

# JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

## Civil Discourse Project Shoots Straight from Hip

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Imagine having a debate where nobody is name-calling or insulting the other side and their families.

No one's calling someone unqualified or inciting supporters to either physically or verbally intimidate those who disagree. And when it's over, rather than wish they could throw punches, they'll simply shake hands and move on.

Well, on April 27 at Congregation Beth Sholom in Elkins Park, you won't have to imagine anymore.

That's the purpose of the fourth annual Bernard Wolfman Civil Discourse Project — the operative word there being civil. Named in honor of the former University of Pennsylvania law professor and dean and Harvard University law professor, who was a scholar of legal ethics, it's an attempt to get serious issues discussed without the rhetoric and histrionics that often come as a result.

This year's topic, "Let's Talk about Guns," is bound to trigger plenty of emotional responses. It's such an incendiary topic yet one so commonly used in our everyday expressions — where one side will fire off its viewpoint, and the other attempts to shoot down those ideas.

This way, at least, while both will be shooting from the hip, they'll at least hear what each other has to say.

"It's a father's nature to be proud," said Dina Wolfman Baker, the Waltham, Mass.-based organizer of the project, which, in previous years, has debated Obamacare, fracking and political funding. "But I think this would mean a lot to him.

"One thing I learned from him was the importance of his children being engaged in public policy in a respectful, productive way," added Wolfman Baker. "A few months after his death in 2011 we started thinking about what we wanted to do to honor his life. When we looked at what mattered to him about teaching and tax law, it was the ability to really engage and learn from each other.

"You can't do that if the rhetoric is invective and you're shooting down the other person."

The guest speakers, moderator and public must agree to specific rules of decorum in order to attend. Both sides, though, welcome a chance to be heard under such conditions.

“I like this format,” said 30-year-old Adam Bates, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute think tank in Washington, D.C., who describes himself as a gun advocate. “It’s a very useful way to discuss hot-button issues with everybody kind of disarmed — no pun intended.

“Just have a conversation where everybody is talking in good faith. Not where every side thinks the other is being disingenuous. So I’m looking to it and happy to be a part of it.”

So is fellow D.C. native Chelsea Parsons, vice president of guns and social policy at the Center for American Progress.

“What I like about this particular forum is it’s much more reflective of the kind of conversation that regular people have about guns,” said Parsons, who met Bates previously but has never been in this kind of public debate with him. “Rhetoric about guns in D.C. with lawmakers is often hyper-partisan and really divisive.

“When you actually talk to people one-on-one as neighbors and members of the community, you find we really agree on a lot. Nobody wants the level of gun violence we have. We need to figure out how to move forward in this country. Hopefully this can lead to a productive conversation.”

Yet the conversation probably won’t change anyone’s minds.

“In the traditional sense of gun proposals, I’m probably not gonna compromise,” admitted Bates, a native Oklahoman who became a University of Miami walk-on offensive lineman, then later received his master’s in Middle Eastern studies at the University of Michigan. “Everybody on all sides agrees that dangerous, violent people shouldn’t have firearms.

“It’s just making sure these policies respect constitutional rights and don’t infringe on the rights of people who aren’t violent and haven’t hurt anyone.

“But I’ll be interested in hearing what Chelsea thinks. She may be amenable to ending the war on drugs without raising the issue of infringing on Second Amendment rights.”

Keeping the conversation flowing will be moderator Chris Satullo of Penn’s Annenberg Center for Public Policy and a former editorial page editor and columnist at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He’ll pose specific questions handed in by the audience to the principals.

Then they’ll wrap up with a call to action.

“Chris will ask each speaker to close and say, ‘If you agree, here’s action you can take,’” explained Wolfman Baker, who chose Beth Sholom because it was her synagogue growing up.

“Discourse leads to learning, which leads to meaningful action. That’s what my father believed in.”

And having this during Passover is no accident.

“It was father’s favorite holiday,” she added. “But most importantly, Passover really stands for that freedom to state your mind, move forward and be an activist.

“When you think of Moses speaking before Pharaoh and needing to be respectful but strong enough to get his point across, he was the first to model civil discourse for us and show how effective it can be in creating change.”

Translating that into modern words thousands of years later: Don’t be gun shy.