

## WJC TASK FORCE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

# REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING ON 20-22 MARCH 2023

## FINLAND - SCECHITA

This is the principal subject of this Report and I am pleased to say that it is highly positive.

Since the establishment of this Task Force in 2021 a major focus of concern has been a serious threat to the right to carry out shechita in Finland. The Animal Welfare Bill was tabled in Finland's Parliament with cross-party support, including the party leading the Finnish Government. The Bill would have imposed mandatory pre-stunning and would have effectively meant that shechita was banned. The Bill was open to criticism on many levels, not least of which were provisions specifically permitting hunting, on the basis that hunting a wild animal was accepted as inhumane but it was an established cultural practice. Apparently, in the view of the promoters of the Bill, the humane method of slaughter practised by Judaism, one of the world's oldest faiths, did not count as an established cultural practice. The Bill would also have permitted boiling crustaceans alive, although this too is almost universally regarded as inhumane (not to say abhorrent).

The Chair of the Central Council of Jewish Communities in Finland, Yaron Nadbornik, who is also a Vice Chair of WJC, was quick to call for WJC's support and he assembled a local group to lead the campaign in Finland.

For its part WJC coordinated an impressive range of international supporters to make their feelings known to the Finnish Government. My Report to the Executive Committee in April 2022 set these out in detail. In summary, Jewish communities across Europe wrote to the government setting out their concerns, accompanied by a forthright letter from President Ronald Lauder. The UK Government intervened at ministerial level, as did Diaspora Affairs Minister Nachman Shai from Jerusalem. EU bodies were briefed and stood ready to intervene. Further high level support was also readied. I am pleased to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the hard work of Petra Kahn Nord, WJC Representative in the Nordic Countries who made a significant contribution in coordinating these actions.

For a considerable time the Finnish Government appeared unmoved and indifferent, which was a matter of concern.

The war in Ukraine paused politics around this issue in Finland, which was naturally pre-occupied with its moves to join NATO.

Meanwhile the community in Finland lobbied patiently, energetically and above all, effectively. A detailed, well-argued and compelling paper drafted by Shechita UK was translated into Finnish and widely discussed between the community, the Finnish government and public figures.

Finally, these efforts have borne fruit. On 16 February 2023 the Constitutional Committee of the Finnish Parliament voted by an impressive majority of 10-5 that a ban on shechita would be unconstitutional. This was followed by a majority of the Agricultural Committee.

The statement of the Constitutional Committee can be found at  
[https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/Lausunto/Sivut/PeVL\\_106+2022.aspx](https://www.eduskunta.fi/FI/vaski/Lausunto/Sivut/PeVL_106+2022.aspx)

Paragraph 12 of the statement made it clear that a measure to ban shechita and halal was a limitation on freedom of religion which was not proportionate to the goal of protecting animals. The Bill was required to be amended to permit freedom of religion, in other words to enable Jews and Muslims to continue to practice shechita and halal.

The decision in Finland represents an important precedent. A country with strong liberal credentials has understood that Jewish and other communities have rights that are deserving of respect. The correct course is not to ban something you disagree with, which we have seen has become something of a knee-jerk reaction in some quarters professing to be liberal, but instead to permit faith communities to practice their long-held beliefs and to respect their views.

This is a time not for loud celebration, but for quiet satisfaction. Finland deserves credit for listening and understanding to its small Jewish community and its friends abroad.

The lesson for Jewish communities around the world, once again, is to stand united behind a professional, well-argued case, pursued with reason and care to influence the opinions of those that matter.

We Jews are a people relatively insignificant in size. We will win not by force of numbers, but by the force of our rational arguments.

## SWEDEN

During 2022 a Law Proposal U2022/01678 – “Stopping new establishments of denominational schools, preschools and after-school clubs” came to the notice of the Task Force. In essence, the proposal outlined new rules which would severely hinder any expansion of existing denominational schools and prohibit the establishment of new denominational schools. It would mean that Sweden would be the only liberal country in the world explicitly prohibiting the opening of Jewish and other religious schools, in violation of its international obligations

The law proposal had potentially serious consequences for the expansion of denominational pre-schools, schools, after-school clubs and new faith schools to be established in the future, including Jewish ones. This could have had a devastating effect on Jewish life and culture in the country and the ability to provide adequate education to the Jewish community

WJC Representative Petra Kahn Nord, who is herself Swedish and is based in Stockholm, conducted meetings with all political parties in the Parliament, except for the left party who did not respond to the request for a meeting. The Task Force requested support for the proposal to be dropped or for its amendment so as to permit Jewish schools.

After the General Election in Sweden in September 2022 a new coalition government was formed. The newly elected government quickly withdrew the proposed bill.

In addition, a Bill entitled “The democracy clause for state support to religious communities and civil society”, which had a potential to affect the Swedish Jewish community which had been put forward by the previous government was also withdrawn and will be re-presented, in all likelihood in a different form.

**Jonathan Arkush**  
**Chair, WJC Task Force on Religious Freedom**

**March 2023**