

OU, Agudath Israel reject Beijing boycott

Matthew Wagner , THE JERUSALEM POST

May. 4, 2008

The Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel, the two largest Orthodox organizations in the US, rejected a call last week by more liberal-minded Jewish leaders to boycott the Beijing 2008 Olympics.

In separate statements, the OU and Agudath Israel, who represent more conservative political and religious views within American Orthodoxy, expressed concern that a Jewish-led boycott against China would do more harm than good.

China's human rights violations are well documented. The Chinese provide essential aid to Sudan, where government-allied militias have murdered hundreds of thousands of civilians in the civil war in the Darfur region.

The country has also cracked down viciously on independence movements in Tibet, and has been involved in involuntary organ harvesting among political and religious dissidents and criminals. It has also cultivated ties with Hamas.

However, China has extensive business connections with Israel, and it has given some backing to US and Israeli efforts to isolate Teheran to try to force the Iranians to discontinue the development of nuclear weapons.

And even the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the exiled Tibetan government, recently told NBC he was in favor of moving ahead with the Beijing Olympics.

As a result of China's mixed record as both friend and foe, the Orthodox Union and Agudath Israel are concerned that a Jewish-identified sanction could backfire.

"We at Agudath Israel of America understand the motivation behind the effort," read one statement. "We, too, are deeply concerned about reports of human rights violations in China. We believe, however, that it is presumptuous, and perhaps even counterproductive, for a group of private citizens to urge a boycott of the Beijing Olympics - and to direct their appeal specifically at members of the Jewish community."

The OU issued a similar statement: "Jewish law indeed teaches that the preservation and saving of human lives is of paramount value. But Jewish law cautions that we must act with exceptional care lest we cause more harm than good. The leadership of the Orthodox Union believes such exceptional care is demanded in these circumstances with regard to relations with the Chinese government."

The OU and Agudath Israel were responding to an appeal issued by 185 Jewish leaders - mostly rabbis - who called on Jews not to attend the Beijing Olympics as tourists.

The appeal, narrowly directed at only potential Jewish tourists, was carefully worded to avoid harming the interests of athletes or Israel. It is limited to tourism surrounding the Olympics and does not target all business and diplomatic dealings with China.

The appeal coincided with Holocaust Remembrance Day, and drew parallels between China's attempts to use the Olympics ceremonies to cover up human rights abuses and Nazi Germany's attempts to do the same at the Munich 1936 Olympics.

These parallels were rejected by the OU and Agudath Israel, as well as the Anti-Defamation League, as "inappropriate".

"We believe that these comparisons are inappropriate," read an ADL press release. "China is a complicated society that is changing and opening up in many ways, and one simply cannot equate the Beijing Olympics with those games in Nazi Germany on the eve of the Holocaust."

Two more liberal-leaning Orthodox rabbis, Haskel Lookstein, head of Manhattan's Kehilath Jeshurun synagogue, and Irving "Yitz" Greenberg, the former chairman of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum Council, were instrumental in organizing the appeal.

Greenberg and Lookstein recruited other Orthodox leaders, including Rabbi Norman Lamm, the chancellor of Yeshiva University; Rabbi Dov Linzer, the dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, a rabbinical school in New York City; and David Bernstein, the dean of the Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies in Jerusalem.

"I don't think people should spend their discretionary time or funds in support of an activity which serves to give legitimacy to a government which is doing some terrible things," Lookstein said.



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