
NRA

The President of the National Rifle Association is Jewish?

Mara Weinstein Bilson

In the corner of a dark, old-boy's-clubby bistro outside of Washington, DC, my lunch companion is holding court; the restaurant's owner is listening intently to her story of collaboration with a restaurateur in Tucson, where she lives. "I said to him, 'Can you do anything with elk?' I had so much elk in my freezer from hunting, I didn't know what to do with it. So I gave some to him for an event he was planning and he served elk hors d'oeuvres: tiny elk burgers, sliced elk steak with cherry sauce."

The huntress at my table is Sandra Froman, the president of the National Rifle Association. She is flanked by Bill Powers, her public relations representative, and one of his younger colleagues. They are all clearly regulars at this restaurant, close as it is to Powers' Alexandria, Virginia office; the owner had greeted Froman—well-appointed in a conservative black dress, gray-blond crop perfectly coiffed—with a big hug and kiss.

Sandra Froman is only the second woman and the first Jew ever to hold the volunteer position of NRA president. While there are certainly other Jews on her side of the gun debate (including several NRA board members), the vast majority of American Jews and much of the organized Jewish community consistently support gun control measures. Hadassah, B'nai B'rith, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, the American Jewish Committee and others have been essentially "blacklisted" by the NRA on its website. Yet here is a Harvard Law-educated Jewish woman emerging as a leader on—as she herself teases—"the dark side."

The anomaly is irresistible, and Froman knows it. She's happy to milk it for all it's worth, particularly if it brings additional attention to her cause.

The office she now holds never garnered much public notice until 1998, when actor Charlton Heston—of "from my cold, dead hands" fame—stepped into the role. While Froman lacks Heston's name recognition, she has attracted attention for the ways that she differs from him. Where Heston was famous (or infamous) for being abrasive, Froman is gracious and personable, even funny. In fact, her effectiveness as a spokesperson may actually be rooted in the combination of her disarming demeanor and the very qualities that demeanor belies: a firm grasp of the issues, a keen mastery of the art of persuasion and a fierce determination to push forward her organization's agenda.

Her personal journey from young partner in a liberal entertainment law firm to gun-owner to gun advocate extraordinaire began when she was divorced and living by herself in a Los Angeles apartment in the early '80s. One evening she heard somebody try to jimmy the lock of her door. "I knew it was a bad somebody," she says. Terrified, she phoned neighbors, with no response. Eventually, she called police, but by the time they arrived, the would-be intruder had fled.

"The next day, I went straight to a gun dealer, who asked me what kind of gun I wanted." She laughs as she recalls her answer: "Any kind." Froman's was not an uncommon reaction. It is precisely that response to threats real and perceived that she—as NRA spokeswoman—wants to normalize in our society, particularly among women. Her persuasiveness with non-gun-owners—getting average people to consider gun ownership—has been the hallmark of her presidency.

"I didn't know anything about the politics of guns when I went to the dealer that first time; I just wanted protection," Froman tells me. She was soon initiated into the gun debate head-first. "I mentioned to one of the partners at my firm—someone I'd worked with for years—that I was

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(On page 40) Froman speaking at the 2005 NRA Annual Meeting in Houston, Texas. (Above) Vice President Dick Cheney inspects a flintlock rifle given to him by the NRA during the 133rd Annual NRA convention in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

going to target practice, and he was really taken aback. He said to me, 'You're dangerous.' And he wasn't joking."

By then, Froman had become part of what she calls "a community of sport shooters—the same people who would shoot every Saturday morning" at the local range. When she shared her colleague's comment with her friends, and asked why he might have reacted that way, they told her she would learn more from the NRA and encouraged her to join.

She did just that and within a few years—having remarried and relocated to Arizona—was at the forefront of efforts to pass a state conceal-and-carry law, enabling citizens to carry concealed weapons in public. Froman quickly climbed the ranks of the national organization, ultimately serving as president of the NRA Foundation and an officer on Heston's board. In 2003, she became first vice president, and, in 2005, captured the presidency.

Our entrées arrive (no wildlife), and we move from her political rise to her Jewish upbringing, a story that is short. Her parents didn't emphasize her Judaism for fear that anti-Semitism might stand in her way. She doesn't remember the denomination of the synagogue near San Francisco where her family occasionally attended services and where she was married the first time. She speaks freely both of her respect for the Jewish spiritual tradition and of her lack of meaningful connection with it. Settling back into her seat, she mentions friends who have reconnected with their Judaism and allows that "maybe someday, when I'm done working these 18-hour days, I'll have time to explore those other parts of myself."

I am troubled by the ease with which she has spoken to the NRA faithful about the importance of "faith and family traditions" and the problems caused by America's becoming more "urbanized and secularized." It's surely language they want to hear. Given what she's just told me, however, it hardly seems authentic coming from such a secular person.

Unflinchingly, Froman also makes a point of connecting the NRA's reading of the Second Amendment's guarantee of the right to bear arms with the history of the Holocaust. She points out that the Nazi government confiscated guns from private citizens, including Jews (one NRA "proof text" for fighting any registry of guns: to prevent the government from ever indulging in wholesale confiscation), as well as the importance of guns in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and Resistance.

"I am not a student of this," she says, looking to Powers while presumably addressing me, "but it seems to me that, if God gave us the precious gift of life, we should be able to protect it." Turning back to me, she asks, "Isn't it a Jewish principle to protect oneself against attack?" I don't say anything but I know that halachic wrangling over particular scenarios isn't quite so clear-cut.

I do mention that I'm a mom and I ask her how I might protect my child from gun violence. While I imagine most gun-owners are responsible, laws vary tremendously from state to state, and there's generally no limit on the number of guns one can buy. There are also few or no laws about how guns are stored. I worry about the irresponsible gun users. How do I know my child will be safe in someone else's home without asking if he or she owns guns or how the guns are stored?

Froman tells me that though she doesn't have children, she imagines, "as a responsible parent, you would want to check out any home your child was going into: Is there a fence around the pool? Do the parents smoke crack cocaine?" She stresses that the NRA is concerned about safety—that's why the group encourages kids to take gun safety lessons. "You need to understand," she tells me, "the gun industry is the most heavily regulated industry in America." Powers and his colleague nod vigorously in agreement.

I've discussed this with two other Jewish women lawyers in the center of the gun debate: Robyn Thomas and Nina Vinik, executive director and senior counsel, respectively, of the Legal Community Against Violence, which tracks gun legislation nationwide. "Firearms are, in fact, one of the least regulated

industries in this country," Vinik says. Guns, for example, can rarely be traced as cars are, by serial numbers and ownership registration.

Froman has been quoted as saying that she essentially agrees with the Brady Campaign Against Gun Violence, the NRA's arch-nemesis, that we should "keep guns out of the hands of criminals and the mentally deranged." I ask how she would make sure that happened. "Well, we need the government to enforce the laws that are on the books," she tells me, echoing a bottom-line NRA position. I point out that the NRA is also trying to dissolve existing laws.

Forget about existing laws, I say. In an ideal world, how would she make sure that criminals and the insane did not get guns? For the first time in our conversation, an answer fails to roll off her tongue. She pauses and begins repeating something about "enforcing laws on the books." I ask about the legal loopholes that the NRA has advanced that allow anyone to purchase used guns in certain venues without completing a background check. Those are special cases, she tells me, and boasts that the NRA essentially wrote the law that gave us background checks in the first place.

The legislation she is talking about is known as the Brady Law and was put forward by the Brady Campaign, perhaps the country's most prominent gun-control advocacy group. The NRA fought vigorously and successfully to weaken the proposed background regimen. It certainly did not create the system.

Pushed further, she says that "no system is 100 percent effective, but I guess I'd create a legal scheme." I look across the table. Sandy Froman—Jewish woman, the nation's chief gun lobbyist—pauses. "[I'd create] an incentive scheme—to keep those people who clearly have those backgrounds from having…the means to do harm." Powers, her PR person, is no longer smiling, but Froman remains pleasant. Our luncheon is clearly over.

Guns and Jewish Law

Our ancestors may not have owned rifles, but the prohibition against the use of guns could not seem clearer: "Thou Shalt Not Kill." Yet, when three North American rabbis were asked about gun control, even the Ten Commandments appear to be open for interpretation.

Rabbi Benjamin Blech, associate professor of Talmud at Yeshiva University and a regular contributor to the website Aish HaTorah, interprets Jewish law as prohibiting the unsafe use of guns. Jewish law, he says, strongly disagrees with the National Rifle Association slogan "Guns don't kill people, people kill people." "All too many times," he explains, "kids find guns left around homes, [causing] horrible accidents." Biblical law requires a gate, wall or other barrier around a roof, to prevent falls. While there may be an occasion to bear arms, he says, Judaism construes gun control under a "paradigm for all dangerous objects that cause harm."

Exodus 22:1 says that "If a thief be found breaking in, and be smitten so that he dies, there shall be no bloodguiltiness for him." Torah makes an exception, therefore, to the general rules about killing someone. But Blech argues that in a "society of law," security should be left to police and armies; "only when we can't rely on them—like in Nazi Germany," should we take the matter into our own hands. "Judaism is not pacifist by nature," he contends. "There is absolutely good cause for armies and police to have guns. [But] should every person have a gun like a mezuzah on the door? Jewish law mandates we protect ourselves, but when you can call 911, you don't have to have a gun in your house. Who are you to decide who is worthy of death?"

Rabbi Robert Mermelstein disagrees. An infantryman in the Vietnam War who later started an ammunitions manufacturing company, Mermelstein is a life-long gun owner. In addition to joining other gun owners who cite the American right to bear arms, he views gun ownership as part and parcel of Jewish responsibility.

Mermelstein writes that Jewish law "is quite adamant regarding the preservation of innocent life even at the expense of killing another individual whose intentions are murderous." Guns are not only permitted but may be used against those who would kill, he says. This is not simply a rationalization to fire guns to prevent others from breaking the "do not kill" commandment, to Mermelstein. Rather there is a value in gun ownership itself: self-preservation, the upholding of life. In a column he writes for the Gun Owners Alliance, he calls the Sixth Commandment "the biblical source for the obligation to defend oneself against an unprovoked attack."

Gun use can be thus interpreted as legal in Judaism, at least in special circumstances. Rabbi Chaim Steinmetz, who leads Tiferet Beth David Jerusalem congregation in Montréal, Canada, and pens a regular column on Jewish Law for the *Canadian Jewish News*, says it is analogous to dangerous dogs. The Talmud says that such dogs must be kept tied up at all times. He notes an "interesting distinction [about] keeping dangerous dogs in a border town. When there are great needs for security [we are permitted to] relax the regulations of a lethal animal." As in other instances—and gun use in times of potential harm may qualify, he says—Jewish law relies on common sense. Regulations can be relaxed "if security is an overwhelming concern. In other areas, [we are told to] make sure not to cause damage mindlessly or unexpectedly."

Of course, be it letting a dangerous dog loose or a firing a gun, what constitutes such a special circumstance is a key issue. Consensus there may be equally as hard to find as it is on the issue of gun control itself.—*Moment Staff*