

# Guns

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I know I am expected to write about Brexit this week--a classic conflict between a great concept and a corrupt, incompetent, bureaucratic misexecution of it. But I won't, because it's too early to know how it is going to play out.

Instead I turn to another issue of conflicting worldviews. I have written before that I simply do not understand America's attitude toward guns. There are certain American loves, like capital punishment, that a Brit does not get. I know it is a cultural dissonance, and I do not expect my gun-loving friends to understand my position either. Whatever weird justifications are offered--it's the American constitution; right to self-defense; guns don't kill, people do--nothing I have heard brings me any closer to understanding the lunacy that leads to so many deaths each year (the majority of which are cause by people they know and often by accidents).

Anyone familiar with the issue in halacha (Talmud Avodah Zara 15b-16a, Rambam Hilchot Rotzeach, etc.) will know that the dominant position is that one does not distribute dangerous weapons to people who may misuse them. A human is always regarded as potentially dangerous. The counterargument of self-defense only pertains where there is no reliable system of law and order, and that's the let out that all vigilantes claim. So there's a screw loose in my brain, but I am in good company.

The National Rifle Association is one of the most powerful lobby groups in the USA, and it has almost every Republican Senator in its pocket. Every time there is a mass murder, outrage explodes; presidents promise, huff and puff, beg, and even cry for limited restrictions. The NRA turns its back and ensures that no law is passed. No matter how often advocates of minimal restrictions say they are not challenging the ancient, barbaric, even Neanderthal (apologies to Neanderthals) right of Americans to possess guns, no matter what limitations, however anodyne, they advocate. The gun lobby blocks any reasonable proposal on principle.

Once again after Orlando there was another drive to contain this madness.

You won't believe this, but the law in the USA allows someone who is banned from flying because he or she is regarded as a security risk to buy a high-powered multi-magazine weapon. Now you would have thought the NRA, made up largely of xenophobic, backwoods, reactionary yahoos, might just get a wee bit worked up if a jihad-proclaiming supporter of ISIS would be allowed to buy a weapon of mass murder. But no. The fanatics of the NRA won't even change that. Because they fear if you give an inch the crazy leftist anti-gun lobby will take the whole of your arm and your genitals too!

BBC report of June 21st:

*“The US Senate has rejected plans to tighten gun controls, including the restriction of weapons sales to people on terrorism watch lists. Four proposals were brought before the Senate after 49 people died in an attack on a gay nightclub in Florida. Democratic and Republican senators voted along party lines, blocking each other’s bills.*

Senators strongly disagreed about how to prevent more attacks happening in future.

Republican Senator John Cornyn said: ‘Our colleagues want to make this about gun control when what we should be making this about is the fight to eliminate the Islamic extremism that is the root cause for what happened in Orlando.

‘My colleagues in many ways want to treat the symptoms without fighting the disease.’

“For her part, Democratic Senator Barbara Mikulski said: ‘Why is it we would go through such incredible scrutiny to board an airplane to protect me against terrorist, and yet we have no scrutiny of the people on the terrorist watch list to be able to buy a gun?’

“Republicans and members of the National Rifle Association (NRA) complained that the bills put forward by the Democrats violated the constitutional right to bear arms. They are concerned that without enough ‘due process’, law-abiding Americans wrongly named on watch lists would be prevented from buying weapons. Democrats said the Republican proposals were too weak.

“In the US, gun dealers are licensed by the federal government. People can be prevented from buying weapons if they have mental health problems or are guilty of serious crimes, but there is no specific prohibition for those on the terrorism watch list. There are currently about one million people on that list. Besides, there are other ways to buy guns – at gun shows, or from a private vendor online – that do not require any background checks altogether.

“The Senate voted down legislation that would have closed a gun show loophole and expanded background checks to cover private sales.

“Also rejected were:

- A bill to ban suspects on terrorism watch lists from buying guns

- A bill (backed by the NRA) that would allow the US attorney general to delay a gun purchase by a known or suspected terrorist, but prosecutors would need to convince a judge of the would-be-buyer's connection to terrorism within three days
  
- A bill that would alert the FBI to terrorism suspects who have purchased a gun, without blocking the purchase outright.”

Now I ask you who is mad? How can a country as dysfunctional and a legislatively as paralyzed as this survive? It really makes one wonder whether democracy must be one of the worst forms of government ever invented. But for all of this, America is still one of, if not THE place in the world where most others would like to live. Even those who want to blow us up would rather be here than there, if we let them choose!

Democracy is a mess, but it's a better mess than some other forms of either incompetent or venal rule. So I guess I just have to put up with all these crazy, gun-loving, Montana backwoodsmen and -women. Which is, after all, what a truly democratic society must allow for, even when it does make crazy decisions.

Which leads me back to Brexit, of course.