

## **REQUEST FOR B'NAI HAVURAH TO BECOME AN OFFICIAL ENDORSING CONGREGATION OF COLORADO FAITH COMMUNITIES UNITED TO END GUN VIOLENCE**

Submitted by B'kavod Jose Diaz Havurah, September 2017

In January 2014, our longtime custodian, Jose Diaz, became Denver's first gun fatality of the year. In his honor, we formed B'kavod Jose Diaz Havurah to work for greater gun safety in our community and state. Our members include: Martie Bombel; Glenn and Susan Cooper; Rich Fantel; Pat Madsen; Shauna Morgan-Sherman; Debbie Reinberg; Zeik Saidman; Paul Simon; Alana Smart; Howard Tishler and at least 25 Friends of B'kavod Jose Diaz.

### **Position statement**

Gun violence has reached epidemic proportions in the United States, killing over 33,000 Americans each year. Firearm fatalities in Colorado (704 in 2015) continue to rise and now exceed those for motor vehicles (596 in 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Almost 80% of these firearm deaths are suicides, which are highly preventable. Guided by our faith tradition's profound commitment to life, *l'chaim*, we are called to prevent deaths and injuries caused from the improper use of firearms by promoting public health and community safety.

### **Action**

B'kavod Jose Diaz Havurah has been a participating member of Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence (CFCU) since June 2014. An auxiliary group, Friends of B'kavod Jose Diaz, lists over 25 B'nai Havurah members who provide support for specific actions and events. CFCU is a multi-faith coalition of 36 congregations working together to reduce gun deaths and injuries in Colorado. We request that B'nai Havurah itself become an official congregational member of Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence. Membership means endorsing the Statement below. Participation in CFCU has already been endorsed by the Rocky Mountain Rabbinical Council and JCRC. Membership commitments include:

- designating two representatives to regularly participate in CFCU meeting and activities (Glenn Cooper and Rich Fantel are the current representatives and Alana Smart serves as a CFCU Co-Chair)
- making an annual dues payment of \$100

### **Statement to be Endorsed by B'nai Havurah**

We, the members of B'nai Havurah, affirm the profound value of human life and feel called to speak out and act when our blood or the blood of our neighbors is shed. Aware of the continuing problem of gun violence in our state and country, we seek to give voice to those lost to gunfire, their families and their communities. Therefore, we endorse, as a congregation, the following statement:

We, as a member of Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence (CFCU), join and endorse the work of CFCU to promote legislation, policies and public programs designed to reduce the current levels of violence arising out of the improper use of firearms.

We call for the passage and preservation of common sense gun safety laws at the state and national level that will keep deadly firearms out of the hands of people who should not have them.

We call for a variety of public sector programs that help educate the community about the costly and growing public health issue that gun violence has become and how to address it, like those that have succeeded in reducing tobacco and motor vehicle fatalities.

And we call for more faith communities to join hands with us and the other members of Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence to raise our collective voice in a powerful and impassioned effort to build communities of peace.

Approved this day,  
(Name of Congregation)  
Date:

### **Endorsement of the Rocky Mountain Rabbinical Council**

Because Judaism values the sanctity of life, and because too many lives have been shattered by gun violence, we ask the Colorado Jewish community to take a stand.

We specifically ask the Rocky Mountain Rabbinical Council to support the work of Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence. The purpose of this coalition is to help decrease the gun deaths, injuries and violence in Colorado caused by the improper use of firearms. We also ask those of you who are pulpit rabbis to encourage your congregations to join Colorado Faith Communities United to End Gun Violence.

We believe that this is the right coalition to be a part of because Jewish tradition inspires our concern with issues of quality of life and public safety and compels us to speak out when our blood or the blood of our neighbors is spilled. We stand as Jews, but we are part of the greater faith community.

*Note 1 in original: Firearm Deaths in Colorado 2010 – 2015, by the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment, CDPHE*

### **Proposed Congregational Educational Activities:**

- Posting of request and educational programs in What's Nu and on B'nai Havurah website
- "Gun Violence Touches Everyone Panel" featuring the stories of B'nai Havurah members during the Dvar and in support of the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Vigil for all Victims of Gun Violence - Dec. 9 services
- Gun safety in the home for children presentation to Sunday School parents – January 2018 exact date TBD
- Community forum for questions and feedback - Feb. of 2018

## **ALIGNMENT OF THIS REQUEST WITH RECONSTRUCTIONIST POSITIONS, JEWISH AUTHORITY AND B'NAI HAVURAH MISSION/VISION/GUIDING VALUES**

### **Reconstructionist Positions**

At its March 12, 2013 annual meeting, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association adopted the following resolution. The positions taken and actions called for resonate with those of CFCU: advocacy for meaningful gun legislation; outreach to political leaders; parent and community education about gun safety; and working through coalitions.

### **RRA RESOLUTION TO END GUN VIOLENCE**

WHEREAS our nation has been shocked by an increased number of mass shootings, with the most recent horrifying events at the Sandy Hook elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012; and

WHEREAS eighty-three people, including eight children under the age of eighteen, die daily in the United States, as a consequence of gun violence (source:StopHandgunViolence.org); and

WHEREAS suicide is the leading cause of firearm death in the U.S. and more than half of all suicides in the U.S. are committed with firearms (Centers for Disease Control 2012); and

WHEREAS a disproportionate number of deaths by gun violence in the U.S. occur in urban areas in underserved and minority communities; and

WHEREAS we are called by the words of Torah: “Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor/*lo ta’amod al dam re’echa*” (Lev. 19:16) and by Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra’s commentary “that one not be joined with people of blood” warning against the complicity of silence; and

WHEREAS the Talmud raised awareness of the danger of weapons falling into the wrong hands and therefore set stringent guidelines not only for the sale of weapons, but also for the sale of material that could be used to make weapons: “We may not sell to them armament nor accessories of armament. Just as it is forbidden to sell weapons to an idol worshipper, so it is forbidden to sell them to a Jewish robber.... We may not sell thick pieces of iron to them. What is the reason? Because they can be flattened out and weapons made from them” (Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 15b-16a); and

WHEREAS today there are virtually no limits to the weapons and accessories that can be purchased legally (for example, the shooter in the movie theatre in Aurora, CO on July 20, 2012 had purchased an assault rifle, a shotgun, two pistols, a gas mask, body armor, gas canisters, explosives, and six thousand rounds of ammunition through on-line sales); and

WHEREAS we stand committed to working with our local, state, and national leaders to squarely address these issues and honor the victims, survivors, and their families;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association supports comprehensive action to end gun violence, including: meaningful legislation to limit access to assault weapons and high capacity ammunition magazines; to require criminal background checks for all guns sold in the U.S, to close the private sale loophole; and to limit how many guns someone can buy in one transaction.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association supports efforts to ensure aggressive enforcement of firearm regulations.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that, with due recognition that criminal shootings are not necessarily tied to issues of mental health, the RRA takes this opportunity to affirm that every person in need should have access to quality mental health care.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association urges rabbis in a position to do so to invite political leaders, mental health experts, educators and other appropriate authorities to our communities to share views and develop action plans to stop gun violence.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association urges rabbis to organize programs for parents and children in our communities to address issues of violence that touch all of us and the choices we can make in our own lives to help create a more nonviolent society.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the RRA empowers the RRA Board to act on behalf of the RRA in joining the Association as appropriate to coalitions, projects, events, statements and other such activities as promote the goals of this resolution and support its aims.

**Under Tikkun Olam Focus, Jewish Reconstructionism** lists Faiths United To Prevent Gun Violence as a partner and later encourages participation in the Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath as B'kavod has been doing since March 2014

We continue to maintain other Tikkun Olam alliances, and the Commission evaluates new possibilities on an ongoing basis. Currently we are partners with the following groups:

- Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (COEJL): [www.coejl.org](http://www.coejl.org)
- **Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence:** [www.faithsagainstgunviolence.org](http://www.faithsagainstgunviolence.org)
- Green Hevra: [jewcology.org](http://jewcology.org)
- Jewish Council for Public Affairs (JCPA): [www.jewishpublicaffairs.org](http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org)
- Jewish Day of Constructive Conflict: <http://9adar.org>

- Jewish Social Justice Roundtable: [www.jewishsocialjustice.org](http://www.jewishsocialjustice.org)
- Mazon: Jewish Response to Hunger: [www.mazon.org](http://www.mazon.org)
- Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice: [www.rcrc.org](http://www.rcrc.org)

<https://www.jewishrecon.org/node/102>

The Reconstructionist movement supports Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence, and encourages Reconstructionist communities to participate in the Gun Violence Prevention Sabbath Weekend they are organizing. Places of worship across the nation are joining to remember those who have lost their lives to gunfire, pray for those whose lives have been forever changed because of the loss of a loved one, and to continue the discussion on how communities of faith can work together to help reduce gun violence.

<http://archive.jewishrecon.org/resource/national-gun-violence-prevention-sabbath-weekend-2014>

### **Reconstructionist and Jewish Views on the Reasonable Regulation of Weapons**

In addition to the following scriptural statements supporting the reasonable regulation of weapons, there is a national Rabbi's group working to prevent gun violence and resolutions have been passed by the Reform movement and United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism.

**Rabbi's Against Gun Violence** is a national grassroots coalition of Jewish American leaders and faith activists from across the denominational spectrum mobilized to curb the current gun violence epidemic plaguing our country. <http://ragvtest.weebly.com/>

### **The 1989 Reform resolution reads:**

WHEREAS the proliferation of firearms and automatic weapons continues unabated; and WHEREAS the loss of life and personal injury from the use of such weapons grows astronomically, and

WHEREAS the Central Conference of American Rabbis has been on record in previous years in support of gun control.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the CCAR urge local, state, and national officials to restrict the sale of all handguns and to ban the sale of automatic weapons to the general public.

(Information from Rabbi John Sherwood, Deceased (z"l) at <http://www.jewishvaluesonline.org/question.php?id=118> )

United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism passed a resolution in 1993 in favor of gun control, re-affirmed in the 1995 support of the Brady Bill banning assault weapons.

(Information from Rabbi Wayne Allen at <http://www.jewishvaluesonline.org/question.php?id=118> )

## Reconstructionist Teachings

According to the teaching of the Torah and the Prophets, the people of Israel was expected to demonstrate its loyalty to God not merely by worshipping Him, but mainly by practicing justice and righteousness. Mordecai Kaplan, *The Greater Judaism in the Making*, p. 477-478.

Jewish law permits ownership of weapons – but only with good reason, responsibly exercised and with clear limits imposed. ... this Jewish pro-regulation view comports with today's best American thought. Well-regulated steps like universal background checks, criminalizing gun trafficking, information sharing across all levels of law enforcement and banning high capacity clips are supported by most Americans (and even by most gun owners) and are deeply consonant with our Jewish values. {para} Mordecai Kaplan bade us to consciously “live in two civilizations,” the best of one informing the other. Like Americanism, Judaism cherishes freedom, always yoked with responsibility. Emphasizing one's freedom to shoot over others' freedom to live fails the test. We must bring the prophetic, justice-seeking, lifesaving, pro-reasonable-regulation Jewish perspective proudly to bear in the public square. Rabbi Fred Sherlinder Dobb, Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation, Bethesda MD quoted in “Should Jews Be For or Against the Right to Bear Arms?” in *Moment* 2013 July/August.

## Jewish Authority

Torah says we should safeguard our souls (Deut. 4:15) and be prepared to defend others (Deut.19:16). However, while we are to defend our homes, we are also to remove hazards in them, for example, by building parapets around roofs (Deut. 22:8). Talmud extends this to all safety hazards (Baba Kama 15b). Vicious animals are to be kept away from populated areas (Baba Kama 79a). Shulhan Arukh (Hoshen Mishpat 409:3) extends this to other matters as well. Talmud, Bava Kama 46a: *R. Nathan says: From where is it derived that one should not breed a bad dog in his house, or keep an impaired ladder in his house? From the text [Deuteronomy 24:8], "You shall bring not blood upon your house."* Schlomo Yaffe, “Of Weapons and Wickedness,” at

[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/507002/jewish/What-Does-Judaism-Say-About-Gun-Control.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/507002/jewish/What-Does-Judaism-Say-About-Gun-Control.htm)

The Talmud (Avodah Zarah 15b) limits dangerous weapons being put in the hands of aggressors or would-be criminals. *And it has further been taught: One should not sell them either weapons or accessories of weapons, nor should one grind any weapon for them, nor may one sell them either stocks or neck-chains or ropes, or iron chains — neither to idolaters nor Cutheans.* The implication here is that some significant screening is justified. Yaffe, above.

Rabbi J. David Blicch, a professor of Jewish law at Yeshiva University wrote, “Jewish law recognizes that indiscriminate sale of weapons cannot fail to endanger the public. The daily newspaper confirms this deep-seated distrust far more often than is necessary. As the

bearers of an ageless moral code, Jews ought to be in the vanguard of those seeking to impress upon our legislators that handguns are indeed ‘stumbling blocks’ which must not fall into the hands of the ‘blind.’ Criminals do commit crimes, and it is precisely because ‘morally blind’ criminals are disposed to crime that Judaism teaches that it is forbidden to provide them with the tools of their trade.” Information from Rabbi Mark Dratch at same web site.

Another discussion of the connection between weapons and stumbling blocks:

[Leviticus 19:14 commands us] to avoid putting “a stumbling block in front of the blind.” The rule is understood as speaking not only of a physical barrier, and the rabbis broadened this definition to include anything that adds undue danger or harm to someone who is unable to expect it. ... Since guns might be found by children who don’t understand their power, or acquired by unstable individuals who do not have the adequate means to keep their emotions in check, guns can often become a dangerous stumbling block. Jewish law teaches that “it is a positive commandment to remove and be vigilant about any stumbling block where there is a danger to someone’s life ... and if you do not remove it or leave the stumbling block and it brings about danger you have failed in your mission to fulfill the commandment and [you] may have been responsible for spilling another’s blood” (S.A Choshen Mishpat 427:8). Marc Katz at <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-life-and-religion/119539/what-judaism-says-about-weapons>.

### **B’nai Havurah Mission/Vision/Guiding Values**

Joining with CFCU aligns with our mission, vision and guiding values (listed below) in the following ways:

- clearly supports the social justice (Tikkun Olam) aspects of our Mission and Guiding values, as indicated by the positions of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association and Reconstructionist Movement.
- connects our members with the greater Denver Jewish community as evidenced by the CFCU resolution of support from the Rocky Mountain Rabbinical Council and Jewish Community Relations Council (Vision statement)
- enables members to engage in good deeds and volunteer work through CFCU’s advocacy and public health activities

### **Mission Statement**

We do this through study (Torah), worship and joyous practice (Avodah), **social justice (Tikkun Olam)**, acts of kindness (Gemilut Hasidim), and connection with the Jewish People (Am Yisrael).

### **Vision/Values Statement**

- We provide multiple gateways to this Jewish life, including learning, prayer, **tikkun olam (social justice)**, celebration, and the arts. There will be both community-wide programs and havurah-centered activities.
- We help our members to connect with the greater Denver Jewish community, the Reconstructionist movement, Israel and the Jewish people.
- We encourage all members to participate in tzedakah (good deeds) and volunteer projects