstops" organization made up of local elected leaders. Led by Michael Bloomberg of New York and other big city mayors, Mayors Against Illegal Guns, has grown rapidly in the past several years.

In addition to this new grasstops effort, this year several religious organizations have been working to reduce gun violence. Attorney General Eric Holder and Senator Diane Feinstein, the original sponsor of the Assault Weapons Ban, have indicated their interest in reinstating this measure. Gun-safety advocates, however, may want to take a page from the NRA and use this opportunity to push for meaningful, but strategic and incremental, advances. Each small victory will build momentum and a sense of inevitability for the next fight. This would reverse the tide and create the opportunity to restore common sense measures like the assault weapons ban. 

Discussion Guide

Bringing together myriad voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. Why has the "loophole" in current gun laws remained on the books?
2. How might you bring a talmudic explication to the Second Amendment, the right to bear arms?
3. Do you know anyone who owns a gun? How do you feel when you're in that person's house? Would you let them bring the gun into your house?

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The Fading Faith of a Jewish Moral Exceptionalist

DAVID N. MYERS

Writing a few years after the creation of the State of Israel, the Jewish thinker Simon Rawidowicz asserted that the age-old “Jewish question” had become the “Arab question.” Jews were no longer a minority seeking to survive in the face of an often hostile host. They had assumed sovereignty in 1948, and with political power they had the responsibility to behave as they would have wanted their hosts to behave toward them over the centuries.

Observing developments from his perch at Brandeis University, Rawidowicz was gravely disappointed by the failure of Jews, in the form of the State of Israel, to act on the lessons of their historical experience. Rather than evince sympathy for another national minority, the state treated the Arab population in its midst (as well as the refugees who took flight or were expelled) with contempt, hostility, and discrimination. What was especially unsettling to Rawidowicz was that the state’s behavior marked a precipitous moral descent. Jacob, he lamented in his characteristic language, had assumed the ways of Esau; the ethical code of the Jew had become indistinguishable from that of the gentile.

Rawidowicz thus positioned himself as an unreconstructed Jewish moral exceptionalist, firmly wedded to the belief that Jews, by virtue of their past travails, demanded more of themselves as ethical beings. Ironically, it was a similar belief that undergirded the worldview of the Israeli political leaders whom Rawidowicz took to task. Already in 1939, the influential Zionist leader Berl Katznelson spoke of the Jewish and Zionist moral imperative of maintaining purity of arms when engaging the Arab enemy. Subsequently, Israeli political leaders insisted that purity of arms, known in Hebrew as *tohar ha-neshek*, was the code of honor that would guide soldiers of the Jewish state in battle. And purity of arms, it is said in stridently defensive tones today, continues to guide soldiers of the Jewish state in battle.

Is this so? The current version of *tohar ha-neshek* in the IDF manual declares:

The IDF servicemen and women will use their weapons and force only for the purpose of their mission, only to the nec-

essary extent and will maintain their humanity even during combat. IDF soldiers will not use their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war, and will do all in their power to avoid causing harm to their lives, bodies, dignity and property.

We are left to wonder whether the doctrine of “purity of arms” has much operational significance for the IDF today.

And yet, the recently released report of the United Nations (UN) Fact-Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, headed by the widely respected South African jurist Richard Goldstone, casts serious doubt on the veracity of this formulation. The controversial report catalogues instances in which Israel attacked impermissible targets (a mosque, a hospital, a UN compound), employed illegal arms or techniques, and in fact, to borrow from the IDF’s own code, “use(d) their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war.” Though incomplete (Israel did not cooperate with the Goldstone mission), the findings are sobering. They are echoed by the testimonies of Israeli soldiers collected by the Israeli nongovernmental organization (NGO), Breaking the Silence. These findings led the UN Fact-Finding Mission to best conclude that “some of the actions of the Government of Israel might justify a competent court finding that crimes against humanity have been committed.”

The response is sadly familiar. Attack the messenger. Goldstone is a bad Jew. The soldiers of Breaking the Silence are traitors. The world is against us. Contrary to appearances, the IDF claims that *tohar ha-neshek* was indeed upheld, at great cost — and not just in Gaza, but in Lebanon (I and II) and in every other military conflict in which it has been engaged.

Although many Israeli soldiers undoubtedly believe that it is better to incur risks to their own wellbeing than to incur civilian casualties on the other side of the battle line, I am no longer certain that a markedly higher percentage of Israeli soldiers than, say, American, Russian, South African, or Egyptian soldiers would agree to — and more importantly, act on — the principle of

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tohar ha-neshek. Consequently, we are left to wonder whether the doctrine of “purity of arms” has much operational significance for the IDF today.

To confront this prospect is to surrender, and quite painfully so, the claim of Jewish moral exceptionalism. Perhaps we need to consider the notion that *tohar ha-neshek* was — if not a historical myth *tout court* — widely and regularly violated throughout the history of the long conflict between Jews and Arabs in historic Palestine. While surely practiced in some instances, it has served in others as a shield of self-justification, at once capable of deflecting criticism and asserting a Jewish moralism that Israelis invoke selectively (e.g., when not dismissing it as the limpid product of the *galut* Jew).

In this, as in many matters, the irascible and always trenchant Jewish philosopher Yeshayahu Leibowitz has much to teach us. In

October 1953, an Israeli army unit commanded by a young Ariel Sharon led a reprisal raid in the Jordanian town of Kibya to exact revenge for an Arab terrorist act in which a Jewish woman and her two children in the town of Yehud were murdered. Many decried the disproportionate violence of the reprisal in which some 60 people were killed as a violation of the exalted norms of Jewish morality.

Leibowitz, though, dissented. “The morality of Judaism,” he pronounced, “is a most questionable concept. Morality, after all, does not admit a modifying attribute and cannot be ‘Jewish’ or ‘not Jewish.’” Leibowitz understood a half century ago the dangers of cloaking oneself in the veil of purity — in ways that speak directly to the veil of moral exceptionalism that has long cloaked *tohar ha-neshek*. “For the sake of that which is holy,” he warned, “man is capable of acting without any restraint” — Jacob, no less than Esau. 

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Are They His Adornments? On Guns and Masculinity

ARYEH COHEN

When I went to Israel in the mid-1970s to study in yeshivah for a year (which became two years, then five years, then *aliyah* and a life-long commitment, then twelve years), there was a moment ritualized in the surety of its repetition with every new cadre of American students.

As I was studying at a *hesder* yeshivah, all of my Israeli contemporaries were either serving or on the brink of serving in the Israeli army. As a result of this, our Israeli colleagues in the *bet midrash* and with whom we shared dorm rooms and lunch tables were — when on security detail — armed. This was quite a change from the urban and suburban lives that my American colleagues and I had led prior to our time at yeshivah. The reaction to this situation is fascinating in hindsight. The overwhelming response was awe. Here's the ritualized moment: At some time during the year, almost every one of the Americans would borrow one of the Israeli students' weapons (usually an M16 submachine gun), unloaded, and be photographed holding the gun. There were ancillary moments to this central ritual such as acquiring IDF shirts or hats or T-shirts. However, all were secondary to the moment of posing with the weapon.

I feel the need to stress that these were seventeen-, eighteen-, or nineteen-year-olds who spent most of their waking hours studying Talmud. These were young men whose life experiences and cultural knowledge up until that moment had taught them to avoid people with weapons. Yet, here they were, venerating death-dealing weaponry. The weapons, of course, were not seen as *real*, as in "I might be in combat where I would have to fire a weapon at another person." They were props and the young men were Rambo or Ari ben Canaan for that moment.

Holding the weapon was also a transitory cure for what might be called the diasporic malady — living historical powerlessness and oppression. These young men were exulting in the power of an army that was no more theirs than their powerlessness in North America; however, this momentary dream of masculinity served to assuage the learned powerlessness of the

American Jewish community.

The contestation about the status of weaponry is inscribed in some of the earliest texts of Rabbinic Judaism — texts that were part of the core curriculum of these students. *Mishnah Shabbat* 6:4 records some regulations for what one may transport from a private domain to a public domain on Shabbat.

A man may not go out with a sword or a bow or a shield or a club or a spear; and if he went out [with the like of these] he is liable to a sin-offering. R. Eliezer says: They are his adornments. But the Sages say: They are only a disgrace to him, for it is said (Isaiah 2:4): And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.

Whether or not a man may carry his weapon from a private to a public domain depends on whether weapons are considered to be adornments like jewelry (*tachshitin*). If so, then it is parallel to what a woman is permitted to wear while going from a private to a public domain in this chapter of *Mishnah*. R. Eliezer claims that weapons adorn a man. They are intricately bound up with his masculinity and are a glory to it. As proof of his position, he draws support from a verse in Psalms (45:4): "Gird your sword upon your thigh, O hero, in your splendor and glory." Rav Kahane, a Babylonian sage who made *aliyah* to the land of Israel, avers: "This verse refers to Torah study."

The American Jewish community is unsettled about what guns, army, power, and violence mean. While it would probably be seen as scandalous if the son of a Modern Orthodox family abandoned the professional track for a stint in the marines, it would be seen as laudable if that same son joined the IDF paratroopers. *Gun control* is desirable in Los Angeles but *guns* are desired by Americans living in Jerusalem.

This should force us to face the question: Do we think that weapons adorn our communal masculinity?

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Israel's Arms

YOSSI MELMAN

Two separate episodes, which occurred in September 2009, can shed a light on Israel's policy of arms sales. The first was the "secret" visit of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Moscow to meet with Russian leaders. Mr. Netanyahu discussed with his hosts the Iranian nuclear program — which, understandably, is of deep concern to Israel — and tried also to persuade them to reverse their decision to sell Tehran the Russian-made anti-aircraft missile defense S-300. The second episode

Israel realized that it had to develop its own small military industry to ensure that its needs would be met in the event of another arms embargo.

was the visit of Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman to five major African nations. While the proclaimed aim of his tour was the discussion of malnutrition, hunger, and disease in Africa, Lieberman and his entourage dealt with less humanitarian and elevated subjects and laid the groundwork for future weapons deals.

The two episodes illustrate Israel's problematic and controversial behavior: On the one hand it is asking the world to take into consideration its security needs. On the other hand Israel itself shows no consideration of other nations' concerns. Israel preaches morality, values, and ideals, and it portrays itself as the only democracy in the Middle East. Yet behind the scenes it is involved in murky and dubious arms deals.

The request that Russia refrains from selling arms to Iran in particular demonstrates a measure of chutzpa and hypocrisy. Israel has surpassed Russia already in 2008 as the world's third largest arms exporter. Israel has (almost) no inhibitions in selling weapons on the global market. And, in fact, Israel ignored Russian protests when it equipped the country of Georgia with military hardware, technology, and military training.

Nevertheless, one shouldn't be so naïve as to ask Israel to be an exception to the dominant rule, or to become a role model. The dream and aspiration of the founding fathers of the Jewish state, rooted in the ideals of the prophets to become "a light to nations," have long ago faded and crashed on the hard surface of Middle East political and military reality. But one might have expected Israel to play down its rule in this shady

and dark business. Instead of showing some remorse and justifying its arms sales policy as a necessity, Israel prides itself on and boasts about becoming a leading power in the field.

With arms sales of between \$4–7 billion annually in the last five years, Israel positioned itself as the third largest arms exporter after the U.S. and France, and before world powers such as the U.K., Russia, China, or India.

It all started modestly and humbly. During the first 20 years of its independence, Israel had difficulties finding sources of military supplies to satisfy its legitimate defense needs. After approval from the then Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, Czechoslovakia provided Israel with airplanes, weapons, and ammunition, which turned the balance in Israel's favor in its struggle against the Arab invading armies in the 1948–9 War of Independence. But once the Soviet Union realized that Israel would not become another "socialist" satellite, it abandoned Israel in the early 1950s and Israel was forced to search for new suppliers. The West was a natural candidate. But having strong oil interests in the Arab world, both the U.S. and Britain rejected Israeli appeals. Eventually, temporary and limited mutual interests formed a French–Israeli alliance. It lasted for more than a decade and resulted in the 1956 conspiracy (together with the U.K.) to invade Egypt during the Suez War. France continued the cooperation by providing Israel with its nuclear reactor and weapons. But the "Bridge over the Mediterranean," as the French–Israeli alliance was dubbed, ended after Israel found itself in another round of war with its Arab neighbors. France declared an arms embargo on Israel in 1967 and refused to honor its commitments.

The 1967 Six Day War turned out to be a watershed in Israeli history for several reasons, among them: a smashing victory over the Arab states and the occupation of Arab territories, a rise in economic prosperity, and the replacement of France with the U.S. as its major political patron and arms supplier. Still, Israel realized that it had to develop its own small military industry to ensure that its needs would be met should an arms embargo recur. Originally the aim was to research and develop state-of-the-art sophisticated systems, enabling the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to maintain a

Yossi Melman, an Israeli writer and commentator with the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, specializes in writing about defense, intelligence, and security matters.

technological edge over its Arab adversaries, especially those systems that Israel couldn't purchase from the Americans. Nowadays Israel is manufacturing missiles, tanks, boats, aviation systems, artillery, rifles, ammunition, and intelligence equipment.

Over time the *raison d'être* for the weapons industry changed. The scope and the range of the Israeli military-industrial complex extended and its mission turned upside down. When the cost of research and development skyrocketed, the IDF justified the expense by seeking markets in which to sell its military merchandise. Since the 1980s, the Israeli military industry has been hiring more workers and salesmen, who travel the world offering Israel's "battle-proven" goods.

The name of the game, sanctioned by the Israeli Ministry of Defense and government, was commerce — at any cost. Israel, it was

claimed, needed to produce weapons and military systems not only for its defense needs but also for economic reasons: to gain hard currency, to provide work, and to sustain a larger workforce. "If we don't do it the British, French, South Africans, Russians, Ukrainians, and others will fill the gap." A new brand of Israelis surfaced and prospered: arms dealers, middlemen, security advisors, and military experts. Restrictions were lifted. Weapons were sold to Israel's enemies such as Iran in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Israeli weapons found their ways to fuel civil wars in Africa and to support dictators in Asia and South America.

In the meantime Israel's reputation has been stained and involvement in conflicts has given Israel a bad name. With good intentions Israel gave birth to an industry that suddenly and unintentionally turned into an uncontrolled beast that has to be fed. 

A Canadian Perspective on Gun Control

MIRIAM KRAMER AND AARON LEVY

In the three years since we moved from New York to Toronto, we've been asked countless times, in all seriousness: "Isn't it dangerous in the United States?" We laugh each time at the seeming absurdity, the way our Canadian colleagues relate to America with the same fear that Americans usually reserve for developing nations engaged in active civil war.

The frequency of the question seems to stem from many Canadians thinking of America as a gun-loving, gun-toting country with dangerous, crime-ridden cities. Conversely, many Americans regard Canada (okay, most Americans never really think about Canada, but among those who do) as a liberal, safe haven where everyone, including people who live in urban centers, leaves his or her doors unlocked. Of course, neither of these oversimplifications is true. Americans own guns and Canadians own guns. Each country has its relatively safe cities and its less-safe cities and each country has crime and gun-related violence. But is there any truth to the generalization that Canada is much safer than the U.S.?

It would seem so: the U.S. has a substantially higher rate of gun-related crimes each year compared to Canada. In 2004, there were about six firearm homicides per 100,000 people in the U.S.; in Canada less than two per 100,000.

Why does Canada have one third the gun violence of the U.S.?

Reason One: Gun Prevalence

The U.S. has more guns overall, with 200 million civilian firearms in 2004 among a total population of 293 million people (or 68,259 guns per 100,000 people), compared to seven million civilian firearms among 32 million Canadians in the same year (21,875 guns per 100,000 people). In other words, there are three times more guns per person in the U.S. than in Canada.

Reason Two: Gun Type

While in both countries the overwhelming majority of gun-related crimes were committed using a handgun, America has a higher proportion of handguns as opposed to long guns or rifles, types of guns used for hunting and other recreational purposes. There are approximately 80 million handguns in the U.S. (comprising 40 percent of all guns) but only one million handguns in Canada (14 percent). Comparing per capita handgun ownership rates is even more striking: some 26 percent of Americans own one or more handguns compared with a mere three percent of Canadians. More handguns lead to more gun-related crime.

While it's possible that Canadians feel less

Miriam Kramer is director of the Canadian Education Project. **Aaron Levy** is rabbi of the Kiever Synagogue and founding director and spiritual leader of Makom, a joyous, grassroots, downtown community in Toronto, where the two live with their son, Elior.

scared and are therefore less motivated to buy guns — a sentiment Michael Moore played up in *Bowling for Columbine* — there are other, more measurable policy factors in play as well. For starters, Canada has no equivalent to the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, with its oft-debated declaration that “the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.” Therefore, Canada has no long history of court battles and judgments regarding the intended meaning of this phrase and whether preventing people from buying, possessing, or carrying a gun is an infringement on their constitutional (or Canadian Charter) rights. In Canada, owning a gun is not a legal entitlement.

Reason Three: Handgun Laws

In America, handgun regulation is left to the states and just about anyone can buy a gun. If you’re over 21 years of age, live in the state where you’re trying to purchase the gun, and aren’t a felon, a fugitive, mentally ill, or an illegal immigrant, you can purchase a gun. (In most states there are actually more restrictions on voting and receiving welfare assistance than there are on buying a handgun.) A background check may or may not be performed on you. In

addition to the ease with which Americans can purchase guns, it’s also relatively easy to obtain a gun permit, which is not actually required for the purchase of a gun.

In contrast, Canada has extremely strict federally mandated handgun regulations. In 1977, handguns were classified as “restricted weapons,” requiring a permit before one can be purchased. In order to obtain a handgun permit, a Canadian must prove that she or he needs the gun for a particular occupation, is part of an approved shooting club, is a collector, or needs the gun for self-protection. Each weapon must be registered and authorizations are required to transport them between different locations. Attending a gun-safety training course is mandatory and all gun purchases are subject to a 28-day waiting period.

It’s true that neither of us often think about guns, and we can’t think of anyone we know who owns a gun in either country. But Canada does feel safer, and not because Canadians are more relaxed, trusting, and *laissez-faire* about life; serious government policies on gun control account for the vastly dissimilar rates of gun ownership and gun type, and therefore gun violence between the U.S. and Canada. 

Firearm-Related Injuries and Deaths

LES FISHER

The U.S. is the most highly armed country in the world. There are 90 guns for every 100 citizens, according to 2007 figures from the Small Arms Survey; in the rest of the world, the rate is ten firearms for every 100 citizens. The U.S. rate of lethal violence is correspondingly higher than other developing countries. A study of crime in the 1990s by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) put the U.S. firearm homicide rate for children at sixteen times that of other developed countries. Moreover, gun-related suicides are the leading cause of gun-related deaths.

Firearm injuries, by virtue of the number of deaths, years of life lost, and cost to society, represent an important and persistent public health problem. Although the total fluctuates from year to year, firearms consistently rank second only to motor vehicle crashes as a cause of fatal injury in the U.S. More than 95 percent of fatal firearm injuries are the result of self-directed or interpersonal violence. The available

data demonstrate that firearm injuries continue to be a major cause of mortality in the U.S., producing approximately 30,000 deaths per year. In 2002, more than half of these deaths were suicides, a fact that has been neglected by much of the public health community and largely outside the scope of criminal justice efforts to decrease firearm misuse. Gun injuries have a very high case-fatality ratio, especially self-inflicted gunshot wounds. And there’s a greater chance that a gun injury in the home will harm another family member — not an outside intruder.

The long-term consequences of firearm injury can be substantial. In one study of hospitalized gunshot victims, health status six to twelve months after injury was significantly worse than before the event. In addition to physical disabilities, more than one third of individuals studied reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Another measure of the magnitude of the

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gun problem and its importance for society are the costs of gun violence, which include not only the costs stemming from gunshot injuries but also the costs of all the efforts to deter shootings or protect against them. For example, it is estimated that the costs of gun violence in the U.S. are approximately \$116 billion per year (in 2004 dollars). These costs increase our individual health insurance rates nationwide — what does this mean?

Banning all guns is not suitable nor realistic among public health prevention workers who

seek not to blame but rather to prevent, reduce, and ameliorate substantial health risks. Public health prevention strategies (before the injury) that do seem to work to reduce gun-related “accidents,” homicides, and suicides, include hospital and community-based programs (like CeaseFire in Chicago) that work to stop victims from shooting others — the most common form of street gun violence. Effective strategies for reducing gun violence also include using tested school curricula. These strategies would eventually prove economically wise. 

The Frisco Kid

JESSICA ZIMMERMAN

Born and raised in San Francisco, I was a Manhattan transplant during college, rabbinical school, and a few years beyond. In the liberal and intellectual enclaves where I was educated — formally and informally — I did not know a single person who would fathom owning a gun, let alone keeping one in the glove compartment of their car. Then, I moved to Phoenix.

It was 117 degrees outside on the day I arrived. On finding my air conditioner broken, I set out to Trader Joe's to fill my fridge with cold drinks and lots of ice cream. There, I was greeted by a huge sign hanging next to the entrance stating, “No Weapons on these Premises.” “No weapons??” I mumbled audibly, “Trader Joe's is known for its tasty salsas and spiced pecans. What is this about weapons?”

As I met people during my first weeks in Phoenix, I started asking about the sign. I learned that owning a gun in Arizona — even within the Jewish community — wasn't unusual. Apparently, I had chosen to become a rabbi in the Wild West. As I met congregants, I'd ask, “Do you have a gun?” With each affirmative answer, my shock grew deeper and my questions more incredulous. “Are there rabbis here with guns? Where do you keep your gun? Why do you have a gun?” People answered very openly about their gun ownership. When I asked the middle-aged president of the congregation — a real estate developer who drives a Cadillac convertible — his answer concurred with many other people's: “Rattlesnakes,” he said. “Rattlesnakes??” I asked. While I could not fathom the scene, I heard that answer frequently. I never saw a rattlesnake in Arizona, aside from the one behind glass in the

Sonoran Desert Museum.

The conversation about guns dominated my first few months in Phoenix. In addition to the still-puzzling reptile explanation, some people told me that it was human intruders they feared. They feel safer with a gun in the house, they said, since it would allow them to protect their families. Others told me that I shouldn't worry, since I had probably unknowingly been in the presence of thousands of guns while riding the subway in New York. Still others told me that we as Jews, should respect our Constitutional right to bear arms, since many Jewish communities throughout history had no way to defend themselves from government-sanctioned anti-Jewish actions.

I never got used to the reality that many people in Arizona (and elsewhere in America) choose to exercise their right to carry a licensed gun. I often wondered if any of the synagogue employees had a gun...or maybe one of the parents of a student coming to a bat mitzvah rehearsal in my office. Did the little old lady in the front row on Friday night have a gun in her purse?

One Shabbat, an argument broke out between two congregants. Before I moved to Arizona, I would have felt sure that nothing more sinister than yelling would take place between two members of a synagogue in the parking lot. But once I realized that most of the Jews in Arizona pack heat in case they encounter a particularly aggressive rattlesnake — or fellow congregant?? — I couldn't be so sure. Half joking, I stepped between the two arguing men and said, “Guys, you know we have a policy of no shooting in shul on Shabbes.” 

Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman, Synagogue 3000's Director of Congregational Engagement, is passionate about helping synagogues transform into *kehillot kedoshot* — sacred communities. Ordained at HUC/NY in 2003, she began her rabbinate as Marshall T. Meyer Rabbinic Fellow at Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in Manhattan and then moved to the Wild West to become the Grace and Horace Goldsmith Rabbi at Congregation Beth Israel in Phoenix, Ariz.

Arms for Images

ARI Y. KELMAN

American Jews like their guns at a distance. Despite the participation of Jewish soldiers in each of America's wars — going back to 1776 — it wasn't until 1948 that Jews finally found guns that fit them, culturally speaking. But there was one catch: Those guns were in Israel.

In both films, the U.S. serves as a peaceful place where people can start their lives anew and leave their Israeli guns and battles behind.

And even more: they fell in love with the young, tanned, fit, Hebrew-speaking kibbutznik who knew how to handle them. As American Jews moved into the suburbs and white collar professions, Israelis both worked and defended the land with their hands. As American Jews inaugurated their own Jewish adulthoods in lavish celebrations of b'nai mitzvah, the kibbutznik-cum-soldier became an adult in the line of fire. From the comfort of their own homes, American Jews cheered on their Israeli counterparts, absorbing and adopting the images of Jewish soldiers while keeping the guns themselves at a safe distance.

Nothing captures this exchange better than "Exodus," the 1960 film of Leon Uris' 1958 novel of the same name. The film follows Ari ben Canaan (Paul Newman) as he leads a boat of refugees through a hunger strike from Cypress to Palestine, and then helps orchestrate the defense of Jewish settlements in Israel's War of Independence.

From the first, ben Canaan is not your average Jew. In fact, the first time we lay eyes on him, he is shirtless, emerging from the cold Mediterranean water, sneaking his way into Cypress. From then on, he takes the form of the prototypical "new Jew": a self-confident and self-sufficient Israeli who is not afraid of getting his hands dirty with either mud or blood.

As Jewish historian Deborah Dash Moore reminds us, "Exodus" succeeded because it sold the Zionist project as western — a genre in which both farmers and guns played a major role. By folding Palestine into mythic visions of the American frontier, "Exodus" drew American Jews into its epic wake and helped set the template for American visions of Israel

and Israelis. Moreover, it let American Jews — who famously did not line up at El Al counters to purchase one-way tickets — export philanthropic dollars and import images of Jews fighting Jewish fights with guns.

Ben Canaan became the poster boy for the new Jew. And his image proved so popular and powerful that for about 45 years, American audiences did not see another blockbuster film with an Israeli main character, until Americans were treated to the double feature of Steven Spielberg's "Munich" (2005) and Adam Sandler's "Don't Mess With the Zohan" (2008).

Like the epic "Exodus," both recent films employ a version of the Israeli superstud/soldier myth. But unlike "Exodus," both temper that depiction with heavy doses of ambivalence and regret. "Munich" focuses on the character of Avner (Eric Bana), who leads a team of Mossad agents to exact revenge on those responsible for the massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. Avner never sits comfortably in his role as hired killer, and even though he carries out his task, by the end of the film he literally disappears into the New York skyline.

Sandler's "Zohan," a parody of the Israeli super-soldier, shares Avner's discomfort. He moves to New York to start his life over as a hairdresser in an effort to make the world "silky smooth." Like Bana's Avner, but with a perverse sense of humor, Zohan eventually partners with and marries the sister of his long-time nemesis and they build a mall together. In Brooklyn.

In both films, the U.S. (and specifically New York) serves as an alternate fantasy of the new Jewish future — a peaceful place where people can start their lives anew and leave their Israeli guns and battles behind.

"Munich" and "Zohan" are no less reflections of American Jewish fantasies of Israel than their predecessor. All three films strive, on some level, to explain the Israel-Palestine conflict to American audiences — both Jewish and not. "Exodus" did this in terms of the myth of the American frontier; "Zohan" and "Munich" do this in a more sentimental register, allowing their characters to embody America's collective ambivalence around the meaning of Israel and its ongoing occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

Yet, despite their different endings, each

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film participates in a similar exchange of arms for images. Each exports guns and violence to the Middle East, leaving American Jews to watch, support, cheer, cry, sympathize, and criticize from their seats. The relationship between Jews and guns remains exportable, as American Jews can thrill vicariously at films

like “Exodus,” and express their ambivalence through characters like Zohan and Avner, as long as those images keep their guns at a distance. Despite their differences, all three films agree that Jews and guns still only belong over there, even or especially as over there seems to grow ever more distant from right here. 

Ethics continued from page 20

inherent connection between ethical considerations and their Jewish identities. A certificate must not only help exploited workers but must also seize what might be “teachable moments” of the grandest proportions.

With the *Tav Chevrati* having reached a certain degree of maturity, I no longer assess its success simply in terms of the number of new restaurants that join our ranks on a monthly basis. For me, success is the world-renowned Rosh Yeshiva who proudly tells his students that, when entering a restaurant, he first looks for a

Tav Chevrati and only afterward for a traditional kashrut certificate. Success is the 50-year-old mother who boasts that her ninth-grader only eats in places bearing our certificate. Success is knowing that we have not only made a difference in the lives of thousands of restaurant workers who now receive their due, or thousands of people with disabilities who can now enjoy a night out like anyone else, but it is the knowledge that we are educating the next generation of young Israelis to take small steps to create a more just society inspired and informed by Jewish values. 

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Avraham's Father's Idols

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Each month over the course of this year, a guest columnist reflects on the midrash of Avraham smashing the idols in his father's shop. We've asked our writers to think about the idols they must still smash to get to "Canaan."

Living with the "Arational"

AMITAI ADLER

My name is Amitai Adler, and right here, right now, I am coming out of the mystical closet. I don't have a tie-dyed *tallis*. I don't identify as "Renewal." I don't even really like drum circles. I am actually a rather studious rabbinical student — with a bent for halakhah — at a Conservative movement seminary. But I believe in energy. I believe in magic. I believe in angels and in demons. I believe in a universe of both the seen and the unseen. I believe in the ability of human beings to see the unseen. And I believe I have caught glimpses of it. There. Now you know my secret.

How did I get here, and what stood in my way? In some ways, my upbringing could not have prepared me better for what I aim to do — be a rabbi and teacher. But the question we ask ourselves in the context of this discussion is: In what ways were we shaped that ultimately proved to be impediments to becoming who we needed to be?

With me, it was rationalism — by which I mean not the Rationalism of classical philosophy but a rationality reflecting an absence of the mystical. Both my parents are, intellectually, children of the 1950s. I appreciate their optimistic streaks, and how they taught me about civil rights early and often. But less helpful was their reasoned approach to Judaism. Though spiritual, they are not comfortable with the mystical. My mother is a deeply pragmatic Reform-oriented thinker and my father was trained by Rav Eliezer Berkovits, z"l, a master of reasoned traditional thought.

I, on the other hand, instinctively relate to God and to the universe first and foremost in terms of energy and essence. While I view *this* world as key (that being a primary tenet of all Jewish understandings of life), I see it as one world among many, and I view it — as I mentioned — as a mix of the seen and unseen, as a living network of energy. Thus I was fascinated early on with magic, mythology, and tales of the Hassidic wonder-workers, though I shunned the "crunchy granola" that so often seemed to accompany such interests in American society. Additionally, by disappearing into books, into silent contemplation, into creative artistic experiments, I began to develop a reputation with my family and teachers as a "daydreamer" with his "head in the clouds." It must have seemed to my parents

that I made less and less sense the older I got.

For me, my life began to make sense after I taught myself to meditate. I probably made a hash of it, seeing as I was only eleven, but I kept at it, both the practice and the inexhaustible reading and research; by the time I entered college, I was seriously meditating on an almost-daily basis. That practice helped me reconcile that although I had instinctively seen the universe I had never accessed the language to understand how it worked. I always instinctively felt as though I were walking in many worlds at once. Deeply empathic, I had always felt what others felt; perceived to some small extent things that were intangible, sensed the invisible; by college, I even began to catch glimpses of the patterns of force and energy that make up the world around us. Naturally, since modern Western society doesn't even acknowledge the phenomena of the mystical, I had always felt constrained to keep my perceptions and feelings to myself since, as a child, there was apparently no place for them in the world around me. Meditation — with its discipline to calmness, to channeling and controlling feelings and perceptions, to balancing one's energies toward inner peace — not only gave me tools to control my sensory input, it gave me a sense of harmony with who I was, thus freeing me to explore the larger universe that beckoned me.

Meditation also influenced my desire to major in theater arts, as acting is a craft well-suited to working by feeling and not reason, and one that is entirely dependent upon the ability to freely embrace the truth and the totality of one's being. That decision bewildered and slightly horrified my uncomprehending parents, who understood the desire to teach and write, but really didn't think a person could make a living as an actor, and never understood the more spiritual and psychological elements of my attraction to acting. Finally, meditation kept me grounded, and, completely unconsciously, it worked its way into my practice of *tefillah*, which probably ultimately saved me as a Jew.

When I was a teenager I took a *rumspringa*, as the Amish phrase puts it: I stopped going to shul, kept zealously *treyf*, and so forth. Then, a few years later, on Rosh Hashanah I went home to go to shul — ostensibly to please my family

Amitai Adler is a fifth-year rabbinical student at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at the American Jewish University.

and enjoy some home cooking. But as I stood in services, bringing to bear the focus and concentration I had learned through meditation, I felt answered; I felt not alone. Not in a wacky sense of hearing voices, of course, but in a real sense, unjustifiable by any rational measurements. This moment of brushing up to *devekut*, a clinging closeness with God, was the payoff for my years of sensing energy and expanding awareness in a controlled way, through the practice of meditating — of channeling experiences through the liturgy rather than approaching the liturgy as an intellectual or abstractly spiritual practice.

I am finishing rabbinical school now at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los

Angeles. My teacher, Rabbi Elliot Dorff, introduced me at long last to the word “arational” — not something rational and not something “irrational” as in senseless, but something that simply falls outside the paradigm of rationalism. Mysticism, which is the term I have used to describe my relationship with Judaism and the world, is “arational.” I never knew the word until recently, but I had to find its meaning on my own. Rationalism was the idol of my parents — their worldview and their engagement with Judaism. It was the idol I had to destroy in order to become the person my Creator meant me to be. And it has provided an extremely fine grounding for studying rabbinics — even those areas most rational. 

Yona Verwer

Protection Amulet — Pewter

From the series “Kabbalah of Bling”
acrylic on canvas with chain

“The Kabbalah of Bling”

YONA VERWER

This series, “The Kabbalah of Bling” features canvasses shaped as large-scale modern “amulets,” hung on chains, and ready to wear.

For centuries amulets have been used as appeals to heaven for safety, health, wealth, and power. Currently many people rely on different types of talismans — worshipping guns, drugs, money, media, and art for their personal and social wellbeing; some deny the need for guidance of any kind.

These paintings comment on the way Kabbalah has been misused lately (appropriated as it has been by pop icons) and also on contemporary notions of religion. These “amulets” reflect on this contemporary concept of self-reliance and the faux spirituality found in the worship of objects for their own value. 

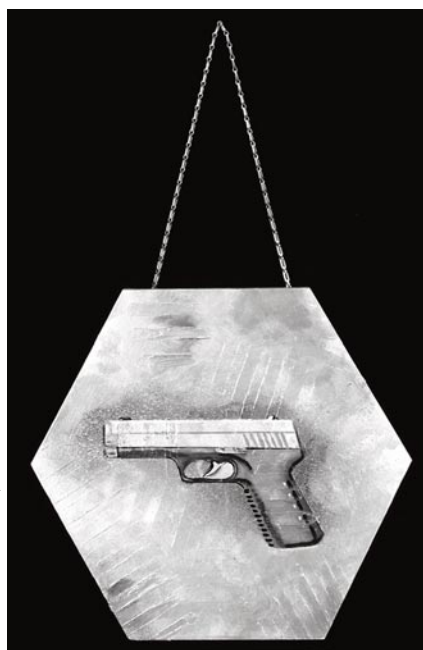
Yona Verwer

Protection Amulet — Gold

From the series “Kabbalah of Bling”
acrylic on canvas with chain



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Dutch-born artist Yona Verwer received her MFA from the Royal Academy of Arts in The Hague. Her recent paintings and photographs feature mystical Jewish imagery as well as amulet-shaped objects and portraits.

Rabbi **Bonnie Koppell** is the rabbi at Temple Chai in Phoenix, Ariz. and a chaplain in the U.S. Army Reserve. As a colonel in the 63rd Regional Support Command, she has been deployed twice to Iraq and twice to Afghanistan to provide Jewish religious support.

David Kopel is research director of the Independence Institute and author of *The Torah and Self-Defense and Armed Resistance to the Holocaust*. He can be reached at www.davekopel.org.

Nathan Weissler, a tenth grader at the Melvin J. Berman Hebrew Academy in Rockville, Md., is an active member at Ohev Shalom, a Modern Orthodox Congregation in Washington, D.C.

Rabbi **David Levy** is the university chaplain at Colgate University.

The talmudic injunction quoted by Rabbi Koppell affirms both a right and a duty to defend one's own life, for life is a divine gift. There is also a duty to defend innocents: "nor shall you stand idly by when your neighbor's life is at stake." (Leviticus 19:16)

Oppressors have always tried to suppress Jewish arms. In pre-monarchic times, "there was no smith found throughout the land of Israel: for the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make them swords or spears..." (1 Samuel 13:19) Later, the dhimmi, the Jews and Christians of Muslim-ruled lands, were forbidden to possess arms or to defend themselves from attacks by Muslims. The Nazis used gun registration lists to confiscate Jewish arms.

Conversely, armed Jewish resistance to the Nazis saved many lives and strengthened Jewish claims to be treated as active allies of the West rather than as passive supplicants.

Regarding military guns, automatic firearms have been very strictly regulated ever since the National Firearms Act of 1934. Contemporary gun prohibitionists attempt to confuse the public by proposing bans on guns that look like machine guns, but which actually function like ordinary guns.

"If someone comes to kill you, get up early in the morning to kill him first." What is the origin and meaning of this quote? This philosophy of self-defense clearly originates from the centuries of persecution the Jewish people have experienced. However, there are many different interpretations as to the meaning of this passage. Numerous scholars, philosophers, and social activists — including Henry David Thoreau,

Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — have understood the concept of killing "him first" to mean that instead of killing your oppressor you peacefully disarm and change him forever. Human rights must be asserted forcefully but without physical violence.

Accordingly, I agree with Rabbi Bonnie

Koppell that "... responsible application is critical.... [and that until] we reach that longed-for era, possession of modest firearms seems reasonable." Thus, we must strike a balance between the Jewish values that cherish all forms of life and our need for defense in a world where antisemitism and other forms of hatred prevail. We must continue the never-ending struggle for justice and equality.

— Nathan Weissler

While I tend to agree that the Sanhedrin text is a call to self defense both politically and personally, I am wary to view this text as a Jewish call to arms. The dangers of personal gun ownership outweigh the value of holding firearms — even for self-defense.

When I was learning to drive in New York, it was impressed upon me that a car could cause

great harm or even death if not handled properly. State law required hours of instruction as well as written and road tests to get a license — and a year's probation. But I can buy a rifle with no permit, instruction, or examination, and no safety certification — just a background check that says I haven't shot anyone (yet).

In tractate *Bava Kamma* 80b Rav preaches that it is forbidden to own a dangerous animal. Rav's view is that we should not possess items that pose a physical threat to others. The threats of injury from firearms are risks that fall under Rav's edict.

— David Levy

If someone comes to kill you, get up early in the morning to kill him first.

Sanhedrin 72a

Judaism is not a pacifist tradition. We recognize not only a right but, it can be argued, an obligation of self-defense. We acknowledge the "yetzer ha-ra," the inclination toward evil, the temptation toward wrongdoing with which we struggle individually and communally. Given the reality of the world in which we live, having firearms reasonably available to those who pass fair background checks seems prudent. The Bill of Rights enshrines this right and we do well to consider the wisdom of the founders of our nation in asserting this right so powerfully. And while hunting is not part of Jewish culture, it is still a legal sport in which many of our fellow Americans choose to engage.

There is no reason, though, to allow the sale of weapons that have exclusively military or criminal applications. The Talmud clearly prohibits the sale of weapons to those bent on destruction. (*Avoda Zara* 15b) As with any privilege, responsible application is critical. We hope, pray, and work for a messianic age in which peaceful coexistence prevails. We are enjoined to "seek peace and pursue it." (Psalms 34:14) It behooves us to develop the skills we need to peacefully coexist within our families, our communities, and our world. Until we reach that longed-for era, possession of modest firearms seems reasonable.

— Bonnie Koppell

— David Kopel

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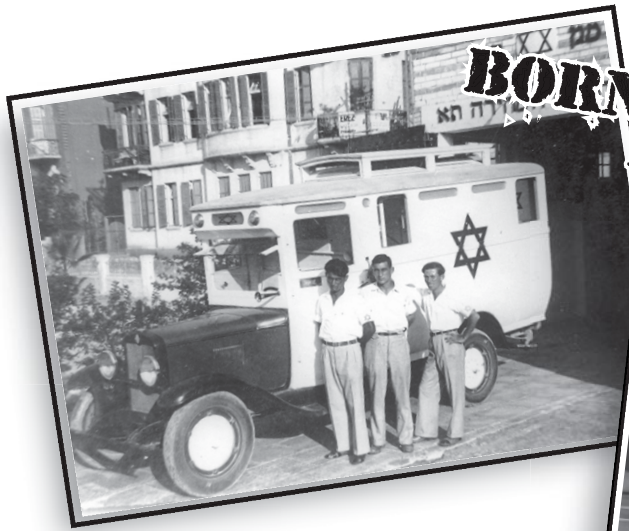
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Yehudah Mirsky, Fellow at the The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute

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Ethics Sigi Ziering

This year our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat; the preparation of food; the people who prepare our food; the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Dyonna Ginsburg is the executive director of *Bema'aglei Tzedek* ("Circles of Justice"), an Israeli NGO that engages thousands of young Israelis, religious and secular alike, in ongoing educational programs and social action campaigns incorporating Jewish text study and in-depth understandings of current socioeconomic issues in Israeli society. For more information, visit www.mtzedek.org.il.

A Journey into the Ethics of Kashrut

DYONNA GINSBURG

In light of last year's scandal at the Agri-processors meat plant, *Bema'aglei Tzedek* ("Circles of Justice") is probably best known for being a pioneer in the field of ethical kashrut. Our *Tav Chevrati*, a certificate granted free of charge to restaurants that treat their employees ethically and are handicapped accessible, now graces over 350 establishments throughout Israel in places as diverse as Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Kfar Saba, Beer-Sheva, Maale-Adumim, Givat Shmuel, Efrat, and Emek Israel.

My journey with *Bema'aglei Tzedek*, in general, and the *Tav Chevrati* in particular, began four years ago shortly after the organization's inception. At that time, I made a very personal decision to eat only in establishments that bear a *Tav Chevrati*. Although today there are hundreds of certified restaurants, the pickings were rather slim back then. This meant that every time I met a friend or colleague for coffee, I couldn't help but think about workers' rights, handicapped accessibility, and what it means to be a Jewish-ethical consumer living in a Jewish state. Although I had been involved in many social justice ventures before, it wasn't until I switched my eating habits that my entire outlook shifted. All of a sudden, I saw things that I had not seen before and became sensitive to the suffering of people whom I had previously ignored. Anyone who has changed their diet — for religious, health, or other reasons — knows that such a decision not only impacts oneself but also one's friends, family, and associates. Indeed, there is not a single person in my address book who does not know that I

only eat in places that are accessible and comply with basic Israeli labor laws — i.e. pay minimum wage, overtime, and social security; register work hours properly; and reimburse expenses related to travel and in-service training.

Several months ago, I had the privilege of sharing our organization's hard-earned wisdom in the field of ethical kashrut with a group of rabbis and lay leaders in Los Angeles who wanted to launch a similar initiative in their own community. Skeptical as to the efficacy of ethical kashrut certification, one of the people at the meeting asked: "In my day job as a labor lawyer, I file class action suits helping thousands of exploited workers. Why should I spend my precious free time worrying about the rights of two Mexican kitchen staff at the local kosher pizzeria? Wouldn't my time be better spent staying at work an extra hour a day?" I answered that an ethical kashrut certificate without a built-in enforcement mechanism is worthless. Consumers will not have faith in a certificate that lacks teeth nor will restaurant proprietors regard such a certificate with seriousness. But, to speak solely in terms of compliance, is missing the point. The power of this certification far surpasses questions of compliance and civic enforcement. Ethical kashrut is about shifting the discourse and behavioral norms in the Jewish community and rediscovering what it means to be a Jew in the modern age. It is about educating an entire generation of young Jews to use ethical considerations in their daily actions and to appreciate the

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