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Hebrews Packing Heat: The Changing Face of Gun Ownership in Jewish America

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Introduction

There's a classic saying that if you ask two Jews a question, you might get three different opinions. American Jews are polarized when it comes to many social and political issues. Whether it is partisan politics, interfaith marriage, or the State of Israel, American Jews hold a wide variety of views on these topics. However, as American Jewish consensus begins to shift following rising antisemitism, the hotly contested opinions regarding firearms in the Jewish community have begun to surface, even if the debate on the issue of gun ownership has been burning for decades. American Jews have contributed immensely to both gun rights movements and gun control movements alike, and Jews have also contributed to America's unique gun culture in many ways. The story of the armed American Jew is a product of both Jewish and American values, relaxed concealed carry laws, and increased alertness due to past and ongoing threats against the American Jewish community.

As a devoted Reform Jew and upcoming rabbi, as well as a certified pistol instructor and range safety officer, I have noticed the ways in which these two worlds have both clashed and cooperated. In sharing my views on the Second Amendment within the Jewish community, I have received a wide variety of reactions, ranging from excited encouragement to awkward disgust. However, as I have noticed that Jewish stances on gun ownership are beginning to shift due to current sociopolitical situations, I realized that my knowledge base as an upcoming rabbi and certified firearms instructor gave me a unique lens on how to analyze how gun ownership has impacted the American Jewish community and our intra-communal relations, and how Jews are rethinking the reality of gun ownership and the role it plays in their lives.

From the age of the Torah, Jews have struggled with the complexities surrounding weapons and self-defense, from moral, spiritual, and ethical perspectives. This aspect of taking

life in order to save life has been a challenge for Jews since the days of antiquity. However, in present-day politically polarized Jewish America, these perspectives are rising to the forefront, as Jews are evaluating what self-protection looks like in their communities.

As I dive into changing trends surrounding American Jewish gun ownership, I want to make my intentions clear, that this work is not necessarily about policy, but rather to analyze the increased and complicated role that guns play in the American Jewish experience. Views on gun ownership that were once considered in the Jewish community to be fringe beliefs have become more commonplace. Like every other controversial issue debated in American culture, the *machloket* around gun ownership for American Jews is not all that different.

Chapter 1: American Jews begin to embrace the Second Amendment

The American Jewish community is undergoing a major transition in regard to its relationship with self-defense, firearms, and the politics of gun ownership. For a long time in the United States, gun ownership rates have been low in the Jewish community, due to a variety of predominant social, political, regional, and cultural factors. The American Jewish community is generally liberal-leaning and liberals tend to favor gun control policies. In addition, the Jewish community is disproportionately concentrated in urban areas in states with stricter gun laws and fewer gun owners, meaning that Jews are less likely than the average American to be exposed to firearms or to be familiar with safe firearm handling. However, due to recent sociopolitical changes over the last couple of decades, such as rising antisemitism and hate crimes, loosened gun laws, and a gradually increasing social acceptance of firearms ownership, many Jews, some of whom once detested the idea of civilian gun ownership, are beginning to take up arms to protect themselves, their families, friends, and congregations. By doing so, I would argue that the Jewish community can better protect itself against security threats and acts of violence, especially given reasonable constraints on temple security budgets and law enforcement resources. However, it is also causing American Jews to experience a moment of fervent controversy as Jews wade their way through the complexities of the centuries-long debate about the place of guns in American society. As we frequently see in American Jewish history, the contested debates present in American culture once again manifest in our synagogue pews and around our Shabbat dinner tables.

It is self-explanatory that America has more firearms in civilian hands than any other country. Firearms are deeply embedded in American culture, all the way from its birth during the Revolutionary War, the Old West, up to today. George Washington, our first president, was

known to carry a sword and pistol at all times.¹ Firearms are frequently mentioned in songs in musical genres as diverse as punk rock, country music, and gangster rap, all of which are uniquely American musical genres which resonate with various sectors and subcultures in American society. The United States also makes some of the best guns in the world, being home to some of the world's most popular firearm manufacturers including Colt, Smith and Wesson, Ruger, Springfield Armory, Mossberg, Browning, Winchester, Kel-Tec, Henry Repeating Arms, Kimber, Magpul, and many others. In a country where there are more guns than people, guns are as American as apple pie, hamburgers, blue jeans, and Hollywood, whether you personally agree with the premise of the Second Amendment or not.

According to the Switzerland-based International Small Arms Survey from 2017², out of the nearly 1 billion firearms owned by civilians, law enforcement agencies, and militaries worldwide at the time, about 393 million of them were privately owned by American civilians, accounting for nearly forty percent of the world's firearm stockpile in a country that boasts only five percent of the world's population. Per capita in 2017, there were 121 civilian-owned firearms for every 100 residents in the United States. That number dwarfs every other country including Yemen, where there were 53 civilian firearms per 100 residents in 2017.

However, it is also common for American gun owners to own multiple guns, as three percent of American adults own half the USA's civilian firearms, and there are several million American gun owners sometimes referred to as "super owners", who have collections of guns numbering larger than eight, with an average of seventeen firearms per "super-owner". These "super owners" only make up about 14% of gun owners overall, which skews existing data on

¹<https://www.mountvernon.org/preservation/collections/general-washingtons-military-equipment/#:~:text=Did%20George%20Washington%20Have%20A,the%20collection%20at%20Mount%20Vernon.>

²<https://www.smallarmssurvey.org/sites/default/files/resources/SAS-Press-release-global-firearms-holdings.pdf>

the prevalence of civilian firearms. Meanwhile, half of American gun owners only own one or two firearms, while another third own between three and seven.³

According to a 2023 Pew Research study of gun ownership, about 40% of Americans live in a household with a gun, and 32% personally own guns themselves.⁴ While this varies quite a bit across America for demographic, sociopolitical, and location-based reasons, it makes sense that there would be at least some overlap with the American Jewish community, boasting 7.6 million people, making up 2.4% of the United States population.⁵

According to data obtained from the 2020 Harvard Congressional Cooperative Election Study,⁶ which included questions regarding religion and firearms ownership, only about 11% of American Jews personally own firearms compared to about three in ten Americans nationally. The only religious groups with lower gun ownership rates than Jews were Muslims, at 9%, and Hindus at 3%. The religions with the highest rate of gun ownership in that specific study in the US include Evangelicals at 33%, Mainline protestants at 26%, and Mormons at 25%. Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Buddhists, and non-religious were in between these two groups.

So why is it the case that American Jews are nearly three times less likely to own guns than their Christian, Catholic, non-religious, and Buddhist counterparts? Based on my research, I have come to the informed opinion that this trend is mainly due to differences in where Jews live, how Jews vote, as well as cultural and religious taboos regarding the hunting of animals. Self-defense, on the other hand, has always had a place in Judaism, but is starting to become a bigger priority for Jews given major events over the last few decades, and many Jews are

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/20/gun-ownership-america-firearms-super-owners>

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/13/key-facts-about-americans-and-guns/>

⁵ <https://jewishjournal.org/2021/04/22/new-brandeis-study-estimates-7-6-million-jews-living-in-u-s/>

⁶ <https://www.deseret.com/faith/2022/5/27/23144900/which-people-of-faith-are-the-most-likely-to-own-guns-mormons-evangelicals-protestantser> a

beginning to reverse their stances on gun ownership and take up arms to because of our ever-changing realities. But this has been a gradual shift, and did not happen overnight.

I believe that the aversion to firearms that persists among many American Jews is often related to a lack of knowledge and experience in handling firearms, because a disproportionate number of American Jews have not had the opportunity to use or access them, leading some to fear even the most responsible of gun ownership. Combined with prevailing support for liberal politics and increased urbanization, some American Jews feel that gun ownership is antithetical to their worldview.

While in rural areas, many gun owners shoot on their own private property or on public lands, this is a different case for denser urban areas, where there are fewer opportunities for people to interact with guns outside of strictly controlled indoor gun ranges that require payment to use, and so unless an urban resident has gone out of their way to experience firearms for themselves at a shooting range or remote rural locale, their exposure to firearms is often filtered through the lens of popular media. When a person's exposure to firearms is limited to television, movies, video games, and news coverage of horrific mass shootings, robberies, and antisemitic hate crimes, these displays of constant repetitive imagery distort people's perception of guns and by extension, responsible gun owners, most of whom are regular ordinary private citizens, not violent extremists by any means. I firmly believe that responsible armed citizens can be pro-peace and pro-gun, and if anything, it's my personal obligation as an armed citizen to choose peace whenever possible.

However, due to our society's propensity towards echo chambers, many left-leaning urban Jews have not had exposure to this view. Given that the Jewish population of the United States is disproportionately concentrated in large and medium-sized cities, especially on the East

and West Coasts, and in predominantly Democratic states with already strict gun laws, many American Jews don't see a need or want to own a firearm.⁷

Another way that Jewish communities being centered around larger liberal coastal cities could affect Jewish gun ownership is that depending on one's state of residence and its policies, obtaining a gun and a license to legally carry it concealed can be out of reach for many individuals in certain states and localities, regardless of faith, for financial, bureaucratic, political, or administrative reasons. I have identified a pattern between how state gun laws and gun ownership affect the Jewish community.

In the chart below, I am listing the top 10 states with the largest Jewish populations⁸, the top 10 states with strictest gun laws⁹, and the bottom 10 states for gun ownership.¹⁰ There is considerable overlap in this regard. Repeated states in all three categories are bolded. In these three categories, 8 out of the 10 states are included in all of them. I also threw in some separate data from New York City to compare the differences in Jewish population, gun laws, and gun ownership, between New York State and the Five Boroughs, which highlights the divide even more. While Washington D.C. is not a state, if it were, its large Jewish population of 8.2%¹¹, extremely strict gun laws¹², and low firearms ownership rate of about 5.2%¹³ would easily push Delaware and Illinois off of the list.

⁷ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hunting-in-judaism/>

⁸ <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/states-with-the-largest-jewish-populations.html>

⁹ <https://wisevoter.com/state-rankings/states-with-strictest-gun-laws/#states-with-the-strictest-gun-laws>

¹⁰ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/gun-ownership-by-state>

¹¹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/washington-d-c>

¹² <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/washington-dc/>

¹³ <https://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/district-of-columbia>

Jewish population, Top 10 (% Jewish)	Strict gun laws, Top 10	Gun Owners, Bottom 10
1. New York State (7%) <i>New York City (18.4%)</i> ¹⁴	1. California	50. New Jersey (14.7%)
2. New Jersey (6%)	2. New Jersey	49. Massachusetts (14.7%)
3. Connecticut (3%)	3. Connecticut	48. Rhode Island (14.8%)
4. Delaware (3%)	4. Hawaii	47. Hawaii (14.9%)
5. Florida (3%)	5. Illinois	46. New York State (19.9%) <i>New York City (~1.5%)</i> ¹⁵
6. Maryland (3%)	6. Maryland	45. Connecticut (23.6%)
7. Massachusetts (3%)	7. Massachusetts	44. Illinois (27.8%)
8. Arizona (2%)	8. New York*	43. California (28.3%)
9. California (2%)	9. Colorado	42. Maryland (30.2%)
10. Illinois (2%)	10. Delaware	41. Delaware (34.4%)

*New York State (outside the five boroughs) and New York City have essentially two different sets of gun laws. New York City has much stricter regulations regarding the purchase, possession, carry, and transportation of both handguns and long guns.¹⁶

Aside from their Jewish populations, strict gun laws, and low rates of gun ownership, the states of New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, California, and Illinois, alongside the District of Columbia, share the commonalities of not only having liberal politics and Democratic-controlled legislatures, but populations concentrated heavily in urban areas where firearms are less prevalent. According to a 2023 Pew Research Study on gun ownership¹⁷, while about 32% of Americans and 45% of Republicans personally own guns, this is only the case for 20% of Democrats. In addition, while 47% of rural residents and 30% of suburban residents personally own guns, only about 20% of urban residents do.

¹⁴ <https://www.shalomlc.org/index.php/resources/articles/jewish-heritage-in-new-york-city>

¹⁵ <https://www.nydailynews.com/2021/05/16/staten-islanders-likeliest-in-nyc-to-own-legal-handguns-daily-news-analysis-of-nypd-data-shows/>

¹⁶ <https://www.brill-legal.com/our-services/criminal-defense/criminal-defense-faq/how-do-gun-laws-vary-across-new-york/>

¹⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/13/key-facts-about-americans-and-guns/>

Just like many other social and political issues present in American society, gun ownership not only straddles the liberal-conservative divide, it also straddles the urban-rural divide. While hundreds of thousands of American Jews do indeed own guns and/or live in rural, conservative, areas in the middle of the country, the tendency of Jews to be concentrated in urban liberal areas where there is less exposure to a culture of responsible firearms ownership greatly skews how Jewish Americans view gun ownership as a whole, viewing it to be a greater potential for liability, rather than an asset, and for some, a potential threat.

In addition to the urban-rural and liberal-conservative divides surrounding gun ownership, disputed Jewish halachic and moral prohibitions on hunting for sport and hunting for food add to the lack of collective American Jewish experience with responsible gun ownership. Hunted meat, even in the case of an otherwise kosher animal, is not considered kosher due to its method of slaughter. While hunting is not popular in the Jewish community, there are many Jews, urban and rural, secular, Reform, and even Orthodox, who ethically and lawfully hunt with centerfire and rimfire rifles, shotguns, handguns, air rifles, and bows.

One example of the influence of Jewish hunters on American hunting culture is that Jewish hunters have been heavily involved in efforts to repeal statewide Sunday Hunting Bans.¹⁸ Sunday Hunting Bans were one of many types of “Blue laws” that prohibited stores and businesses from being open on Sundays and restricted certain public activities on Sundays as well. Because the Sunday Hunting Bans were dated relics of a past era created with the intent to keep people in church during hunting season, some Jewish hunters consider Sunday Hunting Bans as a violation of their religious freedom because they force Jewish hunters to comply with the terms of a Christian sabbath. Josh First, a Harrisburg businessman, Orthodox Jew, and avid hunter, was part of a lawsuit that successfully overturned Pennsylvania’s 1873 law banning

¹⁸ <https://www.jewishtimes.com/jews-hunters-and-sunday-hunting-bans/>

Sunday hunting on the grounds of First Amendment protections regarding freedom of religious observance. Since Josh First keeps kosher, he does not eat the meat and distributes it to his non-Jewish friends who do eat it as a way around halachic issues surrounding kashrut and hunting. However, some Orthodox rabbis from the area were critical of his stance because they expressed concerns regarding the potential for a firearm to cause unneeded pain toward animals. Either way, many Pennsylvania hunters, both Jewish and gentile, were certainly thankful for Mr. First's efforts.

Halachic interpretations regarding hunting are overall more concerned with animal welfare and kashrut as part of hunting for food and sport, and less concerned with hunting as pest control and varmint hunting. While hunting was common among ancient Israel as we see in regards to both Nimrod¹⁹ and Esau in the book of Genesis, farming and keeping livestock quickly became the predominant source of food for Israelites, a process marked by the tale of Esau the starved hunter trading his birthright to his farmer brother Jacob in exchange for lentil soup.²⁰ In the United States, varmint hunting as a form of pest control tends to only exist in rural areas, as most municipalities ban the discharge of firearms and bows within city limits, with the notable exceptions of designated firing ranges and acts of self-defense.

While I do not hunt and have been a vegetarian for most of my life, I have no problem with ethical and lawful hunting using firearms, pellet guns, and bows. When hunting is done properly and responsibly, it causes the animal less suffering and pain in both its lifetime and its final moments than a typical factory-farmed animal. While animals in factory farms all too often live in cramped conditions with no sunlight or room to move around, hunted animals get to live their lives out in nature before receiving a quick and relatively painless death from a trained and

¹⁹ <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.10.9?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

²⁰ <https://www.sefaria.org/Genesis.25.27?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

licensed hunter. The velocity of projectiles discharged from a firearm allows for a quicker, cleaner, and more humane kill than many other methods of hunting animals.

The fact that there are many Americans who gladly consume factory-farmed burgers and chicken nuggets at McDonald's, while simultaneously dismissing people who shoot animals to feed their families as barbaric and backward, demonstrates how out of touch many urban and suburban Americans are with nature, and with their food systems. In my opinion, this also could apply to observant Jews who eat kosher meat, but oppose all hunting, as much of the American kosher meat supply is factory-farmed to offset the costs of a proper kosher slaughter, with animals often kept in cramped and unpleasant conditions.²¹

When it comes to the difference between lawful hunting and kosher factory farms in regards to animal welfare, the kosher meat industry often prioritizes a cleaner death while giving the animal a less clean and less healthy life, whereas lawful hunting prioritizes the animal having a cleaner and healthier life, even if the death is more messy. It is an interesting comparison.

Hunters are also some of the biggest supporters of wildlife and habitat conservation not only nationwide, but worldwide. In my opinion, the Jewish concern over hunting is more about ritual and kashrut, and not entirely a concern over animal welfare, with the reasonable exception of course, of concerns regarding poaching and environmental well-being. In addition, hunting has been widely practiced in North America for thousands of years by many indigenous peoples, many of whom were pushed off of their hunting grounds by white settlers, and still hunt to this day. While hunting is not an activity that I engage in, I do believe it is important to respect the role of hunting for many as a lifestyle, means of survival, and cultural tradition in many parts of the United States when it is done in a proper lawful fashion.

²¹ <https://www.jifanimals.org/blog/virtually-all-kosher-products-are-factory-farmed-heres-how-we-know/>

However, despite a historical lack of Jewish interest in firearms and hunting, alongside an overall collective skew towards liberal politics and urban centers, social, political, and cultural trends both inside and outside the realm of the Jewish community are beginning to change the stances of many Jews regarding the use of firearms for self-defense. Major events in the last twenty years have changed the scope of the debate around the place of firearms in American society, and thus by extension, the American Jewish community.

Increased antisemitism is one of the main trends over the past twenty years which has caused many Jews to reverse their initial positions on gun ownership and begin taking up arms, going to training classes, and getting concealed carry permits. It's clear to nearly every Jew that I talk to that antisemitism has tragically been on the rise long before the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, and that the response to these attacks has served to bolster antisemitism, both from the political left and right. We realize that while antisemitism can appear in the form of snide remarks, discrimination, or swastikas carved into park benches, it all too often can manifest as acts of horrific violence.

On October 27, 2018, a mass shooter brutally murdered 11 Jews with a semiautomatic rifle during a Shabbat Morning service at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA. It was the most deadly act of violence targeting Jews in American history, and it forever changed discussions and operations regarding synagogue security. Armed guards and police officers are more present at synagogues than ever. Steel doors and bulletproof glass are being installed in Jewish institutions across the USA. Jews have been on high alert ever since, and "I remember the days you could just walk into a synagogue" has become a common refrain that I've heard for years. While for some Jews, this event further cemented their support for gun control policies, other Jews began to question the efficacy of additional gun control laws, which were focused on

reducing gun rights for law-abiding citizens rather than trying to reduce the criminal use of guns in the first place.

In response to the tragic Tree of Life Synagogue massacre, many Jews were suddenly made aware that they were on their own and could not necessarily receive timely responses from even the most professional American law enforcement agencies. Yonatan Stern,²² an Israeli-American firearms instructor based in Pennsylvania, told Business Insider that following the mass shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue, he saw a surge in public interest in his firearms training classes, with many of his new customers disproportionately being Jewish.

He emphasized the importance of not only armed guards but also arming congregants. “According to Stern, an armed guard at a synagogue is a useful deterrent but not a replacement for armed civilians, since a shooter could kill the armed guard before entering and killing congregants. “To wait for law enforcement to arrive simply is not the answer,” Stern said.”

The disappearing illusion of safety among American Jews has also contributed to the rise of Jewish gun clubs, mobilizing to arm and train the Jewish community in safe firearms use and handling. These groups, primarily consisting of Orthodox Jewish men, have been active in several states, including New York, Texas, and California, and have been increasing in popularity.²³ The increasing popularity of firearms among Orthodox communities makes sense in regards to political views, as according to Pew Research²⁴, 75% of Orthodox Jews are Republicans and 20% are Democrats, whereas for Reform Jews, 18% are Republicans and 80% are Democrats. Unaffiliated Jews are slightly more conservative than Reform Jews, as 22% are Republicans and 75% are Democrats. Because Orthodox communities lean more conservative,

²²<https://web.archive.org/web/20181126160727/https://www.businessinsider.com/r-fighting-fire-with-fire-jewish-people-train-to-stop-repeat-of-pittsburgh-shooting-2018-10>

²³https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/jns/gun-clubs-mobilize-against-rising-antisemitism-reported-iranian-plot-against-jews/article_c2ec72c9-c18a-5fcd-a338-c101b27b6280.html

²⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-americans-in-2020/>

they generally view the ownership and carry of firearms for self-defense in a more palatable light in comparison to Reform and unaffiliated Jews. Differing attitudes towards firearms ownership in Orthodox communities can also be a reflection of how Orthodox Jews, due to their increased visibility, can be more frequent targets of antisemitic attacks. However, it's possible that with recent events, this is an ever-changing reality for American Jews as a whole.

Over the last two decades, there have been numerous legislative, judicial, and social changes in the overall American society that have caused increased public acceptance of gun ownership. Changes in laws and their interpretations, the increasing diversity of gun owners, alongside major national and international events, have helped lead to an increase in lawful civilian gun ownership which has impacted Jews and non-Jews.

On a federal level, federal courts of varying levels have been dismantling many gun laws on the basis of constitutionality. This is especially evident and prudent with two relatively recent Supreme Court Cases: *D.C. v. Heller* (2008) which overturned Washington D.C.'s handgun ban, and *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen* (2022), which overturned New York's requirement for otherwise qualified applicants to have a sufficient need and a "good cause" to obtain a concealed carry permit, making concealed carry permits accessible to any law-abiding moral citizen who wants one, and overturning similar laws in several other states.

In the 2008 case of *D.C. v. Heller*²⁵, a group of plaintiffs seeking handgun licenses sued the District of Columbia because the district at the time had a longstanding ban on all handguns and other concealable firearms. When the case appeared before the Supreme Court, the justices ruled 5-4 in favor of the plaintiffs, and that the district was now required to allow its law-abiding residents to register handguns. The court ruled that the right to keep a handgun in the home for self-defense was not dependent on service in a militia and that the Second Amendment's clauses

²⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/event/District-of-Columbia-v-Heller>

regarding “a well-regulated militia” and “the right of the people to keep and bear arms” are separate. The majority argued that although having a “well-regulated militia” is important for the purpose of common defense, “the people” are everyday citizens worthy of equal access to the weapons needed to sufficiently defend themselves in a reasonable manner, and that this includes the right to keep a handgun in the home for such a purpose. The case was also instrumental in leading to the overturn of the city of Chicago’s handgun ban two years later.²⁶ With the precedent of constitutionally protected handgun ownership established nationwide following the *D.C. v. Heller* ruling, it would only be a matter of time before the same constitutional protections interpreted to apply to handguns inside the home, will also be applied to the concealed carry of handguns outside the home.

In the 2022 case of *NYSRPA v. Bruen*²⁷, the Supreme Court made a 6-3 decision overturning New York State’s 1911 Sullivan Act, which banned the issuance of licenses to carry handguns without a perceived justifiable need, or “proper cause”. The “proper cause” requirement held that in order to obtain a concealed carry permit valid in New York State or New York City, one must “demonstrate a special need for self-protection distinguishable from that of the general community.” This meant that regular law-abiding citizens in New York were not allowed to obtain concealed carry permits and so in practice, they were only issued to retired police officers and a select few wealthy and famous people. The *Bruen* decision overturned this standard, and while the Supreme Court still allowed New York State to require licensing for the possession and carry of handguns, the Court maintained that the licensing for possession and carry of handguns had to be open to all law-abiding citizens in all parts of the state, including New York City. The ruling had an impact on several other states with similar “may-issue”

²⁶<https://www.chicagomag.com/Chicago-Magazine/January-2010/In-Their-Sights-Lawsuit-challenging-Chicago-1982-handgun-ban-to-be-heard-by-Supreme-Court/>

²⁷ <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/20-843>

concealed carry permit laws, including California, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island, essentially requiring that states and municipalities must issue concealed carry permits to law-abiding citizens, provided that carrying a firearm outside the home for self-defense is a constitutional right.²⁸ With the opening of concealed carry permit applications in many localities as a result of the ruling, the majority of private citizens in many liberal states and dense urban areas now have access to concealed carry permits when they didn't have them before. The localities where this change is happening also happen to be places with larger Jewish populations, opening up new opportunities for Jews living in previously gun-hostile areas to arm themselves.

As a gun owner and a Los Angeles city resident, I personally benefited from this ruling, as I was among the first 1,000 concealed carry license holders to have permits issued by the Los Angeles Police Department under the new *Bruen* shall-issue standard. Prior to the 2022 ruling, the Los Angeles Police and Sheriff's Departments were both extremely strict when it came to issuing concealed carry permits to ordinary private citizens like myself and would deny nearly all applications.²⁹ This change affected the concealed carry licensing policies of many law enforcement agencies across California, mostly in liberal-leaning coastal cities and counties.³⁰

While an interview with a police officer was required for my permit, because of the ruling in favor of shall-issue licensing, I was not asked why I wanted a license to carry or to prove any sort of "good cause", and the police interview at the LAPD academy lasted no longer than ten or fifteen minutes. For the first time in recent LAPD history, concealed carry permits for civilians are now treated like a routine process, rather than a privilege reserved for the elite.

²⁸<https://apnews.com/article/us-supreme-court-new-york-jersey-gun-politics-government-and-24a6a82ea365212ecaa7af71f9c72561>

²⁹<https://scvnews.com/lasd-reports-rise-in-ccw-permits-announces-new-task-force-to-streamline-process/>

³⁰<https://calmatters.org/politics/2023/03/california-concealed-carry-permits/>

In addition to laws regarding the possession and carry of handguns in predominantly urban and liberal localities as a result of being challenged in federal court, many state legislatures in more conservative-leaning states have now legalized permitless concealed carry of handguns, with no licensing or training required, also known as “constitutional carry”. Twenty-eight states now have permitless concealed carry laws on the books, and most of these laws were adopted within the last decade³¹. With the loosening of gun carry laws in both liberal and conservative areas, guns are becoming in some ways, less of a liberal-conservative issue.

This trend of guns beginning to transcend the liberal-conservative divide is also seen in the increased diversity of gun owners, especially among those who are new to firearms. Although historically, the majority of gun owners have been white men, following a surge in gun purchasing during the Covid pandemic, new gun owners are now more likely than ever before to be women, Latino, Black, Asian, LGBT, Jewish, and liberal.³² This trend shows that the stereotype of gun owners as conservative heterosexual white men is quickly fading away, making the option of firearms for self-defense more acceptable and palatable to a wider variety of people from different backgrounds. This shift towards diversity in gun ownership includes Jews as well, as many are given new options for personal protection as laws and social consensus begin to change gradually.

While a slim majority of Americans support tightening gun control laws to at least some extent, gun control support itself is quite diminished from the 1990s, when the Brady Bill and Federal Assault Weapons Ban were passed. Gallup polls have been tracking American support for gun ownership since 1990,³³ and in September of 1990, 78% of respondents supported tightening America’s gun laws, 17% felt existing gun laws were sufficient, and only 2% felt that

³¹ <https://catalyst.independent.org/2024/03/12/louisiana-embraces-gun-rights/>

³² <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/27/us/gun-owners-liberal-women-minority-reaj/index.html>

³³ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/405260/diminished-majority-supports-stricter-gun-laws.aspx>

existing laws were too strict. However, in September of 2022, only 57% of respondents supported tightening gun laws, while 32% wished to keep them as they are, and 10% wished to see them loosened. The drop of over 20 percentage points in support for gun control over the past thirty years demonstrates how gun control proposals are gaining less traction than before due to increased gun ownership and the questionable efficacy of many existing gun control laws around the country. People are slowly realizing that voting for policies and politicians who want them actively disarmed does not make our society safer or more free.

Aside from the decreased popularity of gun control proposals in recent years, many recent events caused Americans to purchase firearms at an accelerated rate, which led to a major firearm and ammunition shortage nationwide which lasted from 2020 to 2022. Following the Covid pandemic-era lockdowns, while many Americans famously panic-bought everything from toilet paper, to hand sanitizer, to wheat flour, many others flocked to gun stores to panic buy firearms and ammunition, predominantly due to fears regarding the stability of society, leading to record-breaking numbers of gun sales and background checks performed.³⁴

In addition to the Covid pandemic, the early 2020s were also host to a great deal of civil unrest, increased violent crime, and political polarization which continued to fuel gun panic buying right even as necessities like toilet paper and hand sanitizer made it back on to store shelves. Following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020, and the riots that ensued for the whole summer and beyond, additional Americans felt the need to arm themselves, knowing that the riots and protests would increase law enforcement response times to potentially unsafe levels. Alongside the pandemic, the riots helped make 2020 one of the strongest years for gun sales, as nearly 10 million firearm background checks were completed

³⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/31/us-gun-sales-rise-pandemic>

that year, nearly doubling the amount of firearm background checks done in 2019.³⁵ The prevalence of major mass shootings over the last 20 years has also bolstered gun sales, in part due to fears that these shootings will cause legislators to pass stricter gun laws making them harder to obtain.³⁶ Reversing a long downward trend, violent crime in major cities began spiking again in the early 2020s,³⁷ motivating more civilians to obtain guns for self-defense. Joe Biden's presidential win in November of 2020 also encouraged panic buying of guns and ammunition because of fears that the Biden administration would pass stricter gun laws.³⁸

While these aforementioned trends and events have pushed more Americans towards purchasing guns in general, one major event has specifically pushed even more Jewish Americans to become gun owners, that being the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel. Not only were millions of American Jews horrified by the shocking and graphic imagery of unarmed Israeli civilians being murdered by Hamas terrorists, but in addition, American Jews were also subject to increased antisemitism, including threats and violence. Gun stores and firearms instructors in Florida, California, and New York have seen an increasing pattern of Jews patronizing these proprietors in order to obtain firearms and safety training.³⁹

As the war between Israel and Hamas rages on, and tensions around antisemitism heat up in the United States and around the world, I anticipate that more American Jews will begin to see the value of gun ownership, and they will begin to understand how the Jewish people can make use of their Second Amendment rights to keep and bear arms to protect First Amendment right of freedom of religious expression.

³⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/16/891608244/protests-and-pandemic-spark-record-gun-sales>

³⁶ <https://observer.com/2022/05/texas-school-shooting-gun-stock-rise-firearm-sales/>

³⁷ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/09/11/united-states-major-cities-violent-crime-homicides-survey/8060734001/>

³⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/12/business/gun-sales-joe-biden/index.html>

³⁹ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/06/us/american-jews-guns-antisemitism/index.html#:~:text=With%20threats%20against%20American%20Jews,the%20US%20in%20recent%20days>

Chapter 2: Jewish texts and perspectives on self-defense and weapons

If you asked any random group of American Jews if they believe that Judaism should encourage or discourage gun ownership, you would probably get a mixed variation of responses. Some Jews would argue that since Judaism is morally opposed to violence, Jews should also be morally opposed to widespread civilian gun ownership. Jews are overwhelmingly liberal and liberals are overwhelmingly in favor of gun control. Other Jews would argue that in this day and age, with increases in antisemitism and recent violence against Jews, reasonable and responsible access to firearms by Jews and non-Jews alike is a necessity for self-preservation and that the saving of a life is among the highest of *mitzvot*. After the October 7 attacks in Israel and the resulting global fallout, attitudes may be changing. To truly understand what Judaism says about the ethical considerations of the premise of gun ownership we must not only look to our extensive traditions of text and commentaries but also acknowledge the historical perspectives surrounding how our texts would approach these issues.

The first thing to keep in mind is that the majority of well-known Jewish religious texts and commentaries were written well before firearms were ever present in the Jewish world, let alone even invented. While most of these texts and many commentaries were written thousands of years ago, gunpowder was not invented until at least 850 C.E. in China at the tail end of the Tang Dynasty⁴⁰. Gunpowder quickly became popular for use in cannons, grenades, as well as small handheld portable cannons which are the original predecessor of today's firearms. These early guns eventually made their way to Europe and the Middle East by way of the Silk Road, occurring around the 13th century following the travels of explorers such as Marco Polo. With advancements in design, firearms became popular in Europe and were exported to the colonies,

⁴⁰ <https://www.history.com/topics/inventions/firearms>

leading to their popularity in places like the United States today. This crucial historical context is absent from Ancient Jewish and Rabbinic texts whose worldview was limited to edged, bladed, and blunt weapons, as well as archery, thus their focus on weapon ownership and self-defense was different in many ways than today, but also bear some similarities.

Like many other contemporary controversial issues that capture the zeitgeist of 21st-century American life, Jewish texts take a complicated and nuanced approach to understanding the concepts of self-defense and weapon ownership. While Jewish texts do place strong emphasis of self-preservation, they do not clearly articulate a cut-and-dry “right to bear arms” as one might see in the Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution.

According to Rabbi Joshua Flug of the Orthodox Union, author of the *Jewish Action* article “Gun Control in Halacha”, he notes that “...there is an important distinction between Jewish law and US law with regard to gun ownership. Whereas US law—as per *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008)—guarantees each individual a right to bear arms, Jewish law does not. Jewish law does not guarantee anyone’s right to bear arms and such a right plays no role in the Talmudic discussion. Jewish law is primarily interested in preserving society and ensuring that public policy keeps people safe. US lawmakers are also interested in protecting its citizens, but must do so within the confines of the Second Amendment right to bear arms. At the same time, Jewish law does value the importance of providing weapons to those who serve to protect us and by extension, those who are interested in protecting themselves... despite the possibility that those very weapons may be used to harm us.”⁴¹

While Rabbi Flug does not view Judaism as having an equivalent to the American constitutional right to bear arms in its legal texts, he does acknowledge that lethal weapons can be important for the protection of the public by authority figures, as well as private citizen

⁴¹ <https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-law/gun-control-halachah/>

civilians who wish to defend themselves. Essentially, it is not the case that the Jewish faith teaches its adherents that there is an explicit right to bear arms, but that the bearing of arms for defensive purposes is congruent with the teachings of the Jewish faith regarding one's duty to protect human life at all costs, even with lethal force. In the Jewish view, especially when looking through the lens of ancient and medieval texts and commentaries, the emphasis has less to do with a right to have a specific weapon and is more about a duty to protect oneself and others. The Second Amendment and its enumerated "right to bear arms" is more of a product of English common law⁴² than any sort of immediate Biblical principle. The right to own and carry a weapon is a legal and constitutional concern, whereas the right to self-defense and duty of responsible weapon ownership is expressed in various Jewish texts from antiquity and beyond.

In regards to the Torah, some verses could easily apply here, especially the issue of self-defense. In Exodus 22:1, one of the laws that is brought to the people regards the issue of self-defense in a residential setting. "If the thief is seized while tunneling and beaten to death, there is no bloodguilt in that case."⁴³ Essentially, the principle displayed in this verse is that a person has a right to defend themselves with lethal force against someone who is forcibly breaking and entering into an occupied dwelling and is a danger to the people inside. This principle is similar to castle doctrine, a premise in the laws of many U.S. states that people have the right to defend themselves in a home during a forced entry.

Even California, a state that is quite strict on firearms and other weapons in general, has Castle Doctrine laws in the state Penal Code, Section 198.5: "Any person **using force intended or likely to cause death or great bodily injury within his or her residence** shall be presumed to have held a **reasonable fear of imminent peril of death or great bodily injury** to self,

⁴² <https://lawreview.unl.edu/passages-arms-english-bill-rights-and-american-second-amendment>

⁴³ <https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.22.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

family, or a member of the household when that force is used against another person, not a member of the family or household, who **unlawfully and forcibly enters or has unlawfully and forcibly entered the residence** and the person using the force knew or had reason to believe that an unlawful and forcible entry occurred.”⁴⁴ This section of the California Penal Code bears many similarities to the law delivered in Exodus, essentially recognizing the right of potentially lethal self-defense against potentially lethal forced entry.

Rabbinic commentaries generally take this view as well. The medieval Torah commentator Rashi noted that the homicide mentioned in this case would be justifiable, noting that “This is not regarded as a murder; it is as though he (the thief) has been dead from the beginning of his criminal act ... He the thief therefore obviously came with this purpose in view — that in case the owner of the property would resist him, he would kill him.”⁴⁵ Essentially, Rashi is saying that because a thief willing to break into an occupied residence could be willing to use lethal force to rob people inside, it is, therefore, acceptable to apply lethal force against breaking and entering into a dwelling.

The following verse, Exodus 22:2, establishes a limit on the conditions of the previous verse: “If the sun had already risen, there is bloodguilt in that case.”⁴⁶ Essentially, if there was enough available light, and you could tell that the person coming into the residence was not a danger to you, the claim of self-defense is much less feasible. Rashi elaborates on this issue, noting that “This is only a metaphorical expression signifying: if the fact is clear to you that he [the suspect] is peaceably disposed towards you. The simile is: just as the sun brings peace to the world so if it is evident to you that he did not come with the intention of killing, even if the

⁴⁴<https://www.shouselaw.com/ca/blog/penal-code/does-california-follow-the-castle-doctrine/#:~:text=Yes..to%20force%20their%20way%20in.>

⁴⁵ <https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.22.1?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en>

⁴⁶ <https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.22.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

owner of the property would resist him ... and the matter of taking human life is not in his thoughts at all ... it is murder if the householder kills him.”⁴⁷ Rashi is essentially saying that while self-defense is a right, it also is subject to reasonable limitation, in that there has to be a clear and present threat of physical danger. This is akin to why today, it is illegal to use lethal force on non-violent trespassers outside the home, as well as on fleeing attackers, or acts of retribution. Just like our present-day legal understandings of the Castle Doctrine, the laws of Exodus relating to self-defense limit the acceptable use of lethal force to situations of immediate potential danger.

Among the Holiness Codes in the book of Leviticus, there is another verse that is often in “Do not stand upon the blood of your fellow.”⁴⁸ One can look to this verse as a commandment to make efforts to prevent bloodshed and to stand up for one’s fellow citizens, perhaps even in the context of a third-party encounter. Rashi interprets this verse as an obligation to save life whenever possible, arguing that when “witnessing his [potential] death, you being able to rescue him: if, for instance, he is drowning in the river or if a wild beast or a robber is attacking him.”⁴⁹ Rashi equates the necessity of justifiable homicide to saving someone from drowning in a river, because he recognizes that acts of self-defense are not only allowed but encouraged, due to the fact that there are times when defensive acts, including lethal force, are necessary to preserve human life. Rashbam, another medieval Torah commentator, notes that in the event of a fellow’s bloodshed, that one must “not stand by idly but go to his assistance.”⁵⁰ Thus, it is fair to say that this verse condemning the passive acceptance of bloodshed can be connected to themes of self-defense, in that defending oneself and others is not just acceptable, but an obligation.

⁴⁷ <https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.22.2?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en>

⁴⁸ <https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.19.16?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

⁴⁹ <https://www.sefaria.org/Leviticus.19.16?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en>

⁵⁰ <https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.22.2?lang=bi&with=Rashi&lang2=en>

When it comes to the issue of self-defense and justifiable homicide, the Torah is fairly clear in not only its permissibility but also the ethical obligation to save the lives of oneself and others whenever possible, even if lethal force is required. However, as we see in prophetic works and rabbinic commentaries, the principles of Jewish ethics regarding weapon ownership and access are much more nuanced and complicated.

In Isaiah 2:4, the prophet Isaiah visualizes a world where people are no longer preoccupied with weapons of war. “And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks: Nation shall not take up sword against nation; They shall never again know war.”⁵¹ In Micah 4:3, the prophet Micah repeats the same exact verse in a similar prophecy.⁵² One potential interpretation of these prophecies from Isaiah and Micah is that the prophets were not only opposed to war, but that they also found the proliferation of weapons in society to be objectionable. However, I interpret this very differently, in that I don’t believe that it was the weapons themselves that the prophets objected to, but rather the way that they were used. The prophets recognized that weapons are tools, and that humans are a tool-making species. These weapons capable of destroying a society could also one day be the tools of building a society, and the prophets saw this as a hope that the world become devoid of conflict, and as a result envisioned that tools of violence could become tools of agriculture. The prophets’ ideal world is not necessarily one where the world is completely devoid of weapons, but where they are no longer used for violence and can find other uses.

In Joel 4:10, the prophet Joel delivers a prophecy that contradicts the stances of Isaiah and Micah, urging the people to prepare for the realities of self-defense when necessary. “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears. Let even the weakling say, ‘I

⁵¹ <https://www.sefaria.org/Isaiah.2.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

⁵² <https://www.sefaria.org/Micah.4.3?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

am strong.’”⁵³ Essentially, what Joel is urging the people to do is to prepare to defend themselves against attack, and that preparing for such attacks includes the use and carry of lethal weapons. While in periods of peace, the plowshares and pruning hooks are for farming, the swords and spears which they can be morphed into are a result of necessity. Joel seems to be implying that while it is ideal to use these implements to farm the homestead, these implements can be also be used to defend the homestead with lethal force if needed.

While Isaiah and Micah prophesize about transforming weapons into farming tools, and Joel prophesizes about turning farming tools into weapons, all three of the prophets who speak on this issue recognize that weapons are tools and that the outcome of their use is truly dependent on the end user. It is the people who are responsible for enacting violence, not the weapon itself. All three prophets also envision a world where one day, people will no longer need to use weapons to defend themselves. However, the split between Isaiah, Micah, and Joel represents that prophetic vision is not reflective of the world we live in but rather the world that we wish to inhabit. And in the world we live in, both then and now, people have needed weapons to defend themselves. Getting rid of weapons doesn’t change the world, but changing the conditions of the world does make it easier for people to put down their weapons and not utilize them for violence.

The Talmud also features several rabbinic debates about the ownership, carry, and use of defensive weapons. In tractate Avodah Zarah, which discusses idolatry, the rabbis mention that Jews cannot sell weapons to Gentiles. “One may not sell weapons to gentiles or the auxiliary equipment of weapons, and one may not sharpen weapons for them. And one may not sell them stocks used for fastening the feet of prisoners, or iron neck chains, or foot chains, or iron

⁵³ <https://www.sefaria.org/Joel.4.10?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

chains.”⁵⁴ (Avodah Zarah 15b:10) The rabbis expand this prohibition as a prohibition against the sale of weapons to Jews who commit criminal acts, noting that “Rav Dimi bar Abba says: Just as it is prohibited to sell to a gentile, it is prohibited to sell to an armed bandit who is a Jew. The Gemara clarifies: What are the circumstances of this prohibition? If the thief is suspected of killing, isn’t it obvious that it is prohibited? After all, he is the same as a gentile. Providing a Jew who might kill with weapons is no different from giving a weapon to a gentile, as in both cases one violates the prohibition: Do not place a stumbling block before the blind. And if he is a bandit who does not kill, why not sell to him? The Gemara answers: Actually, Rav Dimi bar Abba is referring to a bandit who does not kill, and here we are dealing with a bandit who steals, as sometimes he makes use of his weapon to save himself when he is caught. Consequently, it is prohibited to sell him weapons in case he [the bandit] kills with them in self-defense.”⁵⁵ (Avodah Zarah 15b:13-14)

Essentially, what the ancient rabbis are saying is that Jews should not be selling weapons and restraints to gentiles under the logic that gentiles may use them against Jews, and that if a Jew is selling a weapon to another Jew, the seller must engage in due diligence to ensure that the buyer is not a murderer or thief. In a way, one could compare this to the modern-day firearms background check, where purchasers of firearms from federally licensed gun stores must undergo an instant criminal background check which uses a computerized government database to make sure that prospective gun buyers do not have a history of felony criminal acts or psychiatric holds. Many states, but not all, require a licensed dealer to facilitate a similar process for private-party transactions as well. This premise of restricting access to weapons from dangerous parties can also be applied to the premise of safe storage by keeping firearms in a safe when they

⁵⁴ https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.15b.10?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

⁵⁵ https://www.sefaria.org/Avodah_Zarah.15b.13?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

are not in use or being carried. This is important because safe storage of firearms is key to preventing unauthorized access by children, people experiencing mental health crises, and prohibited possessors, preventing a potentially dangerous outcome. The rabbis of the Talmud believed that Jews should be able to have weapons but that measures needed to be taken to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands.

In regard to the issue of carrying weapons in the public domain on Shabbat, the rabbis generally believe that the excessive carriage of visible weaponry was considered an act that violated the rules regarding prohibited work on the Sabbath. “The Sages said that a man may neither go out on Shabbat with a sword, nor with a bow, nor with a shield, nor with a club, nor with a spear. And if he unwittingly went out with one of these weapons to the public domain he is liable to bring a sin-offering. Rabbi Eliezer says: These weapons are ornaments for him; just as a man is permitted to go out into the public domain with other ornaments, he is permitted to go out with weapons ... The Rabbis said to Rabbi Eliezer: And since, in your opinion, they are ornaments for him, why are they to be eliminated in the messianic era? He said to them: They will not be needed anymore, as it is stated: “Nation will not raise sword against nation” (Isaiah 2:4). The Gemara asks: And let the weapons be merely for ornamental purposes, even though they will not be needed for war. Abaye said: It is just as in the case of a candle in the afternoon. Since its light is not needed, it serves no ornamental purpose. Weapons, too; when not needed for war, they serve no ornamental purpose either.”⁵⁶ (Shabbat 63a:3-9)

Essentially, the concern that Rabbi Eliezer shares with this prohibition on carrying weapons on Shabbat is that he considered weapons to be ornaments, and so they can be carried as ornamental pieces on the Sabbath. The rabbis, however, disagree, mentioning that weapons should not have an ornamental purpose when not needed. However, the weapons being described

⁵⁶ <https://www.sefaria.org/Shabbat.63a.3?lang=bi>

as swords, clubs, bows, and spears are generally non-concealable weapons, and so when they are carried in the public domain, they are typically carried openly. I do not believe this prohibition would apply to typical firearm carriers in the United States today because the vast majority carry handguns concealed away from public view, despite open carry of handguns and long guns being legal in many states. It is my opinion that the rabbis are more concerned with the unnecessary display of weaponry during peacetime than simply the carriage of any and all weapons on Shabbat, while also recognizing that the true peace of the Messianic Era, which would remove the need for such weapons, is far off. In recognition that weapons are devices the prophets hoped would one day no longer be needed, the rabbis didn't want to glorify them by having non-concealable weapons be displayed prominently in public during peacetime. My takeaway from this is that while there are times that one legitimately needs to carry a weapon, even on the Sabbath, one should not make a spectacle of oneself by doing so, and if someone is properly licensed and trained, they should carry concealed rather than openly if possible.

While these rabbinic commentaries from the tractates of Avodah Zarah and Shabbat are concerned with the issues of the sale, transportation, and carrying of weapons, other excerpts from the tractates of Berakhot and Sanhedrin further solidify the Jewish ethical stance on self-defense. According to Berakhot 58a:16, "If one comes to kill you, kill him first."⁵⁷ However, Sanhedrin 57b:1 outlines the limits of claims of self-defense, noting that "Rabbi Yonatan ben Shaul says: If a person pursues another to kill him, and the one being pursued can save himself by injuring one of the limbs of the pursuer, but he does not save himself in this manner and instead kills the pursuer, he is executed for killing him even though he acted in self-defense."⁵⁸ Essentially, Rabbi Yonatan ben Shaul is describing the importance of proportionality in

⁵⁷ <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.58a.16?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

⁵⁸ <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.57b.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

self-defense cases. He notes that a person can only claim a justifiable self-defense killing if the person is in such danger that they have no choice but to use deadly force to protect themselves, and that if they have an option to avoid having to use deadly force, the defender should take that opportunity if possible, as self-defense can only be claimed in cases of extreme risk of danger. This issue of proportionality is why many people who carry guns today also carry non-lethal weapons such as pepper spray, because, in cases of simple assaults, non-lethal pepper spray may be a more appropriate response, whereas a firearm is a deadly weapon and would be only appropriate to deploy in response to an aggravated assault.

According to Sanhedrin 73a, the Talmud is very clear that at times, violent intervention in deadly situations is important due to the necessity of preserving life. “From where is it derived that one who sees another drowning in a river, or being dragged away by a wild animal, or being attacked by bandits, is obligated to save him? The Torah states: “You shall not stand idly by the blood of another.” The Gemara answers: Yes, it is indeed so that this verse relates to the obligation to save one whose life is in danger ... From where do we derive that one may be saved at the cost of the pursuer’s life? ... If in the case of a betrothed young woman, whom the rapist comes only to degrade ... the Torah said that she may be saved even at the cost of the rapist’s life, then in the case of one who pursues another person to kill him, all the more so should one say that he may be saved even at the cost of the pursuer’s life.”⁵⁹

Essentially, the rabbis argue that deadly force is not only permissible when preventing murder, but also when preventing rape. The rabbis recognize that due to the extreme harm that rape and sexual assault impose on women, the life of the woman is therefore much more important than the life of the man who tried to attack her, and so deadly force can be used to prevent the act of rape alongside murder.

⁵⁹ <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.73a.3?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en>

While the Jewish world was much different in its conceptualization of weapon ownership and self-defense in the days of the Biblical and Rabbinic periods in comparison to today's world, the Torah maintains that deadly force can be used to save life if necessary. The prophets recognized the delicate balance between being prepared for war and self-preservation while desiring a world where war no longer exists and weapons are repurposed. The rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud emphasize the importance of keeping weapons out of the hands of potentially dangerous people, discretion in how and where one carries weapons, the boundaries of which acts can be considered self-defense, and the obligation to defend oneself and others from horrific crimes such as rape and murder. Essentially, the values espoused by the Torah, prophets, and Talmudic sages regarding weapons can help people today develop a healthier relationship with weapons, especially considering that safe storage, conscientious carriage, and knowing the ethical and legal ramifications of self-defense are all part of responsible gun ownership.

Chapter 3: Contemporary rabbinic sources on gun ownership and policy

In the previous chapter, I discussed the various perspectives that Jewish texts take towards self-defense and weapon ownership. Upon an in-depth review of several texts from the Torah, Tanakh, Talmud, and Medieval commentary works, I uncovered a few major themes.

One major theme is that the Jewish tradition considers the use of lethal force to be justified when responding to cases of breaking and entering an occupied dwelling, intervention against acts of violence committed against others, aggravated assault, attempted murder, armed robbery, and attempted rape. Essentially, this is not very different from current self-defense laws in the USA given that legally justified lethal force is specific to defending oneself and others from violent felonies committed against people and occupied residences.

In addition, the ancient and medieval rabbis concluded that is important to not sell weapons to potentially dangerous people, that the ownership and use of weapons must be done with safety and caution in mind, and that carrying weapons for self-protection is not expressly prohibited to the general public but it should generally be done discreetly and respectfully.

However, through the lens of contemporary rabbinic discourse, predominantly consisting of modern works written by rabbis, rabbinical organizations, and Jewish institutional governing bodies based in the United States, the issue of self-defense and weapon ownership has become superimposed onto the political implications of American gun ownership and policy.

While both Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish organizations and rabbis typically favor measures to make improvements to firearm background checks to prevent dangerous people from easily obtaining firearms, responsa and resolutions offered from non-Orthodox branches of Judaism tend to go much further in explicitly stating more policy goals, such as limitations on certain types of weapons and accessories that are perceived to increase lethality. Despite pressure

for increased gun regulations, non-Orthodox Jewish organizations have gradually shifted their stances away from supporting total bans on civilian handgun ownership over the last several decades.

Reform and Conservative Jewish organizations and movements tend to view gun violence as a result of government policy failure, while Orthodox Jewish organizations and movements tend to view gun violence as a result of spiritual failure. Both sides of the observance spectrum overall view gun violence as a moral failure.

Some might attribute the partial *machloket*, or disagreement, regarding views on firearms between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews to be based on politics. After all, according to Pew Research data, 75% of Orthodox Jews are Republicans, while 80% of Reform Jews and 70% of Conservative Jews are Democrats.⁶⁰ While politics can be ascribed to aspects of it, particularly with certain stances on public policy, leaning on political affiliation alone does not tell a complete picture, especially when it comes to the complex issue of gun ownership in America. According to a November 2023 NBC news poll, gun ownership among Americans is at an all-time high, including for Democrats. As of 2023, 41% of Democrats have firearms in their households, while this is the case for 66% of Republicans and 45% of Independents. When NBC did a similar poll in 2004, the rate of gun ownership for both Democrats and Republicans were 33% and 57% respectively.⁶¹ While gun ownership is skewed towards Republicans, it's worth acknowledging that Democrats indeed own a significant portion of America's civilian small arms, as firearm ownership has slowly become less partisan and has continued to cross the liberal-conservative divide.

⁶⁰ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/u-s-jews-political-views/>

⁶¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/meet-the-press/meetthepressblog/poll-gun-ownership-reaches-record-high-american-electorate-rcna126037>

However, it is also important to remember that statements put out by prominent governing bodies of Jewish organizations and movements are not necessarily representative of their entire movements and membership bodies. Also, the Jewish tradition is both generally non-authoritarian and welcoming of dissent and variance of opinion. This is even more true in the present day. There are plenty of Reform Jews who own guns, and there are plenty of Orthodox Jews who abhor them, as neither side of the observance spectrum is a monolith when it comes to interpreting the religious, personal ethical considerations of gun ownership in the American Jewish community. With this important distinction and careful consideration in mind, contemporary texts from present-day rabbinic authorities about this topic must be interpreted within their respective historical and social contexts.

As for my survey of non-Orthodox contemporary rabbinic texts on the topic of gun ownership, I am going to primarily use sources from the CCAR and the RA, representing stances from prominent Reform and Conservative Jewish leadership. Regarding Orthodox voices on the subject, I have found a variety of publications from the Orthodox Union and Chabad. While the sources do not necessarily reflect how every individual Orthodox, Reform, or Conservative Jew feels about these issues, they do represent respected and trusted authorities within their movements and so while it is not an exhaustive text review of every contemporary opinion or even every Jewish movement, it does indicate general trends among the mainstream American Jewish communal leadership. Especially in Reform and Conservative Judaism, responsa and resolutions, while considered important insight, are also generally non-binding and allow congregations individual freedom to interpret and implement them how they see fit.

Over the years the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR), the principal organization representing Reform Rabbis in North America, has written numerous responsa and

resolutions regarding gun violence, ownership, and policy in the United States. In 1975, the CCAR issued its first resolution regarding gun control. In the resolution, we begin to see the CCAR create its first policy goal around firearms, a near-total ban on private handgun ownership. This was a policy goal that was eventually found to be unattainable, and likely in part due to changes surrounding public opinion and laws regarding handgun ownership, this policy goal has not persisted into more recent resolutions and responsa.

According to the 1975 CCAR Resolution on Gun Control, “The members of the Central Conference of American Rabbis call upon the Congress of the United States and all state legislatures to speedily enact ... legislation, namely to ban the sale of handguns to the general public and to collect and redeem those handguns presently in the possession of persons other than (1) the military, (2) police officers, (3) qualified security personnel, and (4) sports target shooters duly licensed by local authorities.”⁶² Essentially in 1975, the CCAR supported a total ban on handguns to the vast majority of citizens, in which the only private citizens named who would be allowed to own handguns under this ban would be licensed sports shooters, and there would not be any carveouts for self-defense or concealed carry.

In 1989, another CCAR resolution called for gun control, again in favor of national ban on handguns. The 1989 resolution states: “...BE IT RESOLVED that the CCAR urge local, state, and national officials to restrict the sale of all handguns and to ban the sale of automatic weapons to the general public.”⁶³ Given that in 1986, the Hughes Amendment to the Firearm Owners Protection Act had already effectively barred machine gun sales to the general public,⁶⁴ it would make sense that when the resolution was written in 1989, handguns would have been the primary concern.

⁶² <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/gun-control-1975/>

⁶³ <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/gun-control-1989/>

⁶⁴ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/senate-bill/49>

However, in the 90s and 2000s, CCAR resolutions and responsa became less ambitious with their policy positions, especially in regards to handguns, and have shifted their policy proposals towards what some might consider lower hanging fruit, while also accepting some grey area on the issue.

In 1993, the CCAR responsa committee responded to an inquiry from a rabbi in Indianapolis, Indiana regarding a non-Jewish live-in temple superintendent who kept a firearm in his apartment on the synagogue property. This resulted in a *machloket* among temple board members who had mixed feelings about permitting the superintendent to keep a firearm on synagogue property, prompting the rabbi to ask for guidance.

The CCAR responded by noting that Jewish tradition respects the right to self-defense, the synagogue should evaluate what security measures they already have in place, the temple board should inquire with the superintendent regarding his familiarity with firearms handling and self-defense laws, while also acknowledging that the presence of a gun on temple property could be controversial within the community.

Without a specific yes or no answer to the question of firearms on temple property, the CCAR concluded that “In sum, your [temple] leadership will have to make a reasoned assessment of the circumstances which cause the superintendent to request a gun in the first place. If the answer is that a potential danger exists and the superintendent’s precaution is judged reasonable, Jewish tradition and sensibility will not oppose that conclusion.”⁶⁵ Instead of advocating for a one-size-fits-all approach, either by banning firearms on temple property completely, or explicitly welcoming them on temple property, the CCAR responded by acknowledging that each temple is different and that a reasonable assessment of the risks and advantages can help the temple board make an informed decision on the matter.

⁶⁵ <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-responsa/tfn-no-5753-24-281-282/>

In 2000, the CCAR put out another resolution on the issue of gun control, discussing the work with the Religious Action Center, the political and legislative arm of the Union for Reform Judaism, to support gun control measures. With increased participation of the Religious Action Center, the goals became more political, and hence, more partisan.

In the resolution, “...the Central Conference of American Rabbis call upon its members to: organize a gun control advocacy effort, and urge their congregants to write to their Representatives and Senators demanding that effective gun control be enacted during the current Congressional session; utilize the Religious Action Center’s legislative action guide to implement their strategy for addressing gun control advocacy; take a leadership role by extending personal invitations to elected officials to appear in the congregation to explain their positions on gun control; become involved in broader anti-violence coalitions in their local communities that press for effective gun control at all levels, and urge members of congregations to participate in the million mile march against gun violence of May 14, 2000 on the Mall in Washington, DC.”⁶⁶

In a 2015 resolution, policy goals become more articulated, in an effort to work closer with legislators. Some highlights of the resolution included interest in “smart gun” technology, as well as putting pressure on licensed gun dealers perceived to be unscrupulous.⁶⁷

In May of 2018, following recent mass shootings, the CCAR publicly addressed the issue of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines in a resolution, declaring them to be disproportionately dangerous and that they should be banned on this basis. Notably, despite the resolution calling for bans on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, the resolution fails

⁶⁶ <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/gun-violence-ending/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/ccar-resolution-gun-violence/>

to define what an “assault weapon” actually is, and also fails to define how many rounds deems a magazine “high-capacity”.

The resolution explains, “Whereas assault rifles are used in most instances of mass shootings in the United States, Whereas wounds from assault rifles are far more damaging and untreatable, causing more death than other forms of firearms, Whereas high capacity magazines allow these weapons to be even more deadly by allowing killers to continue firing without reloading, be it resolved that the Central Conference of American Rabbis: Calls on State and Federal Legislatures to renew and make permanent a ban on assault rifles and to include a ban on high capacity magazines and bump stocks (all of which to be defined by law); and calls on our members to lead congregations and communities in advocacy to bring about these bans; and publicly supports the teens, including NFTY, who are leading the call for school safety through the ban of assault rifles and high capacity magazines.”⁶⁸

One issue I have with the resolution is that the language of “assault weapon” and “assault rifle” is easily conflated and there are no efforts in the resolution to clear up the ambiguity. Assault rifles are select-fire rifles, capable of both semiautomatic and fully automatic fire. Assault rifles, like all other machineguns, have been restricted to the general public since 1986.⁶⁹ “Assault weapon”, on the other hand, is a heavily politicized term used to describe a certain class of semi-automatic rifles with detachable magazines. Unlike assault rifles, rifles deemed as assault weapons are semi-automatic only, meaning they are only capable of one shot per trigger pull and are therefore not machine guns. While assault rifles are the select-fire weapons of war commonly used on the battlefield, firearms that are commonly deemed as assault weapons are typically semi-automatic centerfire rifles with detachable magazines. These rifles, often referred

⁶⁸<https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/ccar-resolution-on-assault-weapons-and-high-capacity-magazine-ban/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/senate-bill/49>

to as modern sporting rifles, are made for civilians and are in common use, not to be used as weapons of war. While some modern sporting rifles look similar in visual profile to military rifles, they do not have any fully automatic capability unlike their military counterparts, and thus do not have anywhere near the same lethality of military-grade assault rifles used in modern warfare. This ambiguity between assault rifles and assault weapons is important to clarify because it might potentially mislead people to think they are supporting a ban on fully automatic machine guns used as weapons of war, when in reality, the wording of proposed assault weapon bans would actually ban semiautomatic civilian sporting rifles like the AR-15 that are already in common use. These rifles are the most popular rifles sold in America, and in 2023, Ipsos polling indicated that one out of every 20 Americans owned at least one AR-15 platform rifle.⁷⁰

In regards to magazines, no effort is made in the resolution to define what constitutes a high-capacity magazine, and even among state laws there is disagreement about how to define it. While most states do not ban magazines based on capacity, California, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, Hawaii, Washington D.C, and Washington State ban magazines holding more than ten rounds. In Colorado, Vermont, and Illinois, the limit is fifteen rounds. In Delaware, the limit is seventeen rounds.⁷¹ Since the limit on excess magazine capacity is set at such an arbitrary level, it is challenging to make a case that an exact number of rounds in a magazine deems a magazine too dangerous for use by the general public.

In addition, the 2018 CCAR resolution also makes some highly questionable factual claims about firearms and firearms violence. According to an article from *The Trace*, an online news outlet in support of gun control measures, the vast majority of mass shootings occur with

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<https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/americas/us-politics/ar15-rifle-nashville-school-shooting-b2310833.html>

⁷¹ <https://www.usconcealedcarry.com/blog/magazine-limits-what-are-they-and-which-states-have-them/>

handguns, not with rifles deemed as assault weapons. That being said, while the article also acknowledges that long guns are being used more in these kinds of attacks in recent years, handguns are by far the most common weapon used in mass shootings, not long guns deemed as assault weapons.⁷²

It is also a factually incorrect assertion that wounds caused by semiautomatic rifles like the AR-15 are more lethal than wounds caused by all other types of guns. Lethality of firearms is generally determined by caliber and stopping power, and the 5.56mm cartridges used by common semiautomatic rifles like the AR-15 are much smaller than most other rifle calibers on the market. Even many hunting rifles, in both their semiautomatic and manually operated forms, utilize high-powered rifle cartridges such as the .308 which can do much more damage to flesh and internal organs than the smaller 5.56mm cartridges commonly used in AR-15 rifles, as the larger cartridges have more than double the stopping power.⁷³ At closer ranges, even shotguns are more deadly per shot than AR-15 rifles, as they have larger bore sizes, increased muzzle energy, increased projectile mass, and in the case of 12 gauge buckshot loads, anywhere from 7 to 21 pellets per shotgun shell, depending on projectile size. The increased kinetic energy and the spread of multiple heavy lead pellets complicate wound channels and thus shotgun wounds are often harder for trauma surgeons to repair than wounds caused by rifle rounds.⁷⁴

Putting these aforementioned clarifications aside, the resolutions and responsa issued by the CCAR regarding gun violence and gun policy not only represent a shift in priorities among gun control advocates but also a shift in public opinion. In the 1970s and 80s the CCAR was more concerned about handguns and advocated for a near-total ban on them, whereas in recent

⁷² <https://www.thetrace.org/2023/07/mass-shooting-type-of-gun-used-data/>

⁷³ <https://ammo.com/comparison/308-vs-556>

⁷⁴ <https://www.wapt.com/article/shotgun-deadlier-than-ar-15-expert-says/2098767#>

years, the CCAR has quietly dropped its support for a national handgun ban and instead has shifted its focus to other types of firearms.

When looking at the history of public opinion regarding firearms policy in the United States, this shift makes sense. According to Gallup Polls from the 1950s and 1960s, a majority of respondents supported a national ban on handguns. In 1975, 41% of respondents favored a national handgun ban. However, in 2023, nearly fifty years later, only 27% of respondents favored a national handgun ban, while 73% of respondents were opposed, and in 2008, support for handgun bans dropped below 30% and hasn't recovered since.⁷⁵

Other events also explain the decrease in anti-handgun sentiment in the United States, such as the 2008 D.C. v. Heller Supreme Court case, which helped overturn handgun bans in Washington D.C. and Chicago under the basis that having a loaded handgun in a private residence is a constitutionally protected activity under the Second Amendment and is not contingent on militia service.⁷⁶ Concealed carry laws have also been significantly relaxed since then as well, with the rise of permitless carry in 28 states, alongside an increase in states with shall-issue carry permits.⁷⁷ In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic and the George Floyd riots in 2020, purchases of firearms for self-protection, especially handguns, rose significantly, even in states like California with stricter gun control laws.⁷⁸ With these conditions, advocating for a national handgun ban in the United States is unrealistic, whereas multiple states have passed magazine and assault weapon bans, so such policies are more politically palatable.

The Rabbinic Assembly, the primary organization of Conservative rabbis, takes fairly similar stances to the CCAR regarding gun control, taking on a policy-based focus in its

⁷⁵ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>

⁷⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/event/District-of-Columbia-v-Heller>

⁷⁷ <https://catalyst.independent.org/2024/03/12/louisiana-embraces-gun-rights/>

⁷⁸ <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-07-01/california-saw-record-surge-in-handgun-sales-last-year-during-the-pandemic#:~:text=Amid%20economic%20and%20political%20turmoil,from%20the%20state%20attorney%20general.>

responsa. In 1990, the RA issued an Omnibus Resolution of Affirmation declaring the RA's stance on multiple social issues, including gun control, and in this resolution, the RA advocated for more restrictions on handguns.⁷⁹ In 2017, the RA issued a position paper on the subject of gun control. In this position paper, the specific restrictions on handguns are not seen, but other policies are included, including restrictions on firearms deemed assault weapons, magazine capacity, private sales, and concealed carry.⁸⁰ Just like the 2018 CCAR resolution, there is no effort to define what assault weapons or high-capacity magazines are. The shift from handgun bans to assault weapon bans is present in RA publications in the way that it is present in CCAR publications.

While Orthodox movements have published a plethora of works regarding gun violence, they do not take on nearly the extent of policy positions that non-Orthodox movements take toward gun control. Orthodox movements generally view gun violence as a spiritual issue rather than a policy issue, while also supporting modest policy measures regarding improvements to the background check system.

According to Rabbi Joshua Flug's article "Gun Control in Halacha", featured in *Jewish Action*, the Orthodox Union's news magazine, he argues that there is a halachic basis for some gun control measures, particularly relating to point of sale. Citing the provisions in Talmud Avodah 15b prohibiting the sale of weapons to Gentiles by Jews, Rabbi Flug argues that ancient Jewish laws assume that any weapon sold to a gentile could be turned against the Jewish community. By extension, Rabbi Flug denotes that in the modern era, we have modern

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https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/social_action/resolutions/omnibus-resolution-reaffirmation-1990.pdf

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https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/social_action/gun-control/ra_dover_emet_statement_on_gun_violence.pdf

background checks to denote if someone is potentially unsafe to sell weapons to, and as a result, increasing the strictness of the background check process is justified according to Jewish law.⁸¹

While I don't necessarily agree completely with every aspect of Rabbi Flug's conclusion, I think that his logic is more reasonable and more closely based on Jewish textual tradition than the resolutions of the RA and CCAR on the issue. While the CCAR and RA resolutions tend to focus on certain types of firearms and accessories, Rabbi Flug's analysis tends to be more focused on the point of sale and end-user of the firearm, as the end user truly determines how the firearm is used in the first place.

According to Rabbi Mendy Hecht of the Chabad movement, he casts serious doubt as to whether gun control laws prevent violent behavior. In his article, "A Matter of Responsibility", written about the gun control debate in response to the 2007 Virginia Tech Massacre, he believes that the shooter had a spiritual imbalance alongside extreme mental health issues which led to his evil side overriding his good side, leading him to commit mass murder with sheer disregard for human life.

Rabbi Hecht asks: "Could a tough law have kept a weapon out of his hands? Very possibly. But conversely, considering the overwhelming energy of his powder keg of rage, [the murderer] might have opted for knives or bombs had guns been inaccessible. And does a violent, gun-permissive society trigger violence? Very possibly. Innumerable Torah sources discuss the potentially harmful influences of negative people, places... and things, including weapons of all sorts. But conversely, plenty of pleasant people are armed to the teeth, and wouldn't hurt a fly—their mental *gevurah* keeps their primal *chessed* urges in check. Now, does this mean [the murderer] was not responsible for the Virginia Tech massacre? No.

⁸¹ <https://jewishaction.com/religion/jewish-law/gun-control-halachah/>

The Torah—the morality manual for all mankind, not just Jews—makes it clear, by way of Kabbalah, that we're each responsible for balancing our spiritual and psychological systems. "Thou shalt not kill" does not come with the disclaimer, "except if you have psychiatric problems." But with a psychological system as pain-strained and imbalanced as his was, judging by reports of his recent and not-so-recent history, [the murderer] had a responsibility to choose help. Instead, he chose evil."⁸²

Rabbi Hecht acknowledges that while the mass shooter in question had mental and spiritual issues, he does not believe they absolve the killer of any responsibility. He instead views crimes of public spectacle like mass shootings as a result of mental and spiritual deficits in our society, noting that access to guns on a societal scale does not necessarily change the choices of individual actors.

The differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jewish views on gun control mirror the national gun debate in many ways. Regarding instances of gun violence, Orthodox Jews tend to blame the individual, whereas non-Orthodox Jews tend to blame the firearms and the laws that enshrine access to firearms as a public right in the United States. Orthodox organizations and rabbis tend to push for more modest proposals to the point of sale of guns. In contrast, Reform and Conservative Jewish organizations tend to have wider-reaching policy goals in mind, with a heavy focus on assault weapons and magazine bans. The often-repeated phrase, "Guns don't kill people, people kill people" is a favorite among gun rights supporters, while the phrase "People kill people, with guns" is a retort to this claim that remains popular with gun control supporters. While Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews vary in regards to how their movements address the issue of gun policy, they both attempt to answer this question by analyzing various root causes of gun violence, through a social, political, and spiritual lens.

⁸² https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/507848/jewish/A-Matter-of-Responsibility.htm

Chapter 4: Is gun ownership compatible with Jewish values?

Speaking anecdotally, I have been told by other Jews on some occasions that my interest in firearms and support for gun rights is “goyish” and that “Jews don’t own guns.” However, the only factual truth to such statements is statistical, given the relatively low (but recently increasing) gun ownership rates among American Jews which I discussed a few chapters ago. That being said, I think that safe and responsible gun ownership certainly falls in line with Jewish values, especially when it comes to the preservation of life, civic duty, the desire to be free from violence and fear, and following reasonable rules. Likewise, many Jewish gun control supporters feel that their views also align with Jewish values of the preservation of life, civic duty, the desire to be free from violence and fear, and following reasonable rules. I would argue that Jewish gun rights supporters and gun control supporters share many of the same values but have very different means of accomplishing them, in terms of policies and practices involving the arming or disarming of the general public.

In order to discuss what Jewish values are, it’s important to mention that in mainstream Orthodox and mainstream non-Orthodox sects of Judaism, the values systems aren’t necessarily that different between movements, even if practices, worship styles, customs, traditions, social mores, and observance do vary considerably between denominations.

According to a Chabad.org article, “What are Jewish Values”, Rabbi Tzvi Freeman summarizes Jewish values as humanity being created in God’s Image, human dignity, social justice, fixing the world, the land of Israel and the global community, moral monotheism, and world peace.⁸³ According to the Union For Reform Judaism, Jewish values can be summarized as shared humanity, justice, belonging, learning, evolving, and Israel and Jewish peoplehood, while the URJ’s Vision is “A world in which Judaism enables all people to experience peace and

⁸³ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3852164/jewish/What-Are-Jewish-Values.htm

wholeness, justice and equity, and belonging and joy.”⁸⁴ While both the Reform Movement and the Chabad-Lubavitch movement have some worldview differences, the values expressed are not so different. I think that it can apply to Jewish communities across the religious and political divide, recognizing that our tradition allows others to have different opinions on sensitive issues while remaining true to a shared commitment to Jewish values. The issue of firearms ownership exemplifies the diversity of opinions by American Jews, who have similar values sets but draw different conclusions.

In terms of Jewish support for gun control, many Jewish gun control supporters base their arguments on what they consider to be moral or ethical grounds, often because of the inherent risks of gun ownership and the harm caused by people misusing guns. In Rabbi Menachem Creditor’s 2015 essay “Choose Life, says Torah, not Guns”, which he co-wrote with Eileen Soffer, Rabbi Creditor and Soffer argue while Jewish tradition does honor self-defense, Jews should not purchase guns to defend themselves due to increased risk of both unintentional and intentional injury, that there are relatively few defensive gun use incidents, and that people carrying guns could complicate law enforcement responses in active shooter situations, as well as the potential risk to innocent bystanders that can come with defensive gun use, and that Jewish gun ownership enables society to have more injuries and deaths with guns.⁸⁵

On the contrary, Jewish supporters of gun rights argue that firearm ownership is an important part of Jewish communal defense, law enforcement can’t always respond in a timely fashion, and that Jewish gun owners tend to be responsible and show discretion. Tablet magazine author Liel Leibowitz, a staunch supporter of gun rights, wrote the article “Get a Gun: The

⁸⁴ <https://urj.org/what-we-believe/urj-values-vision-mission>

⁸⁵ Creditor, Menachem. 2022. *Ending Gun Violence: Essays, Prayers, and Poems*. Independently Published, pg. 59-62

Jewish way of gun ownership is more about responsibility than power” following the October 7 attacks in Israel and the resulting violence in the United States that ensued in reaction to the reignition of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Leibowitz argues that society has failed to protect Jews from antisemitic attacks, taking up arms is one of the few options American Jews have to actively resist the onslaught of hate and violence, gun ownership that is conducted in accordance with Jewish values is responsible gun ownership, and that most gun owners are discreet and take their duty seriously. Leibowitz also mentions that in Jewish communities where concealed carry is becoming more accepted, such as Brooklyn’s heavily Orthodox neighborhood of Crown Heights, while many Jewish-owned businesses display signs welcoming concealed carry license holders, the license holders in question are also are very discreet in how they choose to carry to the point where it is otherwise unnoticeable.⁸⁶

While Rabbi Menachem Creditor and Liel Leibowitz may seem diametrically opposed in their approaches as to whether or not Jews should own guns, they share more common perspectives and values than one might first realize. Both Rabbi Creditor and Leibowitz would agree that threats to the Jewish community are a growing problem, Judaism recognizes the right to self-defense, gun ownership is a major responsibility, and gun owners should be aware of the risks involved and how to mitigate them. Their similarities in values make up for their differences in worldview, as differing perspectives on gun ownership highlight several Jewish values: the preservation of life, civic duty, the desire to be free from violence and fear, and following reasonable rules.

In regards to the commandment to preserve life, known in Hebrew as *pikuach nefesh*, the commandment to preserve life is so highly valued in Judaism that it is placed above all

⁸⁶ <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/get-gun-liel-leibovitz-jews>

commandments.⁸⁷ This also includes self-defense, going all the way back to the laws of Exodus.⁸⁸ Jews who support gun control argue that because of the frequency of gun deaths, guns should be restricted in order to preserve life. Jews who support gun rights argue that as tools of self-defense, Jews should obtain guns to protect themselves, loved ones, and congregations, in order to preserve life when needed in a dire situation, especially if law enforcement can't arrive quickly enough. The preservation of life, in one way or another, is one of the most frequently cited values by both anti-gun and pro-gun Jews.

Another value that is important to Jews is civic duty, also known as *sh'lomah malchut*. This is derived from Pirkei Avot, an early rabbinic compilation of ethical and theological discussions passed down throughout the generations that became its own entire tractate of Mishnah. "Rabbi Hanina, the vice-high priest said: pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive."⁸⁹ Modern Jews, now mostly living in democracies, tend to interpret this advice to pray for the welfare of the government by being active participants in it. According to a 2022 study, while 84% of Americans are registered to vote, 91% of American Jews are registered voters.⁹⁰ Jews on all sides of the political aisle vociferously engage with the government via voting and political involvement to help improve its function. In regards to Jews who support gun control, they see it as a civic duty to show support for gun control laws and to attempt to reduce gun deaths through policy, while for Jewish supporters of gun rights, they tend to see showing support for gun rights as a civic duty not only because gun rights allow Jews to resist violent attacks through community self-defense, but also because many gun owners feel that gun ownership is essential

⁸⁷ <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/saving-a-life-pikuach-nefesh/>

⁸⁸ Exodus 22:1

⁸⁹ https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.3.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

⁹⁰ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/713921/share-americans-registered-vote-faith/>

to keep the government from oppressing its citizens as a security to tyranny and that doing so is one of the major things that has helped to keep America free.

Jews also value the bringing of peace, known in Hebrew as *hava'at shalom*. This value encourages Jews to desire to live in a world free from violence and fear. This value is also important as it is part of the Jewish concept of the Messiah, as the Messiah is often interpreted to bring in an era of great peace. Jewish gun control advocates argue that their policies of restricting access to firearms can help bring about peace or at the very least, significantly reduce violence as a whole. Jewish gun rights advocates question the ability of gun control policies to contain the massive amount of guns already in existence, but they also recognize the role of guns and weapons in terms of keeping the peace as well, noting that when law enforcement is not nearby, the barrel of one's firearm may be their very last line of defense when more peaceable interventions fail to produce a result of peace and safety.

Finally, an important Jewish value expressed in Jews who are advocates for both gun control and gun rights is the concept of *dina d'malkhuta dina*, which is a principle in halacha that acknowledges that Jews must follow the local laws where they live and that they are binding, provided that such laws are reasonable and do not violate the laws of the Torah.⁹¹ While there is some overlap between this value and the value of participating in the welfare of government, it is different because participating in the welfare of government is about changing and creating laws, while this idea of *dina d'malkhuta dina* is about how Jews follow laws that are already in place. Jewish gun control and gun rights supporters would likely advise that Jews follow their local laws to stay out of trouble even if they may disagree with certain laws on principle and that because each state, alongside many municipalities, has a different set of gun laws, the onus is on the gun owner to research the gun laws wherever they go in order to not fall afoul of them.

⁹¹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/dina-de-malkhuta-dina>

While there is a shared consensus in the Jewish community about what Jewish values are, there is less consensus when it comes to how Jewish values are implemented, especially when it comes to sensitive and controversial topics like gun ownership. While Jewish supporters of both gun control and gun rights are both able to see their perspectives represented within a framework of Jewish values, neither side can truly claim that there is only one correct Jewish view on this topic. This reality of respectful disagreement is not confined to gun ownership, as it is present in both ancient and modern Jewish perspectives on a wide variety of topics. Judaism is a tradition of *machloket*, of respectful disagreement, and with this issue and many others, dissent should be encouraged, not suppressed. Jewish discussions on gun ownership should center Jewish values, not fallacious appeals to intellectual purity on perceived moral or ethical grounds.

In today's American Jewish world, firearms are one of many contested social and political issues. While Jews of all denominations often lean into their values systems when making decisions about how to use the Jewish tradition in order to create informed opinions about social and political issues, this approach to controversy is not limited to firearms, but also extends to how Jewish communities handle other hot-button issues such as abortion, climate change, LGBTQ rights, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, when it comes to how Jews utilize their values to discuss gun ownership, the emphasis on safety, responsibility, and civic duty as Jewish values is present throughout, in both sides of the gun ownership debate. This situation demonstrates that wildly different opinions among American Jews on this issue are still informed by somewhat similar intentions.

Chapter 5: Unpacking the problematic Nazi gun control argument

As firearms continue to be a hot-button issue for not only American Jews, but American society as a whole, there are many who invoke the Holocaust and Nazi Germany when arguing against gun control policies, often from the perspective that the gun control policies in Nazi Germany disarmed Jews and that these policies led to the Holocaust because the disarmed Jews were unable to fight back.

American Jews today have mixed feelings on this comparison between American gun control laws and Nazi gun control laws. Some Jews find this comparison painfully offensive, while other Jews find it to be painfully accurate. As someone who is a gun owner, a student of history (my undergraduate major), and someone who lost relatives in the Holocaust, I find this aspect of the gun debate to be painfully complicated. On one hand, disarmament policies targeting minority groups, such as many gun laws made during the Jim Crow era, are a genuine form of governmental oppression and should be opposed on moral and ethical grounds due to racism, unconstitutionality, and mass incarceration. On the other hand, I think that one needs to be cautious about comparing the motives and policies of American gun control advocates to the horrors of the Holocaust, as the emotionally charged nature of discussions surrounding the Holocaust makes it more difficult to have a good-faith dialogue around the issue of gun ownership when this fallacy-ridden argument is brought up. It is one of the reasons why I do not mention the Holocaust when debating with others about gun rights issues because if I truly feel that my position is well-informed, I shouldn't have to compare my opponent's views to Hitler to make a point. It is not a healthy or productive means of creating dialogue, especially in today's politically polarized reality.

This logical fallacy of unhelpful comparisons to Hitler dates back to the early 1950s, when Leo Strauss, a German-American Jewish professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, coined the term “*reductio ad Hitlerum*”, meaning “reduction to Hitler” in Latin, in response to those who wished to compare their ideological opponents to Adolf Hitler as a deflection from their talking points. In his 1953 book *Natural Right and History*, Strauss notes that in regards to historical reflection on the Nazi regime, “...it does not go without saying that in our examination we must avoid the fallacy that in the last decades has frequently been used as a substitute for the *reductio ad absurdum*⁹²: the *reductio ad Hitlerum*. A view is not refuted by the fact that it happens to have been shared by Hitler.”⁹³ While Leo Strauss’s observation is from the postwar era of the mid-20th century, in the polarized political climate of the 2020s, his observation remains true, and this is the case for both left-wingers and right-wingers on various topics. It’s not uncommon to hear about Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Ron DeSantis, Gavin Newsom, Covid vaccines, American policing, and abortion being compared to Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. Just as these comparisons to Hitler and the Holocaust are unhelpful in creating space for dialogue, the same can be said when it comes to past and present discussions on gun rights and gun control.

In a 2015 CNN interview with Wolf Blitzer, Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson made comments regarding the Holocaust and Gun Control which made waves among members of the American Jewish community. “I think the likelihood of Hitler being able to accomplish his goals would have been greatly diminished if the people had been armed ... I’m telling you there is a reason these dictatorial people take the guns first.”⁹⁴ While Ben Carson

⁹² From Dictionary.com: “a reduction to an absurdity; the refutation of a proposition by demonstrating the inevitably absurd conclusion to which it would logically lead.”

<https://www.dictionary.com/browse/reductio-ad-absurdum>

⁹³ Strauss, Leo. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965 [1953], p. 42.

⁹⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2015/10/08/politics/ben-carson-gun-control-2016-election/>

received both praise and criticism for his comments, many of his critics were Jews who felt that his comparison of American gun control policies to the policies of Nazi Germany was unfair and disingenuous.

In response to Ben Carson's comments, Holocaust historian Alan E. Steinweis argues that "The Jews of Germany constituted less than 1 percent of the country's population. It is preposterous to argue that the possession of firearms would have enabled them to mount resistance against a systematic program of persecution implemented by a modern bureaucracy, enforced by a well-armed police state, and either supported or tolerated by the majority of the German population. Mr. Carson's suggestion that ordinary Germans, had they had guns, would have risked their lives in armed resistance against the regime simply does not comport with the regrettable historical reality of a regime that was quite popular at home. Inside Germany, only the army possessed the physical force necessary for defying or overthrowing the Nazis, but the generals had thrown in their lot with Hitler early on."⁹⁵ Further on in his response, Steinweis also argued that the failure of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising showed that there have been times when armed resistance wasn't always an ideal option for Jews and at times could potentially make Jews more vulnerable.⁹⁶ During the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, 1,500 Jews took up arms, including handguns, rifles, machine guns, and improvised explosive devices to fight the Nazis as they attempted to send the deported Jews from Warsaw Ghetto to the death camps. In the failed armed revolt, an additional 7,000 Jews were killed in the Warsaw Ghetto, while only a few hundred Nazi soldiers were killed in the fighting.⁹⁷ While some laud the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising as a form of resistance to oppression, others believe that the timing of the armed uprising put more innocent Jews in danger. Steinweis also mentioned why *reductio ad Hitlerum*

⁹⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/15/opinion/ben-carson-is-wrong-on-guns-and-the-holocaust.html?_r=0

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Warsaw-Ghetto-Uprising>

is unhealthy for the firearms debate, noting that “...coming to terms with a civilizational breach of the magnitude of the Holocaust requires a serious encounter with history, rather than political sloganeering that exploits history as a prop for mobilizing one’s base.”⁹⁸

The Anti-Defamation League has also taken a strong stance against the use of the Nazi gun control argument. According to Abraham H. Foxman, director emeritus of the ADL and a Holocaust survivor himself, “We know that the national debate over gun control is one of the most divisive issues in the land, and while Americans are entitled to have strong opinions, there is also language that is inappropriate and offensive in any such discussion. The idea that supporters of gun control are doing something akin to what Hitler’s Germany did to strip citizens of guns in the run-up to the Second World War is historically inaccurate and offensive, especially to Holocaust survivors and their families.”⁹⁹ The ADL also argues that “...the small number of personal firearms in the hands of the small number of Germany’s Jews (about 214,000) remaining in Germany in 1938 could in no way have stopped the totalitarian power of the Nazi German state. When they had weapons, Jews could symbolically resist, as they did in the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and elsewhere, but could not stop the Nazi genocide machine. Gun control did not cause the Holocaust; Nazism and anti-Semitism did.”¹⁰⁰

On the other side of the political spectrum, the Jewish gun-rights organization Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership strongly holds the belief that Nazi gun control policies were a major factor in causing the Holocaust, and is fiercely opposed to the ADL’s view on this issue.¹⁰¹ The JPFO even has a chart on their website listing all of the genocides around the world which they attribute in major part to gun control policies.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/15/opinion/ben-carson-is-wrong-on-guns-and-the-holocaust.html?_r=0

⁹⁹ <https://www.adl.org/resources/press-release/adl-says-nazi-analogies-have-no-place-gun-control-debate>

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ <https://jpfo.org/filegen-a-m/jewsandguns.htm>

¹⁰² <https://jpfo.org/filegen-a-m/deathgc.htm#chart>

While I do agree that comparing American gun control policies to Nazi gun control policies is problematic and that it is historically inaccurate to say that gun control policy was a leading factor in causing the Holocaust, the disarmament of Jews in Germany was indeed a violation of civil and individual rights, and was harmful to their circumstances.

According to Columbia law professor Bernard E. Harcourt, “Following Germany's defeat in World War I, the Weimar Republic passed very strict gun control laws in an attempt both to stabilize the country and to comply with the Versailles Treaty of 1919 – laws that in fact required the surrender of all guns to the government. These laws remained in effect until 1928, when the German parliament relaxed gun restrictions and put into effect a strict firearm-licensing scheme. These strict licensing regulations foreshadowed Hitler's rise to power. If you read the 1938 Nazi gun laws closely and compare them to earlier 1928 Weimar gun legislation – as a straightforward exercise of statutory interpretation – several conclusions become clear. First, with regard to possession and carrying of firearms, the Nazi regime relaxed the gun laws that were in place in Germany at the time the Nazis seized power. Second, the Nazi gun laws of 1938 specifically banned Jewish persons from obtaining a license to manufacture firearms or ammunition. Third, approximately eight months after enacting the 1938 Nazi gun laws, Hitler imposed regulations prohibiting Jewish persons from possessing any dangerous weapons, including firearms.”¹⁰³

Essentially, following the First World War, German gun control policies were heavily tightened, so very few Jews or Gentiles in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s even had access to firearms to begin with under the Weimar Republic, long before Adolf Hitler rose to power. Civilian-owned firearms were rare in Weimar Germany, especially in comparison to the United States. While Hitler somewhat relaxed gun licensing during his early years as dictator, he very quickly changed the laws to classify Jews as prohibited possessors and barred them from

¹⁰³ https://scholarship.law.columbia.edu/faculty_scholarship/1327/

obtaining firearms. The issue here that is up for debate is not about whether or not the Nazi party disarmed Jews, which both sides are willing to acknowledge, but rather to what extent gun control policies played in the ability of the Nazis to carry out the Holocaust and exterminate six million Jews. Neither side is denying that there was systematic disarmament of Jews during the Holocaust, but it is important to understand that it was likely a much larger set of factors, such as existing antisemitic attitudes, that played a much larger role in allowing the perpetration of the Holocaust than the reductionist claim that it was caused by the absence of firearms.

There is another critique of the Nazi gun control argument that I have not been able to find in my review of contemporary scholarship on either the gun rights or gun control side, but I find it compelling nonetheless. One additional reason why I take issue with the Nazi gun control argument outside of what has already been mentioned is that it not only denies agency to the victims who were murdered in the death camps but also diminishes the importance of the valorous efforts of the many Jews who took up arms to fight the Nazis while serving as partisans during the European Theater of World War Two. Many Jews during the Holocaust knew that deportation would lead to certain death, and there was a sizable contingent who felt that it would be less of a risk to take up arms and fight back than to be deported, joining existing partisan efforts to participate in anti-Nazi irregular militia activity. These were Jews who proudly defied gun control laws put in place by Nazi Germany in order to fight back by any means possible.

According to the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation, “[Jewish Partisans] were Jews in Europe, many of them teenagers, male and female, who fought against the Nazis during World War II. The majority were regular folks who escaped the ghettos and work camps and joined organized resistance groups in the forests and urban underground. Non-Jewish partisans could sneak back to their homes for security and safety. The Jews had no place to go and so they were

constantly moving through the shadows on the edges of cities and towns. Some, like Polish teenager Frank Blaichman, knew their village would be turned into a ghetto; Frank escaped and joined a group of partisans in a forest. Others, like Abe Asner, were among the very few Jewish partisans with military training. Most partisans knew nothing about guns and ammunition, so people like Abe became important teachers and leaders. People who had guns and knew how to use them were mostly welcomed with open arms. If someone wanted to join and had no weapon, some groups required them to get one, in whatever manner they could. Outsiders who came to fight the Nazis – like Russian partisan groups in Poland – valued Jews who knew local terrain and could act as their scouts.”¹⁰⁴

The role of Jews in the partisan movements was immeasurable in providing a civilian militia response to the Nazis, and while some might argue that the efforts put forth by Jewish partisans were too little and too late, it demonstrates that there were Jews who were able to express agency during an active genocide, in part due to their ability to take up arms and fight alongside the Allied powers against the Nazi war machine. While the story of Jewish partisanship is heroic, it also pokes holes in the historicity of the idea that all Jews were complicit with the Nazi party’s gun control regulations that were used to oppress them. Many of these Jewish partisans, alongside Jewish soldiers from Allied armies, later fought in Israel’s war of independence and brought knowledge and skills with them.¹⁰⁵

While Nazi gun control laws were an abhorrent and immoral product of their fascist regime, due to the small percentage of German Jews and pre-existing lack of firearms in German Jewish hands before Hitler’s rise to power, I do not think it is reasonable to argue that gun control laws were a prevailing or major cause of the Holocaust. I also do not think it is

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.jewishpartisans.org/what-is-a-jewish-partisan>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-evolution-of-armed-jewish-defense-in-palestine>

reasonable to argue that Jewish complacency towards gun control laws inhibited Jews from fighting back against the Nazis, when there were many Jews who deliberately ignored Nazi gun control laws in order to fight back against the regime. In addition, I would not argue that American gun control laws, many of which I personally disagree with, are anything like the antisemitic gun control laws instituted by Nazi Germany. While gun control in the Nazi era was specifically targeted at the Jewish community, and many Jews defied these gun control laws by participating in the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising and joining partisan militia groups, to compare Nazi gun control laws to American gun control laws is akin to comparing apples and oranges. In order to better understand how American gun control laws have oppressed minority groups, Americans should look in our own backyard instead of anachronistically pointing the finger at Nazi Germany, because many American gun control laws have manifested in racially biased enforcement, especially towards Black, Hispanic, and Native American communities.

However, while I do not believe that American gun control laws can be equated with the antisemitic gun policies put in place by the Nazi regime in the 1930s, I do acknowledge the role that both the historical and present-day enforcement of gun control laws in the United States has concerning institutional racism. There are numerous examples of gun control enforcement being used to harm members of ethnic minority groups, despite whites historically having higher levels of gun ownership.¹⁰⁶

In 1890, during the height of the Indian Wars in the Western United States, the 7th U.S. Army Cavalry, under the command of Colonel James W. Forsyth, massacred an estimated 250-300 Lakota Native Americans at Wounded Knee Creek in South Dakota. The massacre was preceded by an attempt by the Cavalry to seize firearms from Native American tribes in the area in order to stop Native resistance against the rapid expansion of settler colonialism in the

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/13/key-facts-about-americans-and-guns>

American West. Many Lakota Natives in the area had taken up arms as a result of attempts by white settlers to forcefully claim Native-owned plots of land.¹⁰⁷

In 1956, following the bombing of the home of civil rights leader Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham, Alabama, he decided to apply for a license to carry a concealed handgun. At the time, these concealed carry licenses were not issued to everyday civilians as they are today and were based on very subjective and arbitrary criteria. According to UCLA law professor Adam Winkler, “The local police had discretion to determine who was a suitable person to carry firearms. King, a clergyman whose life was threatened daily, surely met the requirements of the law, but he was rejected nevertheless. At the time, the police used any wiggle room in the law to discriminate against African Americans.”¹⁰⁸ Twelve years after his failed attempt at obtaining a concealed carry permit, King was assassinated. Just like many other civil rights at the time that we now take for granted, the historic and systematic disenfranchisement of Black gun owners in the United States fits this horrible pattern. While King was assassinated at a long distance with a high-powered scoped hunting rifle, King had numerous other attempts on his life and the ability for him to carry a concealed weapon in public would have likely helped to prevent some of the previous attempts. Nonetheless, it’s important that King distinguished between the use of firearms for violence as a political strategy and carrying firearms as a form of self-protection. He understood that being an armed citizen should never come at the cost of one’s commitment to a philosophy of nonviolence and civil disobedience.

In 1967, in response to armed protests and armed copwatching done by the Black Panthers, the California state legislature moved to ban the open carry of loaded firearms in public, and following a massive protest at the State Capitol, Assembly Bill 1591, also known as

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Wounded-Knee-Massacre#ref343705>

¹⁰⁸ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mlk-and-his-guns_b_810132

the Mulford Act, was voted in quickly and signed into law by then-Governor Ronald Reagan. This law diminished the ability of the Black Panthers to carry guns to protect themselves when engaging in their advocacy for racial justice.¹⁰⁹

For decades in New York City, stop-and-frisk was a policy instituted by the NYPD in order to enforce New York City's very strict gun control laws, by granting law enforcement extra authority to stop people and pat them down for weapons at any time without a warrant with the officer's discretion. According to a 2019 ACLU study of stop-and-frisk incidents during Bill de Blasio's tenure as NYC mayor, it was found that 75% percent of people stopped for potential weapons were Black and Latino, 93% of the people searched for weapons did not have any, and that despite being searched at lower rates, whites who were searched for weapons were more likely to have them than people of color. The use of force by officers was also found to be much more common in stop-and-frisk cases concerning people of color.¹¹⁰

A similar trend was found in the enforcement of handgun registration laws in California, in which possession of an unregistered handgun by a California resident is a wobbler offense, which can be charged as either a misdemeanor or a felony. According to a 2005 study, less than 40% of whites charged with the crime were charged with a felony, while around 70% of Blacks and Latinos faced felony charges for the same exact violation of the law.¹¹¹

While there are numerous other examples of how gun control laws in the United States have been utilized negatively as a tool of systemic racism, my point in mentioning the intersection of systemic racism and gun control laws is that when discussing gun rights issues, it is unhelpful to compare American gun laws with Nazi gun laws from several decades ago.

¹⁰⁹<https://californialocal.com/localnews/statewide/ca/article/show/4412-california-gun-control-reagan-black-panthers/>

¹¹⁰ <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/nyclu-releases-report-analyzing-nypd-stop-and-frisk-data>

¹¹¹ <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna6866962>

Rather, instead, there are many examples of American gun laws, past and present, which are emblematic of an inherently discriminatory system. As Americans and American Jews, we don't need to look at the Holocaust to tell us why enforcement of gun laws is often done in an unjust manner, but rather, we should instead look at how it manifests in our current society, here in the United States. Whether it is in the Great Plains, Deep South, or the so-called progressive bastions of New York and California, the historic and present-day racism often involved in gun control enforcement paints a much more accurate, realistic, and intellectually honest picture of the situation here in the United States than the broad and partially unfounded comparisons to the Holocaust that have become such a popular talking point in the American gun ownership debate, especially among the Jewish community. The inappropriate use of Holocaust arguments in the debate around firearms, alongside other hot-button social and political issues, is not only lacking in historicity and sensitivity but also ruins the ability to have a good faith discussion on important issues that affect our daily lives.

Chapter 6: Jewish involvement in gun rights advocacy

If you look at any major social or political movement in the United States, you are likely to find Jews involved in some way, and as I mentioned in a previous chapter, this is because a sense of civic duty, voting, and advocacy are important values among American Jews across the political spectrum. While American Jews are often unfairly stereotyped as anti-gun, due to the prominence of many Jewish gun control activists, there are lots of other politically active Jews who have contributed to gun rights movements as well. Just as American Jews have been involved in advocacy on a plethora of social and political issues over the years, many American Jews have had deep involvement in the sociopolitical culture of both gun rights movements and gun control movements. While the next chapter is about Jewish advocacy for gun control, which has received significantly more media and press coverage, this chapter is about the many members of the Jewish community who have involved themselves in many different ways in the gun rights movement in the United States.

My first example is the prominent Colorado firearms dealer Mel “Dragonman” Bernstein. Born into a Jewish family in Brooklyn, NY, Bernstein is a prominent military arms collector with a 75,000 square foot military history museum and gun store in Colorado sitting on over 250 acres of his land. At his store, he is a prominent Class III firearms dealer specializing in restricted weapons, such as machine guns, short-barreled rifles and shotguns, and silencers. With over 5,000 firearms, he has one of the largest privately held gun collections of any private citizen in the United States, and has been featured in various television shows and media.¹¹² In 2018, Bernstein attracted controversy when he offered to personally donate free firearms to rabbis following the Tree of Life synagogue shooting in Pittsburgh. He received mixed feedback from

¹¹²<https://forward.com/news/478422/jewish-jew-dragonland-mel-bernstein-machine-guns-dragonland-museum-70-000/>

prominent members of the Colorado Jewish community for his offer, with some expressing gratitude and others expressing unease.¹¹³

Aaron S. Zelman (ז'ל), founder of the Jewish gun rights organization Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, was raised in Tucson, Arizona by his grandmother, who was a Holocaust survivor. In 1989, after working in sales in Wisconsin, he started his journey as a Jewish gun rights activist in response to Jewish politicians and activists who were involved in supporting gun control measures. He wrote many books arguing against gun control, often from his perspective as a descendant of Holocaust survivors. He was a controversial figure in the Jewish community, and his stances were revered by gun rights supporters Jewish and Gentile alike, while also strongly criticized by mainstream Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League. He passed away in 2010.¹¹⁴

Sandra Froman is a former president of the National Rifle Association. Born and raised in a Jewish household in San Francisco, and educated at Harvard Law, Froman was a highly successful lawyer before her brief tenure as president of the NRA.¹¹⁵

Inna Vernikov is a Jewish Republican NYC city councilwoman representing Brooklyn. She has advocated for concealed carry permits to be issued to more New Yorkers. She was caught bringing her licensed firearm to a pro-Israel counter-protest at Brooklyn College approximately a week following the October 7 attacks in Israel. After photos of her at the event with her holstered handgun sticking out of her waistband publicly surfaced on the internet, she turned herself in at a police station, surrendered her firearm, and was arrested and charged with carrying in a sensitive location, as New York bans the carry of firearms both at universities and at demonstrations. The Brooklyn District Attorney dropped all of the charges in November due to a

¹¹³ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jewish-gun-store-owner-from-colorado-offers-rabbis-free-rifles/>

¹¹⁴ <https://forward.com/opinion/172210/meet-aaron-zelman-the-jew-who-loved-guns/>

¹¹⁵ <https://momentmag.com/the-president-of-the-national-rifle-association-is-jewish/>

technicality, as the recoil spring was not installed in the handgun when the gun was turned over to the NYPD, and was thus rendered inoperable, so there was no way of proving that the gun was able to fire at the time of the incident.¹¹⁶ She continues to serve in her role as a city councilwoman and was reelected following the dropping of the charges.¹¹⁷ It is worth mentioning that on a semiautomatic handgun, a recoil spring is a strong steel spring wrapped around a guide rod that absorbs the kinetic energy from a cartridge being fired and redirects the energy toward the slide of the handgun, causing the spent shell casing to be ejected, followed by the chambering of an unfired cartridge from the magazine. As a gun owner, I know from experience that recoil springs on the vast majority of models of semiautomatic handguns are incredibly easy to remove when being fieldstripped for regular cleaning and maintenance, and on many popular models such as the Glock and Springfield XD, this can be done so in less than thirty seconds without the use of any tools. I'm not making any allegations but I will let you draw your own conclusions on what may or may not have happened to Ms. Vernikov's gun.

There are also several rabbis who also work as firearms instructors. Rabbi Yossi Eilfort is a Los Angeles-based Orthodox rabbi, firearms instructor, and mixed martial arts specialist. He founded the Jewish non-profit security group Magen Am, which provides armed security services for Jewish neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Many Orthodox Jews in the Los Angeles area have received firearms training from Rabbi Eilfort.¹¹⁸

Rabbi Dovid Bendory, an Orthodox rabbi in the heavily Jewish city of Teaneck, NJ, works as a firearms instructor teaching Orthodox Jews in the greater NYC metro area.¹¹⁹ He also

¹¹⁶ <https://www.thecity.nyc/2023/11/17/gun-charge-dropped-council-member-vernikov-inoperable-weapon/>

¹¹⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/17/nyregion/nyc-councilwoman-gun-inna-vernikov.html>

¹¹⁸ <https://jewishjournal.com/community/365753/rabbi-yossi-eilfort-and-magen-am-empowering-communities-with-firearm-training/>

¹¹⁹ <https://njewishnews.timesofisrael.com/nj-gun-rabbi-teaches-torah-of-self-defense/>

serves as the Rabbinic Director of the Jewish gun rights advocacy group Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership and has written numerous articles for them.¹²⁰

Rabbi Raziel Cohen is an Orthodox rabbi who works as a firearms instructor and security consultant, specializing in synagogue security. He travels the country giving classes through his organization The National Defensive Firearms Training Academy, and he trains both law enforcement and civilians.¹²¹ He also operates a Youtube channel called “The Tactical Rabbi”, which has nearly 70,000 subscribers and a wide following among gun owners, Jewish and Gentile alike.¹²²

There are also many Jewish authors and academics who have been very public about their support for the Second Amendment. One notable example is Alan Gottlieb, a conservative gun rights activist and the founder of the Second Amendment Foundation is from a Jewish family in Los Angeles. He has written multiple books on the subject of gun rights.¹²³

Eugene Volokh is a Ukrainian-American Jewish constitutional law professor at UCLA. He is a staunch libertarian and has written extensively on First Amendment and Second Amendment issues.¹²⁴ He is a frequent contributor to the libertarian publication *Reason*.¹²⁵

Joel Rosenberg (z”l) was a Canadian-American Jewish science fiction author, who often incorporated themes about Judaism and gun rights into his written works. He also worked as a firearms instructor.¹²⁶ He famously was arrested in 2010 for illegally open-carrying a holstered handgun into Minneapolis City Hall. While it is legal to open carry handguns with a concealed

¹²⁰ <https://jpfo.org/filegen-a-m/about.htm>

¹²¹ <https://www.ndftraining.com/about-us/>

¹²² <https://www.youtube.com/@TheTacticalRabbi/>

¹²³ <https://forward.com/news/169077/jewish-gun-leaders-come-out-firing/>

¹²⁴ <https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2022/05/27/legal-scholar-eugene-volokh/personalities/in-the-green-room/>

¹²⁵ <https://reason.com/volokh/2022/06/23/how-should-courts-evaluate-gun-regulations-after-bruen/>

¹²⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20101212221720/http://www.citypages.com/2003-06-18/books/a-hello-to-arms/>

carry permit in Minnesota, and Rosenberg did have such a permit, carrying in such a manner is prohibited by force of law in public buildings in Minnesota. He passed away in 2011 before the case had a chance to go to trial.¹²⁷

Liel Leibowitz is an Israeli-American journalist and editor-at-large for *Tablet*, a major Jewish publication, co-host of the Jewish podcast “Unorthodox”, and has also written multiple books on Jewish topics.¹²⁸ Leibowitz is a staunch supporter of the Second Amendment, and encouraged American Jews to purchase guns and obtain firearms training in response to the increased domestic tensions following the October 7th attacks in Israel.¹²⁹

Dan Baum, author of the book *Gun Guys: A Road Trip*, is an author and a liberal Jewish gun enthusiast who wrote about his experience traveling all over America to learn about gun culture and the complexity of the national firearms debate.¹³⁰

There has also been a rise in the popularity of Jewish gun clubs, especially among Orthodox Jews. The New York State Jewish Gun Club was founded in Rockland County, New York in order to help provide firearm training resources to the Jewish community.¹³¹ A similar Jewish-oriented gun club, *Bullets and Bagels*, is based in Orange County, California.¹³²

While the majority of Jewish organizations are overwhelmingly in support of gun control, which will be explored more in depth in the next chapter, there are some smaller Jewish organizations that do support the Second Amendment, including the Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership¹³³, as well as the Republican Jewish Coalition¹³⁴.

¹²⁷ <https://www.startribune.com/gun-advocate-joel-rosenberg-dies/123121288/>

¹²⁸ <https://sapijournal.org/authors/liel-leibovitz/>

¹²⁹ <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/get-gun-liel-leibovitz-jews>

¹³⁰ <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15797322-gun-guys>

¹³¹ <https://nysjewishgunclub.com/>

¹³² <https://www.bulletsandbagels.com/about>

¹³³ <https://jpfo.org/>

¹³⁴ https://www.rjchq.org/rjc_statement_of_principles

In 2018, one of the worst school shootings in American history happened at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. 17 people were murdered and numerous others were injured. Because Parkland has a large Jewish community, five of the 17 victims who lost their lives in the massacre were Jewish, and so not only did the tragedy inflame a national conversation on the debate between gun rights and gun control throughout the United States, it also sparked a similar controversy within the Jewish community, even among survivors of the shooting and their families. While some Jewish survivors and victim family members of the school massacre came out in support of the Second Amendment, others became fiercely opposed to it, and became deeply involved in gun control advocacy.¹³⁵ The debate about guns in the American Jewish community mirrors many aspects of the debate in American society as a whole, with the Jewish community being a microcosm of this national controversy.

Following the murder of his daughter Meadow Pollack (ז"ל) in the Parkland school massacre, Andrew Pollack, a dentist and active member of the local Jewish community, came out strongly in support of the Second Amendment. He feels that the gun control movement has exploited the death of his daughter to advance its political agenda. Pollack has since advocated for increased security in schools, arming more school staff, as well as the abolition of gun-free zones in schools, as he feels that making schools gun-free has also made them a softer target for violence with victims who were unable to fight back.¹³⁶

Kyle Kashuv, a Jewish student who survived the Parkland school massacre, has also become a prominent gun rights activist, and his gun rights advocacy was done in part to challenge the views of many of his classmates who were involved in gun control advocacy.¹³⁷ He

¹³⁵<https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-years-after-deadly-school-shooting-jews-in-parkland-still-dont-feel-secure/>

¹³⁶<https://dailycaller.com/2023/12/03/opinion-my-daughter-died-at-parkland-now-i-want-the-media-to-stop-exploiting-the-tragedy-andrew-pollack/>

¹³⁷<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/06/03/the-parkland-provocateur-kyle-kashuv-prepares-to-grapple>

famously met with Donald Trump, and was involved in the conservative political organization Turning Point USA. While Kashuv was accepted to Harvard following his graduation from high school, his admission offer was rescinded as it was uncovered that he was making many horrific racist and sexist comments, including use of the hard-R N-word, in a Google Drive study group chat with other classmates from his high school. Kashuv later apologized for his comments, but the school stood firm in their choice to rescind his offer.¹³⁸

While many of the Jewish survivors and victim family members in Parkland responded to the tragedy with support for gun control, dissenting voices such as Andrew Pollack and Kyle Kashuv provided an alternative to the predominant mainstream perspectives on gun control in the Jewish community. In the next chapter, I will discuss the major contingent of prominent Jews and Jewish organizations who have been involved with gun control advocacy, starting with the contingent of Parkland survivors and victim families whose work Pollack and Kashuv were highly critical of.

¹³⁸<https://www.jta.org/2019/06/18/united-states/harvard-dropped-a-jewish-pro-gun-parkland-student-over-past-racist-comments-was-it-justified>

Chapter 7: Jewish involvement in gun control advocacy

Just as many Jews have contributed to gun rights movements in the United States, many Jews, and prominent Jewish organizations, have also been heavily involved in advocacy for stricter gun control policies. One notable example of how members of the Jewish community mobilized in favor of gun control was in response to the 2018 mass shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in which due to the school's large Jewish population, a large portion of victims and survivors were Jewish.¹³⁹

Following the horrific massacre, a group of students from the school who survived the mass shooting came together to lead the charge for stricter gun laws, as they had felt that state and federal gun laws were too relaxed and that school shootings were a consequence of this. In response, these students founded the group Never Again MSD to work towards tightening gun laws, and also helped organize the 2018 March for Our Lives gun control protests nationwide.¹⁴⁰ One of the co-founders of this student activist group is Cameron Kasky, a Jewish survivor of the Parkland school shooting. In a CNN town hall on gun law reform, Kasky asked Florida Senator Marco Rubio, "This is about people who are for making a difference to save us and people who are against us and prefer money. So, Senator Rubio. Can you tell me you will not accept a single donation from the NRA in the future?" In response, Senator Rubio replied, "There's a lot of money on both sides of every issue in America, and where that leaves us policy makers is to look at both sides of the issue and decide what we think is right, I will always accept the help of anyone who agrees with my agenda."¹⁴¹ His position as a teenager challenging existing authority was considered to be an inspiring event for many gun control advocates.

¹³⁹<https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-years-after-deadly-school-shooting-jews-in-parkland-still-dont-feel-secure/>

¹⁴⁰<https://www.bustle.com/p/what-is-never-again-msd-parkland-survivors-are-standing-up-to-politicians-the-nra-8262680>

¹⁴¹<https://forward.com/news/395005/seething-jewish-parents-and-students-lead-emotional-anti-gun-fight/>

Other Jewish student survivors who were co-founders of the March for Our Lives movement include filmmaker and activist Ryan Deitsch¹⁴² and his author and activist sister Samantha Deitsch¹⁴³. Many Jewish family members of victims were also involved in gun control advocacy and activism as well, including Fred Guttenberg, the father of murdered student Jaime Guttenberg (z”l)¹⁴⁴, Linda Beigel-Schulman, mother of murdered teacher Scott Beigel (z”l)¹⁴⁵, and Lori Alhadeff, mother of murdered student Alyssa Alhadeff (z”l).¹⁴⁶ The activism that came out as a result of the Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, both in favor and against gun control, shows that like many other social and political issues, gun ownership remains a divisive and heavily contested topic in the American Jewish community.

Many Jewish government leaders have come out in support of gun control measures, and in many cases have been involved in implementing them.

Michael Bloomberg, the Jewish former mayor of New York City, is a staunch supporter of gun control, founding the organization Mayors Against Illegal Guns, which has since merged with the gun control organization Everytown for Gun Safety.¹⁴⁷

Jewish Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker is also a gun control advocate as well and has made gun control one of the key issues in his political career. In 2023, he signed the “Protect Illinois Communities Act”,¹⁴⁸ a widely encompassing assault weapons ban that banned many types of firearms and magazines already in common use.¹⁴⁹ Many Illinois sheriff’s departments outside of

¹⁴² <https://www.circle.org/activistspotlight/ryan-deitsch>

¹⁴³ <https://eagleeye.news/13825/feature/msd-students-continue-to-adjust-to-life-two-years-after-deadly-shooting/>

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.heavy.com/news/2018/02/fred-guttenberg-video-jaime-father-marco-rubio-cnn/amp/>

¹⁴⁵ <https://liherald.com/stories/linda-beigel-schulman-joins-protest-outside-santos-office-decrying-national-gun-of-america.173381>

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/2018/05/01/on-her-birthday-friends-and-family-remember-parkland-shooting-victim-alyssa-alhadeff/>

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.bloomberg.org/founders-projects/everytown-for-gun-safety/>

¹⁴⁸ <https://dailynorthwestern.com/2024/01/02/lateststories/deadline-passes-for-illinois-residents-to-register-assault-weapons/>

¹⁴⁹ <https://isp.illinois.gov/StaticFiles/docs/Home/AssaultWeapons/PICA%20Identification%20Guide.pdf>

the Chicago metro area defied the will of the Governor and refused to enforce the ban on constitutional grounds.¹⁵⁰

Diane Feinstein (ז"ל) was a Jewish politician who served as Mayor of San Francisco and also as a long-time Senator represented California, serving in the U.S. Senate for several decades until her passing in 2023 at the age of 90. She helped author the 1994 Federal Assault Weapons Ban, placing restrictions on certain types of firearms and magazines already in common use. The ban expired ten years later in 2004 and has not been renewed since due to its lack of efficacy in reducing gun crimes.¹⁵¹

Jewish Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders was a longtime opponent of gun control when he was an Independent, in part due to him serving a rural state where guns are quite popular among his constituents. However, when he ran as a Democrat for the 2020 election, he reversed his position on gun control to appeal to a more liberal base, though he still caught criticism from mainline Democrats for his previous pro-gun stances.¹⁵²

The Jewish former California Senator Barbara Boxer is a long-time advocate of gun control policies. She has been a vocal supporter of various types of gun legislation proposals, including assault weapon bans, high-capacity magazine bans, limiting legal immunity of firearms manufacturers, and banning the carry of firearms on public transportation.¹⁵³

Jewish New Jersey Senator Frank Lautenberg (ז"ל) was a major supporter of gun control as well throughout his tenure as Senator.¹⁵⁴ Much of his advocacy was on the issue of domestic abuse and firearms, and he famously authored the Lautenberg Amendment, which made

¹⁵⁰<https://www.courthousenews.com/illinois-has-banned-assault-weapon-ownership-but-local-sheriffs-say-they-wont-enforce-it-now-what/>

¹⁵¹<https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/sen-dianne-feinstein-gun-control-assault-weapons-ban-le-gacy/>

¹⁵²<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/newly-revealed-letter-highlights-sanders-complicated-history-gun/story?id=69237184>

¹⁵³ https://www.ontheissues.org/domestic/Barbara_Boxer_Gun_Control.htm

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/06/03/gun-control-advocate-frank-lautenberg-dies-at-89>

misdemeanor domestic violence convictions a disqualifier for gun ownership on a national level.¹⁵⁵ Before the Lautenberg Amendment, only felony convictions for domestic violence were considered to be disqualifying. Lautenberg passed away in 2013 at the age of 89.¹⁵⁶

There are some prominent Jewish authors that have been involved in advocating for gun control as well. Jewish Russian-American author Igor Volsky, writer of the book *Guns Down: How To Defeat The NRA And Build A Safer Future With Fewer Guns*, and head of the gun control organization Guns Down America, has used his platform to advocate for much stricter gun control policies.¹⁵⁷ Prominent Jewish author and academic Alan Dershowitz, Professor Emeritus at Harvard School of Law, is also very much in favor of gun control and has criticized both the NRA and the perceived lack of action on the part of politicians.¹⁵⁸

Many rabbis have been active in gun control advocacy as well. Rabbi Menachem Creditor has been very active on the issue of gun control and has written multiple books and articles about Jewish responses to the issue of gun violence in America.¹⁵⁹ Rabbi Joel Mosbacher became a gun control activist following the shocking murder of his father in 1999.¹⁶⁰ Rabbi Joe Black is a gun control activist who became notable for his 2019 opinion piece for the Times of Israel about how he perceived American support for gun rights as a form of idolatry because he believes that many gun owners worship their guns more than their God.¹⁶¹ Rabbi Jill Jacobs, executive director of T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, has also advocated for gun

¹⁵⁵<https://www.usmarshals.gov/resources/forms/lautenberg-amendment#:~:text=The%20Lautenberg%20Ammendment%20makes%20it,or%20receive%20firearms%20or%20ammunition.>

¹⁵⁶<https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/06/03/gun-control-advocate-frank-lautenberg-dies-at-89>

¹⁵⁷<https://thehill.com/opinion/criminal-justice/415013-i-fled-anti-semitism-in-the-soviet-union-we-must-tackle-lax-gun-laws/>

¹⁵⁸<https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/3506699-the-nras-anti-american-narrative-no-excuse-for-gun-violence-like-the-ualde-school-shooting/>

¹⁵⁹ <https://rabbicreditor.blogspot.com/p/gun-violence-resources.html>

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/20/us/rabbi-pursues-gun-control-as-his-moral-cause.html>

¹⁶¹ <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/guns-and-idol-worship/>

control while working closely among like-minded faith leaders with the gun control organization Everytown for Gun Safety.¹⁶²

Finally, it is worth noting that many major mainstream Jewish organizations have taken strong stances on the issue of gun control. The organization Rabbis Against Gun Violence is a collaborative effort on the part of many Jewish faith leaders to advocate for gun control policies.¹⁶³ The Jewish Center for Justice is very active on the issue of gun control, supporting assault weapons and magazine bans.¹⁶⁴ The Union for Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center, the political advocacy wing of the Union for Reform Judaism, also prioritizes gun control among the many social and political issues that it is involved with.¹⁶⁵ The Central Conference of American Rabbis has put out many rabbinic responsa in favor of gun control measures and has done so for half a century.¹⁶⁶ Despite their longstanding stances towards gun control that have persisted since the 1970s, I mentioned several chapters ago in a review of firearms-related CCAR responsa that they did somewhat relax their stance on civilian handgun ownership over the past few decades, shifting its goals towards assault weapon and magazine bans. The Rabbinical Assembly of the Conservative Movement has similarly passed resolutions on the issue of gun control as well.¹⁶⁷

The Anti-Defamation League has routinely supported numerous gun control policies since 1967. The ADL is also staunchly opposed to the making of comparisons between American gun control and Nazi Germany's gun control policies on the basis that such a comparison is offensive and historically inaccurate.¹⁶⁸ While I respectfully disagree with many

¹⁶²<https://www.everytown.org/press/everytown-announces-new-initiative-with-interfaith-leaders-and-organizations-to-mobilize-people-of-faith-around-gun-safety-in-2020/>

¹⁶³ <https://www.facebook.com/RabbisAgainstGunViolence/>

¹⁶⁴ <https://jewishcenterforjustice.org/project/gun-violence-prevention/>

¹⁶⁵ <https://rac.org/gun-violence-prevention-jewish-values>

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.ccarnet.org/ccar-resolutions/gun-violence-ending/>

¹⁶⁷ <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/story/resolution-american-gun-violence>

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.adl.org/resources/news/resolution-addressing-gun-violence-prevention>

aspects of their stance on the issue of gun control, such as their support for bans on high-capacity magazines and firearms deemed as assault weapons,¹⁶⁹ I do agree with the ADL's stance that it is insensitive and highly anachronistic to make broad comparisons of American gun control laws to the gun control laws enacted by Nazi Germany, as I mentioned two chapters ago.

The heavy involvement of Jews in both gun rights and gun control advocacy represents how in many ways, the American Jewish community is in many ways a microcosm of American society, culture, and politics, and the issues of gun ownership are contested on both the national scale and communal scale. While many mainstream Jewish organizations and leaders are strongly in support of gun control measures, they by no means represent the stances of the Jewish community as a whole. Instead, Jewish communal leaders from a wide range of perspectives are strongly represented on both sides of a very complex and controversial argument about the role of guns in American society.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Chapter 8: Targeted gun violence against Jews and Jewish institutions

It is important to recognize that one of the reasons why many American Jews are uncomfortable around firearms comes from the fact all too often in Jewish history, we have been on the wrong end of the barrel. Whether it is during pogrom attacks in Eastern Europe, the Holocaust, or recent horrific antisemitic hate crimes, the Jewish community has had its disproportionate share when it comes to firearms being used to carry out violent acts of oppression against us. However, it is also important to recognize that like any other tool, firearms can be used for evil and also for good. That being said, the primary purpose of this chapter is to show how firearms have been used against Jews throughout American history, whereas in the next chapter, I will discuss how firearms can empower fellow Jews to take action to protect ourselves and also our communities.

While Jews have lived in America since the days of the Thirteen Colonies, antisemitism was fairly uncommon pre-civil war and the Jewish community at the time was fairly small and primarily consisted of a minority merchant class of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews who chose to live in places that were considered to be more tolerant to Jews at the time, including New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Georgia.¹⁷⁰ However, while the United States has historically been one of the most welcoming countries towards Jews, an undercurrent of violent antisemitism began to rise starting in the American Civil War, and firearms have all too often been a part of these violent acts. Waves of antisemitic violence have come and gone in response to major historical events such as the Civil War, Reconstruction, large waves of Jewish immigration, racist backlash towards the Civil Rights movement, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

¹⁷⁰<https://teachinghistory.org/history-content/ask-a-historian/20494#:~:text=Jews%20were%20not%20welcomed%20everywhere,the%20principle%20of%20religious%20tolerance.>

During the American Civil War, Jews fought for both the Union and the Confederacy. In 1862, then General Ulysses S. Grant issued the infamous General Order No. 11, which was an instruction to Union troops to facilitate the deportation of Jews in Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee despite an injunction by Abraham Lincoln. The dual-loyalty trope was harshly applied to Jews on both sides of the Civil War, with Northerners accusing Jews of supporting the Confederacy due to the role of Jewish merchants in smuggling cotton out of the South, while many Southerners accused Jews of supporting the Union due to widespread antisemitism.¹⁷¹ In Paducah, Kentucky, thirty Jewish families were forcibly expelled from the city by armed mobs in December 1862 as a result of General Order No. 11. Instead of fighting back, the Jewish community in Paducah personally lobbied President Abraham Lincoln to rescind the order. They returned to Paducah in 1863 following Lincoln's January overturn of General Grant's Order, and subsequently founded a Burial Society and a Temple that is still active.¹⁷² Despite General Grant making the declaration in Holly Springs, Mississippi,¹⁷³ the Jewish community there was protected by the Confederate army from Union troops who wanted to deport them during Confederate General Earl Van Dorn's December 1862 raid on Holly Springs, preventing the Union Army from being able to implement General Grant's order there.¹⁷⁴

While during the Civil War, Jewish communities in the South gained the protection of the Confederate Army, the attitudes of Southern society soured towards Jews following the aftermath of the Civil War and the following Reconstruction era. Extremist groups that arose during this time, such as the Ku Klux Klan, began making Jews a target and blamed them for the shifting social and racial norms that were facilitated by Reconstruction-era policies. In 1868,

¹⁷¹ <https://www.history.com/news/ulysses-grant-expulsion-jews-civil-war>

¹⁷² <https://templeisraelky.org/history>

¹⁷³ <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=169021>

¹⁷⁴ <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=183931>

Jewish store owner Samuel Bierfield and his black clerk Lawrence Bowman were shot to death by the Ku Klux Klan in Tennessee.¹⁷⁵ In 1869, Jewish clothing store owner Samuel Fleischman was found shot dead in Florida. This murder was also likely perpetrated by the KKK.¹⁷⁶

During the twentieth century, with its mass waves of Jewish immigration, Jewish involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, and the rise of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, violent antisemitic acts involving firearms became more common. In 1903, Polish-born Jewish merchant Abraham Suransky of Aiken, South Carolina, was shot, killed, and mutilated by Lee Green. Green was motivated by antisemitism against Jewish immigrant peddlers in the area.¹⁷⁷

In 1913, Leo Frank, a pencil factory superintendent in Atlanta, was arrested for the rape and murder of a 13-year-old girl, Mary Phagan, who worked for him. Although there was very limited evidence for the crime and conflicting witness testimony, Leo Frank was convicted of the crime, despite the strong possibility that he was framed. His case was highly sensationalized in print media, as this was the era of yellow journalism, which subsisted on telling extreme stories of questionable veracity in order to sell more newspapers. While he was sentenced to death by hanging, Frank tried to appeal his conviction until 1915, when his death sentence was commuted to life in prison by Georgia Governor John Slaton, upon the results of his private investigation. This decision by Governor Slaton led to major outrage against the Jewish community in Georgia, and on August 17, 1915, Frank was kidnapped from Milledgeville prison by a heavily armed mob who called themselves “The Knights of Mary Phagan”. The armed mob overpowered the prison guards and not a single shot was fired. Leo Frank was then publicly hanged from a tree in front of thousands of people.¹⁷⁸ The miscarriage of justice in Frank’s case, as well as the rise of

¹⁷⁵ <https://forward.com/news/210334/untold-story-of-the-first-jewish-lynching-in-ameri/>

¹⁷⁶ <https://archive.org/details/strangersneighbo00adam/page/298/mode/2up>

¹⁷⁷ https://www.jewishsouth.org/system/files/sjh_v.8_2005_mason.pdf, pg. 80-89

¹⁷⁸ <https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/leo-frank-lynching>

antisemitic tropes in media coverage of the incident, led to the establishment of the Anti-Defamation League in order to combat the rise of American antisemitism.¹⁷⁹

During the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, many Jewish activists came to the South in order to fight against segregation and race-based voter disenfranchisement. In 1964 during Freedom Summer, when many Northern activists came to the South to help with Civil Rights efforts, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, a group of CORE activists working in Philadelphia, Mississippi, were kidnapped, shot to death, and mutilated in response to their work with the Congress Of Racial Equality registering black voters. Schwerner and Goodman were both Jewish. While seven Klan members were convicted for the crime, they had very light sentences averaging about six years, and some were even released early. In 1999, the state of Mississippi reopened the case and in 2005, one of the perpetrators, Edgar Ray Killen, was convicted of manslaughter and was sentenced to 60 years in prison.¹⁸⁰

In 1986, Neal Rosenblum, an Orthodox Jew living in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania was murdered when a car pulled up in front of Rosenblum to ask for directions as he was walking down the street. When Rosenblum approached the vehicle, the driver, Steven Tielsch, pulled out a pistol and shot Rosenblum five times, killing him instantly. The murder was motivated by antisemitism, and Rosenblum was specifically targeted for his visible Orthodox Jewish attire. The murder shocked the Pittsburgh Jewish community at the time, and media discussion of this murder resurfaced following the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre which happened 32 years later in the same exact neighborhood.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/leo-frank>

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedomssummer-murder/>

¹⁸¹ https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/jta/in-1986-another-anti-semitic-pittsburgh-shooter-murdered-my-childhood-friend/article_593c006f-6c6d-5def-a405-9a87e5dfbaf6.html

In the late twentieth century, there were also multiple assassinations of prominent Jewish Americans in which antisemitism was a factor. In 1984, Jewish Denver-area radio host Alan Berg was gunned down in front of his home by members of a white supremacist group known as The Order.¹⁸² In 1990, Rabbi Meir Kahane, a far-right ultranationalist Israeli-American rabbi and political extremist, was shot dead in New York City by Egyptian-American El Sayyid Nosair, who was later convicted for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.¹⁸³ Rabbi Kahane founded the Jewish Defense League, a militant far-right Jewish group created to present an armed response to antisemitism in the 1960s, as well as the Kach Party, an ultranationalist and anti-Arab political movement in Israel.¹⁸⁴

While throughout American history, firearms have been used to attack individual Jews, firearms have also been used in violent antisemitic attacks on Jewish institutions, as over the last sixty years, Jewish institutions of various types, including synagogues, Jewish Community Centers, and kosher markets, have increasingly been targets for antisemitic violence, with the majority of these attacks having been committed with firearms.

Most notable among these incidents are horrific mass shootings at synagogues and a kosher grocery store which have happened in the last couple of decades. Following the passage of the Investigative Assistance for Violent Crimes Act of 2012, a federal statute regarding homicide investigations, the FBI generally considers a “mass killing” to be three or more killings in a single incident, excluding the perpetrator.¹⁸⁵ Because this definition is used often by law enforcement agencies, and the fact that a “mass shooting” is essentially a “mass killing”

¹⁸²<https://www.cpr.org/show-segment/murder-of-colorado-radio-man-alan-berg-still-resonates-30-years-later/>

¹⁸³ <https://vault.fbi.gov/meir-kahane>

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Meir-Kahane>

¹⁸⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/mass-shooting>

involving firearms, I have decided to use this definition when talking about mass shootings specifically, mainly for clarity and consistency.

On April 13, 2014, white supremacist Frazier Glenn Cross, aged 73, of Aurora, Missouri murdered three people in a series of two shootings at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Kansas City and its adjacent Village Shalom retirement community, both located in Overland Park, Kansas. He used a shotgun and a handgun to commit the murders, opening fire in the JCC and retirement community parking lots, and he carried out his attack on the eve of Passover.¹⁸⁶ The three victims included Dr. William Lewis Corporon, 69, his grandson Reat Underwood, 14, and Terri LaManno, 53. Nobody else was killed or injured in the shootings, and none of the victims of the shootings were Jewish, but they were targeted simply for visiting a Jewish institution in the first place. The shootings at the Overland Park JCC and Village Shalom show that all too often, non-Jews are targeted by antisemites simply for being associated with Jews.¹⁸⁷

On the Shabbat morning of October 27, 2018, white supremacist Robert D. Bowers, aged 46, opened fire during services at Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, a Conservative synagogue in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood, resulting in the most deadly antisemitic attack in American history. Using an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle and multiple handguns, he murdered eleven congregants and injured two in the sanctuary, before eventually surrendering to police. Bowers specifically chose to target the Tree of Life Congregation because they were hosting an event by the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society in support of refugees, and in his online writings, he accused the Jewish community of promoting mass immigration into Western countries in order to reduce the white population.¹⁸⁸ Among those murdered in the massacre were

¹⁸⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/04/13/suburban-kansas-city-shooting/7674747/>

¹⁸⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20140418223904/http://www.kctv5.com/story/25235053/shooting-reported-at-overland-park-jewish-community-center>

¹⁸⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/27/us/active-shooter-pittsburgh-synagogue-shooting.html>

David Rosenthal, 54, Cecil Rosenthal, 59, Richard Gottfried, 65, Jerry Rabinowitz, 66, Irving Younger, 69, Daniel Stein, 71, Joyce Fienberg, 75, Melvin Wax, 88, Bernice Simon, 84, Sylvan Simon, 86, and Rose Mallinger, 97.¹⁸⁹ As these types of hate crimes are prosecuted under federal jurisdiction in the United States, Bowers was recommended by a federal jury to be sentenced to death in 2023.¹⁹⁰

On December 10, 2019, David N. Anderson, 47, and Francine Graham, 50, murdered a police detective, and then immediately drove in their stolen van to JC Kosher Market, a kosher grocery store in Jersey City, New Jersey where they opened fire. Using an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, pump-action shotgun, and two handguns, Anderson and Graham shot four people inside the store, killing three and injuring one.¹⁹¹ Following an hours-long shootout with police, two officers were injured, and the pair were eventually killed by the police.¹⁹² Inside the van, investigators found multiple unused explosive devices.¹⁹³ Among the four victims murdered that day included Jersey City Police Detective Joseph Seals, 40, longtime JC Kosher Market employee Miguel Douglas, 49, JC Kosher Market co-owner Leah Minda Ferencz, 33, and rabbinical student Moshe Deutsch, 24.¹⁹⁴ Anderson and Graham were heavily involved in the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, a black supremacist religious movement that considers African-Americans to be the true descendants of the tribes of Israel, and the pair held very strong antisemitic and anti-law enforcement views.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁹<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pittsburgh-shooting-victims-identified-tree-of-life-synagogue-deadly-shooting-squirrel-hill-2018-10-29/>

¹⁹⁰<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/jury-recommends-sentence-death-pennsylvania-man-convicted-tree-life-synagogue-shooting>

¹⁹¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/11/nyregion/jersey-city-victims.html>

¹⁹²<https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/12/us/jersey-city-new-jersey-shooting-thursday/index.html>

¹⁹³<https://www.nj.com/news/2020/01/jersey-city-kosher-market-shooters-planned-other-attack-on-jewish-center-feds-say.html>

¹⁹⁴<https://www.nj.com/hudson/2019/12/victims-of-jersey-city-store-shooting-remembered-for-selflessness.html>

¹⁹⁵<https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/12/us/jersey-city-new-jersey-shooting-thursday/index.html>

While these mass shootings involving Jewish institutions have received the heaviest media coverage due to their high death counts, there have been many other deadly shootings involving Jewish institutions of various types.

On October 8, 1977, as guests were leaving a bar mitzvah at the Brith Sholom Kneseth Israel synagogue in Richmond Heights, Missouri, white supremacist Joseph Paul Franklin, then aged 27, ambushed the crowd and opened fire with a bolt-action hunting rifle, killing Gerald Gordon, aged 40, and injured two others.¹⁹⁶ Franklin was a white supremacist serial killer who also murdered seven others, and outside of the bar mitzvah shooting, he primarily targeted black people and interracial couples in several different states. Franklin was sentenced to death in 1997 and executed via lethal injection in 2013.¹⁹⁷

On March 1, 1994, Lebanese cab driver Rashid Baz, aged 28, opened fire on a Chabad school van driving on the Brooklyn Bridge, killing yeshiva student Ari Halberstam, aged 16, and injuring three other yeshiva students in the van.¹⁹⁸ Baz used two semiautomatic handguns in the attack. Baz's motive for the attack on the Chabad school van was revenge for the Cave of the Patriarchs Massacre in Hebron which occurred a few days prior, in which Israeli soldier and doctor Baruch Goldstein opened fire and killed 29 Muslim worshippers at the shared Muslim-Jewish holy site, and he had also fled Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war, which further stoked his hatred for Jews and for Israel.¹⁹⁹ Baz was sentenced to 141 years in prison.²⁰⁰

On August 10, 1999, white supremacist Buford O. Furrow Jr., aged 37, opened fire with a semiautomatic rifle and a handgun in the lobby of the North Valley Jewish Community Center in Granada Hills, California. Over 70 shots were fired, and five people were injured at the JCC.

¹⁹⁶ <https://stljewishlight.org/news/news-local/three-decades-later-1977-st-louis-synagogue-shooting/>

¹⁹⁷ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/white-supremacist-executed-for-1977-synagogue-killing/>

¹⁹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/02/nyregion/student-15-had-ties-to-family-of-rabbi.html>

¹⁹⁹ <https://www.meforum.org/77/murder-on-the-brooklyn-bridge>

²⁰⁰ <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/01/19/nyregion/bridge-gunman-gets-141-year-term.html>

Right after leaving the JCC, Furrow immediately shot and killed Filipino-American mailman Joseph Ito, 39, and then later surrendered to police after fleeing to Las Vegas.²⁰¹ After his arrest, Furrow admitted that he wanted to target other prominent Los Angeles Jewish institutions, such the Museum of Tolerance, the Skirball Cultural Center, and the American Jewish University, but they had a much higher security presence, and so he chose the Granada Hills JCC in part because he perceived it to be a softer target.²⁰²

On July 4, 2002, Egyptian immigrant Hesham Mohamed Hadayet, aged 41, opened fire in the Tom Bradley Terminal in Los Angeles International Airport, at the ticket counter for El Al, Israel's national airline.²⁰³ Using a semiautomatic handgun, Hadayet murdered two people; diamond importer Yaakov Aminov, 46, and El Al ticket counter employee Victoria Hen, 20, and also injured four others. Hadayet was quickly shot and killed by an El Al security guard. The attack was an act of terrorism aimed at Israel.²⁰⁴

On July 28, 2006, Pakistani-American Naveed Afzal Haq, aged 30, entered the Jewish Federation of Greater Seattle's headquarters in Downtown Seattle and opened fire with a semiautomatic handgun. During the shooting, Haq explained to bystanders that he perpetrated the shooting because of his anger towards Israel.²⁰⁵ Haq murdered Jewish Federation employee Pamela Waechter, 58, and wounded five others in the attack before surrendering to the police.²⁰⁶

On June 10, 2009, white supremacist and Holocaust denier James W. von Brunn, aged 88, entered the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. and opened fire, killing security guard Stephen T. Johns, 39, and wounding an innocent bystander. In immediate response

²⁰¹ <https://www.lapdonline.org/newsroom/north-valley-jewish-community-center-shooting/>

²⁰² <https://laist.com/news/survivors-reflect-on-20-years-since-la-jewish-community-center-shooting>

²⁰³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20041204221915/http://archives.cnn.com/2002/US/07/04/la.airport.shootin>

²⁰⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20151124114635/http://articles.latimes.com/2002/jul/07/local/me-lax7>

²⁰⁵ <https://www.adl.org/resources/news/fatal-shooting-seattle-jewish-federation>

²⁰⁶ <https://jwa.org/weremember/waechter-pamela>

to the gunfire, another security guard drew his gun and fired at von Brunn, injuring him. Von Brunn then surrendered to the police.²⁰⁷ Von Brunn used a pump-action rimfire rifle to carry out the attack, but the gun was so old that it was unable to be traced by law enforcement.²⁰⁸ Von Brunn died in prison the following year.²⁰⁹

On April 27, 2019, during the week of Passover, white supremacist John Earnest, 19, opened fire during Shabbat morning services at the Chabad of Poway synagogue in Poway, California. Using an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, Earnest shot and killed synagogue member Lori Gilbert Kaye, 60, and injured three others, including the synagogue's rabbi.²¹⁰ During the shooting, off-duty Jewish Border Patrol Agent and synagogue member Jonathan Morales drew a concealed revolver as Earnest's rifle suddenly jammed, and Agent Morales fired four shots in his direction as Earnest was fleeing to his getaway vehicle. While the shots missed Earnest, they did hit his getaway vehicle, and as a result, Earnest was quickly apprehended by police. Agent Morales's brave and swift actions that day likely saved many lives, and he was awarded the title Police Officer of the Year by the International Association of Chiefs of Police.²¹¹ Shortly before the shooting, Earnest published his manifesto on the website 8chan, which was full of racist and antisemitic language. He was inspired by the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting as well as the Christchurch, New Zealand mosque shootings that happened the previous month.²¹² In 2021, Earnest received two life sentences for his crimes.²¹³

²⁰⁷<https://web.archive.org/web/20090826051726/http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/06/10/AR2009061001768.html?hpid=topnews>

²⁰⁸ <https://www.cnn.com/2009/CRIME/06/12/museum.shooting/index.html>

²⁰⁹https://web.archive.org/web/20170203204426/http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/06/AR2010010604095_pf.html

²¹⁰ <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/27/717849871/injuries-reported-in-shooting-at-california-synagogue>

²¹¹<https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/border-patrol-agent-jonathan-morales-chabad-of-poway-shooting-synagogue-officer-of-the-year/2059277/>

²¹²<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/apr/28/john-earnest-san-diego-shooting-suspect-posted-open-letter-online>

²¹³ <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/28/us/poway-synagogue-shooter-sentenced/index.html>

There have also been several shootings involving American Jewish institutions resulting in serious bodily injury. On March 25, 1960, white supremacist and neo-Nazi Hubert Jackson Jr., aged 16, threw a Molotov cocktail through the windows of the Congregation Beth Israel synagogue in Gadsden, Alabama during Friday night Shabbat services.²¹⁴ As congregants exited the building, Jackson fired upon them with a semiautomatic rimfire rifle until the rifle jammed. Two congregants were injured in the shooting, one critically. Upon Jackson's arrest a few days later, he admitted to police that he committed the attack because he "passionately hated Jews", and earlier that week, he had gotten into an argument with a Jewish boy from his high school.²¹⁵

On February 15 and 16, 2023, virulent antisemite Jaime Tran, aged 28, used a handgun to shoot two Orthodox men walking home from synagogues in the Pico-Robertson area in a pair of two separate drive-by shootings targeting visibly Jewish men exiting local synagogues. Both men were severely injured but survived. Tran was arrested on the following day on February 17. During the investigation, it was revealed that Tran left dental school in 2018 after he had made anti-semitic threatening phone calls and text messages to his Jewish classmates, and in addition he would frequently email them antisemitic propaganda.²¹⁶

On July 31, 2023, former student Joel Bowman, 33, attempted to enter Margolin Hebrew Academy in Memphis, Tennessee while brandishing a handgun. Due to the heavy security presence, Bowman was denied entry to the Jewish school, and out of frustration, he fired a few shots in the direction of the school building. Bowman was later shot and critically injured by police. While the school was not in session at the time of the shooting, the school's security measures were able to keep Bowman from harming anyone else on campus. Bowman himself is

²¹⁴ <https://abc3340.com/news/local/gadsden-locals-remember-jewish-temple-shooting>

²¹⁵ <https://www.jta.org/archive/jews-in-gadsden-reassured-youth-who-bombed-synagogue-is-arrested>

²¹⁶ <https://www.justice.gov/usao-cdca/pr/man-who-allegedly-shot-two-jewish-victims-leaving-los-angeles-synagogues-indicted>

Jewish and was known to have severe mental health issues, but was not known to have any ill-will towards the school itself. Those who were close to him assumed that his mental health, not hatred or revenge, was likely to blame for the incident, especially given that he attacked the school when there were no children there and displayed erratic behavior during the incident.²¹⁷ While it is extremely rare for Jews to attack Jewish institutions, incidents like this one show that it isn't unheard of.

There have also been cases of guns being used during hostage-taking at Jewish institutions, often motivated by many similar reasons as synagogue shootings. On March 11, 1977 members of the Hanafi movement, a breakaway movement from the Nation of Islam led by Hamaas Abdul Khaalis, took hundreds of hostages using shotguns in Washington D.C. at B'nai Brith Headquarters, the District Building (D.C.'s equivalent of a city hall), and the Islamic Center of Washington. Khaalis specifically chose to target B'nai Brith because he was angry at a Jewish judge who was unable to convict some of the killers of Khaalis's family members in 1973 due to lack of evidence. He also demanded that the convicted killers of Khaalis's family and Malcolm X be released to the Hanafi group's custody to be executed by them, demanded that the government ban a movie made about the life of Prophet Mohammed regarding concerns of his depiction, and requested a refund of legal fees from a contempt of court citation.²¹⁸ After a few days of negotiations and conversations with prominent people in government, Khaalis decided to release the hostages and he surrendered to the police. Aside from the hostage that was killed and the two who were injured in the District Building, no other hostages at B'nai Brith or the Islamic Center were physically harmed.²¹⁹

²¹⁷<https://www.timesofisrael.com/armed-man-who-tried-to-enter-memphis-jewish-school-fired-at-a-contract-or-police-say/>

²¹⁸<https://www.npr.org/2023/01/04/1146891542/american-caliph-revisits-one-of-the-most-dramatic-hostage-crises-in-u-s-history>

²¹⁹https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/the-day-muslim-terrorists-took-dc-hostage--and-there-was-a-happy-ending/2017/03/10/e7cf4918-0517-11e7-ad5b-d22680e18d10_story.html

On January 15, 2022 at the Beth Israel synagogue in Colleyville, Texas, British citizen of Pakistani origin Malik Faisal Akram, aged 44, took four people at the synagogue hostage, including their rabbi, Rabbi Charlie Cytron-Walker. There were very few people in the building because the synagogue had temporarily switched to Zoom streaming due to the Omicron variant of the coronavirus. This decision to keep services online that day didn't just protect people from Covid, but also prevented a much worse situation in which many children, families, and elders would have been held hostage, but the congregants did sadly get to see the hostage incident unfold on live video. To gain entry to the synagogue building, Malik stood outside of the door and pretended to be a homeless man in order to earn the rabbi's attention and sympathy. Rabbi Walker let Malik in, made him tea, and let him stay for services. Unfortunately, in the middle of the services, Malik pulled out a handgun and took the rabbi and the three congregants in attendance hostage.²²⁰ His main demand was the release of a Pakistani woman imprisoned in nearby Fort Worth, who was convicted of attempting to murder American soldiers, and he targeted a synagogue because he believed that the American Jewish community had the political power to make this happen due to antisemitic stereotypes about Jewish proximity to power. After an 11 hour standoff, Malik was shot and killed by FBI agents after they raided the synagogue.²²¹

Gunfire has also been used as a method of synagogue vandalism. In 1994, a neo-Nazi shot out the windows of Beth Israel synagogue in Eugene, Oregon using a rifle. The synagogue was unoccupied at the time of the shooting.²²² In 2000, a white supremacist went on a racist shooting spree in several different areas of suburban Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where shot and killed his Jewish neighbor, and also killed and injured several other Asian and Black people in

²²⁰ <https://apnews.com/article/texas-synagogue-shooting-anniversary-365a254e13ae39f123f2a0f28affefa4>

²²¹ <https://www.keranews.org/news/2023-01-13/we-are-not-healed-the-colleyville-synagogue-hostage-crisis-one-year-later>

²²² <https://web.archive.org/web/20210201030405/https://books.google.com/books?id=ok81T1TM9LkC&pg=PA116#v=onepage&q&f=false>

the area. In addition, the perpetrator shot out the windows of two nearby unoccupied synagogues.²²³ In 2016, a white supremacist shot out the windows of the Kol Ami synagogue in Salt Lake City, Utah, using a handgun. At the time of the shooting, the synagogue was unoccupied.²²⁴

Many people who read about these incidents may come to the conclusion that shootings at synagogues are somehow a uniquely American phenomenon caused by high gun ownership rates and relaxed gun laws. However, shootings at synagogues are not a uniquely American phenomenon because over the last 50 years, there have been many shootings at synagogues and other Jewish institutions outside of the United States in many countries around the world.

On Yom Kippur of 2019, a white supremacist shot and killed two people at a synagogue in Halle, Germany.²²⁵ In 2015, an Islamist extremist opened fire at a synagogue in Copenhagen, Denmark, killing one congregant and injuring two others.²²⁶ In 2014, an Islamist extremist opened fire at the Jewish Museum of Belgium, killing three and injuring one.²²⁷ In May of 2023, five people were killed and eight were wounded at a synagogue in Djerba, Tunisia.²²⁸ In 1986, 22 worshippers were shot and killed by terrorists in a synagogue in Istanbul, Turkey.²²⁹ In 1982, terrorists shot and killed a 2-year old boy and wounded 34 others in a shooting at the Great Synagogue of Rome, Italy.²³⁰ In 2020, terrorists shot and killed four people and wounded 24 others in front of a synagogue in Vienna, Austria.²³¹ In 2008, seven people were shot and killed

²²³<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/04/29/five-slain-in-pennsylvania-shootings/5eaca56d-b3a4-4dd8-8bd1-991474d86264/>

²²⁴<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/utah-man-sentenced-60-months-religiously-motivated-attack-synagogue-and-gun-charges>

²²⁵<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-55395682>

²²⁶<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/16/copenhagen-attacks-danish-police-charge-two-men>

²²⁷<https://www.cnn.com/2014/05/24/world/europe/belgium-jewish-museum-shooting/index.html>

²²⁸<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/tunisia-synagogue-shooting-djerba-deaths-jewish-pilgrimage-ghriba/>

²²⁹<https://www.nytimes.com/1987/01/04/magazine/the-istanbul-synagogue-massacre.html>

²³⁰<https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-documents-show-italy-ignored-warnings-of-1982-terror-attack-on-rome-synagogue/>

²³¹<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54788613>

by Islamist terrorists at a Chabad House in Mumbai, India.²³² In January 2023, terrorists opened fire at a synagogue in the Neve Yaakov neighborhood in Jerusalem, Israel, killing seven.²³³

All of these countries have stricter gun laws than the USA,²³⁴ but at least in the USA, Jews can take communal defense into our own hands rather than having to exclusively rely on our government for protection, especially now that concealed carry laws have been loosened by both state legislatures and federal courts in the last couple decades. I'm very proud to live in a country where self-defense is a right, as most countries do not extend this right to their citizens. Blaming American gun laws for synagogue shootings paints an incomplete picture, as synagogue shootings, motivated by the same hatred that causes them in the United States, happen fairly often in other countries, even in countries with less access to firearms and fewer Jews. Hate is such a strong motivator that no matter what gun laws are passed, those with criminal intent will still find a way to access them.

I have compiled a spreadsheet²³⁵ of the intentional shootings at American Jewish institutions involving death or bodily injury in order to help find data patterns within the incidents. For the dataset, I focused on lethal and injurious shooting attacks involving American Jewish institutions, excluding the previously mentioned attacks on individual Jews, hostage incidents, synagogue vandalism involving firearms, and synagogue shootings abroad. Drawing from the 13 cases from 1960 to 2023 that I mentioned a few pages earlier, I compiled data about the attackers in terms of their age, race, weapons used, and motivation for the attack, as well as the location of the attack.

²³²<https://www.timesofisrael.com/india-terror-suspects-said-to-have-plotted-attack-on-mumbai-chabad-house/>

²³³ <https://www.npr.org/2023/01/27/1152112013/jerusalem-synagogue-shooting-attack>

²³⁴ <https://www.liveandinvestoverseas.com/lifestyle/10-countries-easiest-gun-laws-world/>

²³⁵https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1XBGAs6Kr1N39YKDxV_YRG2INR7j2ATMY5NrtOjndyqo/edit#gid=0

As for age, this varied wildly, with the youngest perpetrator aged 16, and the oldest perpetrator aged 88. 8 out of the 13 attacks (61.5%) were perpetrated by individuals under 40. As for gender, nearly all of the perpetrators were male and acted alone, with the exception of a female accomplice who was a co-perpetrator of the Jersey City Kosher Market shooting in 2019. 8 out of the 13 attacks (61.5%) were perpetrated by white people, 3 out of the 13 attacks (23.1%) were perpetrated by people of Middle Eastern or South Asian descent, and the remainder of the attackers were Black and East Asian.

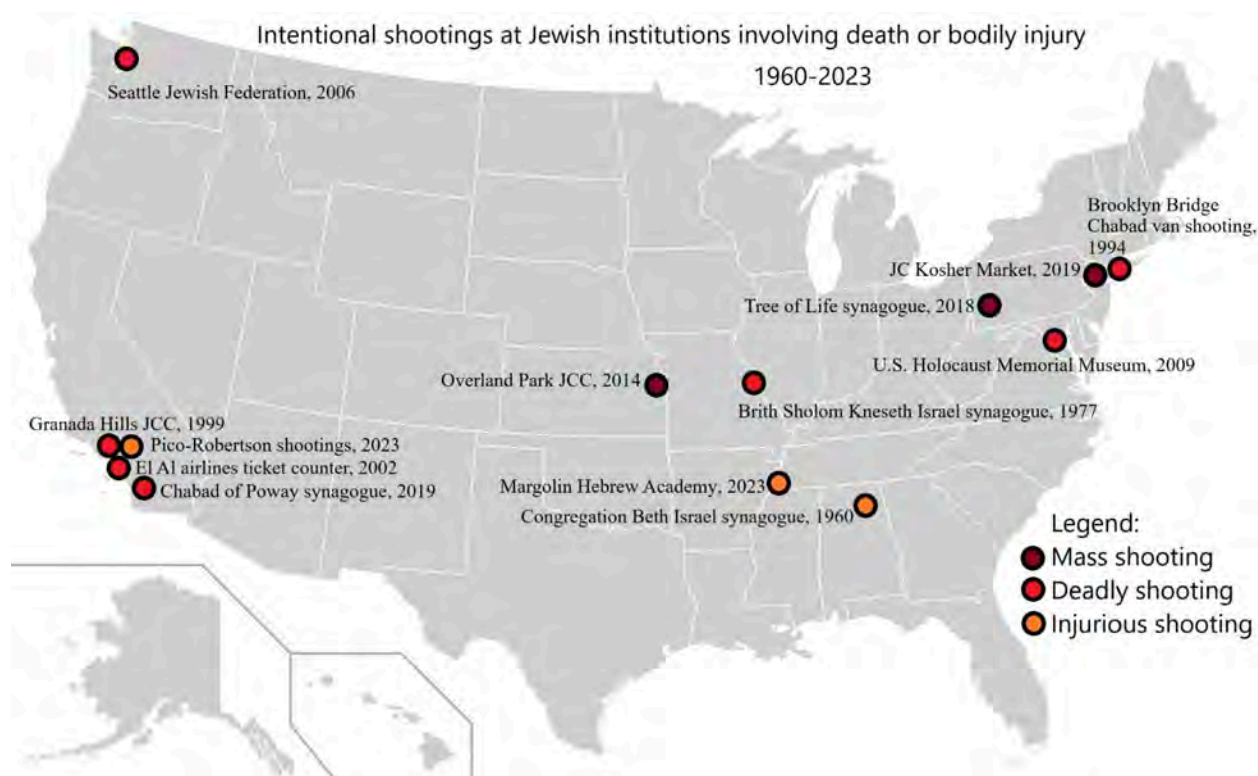
In regards to the weapons used, this has varied quite a bit as well. 9 out of the 13 attacks (69.2%) involved handguns, 5 out of the 13 attacks (38.5%) involved semiautomatic rifles, 2 of the 13 attacks (15.4%) involved pump-action or bolt-action rifles, and another 2 of the 13 attacks (15.4%) utilized shotguns. 6 out of the 13 attacks (46.2%) involved multiple types of firearms.

As for the motivations, two prevailing motives were involved in the attacks. 7 out of the 13 attacks (53.8%) were explicitly motivated by white supremacy, while 3 out of the 13 attacks (23.1%) were motivated by anti-Israel sentiments.

The locations of the deadly and injurious firearm attacks on American Jewish institutions do not necessarily form a clear geographic pattern. Shootings at American Jewish institutions happen in states with both strict and loose gun laws, and also happen in states with both larger and smaller Jewish communities. At the end of this chapter, I have included a dot map of the shootings to show where they have occurred.

Violent antisemitic acts involving firearms have been present in the United States since at least the Civil War, it is really nothing new. There has been a resurgence in recent years in part due to increased political polarization and antisemitism, but throughout American history, surges in attacks on Jews have correlated with reactionary politics, often in backlash to Reconstruction,

waves of Jewish immigration, the Civil Rights movement, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has been compounded by the rise of both left-wing and right-wing violent extremism. Not only are these attacks reactionary in nature, but they also highlight the vulnerability of American Jewish institutions. We can't always depend on law enforcement to deal with these situations in a timely manner. These attacks show that the Jewish community is responsible for its own defense and that nobody else is coming to our aid, or even if they do, it is insufficient for the security needs of our beloved Jewish institutions.



Chapter 9: Concealed carry of handguns in synagogues

At synagogues across the United States, more and more worshippers are lawfully bringing concealed handguns to their synagogues. While a 9-millimeter handgun is certainly not the first item one would think to bring to their synagogue (although perhaps more appetizing than Bubbe's homemade gefilte fish that she brought for the shul oneg), following the rise in violent antisemitic attacks on Jewish institutions, as well as a general rise in antisemitism since the October 7 attacks and the Israel-Hamas war,²³⁶ bringing a concealed firearm to synagogue, once considered by many to be unthinkable, is steadily becoming more commonplace. This is happening in both larger and smaller congregations alike, across both liberal and Orthodox denominations. Since the 2022 Supreme Court ruling on the Bruen concealed carry case, all fifty states must now grant concealed carry permits to law-abiding private citizens who apply on a shall-issue basis²³⁷, meaning that lawful concealed carry in synagogues is no longer reduced to the Red State-Blue State issue that it was ten or twenty years ago. Also, on federal, state, and local levels, concealed carry in houses of worship by license holders is generally unregulated, though some states require permission from the house of worship in order to lawfully carry there.²³⁸ Because of these factors, and current political polarization regarding firearms, Jewish communities across the United States have now had to contend with the increased likelihood that some congregants may indeed be armed.

One of the first things that should be addressed when discussing concealed carry in houses of worship is the fact that in a majority of states, the practice is generally lawful, and no state has an enforceable complete ban on gun carry in houses of worship.²³⁹ While this chapter

²³⁶ <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/antisemitic-attitudes-america-2024>

²³⁷ <https://www.scotusblog.com/case-files/cases/new-york-state-rifle-pistol-association-inc-v-bruen/>

²³⁸ <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/location-restrictions/>

²³⁹ Ibid.

does examine federal, state, and local laws regarding concealed carry in houses of worship, keep in mind that what is discussed here is not legal advice by any means. If you have concerns about the legality of a specific situation, ask an actual criminal defense attorney, as the information below is for reference purposes only.

Houses of worship, such as synagogues, are generally on private property, and have the authority to set policies regarding weapons, and to trespass. It is worth recognizing that in most states, “No Firearms” signs do not hold force of law, and even in most of the states where they do hold force of law, such force of law typically only applies if the sign is posted in a place where carrying a firearm is already illegal, and many states require specific compliant signage. If a gun carrier is seen on the premises of private property prohibiting guns, all the proprietor can really do is ask the gun carrier to leave,²⁴⁰ and if the gun carrier refuses to leave, they can be charged with criminal trespass.²⁴¹ As private property, houses of worship are entitled to the same private property rights extended to other institutions open to the public, and are generally able to decide on whether or not weapons are welcomed in their facilities.

In 1990, the Gun-Free School Zones Act was signed into law, banning unlicensed carry and unsecured firearms in K-12 schools, and on public property within 1,000 feet of the school’s property line. The law applies to all public, private, and parochial schools in the United States.²⁴² The Gun-Free School Zones Act only applies to Houses of Worship with attached full-time K-12 day schools, not to standalone houses of worship with Sunday schools, as schools are specifically defined by this federal statute to be full-time K-12 schools.²⁴³ The vast majority of U.S. Synagogues do not have attached day schools, though it is more common in larger congregations

²⁴⁰ <https://aliengearholsters.com/blog/no-guns-allowed-signs/>

²⁴¹ <https://www.lawinfo.com/resources/criminal-defense/criminal-trespassing-laws-definitions-and-penalties.html>

²⁴² <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/gun-free-school-zones-act-1990>

²⁴³ <https://crpa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Info-Bulletin-Carrying-Firearms-in-Churches.pdf>

in large cities, as well as in Orthodox communities.²⁴⁴ Because enforcement of the Gun-Free School Zones Act by local law enforcement varies by state, some states have passed laws to circumvent the issue of concealed carry in houses of worship sharing campuses with full-time K-12 schools. Florida²⁴⁵, North Carolina²⁴⁶, and Texas²⁴⁷ specifically allow licensed concealed carry in houses of worship that share campuses with schools provided the carrier does not enter the school portion.

State laws vary quite a bit on the issue of concealed carry in houses of worship, and the wording of specific laws in each state is important. In the vast majority of states, it is allowed with or without permission of the house of worship. Some states do require permission to conceal carry a firearm in a house of worship, but actual enforcement of these laws is varied and somewhat limited. The only states that require permission to carry a concealed firearm in a house of worship are predominantly in the Midwest and South and include North Dakota, Missouri, Arkansas, Michigan, Ohio, South Carolina, the District of Columbia, Louisiana, Nebraska, and Mississippi.²⁴⁸ Attempts by New York State²⁴⁹ and California²⁵⁰ to outright ban concealed carry of firearms in houses of worship have been struck down by federal courts and are effectively unenforceable due to their questionable constitutionality. 42 states have state preemption laws relating to firearms, barring cities and counties from passing their own gun control legislation independent of the state legislature, and even in states that allow local regulations on open carry,

²⁴⁴ <https://avichai.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Census-2013-14.pdf>

²⁴⁵ <https://winknews.com/2021/03/26/florida-house-passes-bill-to-allow-guns-at-churches-that-share-locations-with-schools/>

²⁴⁶ <https://www.wral.com/story/nc-house-passes-bill-to-allow-guns-at-religious-services-held-on-school-ground/20722419/>

²⁴⁷ <https://onlinetexaslitc.com/can-i-legally-carry-a-firearm-on-school-property-in-the-state-of-texas/>

²⁴⁸ <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/guns-in-public/location-restrictions/>

²⁴⁹ <https://abc7ny.com/gun-control-new-york-law-laws-2nd-amendment/14154751/>

²⁵⁰ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/california-law-gun-ban-most-public-places-halted-federal-appeals-court/>

basis. In addition, as was shown in California and New York, wholesale bans on concealed carry in houses of worship have been considered unconstitutional by federal courts, and thus it is not in the interest of even the most anti-gun state legislatures to continue to push for bans on concealed carry in houses of worship.

Now that the complicated legality of concealed carry in houses of worship has been established, synagogues all over the country have continued to wrestle with controversies regarding concealed carry, and while many synagogues expressly allow licensed concealed carry, many others disallow it,²⁵³ and most synagogues do not have a formal posted policy.²⁵⁴ There are many reasonable arguments on both sides regarding licensed concealed carry of handguns in synagogues, predominantly concerning safety, image issues, and liability.

One of the biggest arguments in favor of licensed concealed carry in synagogues is self-defense, in which members of the synagogue community will have the means to help protect themselves if their synagogue is attacked. There is also an argument of deterrence as well, that if potential attackers are aware that there are congregants at a synagogue carrying firearms, they may avoid attacking the location and choose a softer target instead. On the flip side of deterrence, since ideally, anyone who would be carrying a handgun in a synagogue would be carrying it concealed, there is also an element of surprise involved, as attackers would not be able to tell exactly who in the congregation is armed. It could be the young family man, an elderly grandmother, or even the rabbi, and this unexpected resistance has the potential to thwart an attack. This element of surprise was seen in the response of Jewish off-duty Border Patrol Agent Jonathan Morales during the Chabad of Poway synagogue shooting in 2019. As the perpetrator's AR-15 rifle jammed, Agent Morales drew a concealed revolver and fired multiple

²⁵³ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-pittsburgh-some-synagogues-are-more-comfortable-with-guns-in-the-pews/>

²⁵⁴ <https://forward.com/news/205158/does-carrying-a-gun-to-synagogue-make-it-safer-or/>

shots at the perpetrator as he began to flee to his getaway vehicle. The shooter was not hit by gunfire but his vehicle was, which led to his quick apprehension.²⁵⁵ Given that AR-15 rifles are relatively easy to unjam due to their simple user interface, had Agent Morales not fired upon the shooter, the shooter would have been able to clear the malfunction and continue to fire upon the innocent worshippers, possibly increasing the death and injury count well beyond the one congregant who was killed and three others who were injured that day.

There are also concerns about response times, as even the best and most professional police departments with very quick response times don't always make it in time to save lives. Police response times have been steadily increasing, especially in major cities, due to officer staffing shortages. According to an article by NPR, "In New Orleans, average police response times almost tripled, from 51 minutes in 2019 to 146 minutes last year. In New York, the number jumped less, from 18 minutes to 33 ...these figures are just a sampling of what's going on nationally. But the trend seems clear."²⁵⁶ There is also major shortage of 9-1-1 dispatchers in the United States, leading to callers in emergency situations being put on hold for up to 20 minutes or longer.²⁵⁷ 20 minutes to an hour is a very long time to leave a violent person in control of the lives of innocent people, and such response times put people's lives in danger. In addition, on February 24, 2024, AT&T experienced a 5-hour long service outage which left thousands of customers across the country without cell service and disrupted the ability to make 9-1-1 calls as well.²⁵⁸ These outages do not happen often but they can be potentially dangerous when they do occur for a myriad of public safety and health reasons.

²⁵⁵<https://www.nbcsandiego.com/news/local/border-patrol-agent-hailed-a-hero-in-synagogue-shooting-honored/2246340/>

²⁵⁶<https://www.npr.org/2023/01/17/1149455678/why-data-from-15-cities-show-police-response-times-are-taking-longer>

²⁵⁷<https://www.newsnationnow.com/crime/911-centers-staffing-crisis/>

²⁵⁸<https://www.npr.org/2024/02/22/1233126300/att-outage-cell-service-verizon>

Even if police are able to respond quickly, delays in 9-1-1 calls being placed on hold can impair the ability of dispatchers and police to quickly coordinate the appropriate response at the appropriate location. “Please wait for the next available representative” is not something you want to hear when you are calling 9-1-1 to report an active shooter murdering people in your synagogue. In addition, even if there is an armed guard at the synagogue entrance, armed congregants carrying concealed in the sanctuary improve the ability to respond to violent acts by addressing threats coming from within the sanctuary in addition to those coming from outside.

True enforcement of a policy banning concealed firearms is difficult, resource-intensive, and highly invasive. Concealed firearms are difficult to detect without the use of metal detectors or gun sniffing dogs and the presence of metal detectors would change the atmosphere of most congregations more than the presence of lawful concealed firearms. Some congregations have permanently installed metal detectors but it is relatively rare. Other congregations rent walk-in metal detectors only for larger events, such as High Holidays, where there are more attendees.

In regards to cost, for smaller congregations, especially those with fewer than 100 members, the finances involved with providing armed security or off-duty police for the synagogue grounds can be cost-prohibitive, and in many of these cases, lawful concealed carry on the behalf of congregants is a more feasible approach. For small aging and dwindling congregations such as those served by the Jewish Community Legacy Project, concealed carry may be one of the few options available. In larger congregations, the presence of armed congregants can help to reduce security staffing costs by lowering the amount of guard positions needed, and the money saved can be directed towards other synagogue programming such as youth and adult education.

One important issue worth considering is that banning firearms from synagogue properties could contribute to the theft of firearms in auto break-ins. Synagogue policies banning concealed carry could result in more firearms being left in vehicles, and with increases in auto break-ins in many American cities, such as Los Angeles²⁵⁹, San Francisco²⁶⁰, and New York²⁶¹, this could lead to more firearms being stolen from law-abiding citizens. In 2020, over half of known firearm thefts happened as a result of auto burglaries, and these stolen firearms are frequently used to commit crimes.²⁶²

Finally, it is worth mentioning that for many Americans, concealed carry is a way of life. While those who live in stricter jurisdictions and are less familiar with firearms might balk at such a concept, the reality is different in different communities, and especially in states with looser laws, many people don't even leave their houses without a firearm on their person. Depending on your community there may be a sizable portion of congregants who such rules would affect. As of 2022, 8.1% of American adults have CCW permits, and controlling for New York and California, which were slower to issue permits, the average is about 10.1%²⁶³ Due to permitless carry laws in 28 states, the number of people who regularly carry guns without a permit is likely much higher than those who are issued permits. Jews who carry concealed should not be excluded from our synagogues if they are doing so lawfully and are trained, and having such a policy prohibiting this lawful act would only serve to further divide and shrink our community.

²⁵⁹ <https://abc7.com/griffith-park-car-break-ins-warning-thieves/12158535/>

²⁶⁰ <https://www.kqed.org/news/11959799/how-to-avoid-a-car-break-in-bay-area>

²⁶¹ <https://spectrumlocalnews.com/nys/central-ny/news/2023/09/23/residents-voice-frustration-as-car-break-ins-and-thefts-continue-throughout-n-y--state>

²⁶² <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-thefts-from-cars-the-largest-source-of-stolen-guns>

²⁶³ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4648999#:~:text=The%20concealed%20carry%20rates%20for.to%20above%2010%25%20in%202023.&text=Alabama%20has%20the%20highest%20concealed.Colorado%20is%20third%20with%2016.5%25.&text=Six%20states%20now%20have%20over.Indiana%2C%20Pennsylvania%2C%20and%20Texas.

On the opposing side of this issue, many who argue in favor of synagogues banning the carry of concealed weapons do so on the basis of perceived safety, expressing concern that if congregants are allowed to carry concealed firearms inside the building, it could potentially lead to an accidental shooting or negligent discharge.

Others may express concern that the mere presence of concealed firearms could make people uncomfortable in a place that is supposed to be welcoming and sacred. According to a Hey Alma article by Nylah Burton, “As a Black Jew, I’m Begging You: Don’t Arm Your Synagogue”, she mentions that increasing the presence of police, armed guards, or armed congregants could make Jews of Color feel uncomfortable due to histories of racist violence and police brutality and that it could potentially lead to more Jews of Color being racially profiled if more members are armed and are on high alert.²⁶⁴ If more congregants are carrying, it could potentially lead to a culture of fear in the congregation where people are too hyperfocused and paranoid about potential threats. Such efforts could also be misconstrued as Jewish vigilantism.

Some may argue that concealed carry training is insufficient and inconsistent when it comes to protecting houses of worship, as different states have different requirements when it comes to the amount of training required to obtain a concealed carry license. For example, in California, following the passage of Senate Bill 2 in 2023, the amount of training required for a concealed carry license was extended from 8 hours to 16 hours,²⁶⁵ Utah requires 4 hours of training,²⁶⁶ while in New Hampshire, no training is required whatsoever in order to obtain a similar permit.²⁶⁷ There are also concerns that such classes do not provide the same level of

²⁶⁴ <https://www.heyalma.com/as-a-black-jew-im-begging-you-dont-arm-your-synagogue/>

²⁶⁵ <https://www.shouselaw.com/ca/blog/laws/are-there-any-requirements-to-getting-a-carry-concealed-weapon-license-in-california/#:~:text=To%20meet%20California%20CCW%20standards,course%20must%20be%2016%20hours.>

²⁶⁶ <https://trainasdi.com/utah-ccw>

²⁶⁷ <https://www.nhsp.dos.nh.gov/our-services/justice-information-bureau/permits-and-licensing/pistol-and-r-evolver-licensing>

training compared to the level of training that licensed security guards or police officers have, and that non-professional carriers could potentially increase safety risks.

There are concerns that concealed carriers could interfere with law enforcement responses, and could potentially complicate such responses if the lawful concealed carrier is mistaken for the active shooter. Some are also worried that armed civilians could be an extremely unpredictable variable in such a tense and complicated situation and that it could potentially increase the possibility of crossfire.

Some express concern regarding potential liability and civil suits against the synagogue if there is an accidental or intentional shooting. Many worry that allowing armed congregants in the synagogue could increase the liability issues of the synagogue by having such a policy.

There are also some concerns regarding image issues that many have in regard to concealed carry in synagogues. Some may argue that synagogues should eschew gun carry and be a model of peace and that sanctioning gun carry in synagogues goes against the synagogue's goal of being a center of advocacy for peace and justice. In addition, many Jewish organizations are strongly in support of gun control measures, and some feel that synagogue weapons policies should reflect this.

In rebuttal to many of the arguments against licensed concealed carry in synagogues, I first want to mention that licensed concealed carry generally requires firearms safety training in most jurisdictions even if it does vary somewhat by state, as New Hampshire is the only jurisdiction that does not require training to obtain a permit, and a permit is not required to carry in that state in the first place. It's also worth noting that according to a study done by John Lott of the Crime Prevention Research Center, concealed carry license holders commit crimes at a lower rate than law enforcement officers. Lott found that while the general population commits

about 3,813 crimes per 100,000 people, police officers only commit 103 crimes for every 100,000 officers. For CCW license holders, the rate of committing crimes is 12.3 for every 100,000 license holders, nearly an eighth of the rate of police officers.²⁶⁸ Because concealed carry permits can be easily revoked in cases of wrongdoing, license holders tend to be on their best behavior as they are on a short leash. Also, the stakes are much higher for license holders in comparison to police officers when it comes to defensive shootings. If a police officer engages in a questionable shoot, the officer will be put on paid leave during the investigation, and due to qualified immunity in most states, the officer will not have to face any personal civil suits for misconduct. If a license holder engages in a questionable shoot, the license holder will likely be jailed or may have to post a very high bail until trial, the permit is revoked, and in addition, the license holder is absolutely on the hook for any civil lawsuits for their misconduct. Essentially, because of qualified immunity and other privileges that come with being a police officer, the stakes are arguably much higher for concealed carry license holders than for police officers, and so, in a way, license holders are held to a much higher standard than police due to their much thinner margins of error.

The only known incident I could find involving negligent discharge inside of a synagogue was an 81-year-old retired police officer in Dallas, Texas whose outdated firearm experienced an accidental discharge during services in 2007,²⁶⁹ and as far as I know, this has never happened to a civilian CCW holder in a synagogue. The firearm discharged into his adjacent daughter's foot as he stood up, and a couple of adjacent congregants received minor cuts from the shrapnel that came from the wooden floor as it was hit by the bullet. Nobody else

²⁶⁸<https://thenewamerican.com/us/crime/more-guns-less-crime-concealed-carry-permit-holders-more-law-abiding-than-police/>

²⁶⁹<https://jhvonline.com/accidental-weapon-firing-in-dallas-temple-injures-gun-owners-daughter-p3245-90.htm>

was injured or killed. The synagogue already had a longstanding policy prohibiting all firearms from the premises but this policy did not stop him from bringing the gun inside.²⁷⁰

It's important to recognize that guns don't magically fire on their own, as the trigger has to specifically be pulled in order to release the hammer and strike the firing pin, and in the last fifty years, transfer bars and firing pin safeties, which prevent the hammer from transferring the energy and striking the firing pin if the trigger is not pulled by using a physical barrier of separation, have become commonplace on handguns. This is why handguns sold in stores today can be dropped while loaded from significant heights without discharging, unlike what is often seen in movies.²⁷¹ While I was not able to find out exactly which firearm this retired officer carried, based on his advanced age, it is very possible that he was using an older handgun that did not have a transfer bar or firing pin safety, as transfer bars and firing pin safeties on modern handguns did not widely emerge until the 1960s and 1970s,²⁷² and so carrying a gun manufactured before that time period could increase the risk of an accidental discharge. There is also the possibility that the retired officer did not use a proper holster, as a proper safe holster covers the trigger completely and prevents it from being pulled unintentionally.

Either way, while the risk of negligent discharge is a real concern for gun owners, it is also very easy to mitigate by using a modern handgun, a proper holster, and basic gun safety skills. While this one event of a retired policeman unintentionally discharging his firearm in the synagogue sanctuary is concerning, and should be a lesson for gun owners everywhere, the risk of being shot in a synagogue by a violent attacker is much more likely, because as I mentioned in the previous chapter, from 1960 to 2023, there were 13 intentional shootings at American Jewish institutions involving death or bodily injury, compared to this one unintentional discharge

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ <https://crimefictionbook.com/2016/03/31/will-a-gun-go-off-if-its-dropped/>

²⁷² <https://blog.cheaperthandirt.com/transfer-bar/>

incident from 2007. Because of the reality of synagogue attacks, the risk of leaving synagogues defenseless against violent attackers is much higher than the risk of a trained firearm carrier experiencing an accidental or negligent discharge. In addition, instituting a policy prohibiting firearms from synagogue premises does not do anything to prevent incidents like this from happening.

The only way to truly enforce a ban on concealed carry in a house of worship is to install full-size metal detectors or use gun-sniffing dogs. The much cheaper metal detector wands are insufficient for this purpose because they take extra time to do a proper screening, can often miss things if not waved over the proper areas, and in addition, can also be hypersensitive and be triggered by small metal objects such as loose change and jewelry.²⁷³ In 2017, undercover investigators from the Department of Homeland Security snuck realistic-looking fake weapons into various TSA checkpoints at airports all over the country in order to test the TSA's security systems, and the DHS found that 70% of the weapons went undetected by TSA employees.²⁷⁴ One can argue that adding such burdensome and ineffective security measures to a synagogue space is very disruptive, alienating, and unwelcoming to those coming to worship, especially in comparison to the presence of a few discreetly armed congregants.

Many concealed carry holders train more often than police officers and are more proficient in their gun handling. They are also well versed in the laws and ethics of self-defense, as these laws are covered in concealed carry classes. Firearms safety training is very simple and straightforward provided you follow a few very basic but very important rules, and even children being properly supervised at a shooting range can be taught how to handle firearms safely. Very little time in police training involves learning to shoot properly. Much of police training includes

²⁷³ <https://www.insight-security.com/metal-detectors-security>

²⁷⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelgoldstein/2017/11/09/tsa-misses-70-of-fake-weapons-but-thats-an-improvement/?sh=3d87843a2a38>

components that are irrelevant for the purposes of a civilian concealed carry license holder, such as traffic laws, how to initiate a stop, how to write tickets, and the use of beanbag shotguns, batons, and tasers, among other things. Civilians do not need anywhere that level of training to be able to safely carry a concealed firearm.

Due to slow law enforcement response times, a firearm deployed immediately by an armed congregant will likely not interfere with the law enforcement response. Odds are that just as in the case of the Chabad of Poway shooting in 2019, an armed congregant responding to a synagogue shooting will likely open fire on the active shooter long before the police actually arrive on the scene. In addition, license holders are generally instructed in their training classes on how to properly interact with law enforcement when carrying, which prevents confusion and misidentification during the eventual response of law enforcement.

In regards to liability, the person who carries the firearm is generally responsible for anything that happens with it, not the facility that allows said gun carrier inside. According to AG Financial, an insurance company specializing in insuring churches, if a firearm was to be misused in a house of worship, the house of worship would likely not be held liable unless the carrier was paid or specifically enlisted by the house of worship for their duties, and that even then they would only be held liable in the case of a shooting if it was considered a foreseeable event, which very few shootings are. AG Financial further elaborates that “If a shooting happens on your premises, it’s unlikely your [house of worship] will be found legally liable for injuries or deaths that occur.”²⁷⁵

According to an article written for the magazine *Claims and Litigation Management*, some may assume that a posted policy prohibiting weapons on private property would decrease liability during a shooting because the proprietor of the facility did not sanction the weapons

²⁷⁵ <https://www.agfinancial.org/resources/article/church-shootings-whos-liable>

being in the building in the first place and can thus not be held responsible for the actions of a third party who violated the facility's consent. However, posting a sign prohibiting weapons can also increase liability in the event of a shooting as well, because posting a sign could give a false impression of safety, and in the event of a shooting, the proprietor could be held liable for not protecting its congregants from potential harm. In addition, in such an event, a facility with such a policy could be held liable for not properly enforcing its policy and letting an unauthorized firearm through, and can also be held liable if the facility in question is perceived as a soft target by attackers due to the posted ban on defensive weapons in the building.²⁷⁶ Essentially, both the explicit allowance and prohibition of weapons on private property such as a house of worship opens up two different sets of liabilities. This is likely one reason why many synagogues and other houses of worship have no such official policy either way.

Licensed concealed carry in synagogues is about creating a culture of responsibility, not fear. When done correctly, it can avert concerns about being able to protect the synagogue from violent acts in a timely fashion. In regards to Nylah Burton's article "As a Black Jew, I'm Begging You: Don't Arm Your Synagogue",²⁷⁷ while I agree with the assertion that synagogue security should take equity and diversity into account and should definitely acknowledge the awful reality and history of racial bias and police brutality, disarming synagogues is a dangerous proposition which puts the Jewish community in more danger by making us into softer targets. Disarming synagogues does not make them more inherently inclusive of people of diverse backgrounds, it just makes them more vulnerable to hate-motivated acts of violence.

Finally, I would like to address some of the image concerns raised by critics of concealed carry in houses of worship. It's important to recognize why people bring guns to their

²⁷⁶ <https://www.theclm.org/Magazine/articles/To-Post-or-Not-to-Post/933>

²⁷⁷ <https://www.heyalma.com/as-a-black-jew-im-begging-you-dont-arm-your-synagogue/>

synagogues in the first place, because guns are for personal and congregational protection, and gun ownership or sanctioned gun carry does not preclude the synagogue's mission of being a voice for peace because it is about defense, not offense. Also, allowing concealed carry on synagogue property is not a reflection on the congregation's or rabbi's stance on the issue of gun ownership or gun reform. It's important to keep in mind that even a majority of gun owners support reforming the firearms background check systems, as according to a 2022 poll, 80% of gun owners support some form of universal background check.²⁷⁸ While prominent Jewish organizations in favor of gun control call for major policy changes, they generally do not call for all synagogues to be gun-free zones, likely under the assumption that this is an issue dependent on the circumstances of each individual congregation. There are other, much more constructive and helpful ways that members of the Jewish community can advocate on this issue in ways that do not jeopardize the safety of our community or render our synagogues defenseless against violent antisemitic attacks.

Most synagogues have no formal policy either way. Guns are such a contentious issue that a strong stance in favor or against gun carry could deeply alienate congregants on either side. In my personal opinion, no policy may be the best policy. I am also opposed to posting signage of any kind, as it is generally unhelpful and should be avoided. In order to have a policy banning weapons, people may need signage to inform them of this policy. However, as I mentioned several pages earlier, in most states, signs on private property prohibiting weapons don't hold any force of law. Even if there is a policy and proper signage, people will ignore the sign unless there is active enforcement. Regardless of policy, it is my opinion that signage of any kind regarding weapons should generally be avoided on temple property because it can

²⁷⁸<https://www.npr.org/2022/07/08/1110239487/most-gun-owners-favor-modest-restrictions-but-deeply-distrust-government-poll-fi>

attract unwanted attention from attackers looking for a soft target. On the flip side, I also don't think synagogues should post signs welcoming gun carry either due to the potentially politically charged nature of posting such a sign.

Should you ask permission? Let's just say this, unless metal detectors, bag checks, and gun sniffing dogs are routine at your synagogue, concealed is concealed. It's not like anyone is going up to you and asking you if you are carrying or not, and honestly most people would rather not know. If you are a license holder with proper training you are probably a very responsible and competent adult and I trust you to make the right decision for yourself and others.

What if there is already posted signage prohibiting weapons? In the vast majority of states and situations, a sign on private property generally does not hold any force of law in the way such signs often do on public property, so in most jurisdictions, it is not inherently illegal to bring licensed concealed firearms inside. Most synagogues do not use metal detectors, bag searches, or gun-sniffing dogs, so the facility can realistically only ask a person to leave if someone sees a visible firearm, which is highly unlikely because if someone is concealed carrying properly, the firearm shouldn't be visible to anyone. It is very difficult and resource-intensive for a synagogue to screen every congregant for concealed weapons, even if there is a posted sign, so most congregations, even those who do have such a policy, generally don't bother. My realistic advice is that you should treat the sign on your synagogue the same way that you treat similar signs that are posted in grocery stores, malls, and movie theaters. Concealed is concealed.

What if there is a need for a formal policy? If there is a need for a formal policy for some reason, there are other ideas that may work as well. One reasonable policy compromise could include restricting open carry from synagogue property, and another compromise could include

restricting concealed carry in synagogue properties to valid license holders only. Both of these policies are also more enforceable than blanket “gun-free zone” policies, helping to keep synagogues safeguarded from exterior threats while also helping to address reasonable visibility, training, and safety concerns that may arise when it comes to discussions of armed congregants.

What are the best firearms to use for defending a house of worship? I prefer to carry semiautomatic pistols over revolvers because they have more capacity and are easier to shoot accurately. While snubnosed revolvers are a great choice for hikers, backpackers, and joggers, due to their compact size, light weight, concealability, and reliability, they are much harder to shoot accurately in comparison to compact and full-size semiautomatic pistols due to their heavy triggers, short barrels, and minimal capacity.

In regards to semiautomatic pistols, one can choose between pistols with a single-stack magazine or a double-stack magazine. While a single-stack pistol is more concealable, a double-stack pistol has more capacity and greater surface area for more accurate handling. When it comes to deciding between a larger pistol or a smaller pistol, I would recommend only carrying the smaller gun if it is the only gun you can carry without printing, or if carrying a larger gun causes physical discomfort. But if you can carry a larger gun without printing or physical discomfort you should, because it is better to have more ammunition and not need it than to need it and not have enough, especially due to current attacks on houses of worship. More magazine capacity is better when possible, given that in a synagogue setting, we are dealing with targeted ideologically motivated premeditated attacks often using long guns, not random crimes of opportunity like muggings or carjackings. Between 15 to 21 rounds is the ideal capacity for a double-stack pistol. Any handgun with a magazine larger than 21 rounds will be hard to conceal for an average person, but if you can conceal it, I’m legitimately proud of you.

I exclusively carry my Glock 19 with 15-round OEM magazines as most off-brand magazines are less reliable, though I have found Magpul Glock magazines to be a notable exception to this as in my experience they have shown to be quite reliable for range use. I would also avoid using magazines blocked to ten rounds whenever possible as they occasionally have issues seating properly in the magazine well when loaded at capacity, increasing the potential for double feeds and magazine-induced malfunctions. I have never seen this happen with 15 and 17-round OEM Glock magazines. I usually carry one or two spare mags, not only for extra ammo but also in case of malfunction, as magazines are the most likely cause of malfunction on semiautomatic handguns.

Regarding caliber, 9mm is an ideal carry caliber, as it is highly popular, easy to find in stores, cheaper than other handgun calibers to train with, and can be found in a variety of different loadings depending on your needs. .380 ACP is underpowered, .40 S&W and .45 ACP are slower, heavier, and take up more space in a magazine, and 10mm and .357 Sig have more power but also more felt recoil. 10mm and .357 Sig are wonderful handgun calibers for camping and defending against animal attacks but I would not use them for defending a house of worship due to the increased recoil potentially affecting accuracy. Hollow points are preferred to full metal jacket ammunition in order to avoid overpenetration, as hollow point bullets are designed to expand and stop inside their target rather than continuing on. My personal ammunition choice for concealed carry is 124-grain Federal HST hollow points, as they are popular with law enforcement agencies and have a proven track record. While I like Federal HST, many other manufacturers also make high-quality hollow point carry ammunition for 9mm handguns.

There are many reliable concealed carry pistols made by reputable manufacturers on the market today, and as concealed carry becomes more popular in the United States, more types of

carry pistols are being released every year. I would not be surprised if in a decade, this list becomes outdated due to changes in gun technology. This list is by no means exhaustive, and is mostly speaking from personal experience, but is more of a reference of helpful recommendations. The gun models are not listed in any particular order.

Some of the best double stack pistols for concealed carry include the Sig Sauer P365 and P320, the Glock 19, 19X, 17, 26, 45, and 47, S&W M&P9, Springfield XD, CZ75, as well as the H&K VP9 and USP9. In regards to smaller and thinner single-stack handguns, the S&W M&P Shield, Glock 43, 43X, and 48, Ruger LC9, and Springfield Hellcat are all good choices. All of these handguns can be found for under \$1000, with most in the 400-700 dollar range. Many of these guns can be found used at a substantial discount, and given that all of these guns are designed to be able to handle tens of thousands of rounds, buying used can be a great way to get a reliable pistol on a budget.

It's important to recognize that different firearms work differently with different people. My personal recommendation, in order to avoid spending unnecessary money on gear you don't need, is to try a variety of guns at a range or if possible borrow from a friend who has a particular gun that you want. Many gun ranges rent firearms for a reasonable rate, and I'd rather spend \$20 to rent a gun I don't like, than spend hundreds on a gun I don't like only for it to sit in the back of my safe and collect dust.

It is also important to use a quality holster that covers the entire trigger guard, preferably made from a robust polymer like Kydex or hardened leather. For concealed carry, I personally use the PHLster Enigma plastic concealed carry holster, which is designed with a plastic shield on top of the holster to prevent the outline of a gun from printing through your clothes, but there are other good holsters on the market too. Unless you wear a medical device on your abdomen or

have sensory issues in that area, I can not stress enough the importance of on-body carry, as keeping a firearm in a purse or handbag can lead to the firearm being accidentally left unattended somewhere, and in addition, on-body concealed carry is much better for retention purposes as it can prevent the gun from being physically taken away from you, as nobody wants a simple purse snatching to turn into a gunfight. Loose clothing is ideal for concealed carry, and with the right combination of loose clothing and proper holster, even larger handguns can be concealed.

While concealed carry of handguns is still a controversial issue in synagogues across America, more and more Jewish communities are embracing concealed carry as a legitimate means of personal and communal defense. Although it is important to consider the legality of carry in houses of worship, as well as to weigh the pros and cons that are specific to your community's needs and attitudes, when done responsibly and respectfully, concealed carry can often be the last line of defense for Jewish communities to handle the rising tide of violent antisemitism.

Chapter 10: American Jews take up arms in response to October 7

On October 7, 2023, the eve of the Simchat Torah holiday, Hamas terrorists broke through the Gaza border fence and launched a violent and horrific series of attacks on the communities surrounding the Gaza Strip, including several kibbutzim and a music festival. The attacks were predominantly aimed at civilians and involved bombings, shootings, rockets, arsons, torture, mutilation, beheadings, kidnappings, and mass rapes of Israeli women and girls.²⁷⁹ The attacks that day resulted in the deaths of over 1,200 Israelis that day, the kidnapping of 250 civilians in Gaza, as well as a still-ongoing war in the region, in which 30,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed as of March 2023, the vast majority being civilians.²⁸⁰

The October 7 massacre was the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust,²⁸¹ and has not only been a source of collective grief and trauma for Israelis and Palestinians but also for the Jewish diaspora worldwide. In addition, because so many videos of the war have gone viral on the internet, the proliferation of extensive violent imagery has only perpetuated and ingrained the trauma, as researchers have noticed that those who repeatedly watched videos of the October 7 massacre were more likely to experience PTSD and anxiety symptoms.²⁸² Just as the Vietnam War was known for being the first “television war”²⁸³, broadcasting uncensored footage from the battlefield into the homes of everyday citizens, the internet and platforms such as TikTok²⁸⁴ have similarly proliferated this grotesque violent imagery, arguably to an even greater extent.

²⁷⁹<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2024/03/08/1235269968/israel-hamas-sexual-violence-first-responder>

²⁸⁰<https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-30000-israel-war-hnk-intl/index.html>

²⁸¹<https://www.holocaustmuseumla.org/post/the-most-deadly-massacre-against-jews-since-the-holocaust>

²⁸²<https://www.israel21c.org/to-keep-calm-stop-watching-october-7-videos-say-experts/>

²⁸³<https://thinkport.org/special-collections-vietnam-m7.html#:~:text=Vietnam%20was%20the%20first%20%E2%80%9Ctelevision.Americans'%20views%20of%20the%20conflict.>

²⁸⁴<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2023/10/10/tiktok-hamas-israel-war-videos/>

However, in spite of the horrific carnage and war crimes that Hamas perpetrated against Israelis, many kibbutzim around the Gaza Strip were armed and prepared with dedicated volunteer security teams, and in several kibbutzim, including Zikim, Netiv HaAsarah, Yad Mordechai, Erez, Nir Am, Miflasim, Alumim, Re'im, Ein HaShloshah, Nir Oz, Magen, Sufa, and Kerem Shalom, residents were able effectively to use their security teams to limit casualties inflicted by the Hamas terrorists, albeit to varying degrees.²⁸⁵ Some of the kibbutzim had larger and more organized security teams than others, and the kibbutzim of Magen²⁸⁶, Nir Am²⁸⁷, and Ein Habesor²⁸⁸ were able to prevent the Hamas invaders from entering completely due to a large and well-organized volunteer armed resistance. The armed resistance of many Israeli civilians during the October 7 massacre not only saved countless lives, but kibbutzim with larger and more organized security teams were more easily able to repel these brutal violent attacks.

Following October 7, Israeli gun laws became significantly relaxed and it became much easier for average Israeli citizens to obtain and carry firearms.²⁸⁹ Itamar Ben-Gvir, the National Security Minister, also made an effort to distribute 10,000 fully automatic assault rifles to volunteer security teams across Israel.²⁹⁰ While the increased prevalence of gun ownership in Israel sparked condemnation from the UN due to fears that increased availability of firearms could escalate additional acts of violence,²⁹¹ if anything, the expanding presence of firearm ownership among Israeli civilians has likely made Israel a safer country. For example, on

²⁸⁵ <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/h1yx3zhwt>

²⁸⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/from-his-hospital-bed-injured-kibbutznik-recounts-how-his-community-fended-off-hamas/>

²⁸⁷ https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/defenders-of-kibbutz-nir-am-say-they-killed-2-terrorists-saturday-preventing-takeover/

²⁸⁸ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/heart-stopping-accounts-of-bravery-emerge-from-a-town-that-repelled-hamas-onslaught/>

²⁸⁹ <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/06/1216088371/guns-israel-hamas-gaza>

²⁹⁰ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/ben-gvir-says-10000-assault-rifles-purchased-for-civilian-security-teams/>

²⁹¹ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-criticizes-israeli-plan-to-ease-gun-ownership-requirements-after-terror-attacks/>

November 30, 2023, Hamas terrorists shot up a bus stop in Jerusalem, killing 3 and injuring 16. Two off-duty soldiers, as well as an armed civilian, fired back at the terrorists, killing them and ending the attack.²⁹² Had the off-duty soldiers and the armed civilian not been at that bus stop, the death and injury count would have likely been much higher.

The Israel-Hamas war has not only inflamed tensions in the Middle East but also in the United States, contributing to an already heightened environment of political polarization. Since October 7, according to a December 2023 study by researchers at Harvard's Nonviolent Action Lab and the Counting Crowds Consortium, organizations that do studies on political protests in the United States, more than a million Americans participated in over 2,600 protests and demonstrations all over the United States, with "442 pro-Israel rallies, demonstrations and vigils in 266 cities and towns across 45 states and in Washington D.C. ... and 2,100 pro-Palestinian actions in 497 cities and towns across 49 states, as well as in Washington D.C., Puerto Rico and Guam."²⁹³ Many of the demonstrations have also been notable for their presence at American college campuses, which has sparked controversies regarding freedom of speech and campus climate issues.²⁹⁴

While the vast majority of protests on both sides have been fairly peaceful, there have been occasional incidents of physical violence that have occurred at protests, such as a physical altercation at a Ventura County demonstration in which Jewish pro-Israel demonstrator Paul Kessler was killed.²⁹⁵ While Kessler was not killed with a firearm, concerns about safety have led protestors to bring firearms to pro-Israel and pro-Palestine demonstrations.

²⁹² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67575684>

²⁹³ <https://www.msn.com/he-il/news/other/more-than-1-million-americans-participated-in-protests-since-hamas-israel-war-began-on-oct-7/ar-AA1l3gOY>

²⁹⁴ <https://www.chronicle.com/article/israel-gaza-and-the-impossible-predicament-of-college-leaders>

²⁹⁵ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/wave-of-protests-and-rallies-highlight-tensions-in-u-s-as-israel-hamas-war-persists>

The presence of firearms at pro-Israel and pro-Palestine demonstrations has also sparked controversy and concern. Jewish Republican New York City Councilwoman Inna Vernikov was photographed with her unintentionally exposed handgun at a pro-Israel counterprotest at Brooklyn College a week after the outbreak of the war and was arrested and charged with carrying a gun in a sensitive location, though the charges were later dropped.²⁹⁶ Less than a week later, near a pro-Israel demonstration in the Chicago suburbs, a man in a car draped with Israeli flags was mobbed and surrounded by a group of Pro-Palestinian protestors who began attacking his vehicle. The man fired a warning shot in the air with a handgun and subsequently dispersed the angry mob. No charges were filed because the driver of the vehicle was found to have acted in self-defense.²⁹⁷ During a Black Friday pro-Palestine protest at Crabtree Mall in Raleigh, North Carolina, the mall went on lockdown following reports of several gunshots being fired in the midst of the commotion of the protest. The reports were later found to be unsubstantiated and there were no deaths or injuries.²⁹⁸

In addition, the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war led to major increases in both antisemitism and Islamophobia. According to a February 2024 study by the Anti-Defamation League, 24% percent of Americans harbored antisemitic beliefs, compared to 20% in 2022.²⁹⁹ According to a January 2024 study by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, reports of Islamophobic incidents have increased by 180%.³⁰⁰ Just as firearms have been encountered at

²⁹⁶<https://www.fox5ny.com/news/gun-charges-dropped-against-nyc-lawmaker-seen-with-pistol-at-pro-palestinian-protest>

²⁹⁷<https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-chicago-protest-violence-6a077015a80a65ea37c3c1269d83885f>

²⁹⁸<https://web.archive.org/web/20231125150437/https://abc11.com/crabtree-valley-mall-palestine-protest-protesters-raleigh/14099803/>

²⁹⁹ <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/antisemitic-attitudes-america-2024>

³⁰⁰

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-muslim-anti-palestinian-discrimination-in-the-us-rose-180-after-oct-7/>

protests, they have also been used in deliberate hate crimes against Jews, Muslims, and Palestinian-Americans.

On October 14, at a pro-Palestine rally held on the steps of the Pennsylvania State Capitol building in Harrisburg, a man approached the demonstrators, pointed a handgun at them, and shouted racial slurs.³⁰¹ In November 2023, three Palestinian-American college students were shot by a man with a handgun and were seriously injured while walking home from a party in Burlington, Vermont. The shooter targeted the men for wearing black-and-white Palestinian keffiyeh scarves and speaking Arabic. The shooter was later arrested.³⁰² In December of 2023, an Iraqi-American man fired a shotgun into the air twice while screaming “Free Palestine” in front of Temple Israel in Albany, New York. No deaths or injuries were reported, and the shooter surrendered to police.³⁰³ For those on both sides of the issue, the risk of violent confrontations and hate crimes involving firearms is becoming increasingly prevalent, and while Jews are often targeted in this manner, this is also being experienced by Muslim Americans as well.

In October, November, and December of 2023, dozens of mainstream media outlets, both large and small, and both liberal and conservative-leaning, published numerous articles and interviews featuring the increasing popularity of firearms among American Jews, and that many Jews, especially in the Orthodox community, have been seeking out firearms and training in light of heightened domestic tensions and antisemitism enflamed by the Israel-Hamas war. In the week following October 7, a gun store in New Rochelle, New York, sold out its entire stock of home-defense shotguns, almost entirely to Jewish customers.³⁰⁴ That same week, a Jewish-owned gun store in suburban Dallas, Texas reported a 300% surge in gun sales, mostly

³⁰¹ <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/incident/2730097>

³⁰² <https://apnews.com/article/shooting-burlington-vermont-palestinian-students-suspect-dd781a57f5d96cf591a1840db890b4ed>

³⁰³ <https://apnews.com/article/jewish-temple-shots-albany-new-york-hanukkah-cd1c44c4829e699a42eeaa87ef0e5373>

³⁰⁴ <https://jewishlink.news/new-york-jews-and-firearms-smart-or-dangerous/>

from Jewish customers.³⁰⁵ In South Florida, several gun stores reported seeing a major increase in gun sales, similarly in reaction to October 7.³⁰⁶ In Los Angeles, California, the non-profit Jewish security guard company Magen Am received major media coverage following a surge in interest for their firearms training classes.³⁰⁷ In suburban Atlanta, Georgia, a local gun store reported a 30% surge in sales following October 7, with the majority of the surge being from Jewish first-time gun owners.³⁰⁸ The increasing popularity of firearms among the American Jewish community even was covered by major Israeli media as well.³⁰⁹ All over the country, in Red States and Blue States alike, Jews are taking up arms to defend themselves, and the Israel-Hamas war, along with rising antisemitism, are major catalysts for this change.

The increasing interest in gun ownership among American Jews also represents a shift in the Overton Window when it comes to how American Jewish communities perceive firearms in the first place. In a December article from The Jewish Chronicle, Yonatan Stern, director of Cherev Gidon Israeli Tactical Training Academy, mentioned how support for gun ownership in the Jewish community has gone from being perceived as an extreme stance, to a much more moderate and sensible one, and how this change has unfolded relatively quickly among American Jews. According to Stern, “I remember back about 20 years ago the idea of Jews with guns in America was very fringe. It was considered very much of an extreme position. Now I am seeing, since October 7, all these people who are hardcore, lifelong Democrats, who contributed to anti-gun groups and were actively pushing for British-style gun control in America, have completely turned around and changed their attitude ... I was just contacted last week by a

³⁰⁵<https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/gun-sales-up-north-texas-because-of-israel-hamas-conflict/287-f3248d63-763e-4b5d-bef5-fae7d9298304>

³⁰⁶<https://www.wlrn.org/law-justice/2023-12-26/antisemitism-guns-south-florida-jews>

³⁰⁷<https://www.cbsnews.com/losangeles/news/local-jewish-community-sees-spike-in-requests-for-self-defense-firearms-training/>

³⁰⁸<https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/israel-hamas-jewish-americans-buying-guns-georgia>

³⁰⁹<https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/antisemitism/article-771464>

woman who said, ‘I’ve always hated guns. The idea of having a gun is disgusting. I’ve always been terrified of guns, but now I want to get a gun because I see that we are in danger.’ ... I’m getting a lot more women and maybe older people than in the past who were terrified of guns. Their fear and their political ideology, which is anti-gun, has now been overcome by their fear of terrorism.”³¹⁰

In a November CNN article about the increasing popularity of gun ownership in the American Jewish community, Tzvi Waldman, founder of the New York State Jewish Gun Club, also mentioned a shift in the opinions regarding firearms in the Jewish community. According to the article, “Waldman explained Jewish views on gun ownership vary on a spectrum, with Orthodox Hasidic Jews more conservative and leaning toward social issues and family values, and other Jewish people who share more left-leaning political views. “There is a notion out there that Jews are anti guns, but in reality, at least in my community, I think the Second Amendment is very strong over here. What happened in Israel was like a rude awakening for people that no matter where you are on the spectrum in Judaism, you’re hated the same.” He’s been shocked, he shared, at the type of people joining his classes recently – people who were previously unaccepting of guns as a means of safety who now see the value in it, he said.”³¹¹ While many American Jews are still deeply uncomfortable around firearms, many are also willing to challenge this discomfort in order to better be able to protect themselves, their loved ones, and their congregations.

The collective trauma experienced by Israelis following October 7 is clearly also being felt by the Jewish diaspora, and in the United States, where owning and carrying guns is more common than ever, American Jews are beginning to realize that the Jewish community is

³¹⁰ <https://www.thejc.com/news/usa/fearful-american-jews-arm-up-and-flock-to-the-gun-range-nh8wb2nq>

³¹¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/06/us/american-jews-guns-antisemitism/index.html>

responsible for our own defense and that the Second Amendment allows us to take this important responsibility into our own hands. Waiting for the government to come to our aid in a time of urgent crisis only delays our ability to respond to tragedy and atrocity, and with the rising tide of violent antisemitism, we can no longer be passive. However, with the increase in new gun owners in the Jewish community, I highly recommend obtaining formal gun safety training, such as a basic pistol course or a concealed carry class, in order to learn how to handle firearms safely and effectively.

Conclusion

From the days of the Torah, to the Talmudic age, and even in contemporary America, issues regarding self-defense and weaponry have been a concern for Jewish communities throughout history. While much of the Jewish communal leadership has historically opposed gun ownership and has viewed weapons as ghastly devices which will hopefully no longer be needed in the future, many other Jews have confronted this discomfort around gun ownership by recognizing the need to preserve life with the use of deadly force. These perspectives weigh heavily on both ancient and modern Jewish discussions on self-defense and gun ownership.

In the politically polarized era we live in today, antisemitism and anti-Israel sentiment has only continued to fuel violence and hate against Jewish communities, often in reaction to major social change. While antisemitism and antisemitic violence are nothing new, American Jews, blessed with the opportunities presented by the Second Amendment and also recent Supreme Court rulings regarding concealed carry licensing, are beginning to take up arms at an increasing rate. Once a Red State versus Blue State issue, Jews all over America are now considering what formidable personal and communal defense might look like.

While tragic acts of violence such as the Overland Park JCC shooting, the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting, and the October 7 massacre in Israel have only further galvanized American Jewish communities on the issue of gun ownership, the Overton Window on this issue has continued to shift rightward towards increased Jewish support for gun rights. Throughout Jewish history, there have been times of relative safety, especially in the United States, but with increased antisemitism and the burning tensions of the Israel-Hamas war in the background, American Jews are beginning to question if they are safe anywhere and are reacting accordingly, buying guns and getting the training to use them.

Hands down, some of the most important aspects of responsible gun ownership are safety, respect, restraint, and preservation of life. These values of responsible gun ownership align with Jewish values, and more American Jews are willing to take up the call to arms. However, with the rise of new gun owners in the Jewish community, it is important that new gun owners get the proper advice and training in order to learn how to use, handle, store, carry, and maintain their firearms properly and safely. Gun ownership is a right, but it is also an enormous responsibility, and this cannot be stressed enough. Basic pistol courses and concealed carry classes are a wonderful way for new gun owners to learn to safely use their firearms in an approachable setting.

However, even for those who do not have the desire or ability to carry a firearm, there are still things that you can do to help keep the Jewish community safe. Engage in situational awareness. Speak up if you see something suspicious. Be knowledgeable about your synagogue's security plan. Maintain a good relationship between your community and local law enforcement. These seemingly small actions can also go a long way toward creating safer Jewish communities. Every little bit helps.

According to tractate Sanhedrin of the Babylonian Talmud, "Anyone who sustains one soul... [it is] as if he sustained an entire world."³¹² This charge to preserve life has been a constant throughout Jewish history, and as American Jews begin to take matters of armed self-defense into their own hands, this theme of self-preservation continues to be a reality for Jewish communities. It is ignorant of both history and present reality to assume that any government is fully capable of protecting Jews from harm, leading Jewish communities to reconsider previous stances regarding firearms and self-defense and taking such matters upon ourselves.

³¹² <https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.37a.13?lang=en>

About the author

Aria Caligiuri is a soon-to-be rabbi in her final semester at school, being ordained in the Class of 2024 at the Hebrew Union College Los Angeles Campus. A native of the San Francisco Bay Area, she attended her undergraduate studies at the University of California, Davis, majoring in History and minoring in Religious Studies. While at HUC, Aria has earned a Master of Arts degree in Hebrew Letters, and has had the opportunity to do fieldwork in a wide variety of internships, student pulpits, and clinical pastoral education in various locations such as Israel, Central California, Arizona, Michigan, Missouri, and Indiana. She has also interned as a spiritual counselor at Beit T'Shuvah, a Jewish faith-based addiction rehabilitation facility in Los Angeles. Aria loves working with a theology of healing and compassion, and plans to do a hospital chaplain residency program following her ordination in May of 2024.

Outside of her Jewish professional life, Aria is an NRA-certified Pistol Instructor and Range Safety Officer, meaning that she is certified not only to teach handgun lessons but also to supervise an active firing range. She has over a decade and a half of firearms experience, having learned to shoot at the age of eleven in Scouting, and is licensed to carry a concealed handgun in multiple states. In addition to her passion for marksmanship, Aria also enjoys hiking, camping, wilderness backpacking, art, music, cooking, Lego, biking, swimming, and the occasional video game. Aria is an out and proud transgender woman. She is also a center-right libertarian and a liberal Zionist, with a strong passion for equality, justice, and individual liberties. She values honesty, integrity, respect, freedom, kindness, patriotism, resilience, initiative, humor, civic duty, and self-reliance.