

JEWISH EXPONENT

— WHAT IT MEANS TO BE JEWISH IN PHILADELPHIA —

Orlando Tragedy Brings Gun Debate into Brighter Light

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When Dina Wolfman Baker selected the topic for the April 27 Bernard Wolfman Civil Discourse Project discussion at Beth Sholom Congregation in Elkins Park, she had no idea how volatile the issue would become in just a matter of weeks.

The topic, of course, was “Let’s Talk about Guns.”

Adam Bates, policy analyst on criminal justice at the Cato Institute think tank in Washington represented the pro-gun lobby, arguing that upholding an individual’s constitutional rights supersedes all else.

Chelsea Parsons, vice president of guns and crime policy at the Center for American Progress (CAP), took the view that more stringent background checks need to be improvised and that measures should be put in place to make it more difficult for people to have access to firearms.

Then came Orlando, which has resulted in a seismic shift not only throughout the nation’s capital, but the entire country. Since that tragic night, Parsons has been too busy to address the issue with the media, instead co-authoring a position paper: *Turning Shock and Grief for Orlando into Action*.

While equally horrified by the murders of 49 people, Bates cautioned against overreacting, noted that the killer, Omar Mateen, cleared all the background checks the anti-gun forces are advocating.

Back home in Waltham, Mass., Wolfman Baker couldn’t help but think of her late father, a tax attorney and law professor, who took these things to heart.

“My father was always emotionally effected by tragedy,” she recalled. “I remember him watching CNN when the earthquake hit Haiti, and he became immediately engaged. While we couldn’t prevent the earthquake, he felt there were ways to prevent the fallout because of the lack of infrastructure.

“He felt there should be an opportunity for us to take preventative action by working together and finding a real solution. If we didn’t he found it incredibly disheartening.

“When we can’t bring ourselves to get past our differences to do that it would’ve angered and dismayed him.”

Good thing, then, he’s not alive to see the aftermath of Orlando, which includes much finger pointing.

“There’s kind of a knee-jerk reaction to tragedy — an attitude that we have to do something,” Bates warned. “That’s a dangerous impulse and can lead to a lot of bad policy decisions.

“People are not thinking clearheaded and logic gets suspended, but I don’t think it fundamentally changes anything. One of the things we argue about is that background checks don’t have any effect on the average mass shooter.

“[Mateen] passed extensive backgrounds checks and security screenings. This guy went through all the processes gun control advocates want and still walked into a building and murdered 49 people. It’s important to understand the human error part of this. This guy managed to slip through every crack.”

CAP argues those cracks should be completely sealed.

“It’s too easy for people who wish to do harm on a massive scale to have access to guns,” wrote Parsons, in conjunction with other CAP executives. “And while the persistent inaction in Congress to address this problem can make it seem like it is an intractable or unsolvable one, the experience of many states demonstrates that this is simply not true.

“A broad range of states have enacted strong new gun laws over the last three and a half years. Laws that have expanded background checks for all gun sales, prohibited domestic abusers and stalkers from buying and possessing guns, and limited access to deadly weapons of war.

“States that have taken this kind of common sense action to address gun violence have better outcomes. The 10 states with the weakest gun laws collectively have an aggregate level of gun violence that is more than twice as high as the 10 states with the strongest gun laws,” CAP wrote.

CAP called for measures that include banning or more strictly regulating the sale and possession of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines; closing the private sale loophole and requiring background checks for all gun sales; preventing known terror suspects from buying guns; and prohibiting convicted stalkers, dating partner abusers and those convicted of hate crimes from gun possession.

A first step would be getting Congress to act, which is further complicated by the stakes of the upcoming election. Four gun control measures were rejected by the Senate on June 20.

“Because we’re so close to the election, everybody’s trying to fit this story into their narrative,” Bates said. “Democrats tend to want to blame guns. Republicans want to blame Muslims and refugees.

“Now there’s also a debate on immigration. There’s a lot more elements which have more staying power in an election year.”

While they continue to debate more people die needlessly, while Adam Bates, Chelsea Parsons, Dina Wolfman Baker and rest of us hold our collective breath hoping the next Orlando isn’t around the corner.

Especially if it's our corner.