

Congregation B'nai Israel Backs Bipartisan Bills in Arkansas General Assembly

Congregation B'nai Israel has a long history of social justice activism—notably including testimony given by Rabbi Ira E. Sanders, z"l, during the Civil Rights Movement, bravely defying threats of violence. Several years ago, our Board adopted a Non-Discrimination Policy, which, among other provisions, authorized the President and Rabbi to advocate in the congregation's name, against discrimination in the public sphere.

In preparation for the 2021 session of the Arkansas General Assembly, beginning this month, two pieces of legislation were brought to our attention.

1. Our member Steve Ronnel and our youth leader David Ronnel have been deeply involved in the Holocaust Education Legislation Project, seeking to enact legislation to mandate Holocaust education at all levels in Arkansas public schools. The legislation enjoys bipartisan support, and the lead sponsor is Sen. Bart Hester.

This legislation seeks to redress the appallingly low level of knowledge about the Holocaust nationwide, which too often leads to Holocaust denial.

At its October meeting, our Board of Trustees resolved to support this legislation in the name of the congregation. Amanda Ferguson and Rabbi Block submitted a letter in support of the legislation to the committee that is organizing support, and Rabbi Block has successfully solicited additional letters of support from other religious leaders, including the Methodist Bishop of Arkansas, our friends at Second Presbyterian Church, and many others.

2. Arkansas is one of only three states that lacks Hate Crimes Legislation. Governor Hutchinson is seeking to end this embarrassing and troubling situation, which was brought to our leadership's attention by the FBI. Senator Joyce Elliott has been sounding the alarm in this regard for many years. Now, with her co-sponsorship, Senator Jim Hendren has introduced a bill in the Senate, and companion legislation has been introduced in the House, again with bipartisan support.

The proposed Hate Crimes Legislation does not create a new crime. Instead, it provides for enhanced sentences when a judge and jury find that a crime was motivated by animus on the basis of race, religion, ethnicity, color, ancestry, national origin, sexual orientation, sex, gender identity, disability, or prior/current service in the United States Armed Forces. This will be similar to the sentencing enhancement which exists for crimes committed against a police officer based on their status as a law enforcement officer.

At its December meeting, our Board of Trustees resolved to support this legislation in the name of the congregation. Amanda Ferguson and Rabbi Block submitted a letter in support of the legislation to Senators Hendren and Elliott as well as the House sponsors, with a copy to the Governor. Rabbi Block has pledged to Senator Hendren to work on garnering additional support for this legislation from a diverse group of religious leaders.

Congregants Invited to Add Support

We are providing here the letters that Amanda Ferguson and Rabbi Block sent in support of the legislation. Interested congregants are encouraged to contact their representatives in the General Assembly directly. Perhaps these letters will provide a helpful guide to doing so.

Hon. Jim Hendren
Hon. Joyce Elliott
Hon. Fred Love
Hon. Joe Jett
Hon. Jeff Wardlaw
Hon. Tippi McCullough
Arkansas State Capitol
500 Woodlane Street
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Dear Senators and Representatives:

Congregation B'nai Israel is most grateful to you and to Governor Hutchinson for the effort underway to enact hate crimes legislation in Arkansas. By action of our congregation's Board of Trustees on December 15, 2020, Congregation B'nai Israel endorses Senate Bill 3 as introduced, and we urge its adoption.

As a people historically targeted with horrific hate crimes, the Jewish community well understands the importance of this legislation. Those who would perpetrate crimes motivated by animus toward a group are particularly dangerous to society. Arkansans would be safer if such hateful and heinous criminals faced sentence enhancement on the basis of their animus-motivated crimes.

Ours is a diverse congregation whose members include the entire list of those who could be victims of crimes addressed by the laudable legislation—Jewish people, of course, and also people of color, U.S. military personnel and veterans, disabled people, people of various ancestries and identities, gay men, lesbians, women, men, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals—and, from time to time, homeless people. Therefore, this legislation is critically important to Congregation B'nai Israel.

We are all Arkansans, and we have been chagrined that Arkansas is among only a tiny number of states that lack hate crimes legislation. Adopting this Senate Bill into law will enhance Arkansas' reputation, much to the credit of Gov. Hutchinson and the General Assembly.

Please do call on us, and please let us know how we can be helpful in bringing diverse religious voices in support of this critically important legislation.

Many, many thanks.

Very Truly Yours,
Amanda Orgel Ferguson
President

Rabbi Barry H. Block

cc: Hon. Asa Hutchinson, Governor of Arkansas

Dear HELP Committee:

We are pleased to notify you that the Board of Trustees of Congregation B'nai Israel, Arkansas' largest Jewish congregation, unanimously endorsed the Holocaust Education Bill during its meeting on August 18, 2020. We are grateful to HELP Committee member David Ronnel, who met with our Board to explain the Bill and the impact it will have on our state and our nation. We commend your efforts to ensure that all Arkansas public school students are taught about the Holocaust, and we are eager to join your important work in this regard.

Holocaust education is of course a vital part of our congregation's Religious School curriculum. We teach our own young people about the Holocaust both to raise their awareness of the pernicious, potentially deadly impact of antisemitism and to make them aware of the history of our people. We also emphasize that, alongside the six million Jews who perished in the *Shoah*, millions of others were victims of Nazi mass murder—gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, and political dissidents, to name only a few. While no other event in human history compares to the Holocaust, the word "genocide," born in Holocaust studies, is correctly applied to numerous other events in human history when one people has determined to wipe out another. Our Jewish history make us all too aware that any human beings marked as "other" by a society—because of their race, religion, gender, disability status, ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other factor—they are in deadly danger. For this reason, Holocaust education is critically important for all Americans.

We thank you for working tirelessly to ensure that this critical legislation is adopted—and again, we offer our congregation's full support, in and beyond this endorsement.

Faithfully,
Amanda Orgel Ferguson
President

Rabbi Barry H. Block