



AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA **FEDERAL AGENDA 2017**

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AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA **FEDERAL AGENDA** 2017



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AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA'S OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

Agudath Israel of America is a 94-year-old national Orthodox Jewish organization, headquartered in New York, with a Washington Office and affiliated chapters across the United States. Agudath Israel sponsors numerous projects and programs that service the community in a wide variety of settings. Through its Office of Government Affairs, Agudath Israel advocates before federal, state and local bodies on behalf of Orthodox Jews and their growing network of educational, religious and charitable institutions.



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 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.

- Combatting 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 – but very real – threat of bloodshed.

- 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 contains serious flaws that not only fail to address this problem but will more likely exacerbate it. We have already witnessed grave Iranian violations of the agreement. The damage done by the agreement can be minimized, however, by American insistence upon tangible and verifiable progress by Iran in fulfilling its commitments, a zero tolerance policy when Iran does not comply with its obligations, and a readiness on the part of the U.S. to abandon the pact or impose additional and harsher sanctions when Iran fails to act in good faith.

- 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 at the U.N. 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.



American funded Iron Dome missile defense battery



EDUCATION

- Ensuring that funding for America's schools embody and safeguard 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 the 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.

- 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. The flurry of recent federal proposals are welcome developments and we look forward to working closely with President Trump, Secretary DeVos and congressional allies to further these initiatives.

- 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 students without high school diplomas will not be permanently shut out of federal student aid and ensure that students close to graduation are not closed out by running out of grants. Additionally, we must correct the methodology for evaluating institutions based on their student outcomes and graduation rates, which produces skewed results for many non-traditional schools.

- Advocating for greater participation of students with religious dietary requirements to 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.



AIDING & SECURING JEWISH INSTITUTIONS

- Lobbying for the continued vitality for programs that enhance the **security** of Jewish and other persons and 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. The President and Congress must continue to condemn these actions but must also provide material support for security equipment to protect their facilities. While we are pleased and grateful that Congress boosted the appropriation for the Non-Profit Security Grant Program to \$20 million, it is still short of the original funding level, and the recent rise in anti-Semitic incidents shows the need for a substantial increase. Raising that figure – and expanding the reach of that and other programs – is a priority.

- 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. For example, the Stafford Act allows disaster relief funding to go to a range of community entities (including zoos!) but unjustly excludes “houses of worship” from the list of beneficiaries. We saw how devastating this was to Orthodox Jewish communities trying to rebuild after Super Storm Sandy.

- Supporting measures that support our **charitable institutions and 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. Unfortunately, there have been indications that there is an effort It is, therefore, vital that Congress support a strong “charitable deduction” and other tax provisions and proposals that will encourage giving to our non-profits and charities.



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 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 must never 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.



Meeting of the the Council of Torah Sages, which serves as Agudath Israel of America's highest rabbinic body



- Opposing any **health care reform** proposal that would force a religious entity or individual to violate their religious beliefs. Some religious groups have objected to the contraception mandate on these grounds. Others have also pointed out the requirement on physicians to 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.

- 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.



AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA is a 94-year-old national organization which represents Orthodox Jewish communities throughout the United States. Agudath Israel advocates on behalf of Jewish schools, social service and health care needs, religious liberty and an array of other pertinent issues. It also sponsors numerous programs that service the broader Jewish community.

In 2012, Agudath Israel sponsored the Siyum HaShas which brought together 90,000 Jews to MetLife stadium while an additional 50,000 tuned in via broadcast in 120 locations worldwide.

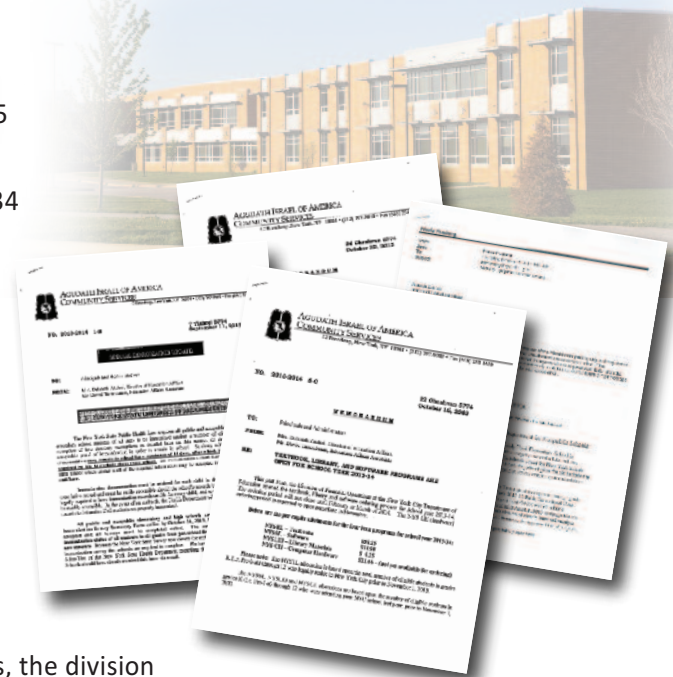
The Siyum Hashas celebrates the completion of a 7.5 year, worldwide, Talmud study program.

The **OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS** and its staff of attorneys works to safeguard religious and civil rights of observant Jews through a variety of channels including a full-time Agudath Israel Washington Office.

- 7 regional offices
- Active government advocacy in more than 25 states
- Representation in 34 States

The **EDUCATION AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT** at Agudath Israel of America advocates on behalf of Orthodox Jewish schools. Through a series of workshops, seminars and newsletters, the division helps Jewish schools navigate the maze of applicable laws, regulations and governments sponsored programs. The organization serves as a liaison between the schools and the local, state and federal governments.

- Represents the interest of more than 700 elementary and secondary schools under the umbrella of the National Society for Hebrew Day Schools
- Advocates on behalf of nearly 250,000 students nationwide.
- Arranges workshops relating to government regulations that pertain to nonpublic schools, as well as government programs for which they are eligible to apply
- Responds to numerous daily calls from principals and administrators, answering questions on a wide range of issues.



PROJECT LEARN, the special education division of Agudath Israel of America, advocates on behalf of children with special needs and assists parents who are dealing with the full range of the special education needs of their children. Project LEARN is also involved in special education legislation, activism, and advocacy.



Agudath Israel's **LEGAL SUPPORT SERVICES LLC** is a network of lawyers who volunteer their time and skills to assist with individual cases that meet the organization's criteria. These include custody battles between spouses of different levels of religious observance, immigration related problems, Sabbath and holiday observance issues, and zoning issues which affect Jewish institutions.

The **CONSTITUENT SERVICES DEPARTMENT** assisted 4,000 callers last year with a myriad of social services issues.

Agudath Israel of America's **COMMISSION ON SENIOR CITIZENS**

- Sponsors three senior citizens centers in the New York area.
- Offers 1000 elderly senior citizens free, kosher hot lunches and a wide range of social services.



AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA



COPE AND PROFESSIONAL CAREER SERVICES (PCS), with offices in both New York and New Jersey, provide training, job readiness and career placement for young men and women

- More than 85% of COPE graduates find jobs in their field
- Junior Accounting Program: 175 students enrolled in 2016; more than 2000 since inception
- CPA Track Program: 115 students enrolled in 2016; more than 600 since inception.
- Counseled 18,226 clients
- 5,195 job placements

ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY SERVICES provides assistance to hundreds of immigrants every year by offering English language courses, preparing participants for employment

SOUTHERN BROOKLYN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION is committed to helping low and moderate-income residents obtain and maintain affordable housing. It also provides a broad spectrum of housing services to strengthen the viability and quality of life in Brooklyn neighborhoods.

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PIRCHEI AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA

is a national youth group program of Agudath Israel of America.

- 4,000 boys from 25 cities participating in 5 annual Siyum Mishnayos events
- 115 branches across the country with 10,000 participants

BNOS AGUDATH ISRAEL OF AMERICA is an afterschool youth program for Orthodox Jewish girls.

- 150 branches in 39 cities
- 100 senior advisors
- 200 branch leaders
- 200 branch leaders
- 1,000 leaders
- 1,000 Shabbos Group leaders
- 10,000 participants
- 500 paired big and little sisters in 7 cities

Agudath Israel's **CAMP DIVISION** provides a beneficial summer experience for thousands of children.

- 4 campuses in New York State which service 7 camps and 2,500 campers
- 5 campuses in the Midwest which service 9 camps and 1,840 campers





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