



While American Jews have historically been at the forefront of gun control legislation and the banning of firearms, the guy sitting next to you in shul might own a gun and even go to target practice every week. They might not advertise it, but many Orthodox Jews are proud of their weapons and believe those guns help keep their families safe



“JEWS DON’T LIKE TO TALK ABOUT THEIR GUNS, because it isn’t politically correct,” Richard Feldman, the National Rifle Association’s first Jewish lobbyist, recently commented. “People know it’s an issue better avoided.”

American Jews have historically supported gun control, and some of the country’s most powerful Jews have been at the forefront of recent gun control legislation and banning private firearms. New York’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Senator Charles Schumer are among the country’s biggest antigun activists, and Jewish lawmakers in the Senate and the House were among the first to introduce new gun control legislation following the December 14 Sandy Hook elementary school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, that took the lives of 20 students and six educators. So you might be surprised to discover that your *frum* neighbor owns a gun and even goes to weekly target practice.

For many, the idea of private citizens carrying guns conjures up the image of the Old West, a cowboy with dusty spurs on his boots and a six-shooter riding low on his hip, preparing for a showdown with the outlaws. Or perhaps a ragged band of Colonial militiamen, clutching their muskets against the onslaught of British redcoats.

But according to the NRA, an estimated 40 percent of US households have guns, with about 45 million privately owned firearms. And no, not all of those are in the Wild West. Some of those gun owners have a Glock tucked into the holster under their tallis, while others keep their rifles locked in the safe behind their seforim shelves.

Everyone wants to achieve a society that is safe and nonviolent, but the gun control debate has highlighted the disparity in opinions of how to achieve that goal. Favi, an insurance agent from Monsey, is a vocal supporter of gun ownership. He believes that when law-abiding people own guns it enhances not only their own personal security but the security of society at large. He finds support for his view in halachah. “The halachah is clear that if someone is coming to kill you, you are obligated to defend yourself, and use lethal force if necessary. It stands

**YAAKOV SAYS THAT WHEN FRIENDS FOUND OUT HE OWNS A GUN, THEY WOULD COME OVER TO HIM IN SHUL PEPPERING HIM WITH QUESTIONS:**

**“WHAT KIND OF GUN DO YOU OWN?”  
“CAN I SEE IT?” “CAN I TOUCH IT?”**

to reason that you are required to have the tools with which to do that in order to fulfill the obligation.”

Favi was picking up his daughter from the mall late one afternoon at dusk and was parked at the far end of a virtually empty parking lot. When he saw some suspicious characters lurking near his car, he was glad that he had his weapon with him. “I’m a middle-aged guy who’s five feet, five inches and couldn’t punch his way out of a paper bag,” Favi relates. “Plus my daughter was with me, so I couldn’t even run. What chance would I have against two hulking thugs? Knowing I had the ability to defend myself and my child when I walked past made me feel safer. I can’t tell you how relieved I was when finally, under threat of their hostile stares, we got into the car and left without incident. But it drove home the point to me how much I would rather have a gun and not need it than need it and not have it.”

In the wake of Sandy Hook, President Obama announced his three-pronged, \$500 million package of gun control measures, which will mean stricter background checks

for all gun buyers including screening for a criminal record, mental illness, or other reasons to block the purchase of a gun — not only for those buying from federally licensed dealers, as is now the law (although universal background checks wouldn’t have stopped the mass shootings at Sandy Hook, where the disturbed assailant took the licensed guns from his mother and then murdered her). “Go to a gun show and you’ll see individuals who advertise: ‘No background check, no questions asked, cash and carry.’ They don’t want to know anything,” gun policy researcher Daniel Webster told the *Wall Street Journal*.

The plan also includes a ban on semiautomatic rifles and high-capacity ammunition magazines; improvements in school safety, including putting 1,000 police officers in schools; and bolstering mental health care by training more health professionals to deal with young people who may be at risk.

On a state level, Democratic leaders in California introduced legislation that would mandate more extensive background checks and one-year permits for anyone buying ammunition. Governor Andrew Cuomo and the

Democrat-led New York state assembly have already passed a measure that includes the most restrictive gun laws in the nation.

All this legislation worries gun owners across America, who keep firearms in the interest of both self-defense and the primary American right to bear arms, as protected by the Second Amendment. Jewish gun owners say they have additional reasons to keep a weapon. Citing historical incidents of anti-Semitism, from the Holocaust to the more recent Crown Heights and LA riots, many religious gun owners feel a Jew has an obligation to own a weapon, because it is more likely he will be attacked in times of political or civil unrest. The JPFO (Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership) even claims that the Gun Control Act of 1968 — enacted when gun control became a hot-button issue following the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King — was lifted almost verbatim from the Nazi Weapons Law of 1938 that disarmed German citizens, putting them at the mercy of the ruling power.

**What’s That On Your Hip?** In Orthodox Jewish circles, owning a firearm sometimes raises eyebrows, and many religious gun owners choose to remain anonymous. Yaakov, an electrician who lives in Lakewood, says that when friends found out he owns a gun, they would come over to him in shul peppering him with questions: “What kind of gun do you own?” “Can I see it?” “Can I touch it?”

And although some people might enjoy the status of advertising their firearm, there is a general safety concern that publicizing one’s gun collection is an invitation to thieves to break in and carry off those weapons. In fact, a gun safe was among the possessions stolen in a home burglary in White Plains, New York. The 70-year-old owner was one

of 44,000 gun permit holders whose names and addresses were published by a New York newspaper. State senator Greg Ball, who said the paper created “a virtual shopping list for criminals and nut jobs,” immediately introduced a new bill that would ban such information disclosures.

Although most gun owners have never had the occasion to draw or fire their weapons — and most of them pray they never will — Yaakov’s pistol came in handy one night. “I woke up to a noise and I thought at first that it was one of my kids. Then I realized that someone was trying to break open the lock on our front door.” After sending his wife to the children’s room and instructing her to call 911, Yaakov unlocked his gun and crept downstairs to the intruder, who had moved around to the back of the house.

While safety precautions recommend that one should *not* confront an intruder, Yaakov had recently heard of a friend in Lakewood who had been assaulted by armed thieves in his own home, and he was taking no chances.

“I came face-to-face with the guy by the back door. I saw him through the glass, trying to open the door. I just held up my gun and yelled ‘Freeze!’ ”

Moments later the police arrived and took the intruder into custody.

Yaakov admits that a gun in the hands of the wrong person can be dangerous, but so can so many other tools. “A hammer or a chain saw can also cause a lot of damage. Any tool can be used for the wrong reason, but the gun itself is not inherently bad.” And although he’s not supporting a people’s revolt, he is adamant about the fundamental democratic right of the people to bear arms. “Should the government have guns and not the people? Do we need a bigger and stronger government to take care of us? Or should we have the right to take responsibility and

# “WHEN MY CHILDREN WERE YOUNGER,

## I KEPT MY GUN LOCKED UP, BUT WHEN THEY WERE OLD ENOUGH, I TOOK THEM TO THE RANGE TO GO SHOOTING WITH ME”

### THE RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS

Adopted on December 15, 1791, the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution is a part of the United States Bill of Rights. It states:

*“A well regulated militia, being necessary to a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”*

The Bill of Rights, including the rights to free speech, due process of law, trial by jury, and other civil liberties, was established by early Americans to put some limits on federal power.

The ambiguous language and confusing placement of commas in the text of the Second Amendment have been the subject of much debate.

If the prefatory clause, “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state” was intended to declare the amendment’s only purpose, then the Second Amendment applied only to states and not individuals. But if this phrase serves only as an introduction to the operative clause of the right to bear arms, then the Amendment recognizes the personal rights of individuals to bear arms.

The issue was resolved in a series of Supreme Court rulings which interpreted the Second Amendment as the individual’s rights to bear arms.

defend ourselves?”

Avraham, a data processor from Monsey and a handgun owner, is adamant that protecting oneself is the individual’s responsibility. “The police force can’t be everywhere at once,” Avraham maintains. “And remember, deviant crimes are committed by deviants. Stricter gun laws are not going to stop them.”

The recent shooting sprees, he notes, have occurred in gun-free zones because there was no one to stop the criminal. “Law enforcement is there to arrest the criminals after the crime. Of course your guns should be kept in a locked and secure place. But they should be quickly accessible if you need them. I prefer to take my safety into my own hands.”

Chaim, a salesman from Cleveland, has a permit to carry a concealed weapon. He carries his gun in a holster in the small of his back, under his jacket.

“There’s a certain comfort level in carrying a weapon,” Chaim comments. “It makes me feel safer, and it helps my neighbors too.” He says that although his neighborhood is relatively secure, there are some undesirable elements just a few blocks from his home, and a thief is less likely to break into a home when there’s a possibility he could get shot. As NRA executive vice president Wayne LaPierre said after the Newtown massacre: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.”

David, a gun owner from Baltimore who is a yeshivah graduate and practicing attorney, says it is a mistake to think that making a law will create a new reality. “The guns are already out there, and creating a law banning guns will not cause them to disappear.”

Josh Wander, a native and resident of Pennsylvania who attended Mir before participating in the Israeli army’s yeshivah-plus-service *hesder* program, is a certified NRA firearms instructor. He is also the founder of “Jewish Preppers,” an organization that educates and encourages Jews in disaster preparedness. Josh views personal safety and preparedness as imperative for any Jew.

“We may live in a civil society,” Josh says without wanting to sound hysterical, “and people in the US act politely to each other. But they said the same thing about Germany in the 1930s.” The right to bear arms, he

said, is not just about protection from thieves. The founding fathers also wanted to ensure protection from a government that could turn tyrannical.

While Josh’s yarmulke makes him stand out at gun shows — and Jews are generally known to fall out on the liberal end of the gun control debate — he doesn’t feel that he’s treated any worse for it. “Once the gun salesmen see my knowledge and experience, they are very respectful,” Josh says.

Gun rights supporters claim that every limitation on firearms has failed to produce any reduction in violent crimes, and that the assault weapon ban is actually just “feel-good legislation,” a confusion of terms aimed at assuaging the spirit of a frightened nation. They point to Britain and Australia as examples of countries where guns have been banned, but

the crime rate has risen. There are already millions of guns out there, and a thug, they say, is going to ignore the new gun laws when staking out an unarmed victim.

But those on the other side are perplexed. Why can’t gun rights supporters see the wisdom of this common sense regulation, such as outlawing guns capable of spraying a hundred bullets at a time without reloading, they ask? Why would anyone support personal ownership of automatic weapons?

Perhaps the reason the “gun nuts” are in such an uproar about a seemingly logical piece of legislation — in addition to their fear that it spells the beginning of a disarmed society — is in the obfuscation of terms. Since 1934, no individual can own automatic weapons (which fire more than one bullet per trigger pull) except for a specific few with certain

federal licenses. The assault weapon ban does not address SWAT team-style assault rifles and machine guns, but actually addresses semiautomatic weapons such as the popular AR-15 rifle, which fires just one round per trigger pull. Although it reloads automatically, it doesn’t fire until the trigger is pressed again — and most revolvers and pistols do the same.

**Target Practice** Owning a firearm doesn’t help if you aren’t proficient in its use. It could even be turned against you. That’s why Al, a retired salesman from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who wears a cowboy hat and spends vacations in Israel learning Torah, is constantly pushing himself to gain a higher level of expertise.

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## Jews Stick to Their Guns

“Shooting requires a great deal of concentration, muscle control and development, and hand-eye coordination,” he says. He encourages gun owners to go to the shooting range as often as they can to improve their skill. Al himself is an expert archer and marksman. “Like any other activity, the more practice you get, the more skill you develop. And it feels great to be able to score better and better.”

When a few of Al’s friends became interested in shooting, they created the “Shaloshooters,” a *shomer Shabbos* gun club. They meet at the shooting range on Motzaei Shabbos or Sunday afternoons to practice skeet shooting, an exercise in marksmanship in which participants fire shotguns at clay disks that are launched into the air.

The decision to own a gun may be a personal one, undertaken after consulting safety experts and perhaps one’s *rav*, but how can a man with a family conscientiously bring such a lethal weapon into his home? And once it’s there, what does he tell his children?

Every father handles the situation according to his wisdom, and Al says that once he felt his children were old enough, he sat them down and actually taught them about weapons. “I took them shooting and taught them how to clean and care for guns. I showed them how to have respect for their tools.”

Favi says that if your kids know you have a firearm in the house, you need to satisfy their curiosity about it. “When my children were younger, I kept my gun locked up, but would take it out to show it to them whenever they

asked. It was never treated as something forbidden. And when they were old enough, I took them to the range to go shooting with me.”

Detractors of keeping a gun at home cite lists of accidents that occur when children find or want to experiment with their parents’ weapons. In the US, over 500 children die annually from accidental gunshots. Some shoot themselves, while others kill friends or siblings after discovering a gun. Americans own millions of firearms, and a recent study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found more than 1.7 million children live in homes with loaded and unlocked guns. Furthermore, a study published in the *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* found 39 percent of kids knew where their parents’ guns were stored, while 22 percent said they had handled the weapons despite adults’ warnings to stay away. What’s more, age was not a factor in whether children had played with the guns — 5-year-olds were just as likely to report doing so as teenagers.

The biggest mistake parents make is assuming their child doesn’t know where the gun is in the house, according to the Harvard Injury Control Research Center. If they know there is a firearm at home, chances are good that they’ll find it and maybe even experiment with it. The center gives some sensible tips for parents who feel they need to keep a gun at home: don’t keep the gun loaded; store the ammunition in a locked safe and carry the key with you at all times; and ask

the parents of your children’s friends if they keep guns at home and if kids will be playing where they’re stored.

Favi says that allowing children to see and handle a weapon actually removes the mystique surrounding guns and fosters a sense of responsibility. “Since they can access it whenever they ask permission, and learn about and understand a firearm’s potential for destruction if used irresponsibly, they don’t have the urge to try to unlock it or experiment on their own.”

The Orthodox community in general shies away from violence, and many parents do not allow their children to play with cap guns or water pistols. Are gun owners undoing all this and instead glorifying weapons?

Josh Wander does not allow his children to play with toy guns, but he does teach them about his own weapons. “Children should understand that a gun is a deadly weapon and must be treated with reverence. If they’re not allowed to play with toy guns, it makes it clear that guns are not recreational.” The real problem, he says, is that guns are all over the media and are looked upon as some kind of adult toy, and it would make more sense to address cultural issues that lead to gun crimes, such as violent video games and movies. “When kids play video games, they become accustomed to pulling the trigger on another person,” he said. Or, as gun rights supporters say, “Guns don’t kill, people do.”

—Rachel Ginsberg contributed to this report

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