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AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA **FEDERAL AGENDA** 2019

Agudath Israel of America is a 97-year-old national grassroots Orthodox Jewish organization, headquartered in New York, with a Washington Office, state offices and affiliated chapters across the United States. Agudath Israel sponsors numerous projects and programs that serve the community in a wide variety of settings. Agudath Israel advocates before federal, state and local bodies on behalf of Orthodox Jews and their growing network of educational, religious and charitable institutions.



CURRENT ISSUES

ISRAEL & INTERNATIONAL

- Advocating for a **Middle East peace** agreement, including a resolution of the Palestinian issue that is based on the right of Israel to live as a Jewish state within secure borders. This will happen as long as the United States clearly demonstrates its ironclad support and commitment to Israel – both morally and materially – thus persuading the Arab nations that they have no choice but to come to the negotiating table. Any perceived weakening of this bond –including the imposition of conditions by any means other than through direct negotiations -- will only embolden rejectionists. We also encourage the United States to continue and enhance its strategic and security relationship with Israel, including the most advanced and effective weaponry and defense systems.

Agudath Israel commends President Trump for his courageous and principled stand in declaring our government's formal recognition of **Jerusalem** as capital of Israel and in moving the U.S. Embassy there, bringing to fruition legislation passed overwhelmingly two decades ago by a bipartisan Congress. We also applaud the Trump Administration's advocacy at the **United Nations**, where former Ambassador Nikki Haley had openly and directly called out the world body for its blatant animus and double standard in regard to the Jewish State.

- Combating the scourge of **terrorism** in Israel and around the world and making clear that acts of violence against innocents will not achieve the aims of Islamic and other extremists bent on the destruction of Israel, Jews and free societies. This isolation of terrorists includes the continued non-recognition of Hamas and other such groups, and severe consequences for a Palestinian Authority or any entity or country that abets, condones or honors terror or terrorists. It is absolutely unacceptable that Israeli citizens should have to suffer continued missile attacks and the daily – and very real– threat of bloodshed.

For that reason, Agudath Israel commends the 115th Congress for its passage of the **Taylor Force Act**, legislation that will withhold financial aid to the Palestinian Authority as long as it continues to make “reward” payments to the families of those who commit terror. Now, signed by the President and enacted into law, we will remain vigilant that its provisions are adhered to.

- Preventing a **nuclear Iran**, which poses grave danger to the United States and the West and a mortal threat to Israel and to countries in the region. The pact concluded with Iran contained serious flaws that not only failed to address this problem but would more likely exacerbate it. We had already witnessed grave Iranian violations of the agreement. We applaud President Trump for scuttling the pact and the inevitable dangers it presented.

Another vital concern that remains for Agudath Israel is the safety and security of **Iranian Jewry**. Living at the whim of a virulently anti-Israel and anti-Semitic regime, many thousands of Jews seek to leave the country. Unfortunately, due to recent U.S. immigration restrictions, the decades-long American rescue of religious minorities facing persecution in Iran (Jewish, Christian, Baha'i, etc.) has slowed down to a standstill. We urge the Administration and Congress to do everything possible to restore the flow of these refugees to freedom and security.

- Urging the United States, the beacon of the free world, to condemn and do all in its power to combat the open and ugly manifestation of **anti-Semitism**, expressed in both words and violent deeds. Calls to “Gas the Jews” and other such venomous expressions of hate cross the line of legitimate political discourse and expose the motives and intentions of those who make such statements. Applying a delegitimizing double standard when evaluating the actions of Israel and Jews, whether it is seen in world bodies or in the pronouncements of the “boycott, divestment and sanctions” (BDS) movement at home or abroad, must be roundly condemned. We must also remain vigilant when religious rights – such as kosher slaughter and ritual circumcision – are being threatened, and when individuals, synagogues, cemeteries and other institutions are attacked.



In the 116th Congress, Agudath Israel:

- *Applauds passage in the Senate of [S.1](#), the bipartisan “**United States-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act,**” legislation introduced by Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) that will strengthen the strategic alliance by authorizing U.S. foreign military financing for Israel over the next 10 years. The bill also supports Israel’s ability to address both conventional and emerging threats from Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. Representative Michael McCaul (R-TX) has introduced a companion bill in the House, [H.R.336](#), and we urge its members to swiftly take up and pass the measure.*
- *Urges the House to follow the Senate’s lead in passing (as part of S.1) the “**Combatting BDS Act,**” legislation introduced by Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV) that will fight back against the BDS movement by increasing protections afforded to state and local governments from financially supporting or engaging with entities that seek to delegitimize and wage economic warfare against the State of Israel.*
- *Continue to support [S.238](#) the “**Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism Act,**” legislation that was introduced in the last Congress by Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) that would upgrade and enhance the position, duties, rank and qualifications of the Special Envoy position. While we are exceedingly pleased that the President has recently selected such an eminent choice, Mr. Elan Carr, for the position, we will urge that this bill be reintroduced, as anti-Semitism around the world proliferates in open and ugly ways and the fight against it will greatly benefit from these improvements.*



EDUCATION

- Ensuring that funding for America's schools embodies and safeguards the principle of "**equitable participation**." As a government liaison for over six decades on behalf of the entire range of Orthodox Jewish educational institutions we have found that, all too often, private and religious schools do not receive the funding that is mandated under law. Our success in helping to craft and promote provisions in ESSA that strengthen local transparency, accountability and flexibility was a major step forward and we plan to build on this achievement when we confront the reauthorization of IDEA, where equitable participation has been sorely deficient, and in other federal education proposals as well.

- Advocating for legislation that will provide parents the full range of **school choice** for their children – public, private or religious. A longtime leader in the school choice movement on both the federal and state levels, Agudath Israel strongly believes that allowing parents to choose the education best suited for their children is sound public policy and squarely within constitutional parameters. We support various forms of school choice, including vouchers, tax credits and education savings accounts.

One education-related change we strongly endorsed in the recently passed tax bill is the expansion of **529 savings plans** to include K-12 tuition, which will make it easier for parents to save their own money for their children's schooling. Agudath Israel is currently working in states to optimize this benefit for these parents. And, we have been pleased to work closely and cooperatively with President Trump, Secretary DeVos and congressional allies, in crafting and promoting landmark federal school choice legislation – in the form of a "**scholarship tax credit**" – that has recently been introduced.

- Emphasizing the need for the reauthorization of the **Higher Education Act** to better reflect the unique circumstances of Jewish and other religious post-secondary institutions. A top priority relates to changes in the Pell Grant and other campus-based programs, which must include greater flexibility in income limits for larger families, restore the "ability to benefit" option so that students without high school diplomas will not be permanently shut out of federal student aid options, and ensure that students approaching to graduation are not closed out by running out of grants. Additionally, it is necessary to correct the methodology for evaluating institutions based on their student outcomes and graduation rates, which produces skewed results for many non-traditional schools.

Agudath Israel also supports provisions in the Higher Education Act that would prohibit accreditors and governmental entities from taking adverse action against faith-based institutions because of policies and actions related to their **religious missions**. Furthermore, we support protections in the bill that ensure "**equal access**" on public university campuses for student religious groups.

- Advocating for greater participation of students with religious dietary requirements in **school-based nutrition programs**. Jewish schools, like many in the nonpublic school community, participate widely in the USDA-administered programs, whose goal must be to maximize inclusion of needy students. Reasonable and workable accommodations must be made for kosher and other dietary laws when program requirements limit the availability, affordability, and accessibility of nutrition foods to children. We must also explore the possibility of expanding nutrition programs to the higher education level, where the compelling need for such programs for economically disadvantaged students has steadily increased.



In the 116th Congress, Agudath Israel:

- Strongly supports the **“Education Freedom Scholarship and Opportunity Act,”** legislation introduced in the Senate ([S.634](#)) by Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) and in the House ([H.R.1434](#)) by Representative Bradley Byrne (R-AL), and strongly endorsed by the Trump Administration. The multi-billion program will allow a dollar-for-dollar tax credit to individuals and corporations for contributions made to state-approved “scholarship granting organizations” (SGO), which dispense scholarships for a range of educational services. These services may include private school tuition, special education instruction, transportation, etc. There are important religious liberty protections in the bill that prohibit state involvement in curriculum (for example) or discrimination against a religious school because of a religious practice (for example).
- Urges the reintroduction of the **“Anti-Semitism Awareness Act,”** legislation introduced in the last Congress by Senator Tim Scott (R-SC) that will provide a working definition to the Department of Education to enable it to determine when religious discrimination against Jewish students has possibly occurred and should be investigated. This approach will be helpful in determining whether students on campus with Jewish ancestry or ethnicity are being targeted, and when discriminatory anti-Semitic behavior is being couched as anti-Israel or anti-Zionist.
- Supports [H.R. 943](#) the **“Never Again Education Act,”** bipartisan legislation that was introduced by Representative Carolyn Maloney (D-NY) and Representative Elise Stefanik (R-NY). The bill will create a new grant program at the U.S. Department of Education to give teachers the resources and training to teach schoolchildren about the Holocaust and its lessons.



AIDING & SECURING JEWISH INSTITUTIONS

- Lobbying for the continued vitality of programs that enhance the **security** of Jewish and other institutions highly vulnerable to violence by domestic and foreign extremists. Recent months have seen numerous reports of synagogues, schools, community groups and cemeteries being threatened and desecrated. And the Jewish community is still reeling from the murderous anti-Semitic rampage in Pittsburgh. The President and Congress must continue to condemn these actions but must also provide material support for security equipment to protect their facilities.

Agudath Israel has been instrumental for over a decade in creating and maintaining the **Non-Profit Security Grant Program**, which has helped secure many at-risk terrorist targets. In light of the continuing spike in anti-Semitic incidents, we had urged Congress to include in its FY 2019 NSGP Appropriations the critically needed current funding level of **\$60 million**, which included the expansion of the funding to include **non-UASI areas**. We are pleased that Congress – after some initial uncertainty in the Senate – agreed to keep the level funding.

- Ensuring that steps are taken to continue and enhance the **faith-based initiative**, which levels the playing field for religious groups to administer federal programs for the needy and vulnerable. With a proven track record for success, faith-based participation should be encouraged and we should amend laws that do not put religious institutions on the same footing as similarly situated secular entities when it is constitutionally permitted to do so.

Agudath Israel applauds the Supreme Court's ruling in **Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer** and will seek to enshrine it legislatively in a manner that will expand faith-based participation in appropriate federal programs. One area in which we have played a leading role has been **federal disaster relief** where funding had gone to a range of community entities (including zoos!) but, because of previous FEMA policy, unjustly excluded "houses of worship" from the list of beneficiaries. We commend President Trump for changing this policy so as to conform to the Trinity decision and we congratulate congressional leadership for passing the **Federal Disaster Assistance Nonprofit Fairness Act**, which ensures the participation of houses of worship, religious schools and other faith-based entities in the federal disaster relief program.

- Supporting measures that support our **charitable institutions and charitable giving**. As budget cuts will have a profound effect on many social programs and those that benefit from them, charitable institutions will be asked to step up and seek to address some of society's most pressing needs – the young and the elderly, housing, employment, health care, etc. But they often lack the resources to do so. We are pleased that in the recently-passed tax bill the "charitable deduction" was retained, but we must seek to correct other tax provisions will have unintended negative consequences for charitable giving.



In the 116th Congress, Agudath Israel will:

- Continue to strongly support full funding for the “**Nonprofit Security Grant Program**” during consideration of the FY 2020 DHS Appropriation. The facts and figures show that the need for security remains and only grows stronger. We will continue to advocate for the \$60 million allocation and any additional amount and measures that will adequately address the need.
- Continue to support [H.R. 651](#), the “**Charitable Giving Tax Deduction Act**,” introduced by Representatives Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Henry Cuellar (D-TX), which allows uncapped charitable deductions for non-itemizers and thereby retains incentives for non-profit contributions. Because last year’s tax bill doubled the standard deduction, it is likely that taxpayers will opt to take the higher deduction and not to itemize, forgoing the tax benefit of charitable deductions. This bill will maintain an uncapped “above the line” deduction for charitable contributions, enabling those who take the standard deduction to still itemize and receive the tax benefit for their donations.
- Support ([S.632](#)/[H.R.1545](#)) the “**LIFT for Charities Act**,” bipartisan legislation that has been introduced in the Senate by Senator James Lankford (R-OK) and Senator Chris Coons (D-DE), and in the House by Representative Mark Walker (R-NC) and Representative Tom Toussi (D-NY). Majority Whip James Clyburn (D-SC) has introduced a similar bill, [H.R. 1223](#), entitled “Stop the Tax Hike on Charities and Places of Worship Act.” These bills will repeal the new, unprecedented “parking and transportation fringe benefit” tax on charities, including houses of worship, that came into effect after last year’s tax reform bill. The repeal will eliminate a financial burden that will be onerous on charities, intrusive on religious groups, and have a detrimental effect on nonprofit services to the community.



RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

- Advocating for employees who require **reasonable accommodations** for religious observance, such as taking time off for the Sabbath and holidays. Problems in this regard continue to face religiously-observant employees and current law needs to be strengthened through enactment of the proposed Workplace Religious Freedom Act and enhanced provisions governing the federal religious compensatory time law. In line with recent Supreme Court decisions, we must also focus on the religious rights of corporate employers, who also deserve protection when federal regulation implicates their faith-based beliefs and practices.
- Protecting the **rights of religious entities** to maintain policies that are in accord with their religious beliefs and mission. Excessive government regulation can destroy the very character of religious entities, particularly schools. The autonomy of religious entities must be protected in regard to its employment and hiring policies, and they should not be forced to adhere to religiously-objectionable beliefs or practices at the expense of suffering the loss of tax exempt status, accreditation, federal contracting, funding, etc. Regarding religious schools, this autonomy must extend to curricular and assessment requirements, and such independence must be safeguarded even in the context of school choice programs, as they are in the current Cruz/Byrne proposal.

Agudath Israel welcomed the U.S. Department of Justice Memorandum issued last year by former Attorney General Jeff Sessions setting forth all the protections for religious liberty in federal law. It is a strong statement of support that staunchly defends the rights of individuals and organizations to receive accommodation for their religious beliefs and observances. It will be useful in guiding federal agencies to ensure that religious liberty is upheld to the greatest extent possible and to prevent future discrimination against religious individuals or organizations.

- Opposing any **health care reform** proposal that would force a religious entity or individual to violate their religious beliefs. Some religious groups objected to Obamacare's contraception mandate on these grounds and we applaud President Trump for taking steps to respect the religious rights of employers. Others have also pointed to the requirement that physicians participate in gender reassignment surgeries, where such operations run contrary to the doctors' religious beliefs. In the Orthodox Jewish community this problem is perhaps most relevant to "**end-of-life**" issues, where Jewish law prescribes strict guidelines as to whether or not life sustaining treatment is required.

Agudath Israel commends the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for recognizing the interplay between medical care, social mores, and matters of religious freedom, and for establishing within its Office of Civil Rights a division that will focus on **faith and conscience**. As technology advances and societal values are questioned there is a great need for such a focus.

- Blocking any attempt to weaken the **Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)**, which has become the primary source of religious protection in the U.S. Unhappy with the high level of protection RFRA affords religious entities and individuals, some have attempted to carve out certain classes of people and activities from the scope of its protection. But religious freedom should not, per se, be sacrificed in favor of other interests; doing so would have a devastating effect on America's First Freedom.



In sum, during the 116th Congress, Agudath Israel of America will be working on a legislative agenda in Congress that will highlight the following issues:

- *Applauds passage in the Senate of [S.1](#), the bipartisan “**United States-Israel Security Assistance Authorization Act**,” legislation introduced by Senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) that will strengthen the strategic alliance by authorizing U.S. foreign military financing for Israel over the next 10 years. The bill also supports Israel’s ability to address both conventional and emerging threats from Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. Representative Michael McCaul (R-TX) has introduced a companion bill in the House, [H.R.336](#), and we urge its members to swiftly take up and pass the measure.*
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If you have any questions or need additional information, please do not hesitate to contact Rabbi Abba Cohen, Vice president for Government Affairs and Washington Director at (202) 835-0414 or acohen@agudathisrael-dc.org.

