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Commentary

Jews: Don't Boycott The Olympics!

Maurice R. "Hank" Greenberg 05.04.08, 6:00 PM ET

I am angered by the ill-advised suggestion by the group of rabbis and other Jewish leaders who have said that the U.S. should boycott the Olympic Games in China. The idea that the Tibet issues in China have any similarity to the Nazi Holocaust demonstrates an appalling misunderstanding of history.

Ironically, one of the Jewish leaders said it was China's plan to offer kosher food at the Olympics that triggered their protest. It seems like no good deed goes unpunished in today's world.

The secretary general of Israel's Olympic Committee, Efraim Singer, was quickly and sharply critical of this effort by American Jewish leaders. "The Olympic Games are the most important events worldwide, beyond sports," said Singer. "I think there are other forums to express oneself."

History has not been kind to past boycott efforts at the Olympic Games. The American boycott of the Moscow Olympics in 1980 and the somewhat reciprocal Soviet boycott of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles accomplished little. Neither was a diplomatic success. Boycotts only tend to punish the athletes as the innocent victims of someone's political protest. They have never achieved much.

China is a vast country. Within its borders, there are 55 recognized ethnic minorities and various other affinity groups, many with their own languages, cultures and customs--all part of China's rich history of dynasties stretching over centuries and uniting the nation. The constitution and laws of the People's Republic of China guarantee equal rights to all ethnic groups today.

This boycott campaign is wrong-footed and counterproductive for so many reasons.

First, we should encourage China to continue to be an engaged citizen of the world, including hosting global events like the Olympics. Economic and social inclusion has always been the most powerful agent of change and builder of mutual trust. No one is going to successfully bully a powerful country like China. Instead, events like the Olympics bring us together. They are a showcase to encourage harmony and cooperation.

I have traveled extensively in China over many years--a witness to the great strides it has made as a country. Certainly, China has on its agenda even more change in the form of social and economic progress. We do the most to help advance human interests when we are engaged as business, economic and social partners. I can see nothing to be achieved by policies of isolation, ostracism and boycotts.

Second, the rabbis are regrettably ignorant about the long, rich history of Jews in China. Jewish merchants were early traders there. Jews and Judaism have been in China since before the 7th or 8th century. The first Jewish synagogue in China was built along the Silk Road trading route during the Song Dynasty.

There is a significant Jewish settlement in Shanghai today. The Ohel Rachel Synagogue in Shanghai is symbolic in many ways of the Jewish history in China. Rebuilt after its destruction in World War II, today it is a prominent Jewish place of worship.

Moreover, China was a refuge for Jews escaping the revolution and pogroms in Russia in the early 1900s and it was a refuge for Jews escaping Nazi Germany.

In fact, history records three great waves of emigration where Jews sought China as a safe haven:

- the first wave before 1920 when Baghdad refugees built the large synagogue in Shanghai;
- the influx of escaping Russian Jews who fled pogroms and the revolution from 1920 to 1937;
- the third wave from 1938 to 1952 with Jews escaping persecution in Europe and Nazi Germany.

I do not understand how we could be so forgetful about the role of China over centuries in providing a safe haven for Jews who were escaping persecution, death and annihilation elsewhere.

The statement by the Jewish leaders that China somehow resembles Nazi Germany during World War II and the 1936 Olympics in Berlin is ridiculous. I saw the Nazi empire first hand as an American soldier in Europe during World War II. I was there when U.S. forces liberated Dachau. I have also been traveling to China for decades. There is no similarity between the two and the comparison that these leaders have raised is absurd.

American Jewish rabbis and leaders would be well advised to be better students of Jewish history in China before criticizing the country. We should also stand for tolerance and understanding in working with other people and other countries. We need to engage countries around the world and not seek to isolate them.

Israel is probably a better guide for us than these Jewish leaders in how to deal with China. It plans to be at the XXIX Olympiad in Beijing, just as it is also a significant trading partner with China today. Indeed Israel seems to have a much better understanding of the heritage of a longstanding relationship with China than my American Jewish colleagues.

Ironically, the XI Olympiad in Berlin in 1936 that is referenced by these leaders was hardly a showcase for the Nazis who allowed only those of Aryan descent on their Olympic team. The winner in Germany was African-American Jesse Owens who stole the show and won four gold medals. It would have been a terrible tragedy if the U.S. had boycotted those games.

It's time to let the Olympics be the world games they were always intended to be. The Olympics needs to be about athletes and not politics.

I am looking forward to being in China for the opening of the XXIX Olympiad in Beijing this year.

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