

Machar Statement on Gun Violence Prevention
January 29, 2015

Machar supports efforts to limit the damage caused by gun violence, and has done so for at least fifteen years. In 1999, Machar's Social Action Committee called on the Jewish community to support "more stringent and effective gun control in the United States." Similarly, the Society for Humanistic Judaism has also taken a stand on this issue. The SHJ newsletter in 2013 stated: "Schools in Columbine, Sandy Hook, Decatur; a political rally in Tucson; a movie theater in Aurora; in our homes and on our streets – gun violence must end. SHJ has adopted a resolution urging a ban on assault rifles and high-capacity magazines, but this fight continues."¹ Today, we reaffirm our commitment to efforts to reduce gun violence in our country, and the injuries and loss of life that result from it.

How is this issue consistent with Machar's mission and values?

It is appropriate that Machar remain actively involved in this issue. A central value of our congregation, and of the wider Jewish community, is the ancient commandment of Tikkun Ha-olam, to engage in repair of the world. There is much injury that results from gun violence in modern America. Similarly, saving life is a core humanist value, and gun violence results in a terrible loss of life. Thus, the issue fits squarely in the core mission of our congregation and secular humanist Judaism as a whole.

Guns take a terrible toll in America today, and given the magnitude of this violence, we must as a congregation do all we can to prevent the tragedies that result from gun violence. Consider a few facts:

- Every day in America, 50 teens and children are shot.
- A gun in a home is 22 times more likely to be used to kill or injure in a domestic homicide, suicide, or unintentional shooting than in self-defense.
- One person is killed in the U.S. by a firearm every 17 minutes, 87 people in an average day, and 609 every week.
- Since the December 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut, there have been at least 96 school shootings in America – an average of nearly one per week.
- Americans are 20 times more likely to be murdered with a gun than are people in other developed countries.
- There were some 310 million non-military firearms in the U.S. as of 2008 – 65 million more guns than adults.²

We as a congregation support efforts to reduce these losses, and we believe there are sensible actions that can be taken that will do so.

What actions can we support that will help to reduce gun violence?

We support a broad range of actions to reduce gun violence in America, all of which we believe are clearly compatible with the Supreme Court's rulings protecting the right of an individual to bear arms.³ The examples that follow are illustrative of actions which we support.

¹ <http://www.sjh.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/11/HumanorahSpringSummer2013.pdf>

² <http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/09/politics/btn-guns-in-america/index.html>

We support mandating that private sellers be required to conduct background checks on buyers, just as federally licensed gun dealers are required to do. According to the group Americans for Responsible Solutions, up to 40% of all gun transfers take place without a background check; and 80% of criminal inmates in a Department of Justice survey said they got their guns through private sales, without a background check. The website Armslist.com caters to this market with more than 70,000 gun advertisements at a time, many of which announce that they require no background checks. Reducing this open loophole could reduce the use of guns in the commission of crimes.

We support tightening and strengthening the federal background check system. One important failing is the non-reporting of mental health records, and therefore the system fails to prevent many persons known to be mentally unstable from buying guns. Nineteen states have submitted fewer than 100 mental health records to the federal NCIS background check system. These and similar inadequacies in the background check system should be repaired.

We support efforts to prevent illegal gun sales, such as through straw purchasers and selling guns without a license. Nearly 90% of the guns used in crime across the country can be traced to just 5% of gun dealers – who skirt the minimal rules and put profit over safety.⁴ Exceptionally high standards of proof for gun trafficking violations have made it difficult for local officials to deal with suspected traffickers, and minor penalties for illegal gun sales have done little to deter these sellers. Statutes that respond to these weaknesses in the system are of great importance.

We also support educating Americans in practices that have the potential to reduce gun violence. For example, encouraging parents to ask if there is an unlocked gun in a home in which their child might go to play can reduce the number of deaths through accidental discharges of firearms.

This is not an exhaustive list of actions that may help to support gun violence, but it includes many that are currently on the agenda of national organizations focused on this problem. Machar supports and will work to implement a wide array of policy changes and educational efforts to reduce the availability of guns to inappropriate persons, to reduce the lethality of guns (such as banning assault rifles and high-capacity magazines and requiring “childproof” safety locks), to raise the awareness of gun violence as a public health issue, and to otherwise help address this crisis.

Why now?

While it is an uphill fight for gun regulation reform, especially at the federal level, work undertaken at the state level has been more encouraging, such as the successful 2014 ballot initiative for stronger background checks in Washington State. Gun violence prevention

³ District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570 (2008); McDonald v. Chicago, 561 U.S. 742 (2010). The Court in *Heller* stated:

[N]othing in our opinion should be taken to cast doubt on longstanding prohibitions on the possession of firearms by felons and the mentally ill, or laws forbidding the carrying of firearms in sensitive places such as schools and government buildings, or laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms." *Heller* at p. 54.

⁴ See <http://www.bradycampaign.org/our-impact/campaigns/stop-bad-apple-gun-dealers>.

advocates have also focused on 2016 as a much more receptive environment, and the efforts we pursue now can help lay the groundwork for a more positive public perception of gun regulation at that time.⁵ Furthermore, if gun regulation does not move forward, educational efforts to reduce the risks associated with guns become more important – efforts such as the Brady Campaign’s ASK program, the Suicide-Proof Your Home Program, and Speak Up!⁶ Groups such as Machar can play a valuable role in these areas.

It is also important that the public realize the issue is not going away, that there remains a need for reform, and that our efforts do not represent a threat to legitimate interests in guns. The Supreme Court’s recent *Heller* decision recognizing a right in the individual to own firearms is not threatened by any of the agenda of the gun violence prevention movement, and the public must be educated on that issue. Thus, it is perhaps even more important at times like this, when the likelihood of comprehensive reform seems slight, that the campaign for reasonable gun regulation remains vital. We should not be discouraged from acting because we can’t solve the whole problem. To quote the Mishnah, “It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.”

⁵ See, e.g., Katie Glueck, “Gabrielle Giffords’ Group: We’ll Push Gun Debate in 2016,” Politico 11/19/14, <http://www.politico.com/story/2014/11/gabrielle-giffords-gun-control-pac-113017.html>.

⁶ See <http://www.bradycampaign.org/our-impact/campaigns>.