



I Am Alive, No Thanks to Gun Control

There are times in our lives when many of our most basic assumptions come under a barrage from the heavy artillery of reality. Some of us receive such a wake-up call in the form of a life-threatening event that literally shatters our lives. It is then up to us to do our best to take inventory of the damage to body and soul, pick up the pieces, and start afresh. I would like to tell you, at the time of the anniversary of a horrible encounter that almost killed me, of such a time of reckoning. But first, some background will help.

I was born in Rochester, New York, on the holiest of Jewish Holidays, Yom Kippur. My parents are American-born children of Eastern European Orthodox Jewish immigrants. Had my grandparents chosen to stay in Europe, I would not be around. During World War II, every member of my paternal and maternal families that stayed behind in Galicia and Lithuania died a horrible death at the hands of the Nazis. So we can be counted among the fortunate ones.

Martial Memories

My family and I moved to Israel in 1973, a month before the Yom Kippur War. At the time, it seemed strange to see young men and women toting rifles. I quickly learned the reason for this: These young conscripts were the first to leap into action if anything went awry. Almost daily, I heard news accounts — terrifying, chilling stories — about terrorists who invaded high school dormitories, or who stormed into the apartments of regular Israeli citizens. Since most Israelis serve in the Reserves until well into middle age, many of them were able to fight back, although the terrorists tended to have the cowardly advantage of sheer surprise. I was drafted into service in the Israel Defense Forces in 1983, and served for three years in a combat unit. I saw two tours of combat duty in Lebanon. By the time I became a staff sergeant, firearms were a natural extension of my arm, reserved for what police marksmanship trainer Massad Ayoob would call the gravest extreme.

At various points in my military career, I carried an M-16, short M-16, m-203, Galil, and short Galil (Glilon). I was a good shot and a disciplined soldier. In my specialty in the Israeli Defense Force, I functioned as a drill sergeant for the 18-year-old boy-soldiers who were recruited every few months. The many stereotypes that abound about basic training stem, in part, from the immensely difficult task that recruits must master within six months: They must transform themselves from high-school graduates into soldiers. The extreme psychological stress inherent in military combat duty left a strong impression on me. I became fascinated with the amazing adaptability of people to less-than-ideal situations. I developed an interest in psychology that has guided my career ever since.

Attacked in the U.S.A.

In the summer of 1986 I returned to the United States. After acquiring a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees in psychology, I settled in Chicago to raise a family and complete my Doctor of Psychology degree. I lost contact with the world of firearms — until Benjamin Smith, a Neo-Nazi from a wealthy home, tried to kill me as I walked home from synagogue on Friday, July 2, 1999.

I am a Chassidic Jew, and at the time of Benjamin Smith's attack I was wearing my traditional Sabbath garb. "Easy target," he must have thought. Like many complacent Americans, I used to think — naïvely — that spree-killings such as Benjamin Smith's couldn't happen in "my neighborhood." Yet there he was, my would-be assassin, idling at the stop sign on my block. As soon as I came within a few feet of his vehicle, he opened fire. I didn't have a clue what was happening. As it was the Fourth of July



Written by [Hillel Goldstein](#) on July 17, 2000

weekend, firecrackers had been going off all day, and this did not sound any different. I kept walking, but I felt a sudden pain and I realized that I was bleeding heavily. I had been shot in the abdomen, shoulder, and arm. And so, on the Fourth of July weekend, when we proudly celebrate our independence, I almost died.

What About Gun Control?

I was categorized as seriously wounded, and, thank God, received emergency treatment at one of Chicago's best trauma units. As I convalesced in the hospital I was astounded at the number of phone calls I received right in my room from the news media, local and national. Suddenly I was "somebody" to these folks, because Benjamin Smith was still on the rampage in Illinois and Indiana, and reporters hungry for a scoop continually pestered me for an interview. I refused to speak to anyone. Although that time is somewhat clouded by a painkiller and IV-induced haze, I recall all too clearly that the vast majority of the media people wanted to speak with me about the implication of my personal tragedy for "gun control."

As a result of my experience, I became interested in the issues pertaining to the so-called panacea called gun control, and decided to investigate the question with an open mind. I read about handguns, studied Second Amendment issues, and examined all sides of the argument. To my dismay I reached the conclusion — without any help from such groups as the National Rifle Association, Gun Owners of America, Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, or the John Birch Society — that good, law-abiding people are being systematically disarmed. While some might contend that my traumatic experience impaired my judgment, I beg to differ: It seems to me that as a result of my personal tragedy I can actually see much more clearly than before. All I want is to have the legal option to have a fighting chance of surviving if a two-legged animal of any persuasion tries to kill me again, or if, Heaven forbid, my beloved wife and two small children are in mortal danger.

Many of the things said in the aftermath of Benjamin Smith's rampage, and the shooting spree conducted just weeks later by neo-Nazi Buford Furrow, were utterly astonishing to me. Both Smith and Furrow were racist pagans inspired by Hitler's National Socialist ideology; Furrow made a point of saying that his attack on a Jewish day-care center was intended as a "wake-up call for America to kill Jews." Guardians of "respectable" opinion properly condemned the murderous bigotry displayed by Smith and Furrow. However, the "real" problem, Americans were told, was private gun ownership, and the "solution" was to deprive law-abiding citizens of the means to protect their families from violent crime. This was the message of the White House-orchestrated piece of political theater called the "Million Mom March."

Lesson of History

Surely, there are clear lessons taught by history, one of which is that civilian disarmament empowers not only relatively small-time murderers such as Smith and Furrow, but also paves the way for major-league mass murderers, such as Adolf Hitler. It would seem that this lesson would be particularly clear to American Jews. However, I was to learn, much to my amazement, that my newfound understanding of this lesson was extremely unpopular in my very own Orthodox Jewish community.

As I eagerly — and somewhat naïvely — shared my insights within my community, I was hit with repeated fusillades of empty clichés: "The police are here to protect us" (although they were nowhere to be found when I took three slugs from a neo-Nazi nutcase); "You're not in the Army anymore"; and so on. I soon realized that I had to keep my opinions to myself. I do not mean to upbraid these good



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people: My community consists of kind, pious, God-fearing people who still adhere to traditional values, and I am proud to be associated with them. They were of great help and comfort to me and to my family during my long recovery at home. But I think they were scared by the new fire in my soul. Like many other good people, their views of the right to bear arms have been shaped by people who seek the destruction of liberty.

My painful experience clarified issues for me. Far too many of my ancestors died under Hitler's National Socialist reign of terror for me to defile their memory by indifference. A few months after I was shot, I walked into the local gun shop with great trepidation, expecting to meet Jew-hating Neanderthals bedecked in Nazi regalia. Obviously, my own views had been molded, in part, by the same omnipresent, anti-gun propaganda that has had such an impact on the minds of my Orthodox Jewish friends. But of course, the people I met were genuinely nice guys. They were sincerely sympathetic and not at all patronizing when I told them about my experience, and were eager to help — unlike the "compassionate" media people who pestered me in the hospital out of a desire to exploit my tragedy to advance the "gun control" cause. With the help of my new friends in the much-demonized "gun culture," I was able to re-learn the art of soldiering, albeit the civilian version.

Someday, I hope that my friends in the Orthodox Jewish community will come to understand that it is un-Jewish not to try to defend oneself. In Vayikra (Leviticus) and elsewhere, the Torah unequivocally commands the righteous to defend themselves. Furthermore, Jews, more than most people, should understand the lethal danger of allowing themselves to be disarmed and therefore at the mercy of the lawless — whether the criminals are thugs prowling the streets or despots haunting the halls of government.

This understanding came to me at great personal cost, and I hope that good people across our nation can learn this lesson in a less painful way.



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