



THE PR OFFICE ^{PRO}

Conference of European Rabbis Coverage Update 15th June 2018





Publication:
Date: 09.06.18
1/2

GCR

Rabbis to the rescue: the fight against Iceland's circumcision ban

Posted by GCR Staff Writer on June 9, 2018 at 5:00 pm

RIGA – European Jewish leaders hailed a victory this week over a bid by Icelandic parliamentarians to criminalize non-medical circumcision of boys, which moved Jewish communities in Europe to mobilize to prevent what could have been the beginning of a wave of legislation across the continent to outlaw the ancient religious practice of brit mila.

Last week, Iceland's Judicial Affairs and Educational Committee recommended scrapping the bill, which would have made the country the only country in Europe to outlaw non-medical circumcision of boys under 18.

Be the first to know –

The victory over this bill and how to move forward on the issue of threatened religious freedoms in Europe was the top priority for leading European rabbis who gathered in the Latvian capital this week, for the Standing Committee meeting of the Conference of European Rabbis.

The bill describes the practice as cruel and dangerous, a stance increasingly taken by those on the Left across Europe who seek to ban brit mila – the Jewish practice to circumcise eight-day-old boys.

Conference of European Rabbis president Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt told The Jerusalem Post that his organization used a three-pronged approach to try to combat Iceland's move: applying pressure from Jewish groups; building coalitions with other faith groups; and appealing to international economic and political interests.

On April 5, the US House of Representatives' Committee on Foreign Affairs expressing its concern over the proposed bill.

"The practice of circumcision is critical to the Muslim and Jewish faiths, and enacting this law would be an affront to religious freedom and tolerance," read the letter, signed by ranking member of the committee Eliot Engel and committee chairman Edward Royce.

"If passed into law, this measure would create insurmountable challenges for Jews and Muslims living in Iceland. By outlawing this historic procedure, Iceland would not only be outlawing generations of tradition, but would also be sending a clear message to tourists, immigrants, and the world that Iceland is not a country fully accepting of different faiths and cultures," the letter continued. "The impact of this would be felt far beyond Iceland's borders. This move would make Iceland the first and only European nation to outlaw circumcision. While Jewish and Muslim populations in Iceland may be small, your country's ban would be exploited by those who stoke xenophobia and antisemitism in countries with more diverse populations."





Publication:
Date: 09.06.18
2/2

GCR

"As a partner nation, we urge your government to stop this intolerant bill from advancing any further," the letter concluded.

A representative of the Conference of European Rabbis speculated that this letter was likely a significant factor in the decision to shelve the plan for the ban, in light of Iceland's strong trade ties with the US.

This step had been made possible with the help of major US Jewish groups, like the Anti-Defamation League and the World Jewish Congress, coming to the aid of the conference and appealing to the House of Representatives to take a stand.

GOLDSCHMIDT ALSO said that the united voice of the religious community had been important in voicing its strong opposition to the proposal. "We're thankful to our Christian colleagues in Europe," he told the Post.

But, Goldschmidt said: "Whilst we are encouraged by the united voice of opposition with regards to Iceland's proposed circumcision ban, it is important that the Jewish leadership do not become complacent. Over the past few years we have consistently noted a trend that has targeted freedom of religion, and each time, the Jewish community is forced to react and address the individual problem. At this meeting we will be sharing the lessons learned to ensure that we are ready to react the next time we are challenged."

Oslo Chief Rabbi Joav Melchior spearheaded the battle in Iceland together with his brother, Denmark Chief Rabbi Jair Melchior. Goldschmidt explained that the initiative has actually been a Danish one, where he said the anti-circumcision movement is most active.

"Knowing they have a significant Jewish and Muslim community there, they started in Iceland, where there is no Jewish community, few Jews and also a small Muslim community," Goldschmidt noted. The Melchior brothers had alerted their European colleagues about the law, who mobilized other faith communities to their side.

Goldschmidt charged that the Icelandic lawmakers had received false information about brit mila. "Some of these initiators were told that circumcision is not obligatory [in Judaism]," he said. "There was a lack of information and a lack of dialogue."

A conference held last month in Reykjavik, attended by Icelandic lawmakers and Jewish and Muslim community representative, he added, had been very helpful.

"There [in Iceland], it is much harder because they don't have a Jewish community," Joav Melchior told the Post, explaining that there is no portion of the population that can explain the implication of the bill to lawmakers. If the bill had succeeded in Iceland, Melchior believes it would have paved the way for similar laws in other Scandinavian countries.

"We wanted to show that this direction is not acceptable by providing information and making it known what it means to us," he said.

Melchior said that pressure from various groups together with shedding light on the issue were the key factors in stopping the bill. "I hope the reason they stopped it is due to understanding – as a rabbi that's the right way to go," he said. "Europe should be accepting of its minorities and it's important that it's not only we who say it," he said, gratefully pointing to the support they had received from the churches in Norway.

"It was incredible to see how all the organizations and civil groups took initiative fast and acted fast because we didn't have a lot of time," Melchior said.

"If we succeeded in stopping it in Iceland, we can in other places too," the rabbi concluded.

