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What does Judaism Say About Guns? A Shavuot Text Study

Shavuot's Historical Roots

Known as the Festival of the Giving of the Torah, Shavuot recounts how, after the Exodus from Egypt, the Children of Israel proceeded to Mount Sinai in the desert. Moses ascended the mountain to meet God, who gave Moses the Ten Commandments, which were written on two tablets to be delivered to the Children of Israel.

According to the Torah, it took precisely 49 days, or seven weeks, for the ancient Israelites to travel from Egypt to the foot of Mount Sinai. The Torah commands: "And you shall proclaim that day (the 50th day) to be a holy convocation!" (Leviticus 23:21). The name Shavuot, "Weeks," symbolizes the completion of this seven-week journey. The rabbis tightened this connection by associating Shavuot with Moses' receiving the Torah from God atop Mount Sinai.

Shavuot was also celebrated as a harvest holiday. In the time of the Temple, the ancient Israelites brought their first fruits to the Temple to offer to God at Shavuot.

Shavuot Today

Many people stay up all night studying Torah. This custom evolved from the story that says that when the Israelites were at Sinai, they overslept and had to be awakened by Moses. As a result, many modern Jews stay up all night to celebrate receiving the Torah. These events, known as *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*, are understood as the custom of studying with a community in order to re-experience standing at Mount Sinai, all of the Jewish people, past and present.

Traditionally, the Book of Ruth is also read during services on Shavuot. Ruth is a young Moabite woman who married an Israelite man. When her husband died, she followed her mother-in-law, Naomi, back to Israel and adopted the Jewish faith and people as her own. Ruth is often considered to be the archetype of all who "choose" or convert to Judaism—accepting the Torah, just as Jews accepted the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

Gun Violence Prevention Awareness Month

NFTY and the RAC have been part of the Wear Orange coalition, led by Everytown for Gun Safety, since the first Wear Orange Day in 2015. One week after performing at President Obama's second inauguration, Hadiya Pendleton was shot and killed in Chicago. She was only 15. In her honor, her friends wore orange and spoke out against our country's gun violence epidemic. Since they began their courageous and inspiring movement, orange has been the color of gun violence prevention. The first Friday in June was chosen for Wear Orange Day, in memory of Hadiya and to celebrate her birthday.

On this anniversary of receiving the Torah at Sinai, which falls this year over Wear Orange Weekend, let's explore the responsibility we were given by accepting Torah. The responsibility to repair the brokenness of the world, and use text as our guide to put it back together in a way that makes everyone safe from violence, and the world more just.

Source: ReformJudaism.org - reformjudaism.org/shavuot - English translation is from The William Davidson digital edition of the [Koren Noé Talmud](http://www.korennoetalmud.com). Special thanks to Rabbi Andrew Terkel for helping to develop this resource.



The Religious Action Center pursues social justice and religious liberty by mobilizing the Reform Jewish community and serving as its advocate in Washington, D.C. The Center is led by the Commission on Social Action of the Central Conference of American Rabbis and the Union for Reform Judaism (and its affiliates) and is supported by the congregations of the Union.



Exploring Jewish Texts and Gun Violence Prevention

Gun Safety

When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet for your roof, so that you do not bring bloodguilt on your house if anyone should fall from it. - Deuteronomy 22:8

From where is it derived that one may not raise a vicious dog in his house, and that one may not set up an unstable ladder in his house? As it is stated: *“You shall not bring blood into your house”* ([Deuteronomy 22:8](#)), which means that one may not allow a hazardous situation to remain in his house. Similarly, a person should not keep a forewarned ox in his possession, as it is dangerous. This is why Rabbi Eliezer rules that no level of safeguarding is sufficient for it; the ox should be slaughtered so that it will not cause damage. - Bava Kama 46a commenting on Deut. 22:8

What is our responsibility to keep others safe with our property? Based on these texts, what firearm laws do you think the Torah would have included, that mirrors Torah laws on how our homes are designed and animals are watched?

Gun Access

We don't sell to them [idolaters] a weapon or the housings [or accessories] of a weapon, nor do we sharpen a blade for them. Not stocks, nor neck-chains, nor fetters, nor chains of bronze--neither to an idolater nor to a Cuthean (Samaritans who were responsible for postponing the building of the 2nd temple). - [Avodah Zarah 15b](#)

Why were idolaters banned from purchasing weapons? We have restrictions on who should be able to purchase firearms, including convicted felons, domestic abusers, and people with specific kinds of violent mental health histories. How do our categories of banned purchasers match and differ from this law? Who do you think should be able to purchase firearms, and who should be banned?

Gun Violence Prevention

A man may neither go out on Shabbat with a sword, nor with a bow, nor with a shield [teris], nor with an alla, 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. And the Rabbis say: They are nothing other than reprehensible and in the future they will be eliminated, as it is written: *“And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not raise sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore”* (Isaiah 2:4). - [Shabbat 63a](#)

Tosefet Lachazon Hashalom - An Appendix to the Vision of Peace by Yehuda Amichai

Don't stop after beating the swords
into plowshares, don't stop! Go on beating
and make musical instruments out of them.
Whoever wants to make war again
will have to turn them into plowshares first.

Why do we have laws about carrying weapons specifically on Shabbat? What does Shabbat represent, and why do you think we are set up to have a break from dangerous items? We have a right to protect ourselves. What is the solution when one person's way of protecting themselves (firearms) can also make other people feel less safe?