

Talkin' to America

Interview with Rabbi Dovid Bendory October 6th 2009

INTRODUCTION

Aaron Zelman: This is **Talkin' to America**. I'm your host **Aaron Zelman** and our very special guest today is **Rabbi Dovid Bendory** an orthodox rabbi and he has developed a fascinating project called "The Ten Commandments of Self Defense", that could change the terms of the debate concerning the preservation of the second amendment and the self defense issue. **Rabbi Bendory**, welcome to **Talkin' to America**.

Dovid Bendory: Thanks so much Aaron, I am glad to be here.

Aaron Zelman: Well I'm glad you're here too. We have - really fascinating, something you that you have done here. Why don't we start by you telling me about your background and firearms. Did you grow up with guns?

Dovid Bendory: No, I didn't grow up with guns, in fact I didn't even have toy guns, I'm part of that post sixties generation where we were instinctively anti gun when we were growing up. I had water pistols now and again but those were so clearly different that they were OK - but, no toy guns, no toy soldiers, none of that in my house. In fact, you know, a lot of kids uh know that I am more involved with firearms. I know a lot of people get their start with hunting, so in my house hunting was just, it was just despicable, it was not a sport by any means - it was some despicable activity that people engaged in out of cruelty or some such - really no good reason to participate in it.

Aaron Zelman: Well, they should take a look at a seven year old deer sometime that has become wolf bait - they'll want to put the poor thing out of its misery, believe me. I understand that you had a trip to Israel or something, that had to have some effect and impact on your views.

Dovid Bendory: Well, you know, the first time that I ever saw a gun differently than that was was on my first trip to Israel so I was about twenty at the time and you know, you can imagine my shock when, here comes walking down the street a soldier carrying an M-16. It's a whole different world there. Now, that sort of surprise wore off after a while and it was especially different in that there's a need for that kind of security over there, not like here, I don't want to give the wrong picture - it isn't that soldiers are protecting every street corner, but when a soldier is coming home, they are coming back from base on their way home and they'll have a gun with them and that's perfectly normal there, and it was a little bit jarring for me at first. I did get used to it - I spent about six months there at the time and got used to it, but I think that was even the first time I saw a gun in my life.

Aaron Zelman: I have listened to your discussion, your lecture, and which is on two CD's. You sound like you're now pro second amendment, so, something must have changed, that changed your mind.

Dovid Bendory: Indeed, I think the world changed or at least my understanding of the world changed, one or the other. You know I was, I guess, I first really started thinking about defensive firearms

following 9/11. 9/11 changed a lot of things for a lot of people. I was personally an eye witness - I work across the street from the World Trade Center, I should say worked across the street from the World Trade Center at the time, I still work in that area. And, that changed the equation because now that sort of terrorism, security threat that up until that point only existed outside of the United States. Whether in reality that was true or that was just my perception, we could have a whole discussion about but that was certainly my world view. And 9/11 really changed that.

I remember the surprise of the people around me when the second plane hit, when the second plane hit the North tower and I immediately said "Oh my G-d this is a terrorist attack" and I was with about a dozen people at the time who were shocked - they didn't even understand what language I was speaking, but it immediately clicked for me based on some of those experiences that I'd had elsewhere in the world. And that was when I first really started to think about the question of "well, what kind of protection, what kind of defenses would we need to have in the United States to deal with situations like that". Now, unfortunately over the last eight years, that perception of reality has become more and more tangible, you know, as uh, we saw just last week we are seeing events that are going on here. On September 29th - I don't know if you read about it where you are, but a synagogue here in Edison New Jersey was defaced with swastikas. The day after Yom Kippur the people came to the synagogue in the morning and found swastikas painted all over the outside of the synagogue. Similarly last week they found in Brooklyn New York hundreds of hand written, black marker on white paper, little notes strewn all over the street in a Jewish neighborhood that said "kill Jews". Literally all over the neighborhood, this was just last week.

So, it seems that this sort of threat against Jews in particular is clearly elevated or it's escalated. Now, I jumped from 9/11 to recent times but there are a whole series of events in the middle there. I think the first event that got me seriously thinking about learning to use a gun myself was a terrorist attack in Mumbai last year, November 26th, 27th, a group of Islamic terrorists came into Mumbai and they had four teams. Their goal was to wreak as much havoc in the city as they could against any kind of Western target, and one of the targets that they chose - they had four teams - they sent one team going against the Chabad house, so the Chabad house was this little nondescript house - didn't even have a sign out front literally, you had to go looking for it to even find out it was there. It was quite literally the only synagogue in this enormous city of Mumbai and they sent one of their four teams to the Chabad house to murder a half a dozen Jews there. That was part of their goal, that was as important to them as blowing up international hotels and whatever else they were out for.

That was really the event that made me say "well wait a minute", you know, the equation had changed here, this isn't political terrorism, this isn't even international terrorism. That was tory (spl?) anti Semitism, call it anti Semitic terrorism, call it what you will. But, it changed my view on the possibility of needing firearms for defensive purposes in a place like a synagogue. There was also in May, just last year - but by then I was a firearms owner - but May of 09 there were those major arrests in Riverdale new York City, where there were I think four terrorists or want-to-be terrorists who were arrested with plans to blow up a synagogue in Riverdale. Again, for no other reason than the fact that it was a Jewish target. So, I could go on - essentially I watched these events unfold in the world in the last, call it, ten years and had to look at the world with different eyes and ask myself some hard questions - "could these things happen here, could they be coming for my community?". I'm in North Jersey here, I'm about forty five minutes from Edison, every morning I am in the synagogue in New York City which is anything in a half an hour subway away in New York City, but a half an hour subway from Riverdale and "could these things happen in one of my communities?" and if the answer to that is "yes", so, is there some way I should be preparing, and if there is some way I should be preparing, what is it that I should be doing?

Aaron Zelman: Well, I think that you raise a real important question because being a rabbi and taking this position, you have a different point of view, than I guess most rabbis in America. So perhaps you could comment on what you suggest for the rabbis who still support gun control schemes and also the leadership of the Jewish community, the ADL crowd - let's put it that way - what would you tell them concerning this issue?

Dovid Bendory: What would I tell them concerning this issue? My gosh, I think uh, forgive me if I am being hard here but "take your head out of the sand"! You know, Jews, Jews unfortunately through history, we've been the canary in the coal mine, and we're watching here as domestic terrorist threats are increasing. We just had now another arrest in Queens with a plot to blow up, plant bombs in subway lines, like we saw in Europe some years back. These threats are very very real and Jews are on par as a target with great symbols of America as it were, like the Pentagon or the World Trade Center. So, I think if a rabbi wants to look at this issue, I think the first thing to do is to be honest about the issue and have a look at what the Jewish sources say and have a look, read through those sources, study them from the different points of view that are brought in those sources and see what they teach.

Aaron Zelman: I think we should remind people that these sources are part of the lecture that you offer and they are also printed in the study guide that comes with the lecture

Dovid Bendory: Indeed, I'll give myself a little plug here, I'll give the lecture a little plug. The lecture is a two CD lecture, it's about eighty minutes long and it includes a source booklet with it and that source booklet has in it the original Hebrew sources that all the material is based on, and those are there so that number one - anyone who wants to can go and confirm and see yes, this really is the source, Rabbi Bendory represented it, that source, appropriately.

Number two - these are references for further research, anyone who is interested in studying the topic further - this "The Ten Commandments" lecture just scratches the surface.

Number three - I said I included the original Hebrew so, it's got my own translations in there, my own translations and elucidations. I draw out certain aspects of those sources in order to put the lecture material together. And, one who is interested could go and look at other aspects of those sources. But really those sources, they offer a lot of material for further discussion and they give a way to kind of review the lecture in a short outline format - there are eighteen sources there - I give space in the source book where if someone wants to take notes during the lecture. But you know, to go back to your point Aaron about rabbis, so I would encourage any rabbi who thinks about this issue and comes to a different conclusion than I do, I would encourage having a good look at these sources and if there are other sources out there that go against this, I would very much like to see them.

Aaron Zelman: Why don't we make sure that people understand that the name of the project is "**The Ten Commandments of Self Defense**", and it's available at the JPFO.ORG site. You know, there are other lectures about the Second Amendment but what would you say was unique about your approach?

Dovid Bendory: I think my approach differs in a couple of ways. For starters, this isn't really a lecture so much about the Second Amendment as it is a lecture about G-d's Law or what some people might call natural law. This "Ten Commandments of Self defense" - this is looking at self defense from a religious point of view, from a moral point of view and looking at self defense as a moral obligation that we have. And, I'm looking at it based on some of the fundamental pillars of Western civilization. Let me give you a little history of how it developed. A lot of this was from a lecture, a series of lectures,

that I originally gave to orthodox Jews. I teach a daily class, and that was where I really started looking at and exploring this.

Now, those lectures were not about the Second Amendment and frankly they weren't even about firearms. I looked in at sources in the Jewish tradition to see what those sources have to say about preparing ourselves for the kind of threats that it looks like we're facing as a community, and as I dug into those sources, frankly in part I was surprised at what I found. I was surprised about the strength of advocacy in those sources - the idea that we can defend ourselves is not ever questioned. We have a G-d given right to defend ourselves. And, what exactly that means and the extent to which it goes, under what circumstances are we considered to be under a threat, and how much force can we use in responding to that threat. And these sorts of questions are all discussed in those sources and the material in the lecture.

After I had talked about that topic for orthodox Jews I found wider interest. I started getting questions from non religious Jews about it, and as the audience expanded I got questions from non Jews about it, and so really this project, the CD production here, is really about expanding that audience even further and putting the material out there for people to think about and as you put it, perhaps even change some of the terms of discussion.

Aaron Zelman: This is **Talkin' to America**. Our guest today is **Rabbi Dovid Bendory** and he's talking about his new project called "**The Ten Commandments of Self Defense**", which again is available from [JPFO](#).

You include the Hebrew so that people can hear the original Hebrew, what would someone who's not Jewish - how would they find that useful?

Dovid Bendory: Well, it's an interesting question and I debated whether or not to include the Hebrew and obviously ultimately decided to include it. The original sources are obviously all in Hebrew and I thought it was important to give the original, even for a purchaser of the lecture who may not personally understand it. That person should have the original and not just the translation. These are the primary sources and, one of the things that surprised me is that when I spoke with a Christian friend about it, I found out from him that there was a tremendous amount of interest in the Hebrew even among people who can't understand it.

Why is that? Well, as he said it to me, "this is the source, the Old Testament as it's called in our culture here - the Old Testament is originally written in Hebrew. And, there's some authenticity that comes out of that which he expressed to me and he expressed tremendous interest in seeing and hearing the original Hebrew even if he couldn't understand it, as a means of verifying that sort of authenticity, that this really is where that comes from.

Look, these Hebrew scriptures and this Jewish law that I go into in the lecture - this is one of the fundamental pillars of our Western civilization. Whether it comes directly through in legal development and there are certainly parts of Talmudic law that you can trace through the development of Western law, but also coming to Western civilization by way of Christianity. This is the basis on which Christianity started, and so these sources, this material I found to be of surprising interest, not only to Christians but also to Jews who don't understand the original Hebrew themselves.

Aaron Zelman: I assume it would be accurate to say that the Hebrew that you are dealing with is the the very same Hebrew that Jesus Christ would have been reading.

Dovid Bendory: Indeed indeed, in fact that was one of the things that this religious Christian I was speaking with said to me. As he put it, for him it's fascinating to hear this because he hears this and he hears the scripture taught in the way the scripture would have been taught at the temple in Jerusalem two thousand years ago, and for him that's the source of everything he believes and there's definitely a very strong component of that. These texts that I use in addition to the Hebrew scriptures were all in existence then. I quote Mish, I quote Tomlin, I quote Midrash and these are all Jewish sources, I explain what they are in the lecture, that were in existence two thousand years ago at the time when Jesus would have been walking the streets of Jerusalem.

Aaron Zelman: I have a two part question for you, following up on this. One, a brief summary of the Jewish view of self defense, and also though how well does Jewish law regarding self defense mesh with Jewish law?

Dovid Bendory: Well, two heavy questions. Asking me for a brief summary is tough - keep in mind that I had to squeeze that lecture down to get it to be eighty minutes. I guess I could summarize like this. Judaism advocates taking reasonable steps to prepare to defend ourselves against threats that are reasonably likely to occur, and that really is the summary. Now, I don't want to give a wrong picture here - Judaism is against violence, but being anti violence does not mean that we wouldn't do something like take up a gun in self defense - we mentioned Israel earlier - that's a great example.

This whole idea of weapons, of Judaism being against weapons, sort of liberal tie in if you will. In the absence of any real threat of violence of course Judaism is against weapons - we should all be walking around frankly with innocence as individuals, as nations, but Judaism recognizes the reality of the world we live in - it's a world where evil exists. There are people in this world who rob and steal and injure others and, frankly,

Judaism is in favor of good people, for that matter good countries, taking the necessary steps to prepare to defend themselves against attack. If it so happens, and my opinion it is the case, that if it so happens that a firearm is the best tool for self defense then so be it. One can't take the position based on the Jewish sources that that is somehow prohibited. In fact if that kind of defensive step is warranted and that's an efficient way to do it, then as I conclude in the lecture, it's in fact a requirement that's incumbent upon us.

As for U.S. Law, the second half of your question, I'll make a very broad brush statement and say that there is general agreement between the Jewish sources I bring out and U.S. Law. To take one concrete example that your listeners are probably familiar with - Castle Doctrine - so the idea that a man's home is his castle is very very much based on Hebrew scripture, and I bring that out in the lecture and obviously that exists in U.S. Law as well. But, I can't really talk in detail about U.S. Law because most of these laws in the U.S. vary state by state so really there are fifty different sets of law but in the broad brush strokes I would say there is general agreement.

Aaron Zelman: As you discuss within the lecture, when we were confronted with laws that contradict Jewish laws of self defense, and where an individual is challenged to either accept a biblical teaching, G-d's law if you can put it that way versus man's law, what should people do?

Dovid Bendory: I don't think we have any choice on that one. I think we have to do everything we can to change man's law. Look, the idea that some governments, some group of people can make a law that says you have no right to defend yourself is utterly absurd. Nothing can take away that right, it's a G-d given right, no one can make a law preventing that, so to take that to the level of gun control, the idea of declaring that there's a handgun ban in a particular city - what you've essentially

done is told the good people they can't defend themselves and you've told the criminals that they are going to be safe to do whatever it is they want, because the criminals - it's obvious and it's silly to think they are going to follow this law and so effectively what you've done with a handgun ban is you've told good people you have no right to defend yourself. In that kind of situation, I mean frankly, I think the first thing to do is leave the city but leaving that aside we have to work to change that law. That law is fundamentally against human civilization.

Aaron Zelman: I agree. I think our listeners also agree. A lot of people have contacted me over the years and saying "how come Jewish politicians or media folks are always supporting gun control, haven't they learned from history?". And so I wonder, how would you answer a Jew who supports gun control as a vision of improving the world, which includes banning guns from the hands of private citizens?

Dovid Bendory: Well, you know, that's part of my view of improving the world as well. I want to build a world in which handguns are not necessary. It's a beautiful vision, it's a Messianic vision. You know the quote from Izziah, I'm sure your listeners know the quote, "a young child is going to lead a lion a leopard or a wolf", it's a prophetic vision, that's the world we all want to make. But, we also have to face reality, we live in a real world here. I say in the lecture that it saddens me to no end that I live in a world in which I have to go and learn how to use a gun to defend myself. But I'm not going to delude myself with a fantasy world where guns aren't necessary, and I'm not going to delude myself into thinking that we live that Messianic vision today. One can look into Jewish sources for that vision and come to a mistaken conclusion that we have to ban guns. What those sources are really about isn't banning guns, it's about perfecting the world that we live in so that guns are no longer necessary. And, I'm sure that you and frankly every other gun owner longs for a world in which that is true, but in the meantime here we are and we have to defend ourselves against the people who would do harm to us.

Aaron Zelman: How would you like to wrap this up as far as giving a message to people about the mind set they should adopt perhaps concerning self defense and what actions they should take to preserve their ability and their G-d given right to stay alive.

Dovid Bendory: Well, I think there are two points I would take there that I would advocate. The first one is to learn G-d's law with regard to these issues. One piece of that, and there's obviously a lot more of this in the lecture. G-d's law is that good people need to stand together against bad and if that means we have to take up arms to do it then that's what we have to do. To that end, and this would be number two - I advocate ownership of defensive arms for any law abiding and moral and responsible person. A good person who is buying those arms for the right defensive reasons - I most certainly advocate that, we should own firearms for defensive purposes if we can be responsible and use them safely, which I think any moral and law abiding citizen would be able to do.

I think the last thing I would say is I'd encourage all your listeners to pick up a copy of "**The Ten Commandments of Self Defense**". I explore the sources that are in there, I think they'll make great discussion points to have with your friends both religious and non religious, both pro and against gun rights, I think that these are discussion points that will really lead to some interesting exploration with all different people. Then finally, I guess check back with us. I think we are going to have some more lectures coming, I have certainly have been putting some new material together. I would encourage people to visit your web site at JPFO.ORG, if I can give you a plug, and if you ever want to come visit me I actually just got a new web site together - it's called the gunrabbi.com, so you can come visit me on the gunrabbi.com and there's contact information there, I'd love to hear from you about the lecture.

Aaron Zelman: Well **Rabbi Bendory**, I want to thank you very much for being with us today. The lecture is fascinating and the study guide that goes with it is a wonderful source of information, and it is readily available now at JPFO.ORG. And I want to thank you again for being with us and I wish you the very best and stay safe.

Dovid Bendory: Thank you very much Aaron and you stay safe too. It's been a pleasure speaking with you today

Aaron Zelman: Thank you. This has been **Talkin' to America**. I have been your host **Aaron Zelman** and our special guest has been **Rabbi Dovid Bendory** talking about his new project "**The Ten Commandments of Self defense**" and I would like to remind all of you, if you won't defend your rights, then don't complain when you lose them.

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