

Reform rabbis urge relocation of Museum of Tolerance

Feb. 26, 2009

Etgar Lefkovits , THE JERUSALEM POST

The leaders of Reform Jewry in North America on Wednesday urged the Los Angeles-based Simon Wiesenthal Center to relocate its planned Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem to an alternative location in the city due to the location of a Muslim cemetery found on a section of the planned construction site.

The condemnation by the liberal stream of Judaism came three months after the Israeli Supreme Court approved the central Jerusalem site of the \$250 million museum, in the face of opposition from Islamic groups, ending a nearly three-year legal battle over the construction at the site.

"We would protest, in the strongest terms, not only the desecration, but any removal of a Jewish cemetery, no matter what the purpose. Therefore, it is self-evident that we must oppose the removal of another people's sacred burial ground, no matter how worthy the purpose," reads a resolution passed by the Central Conference of American Rabbis meeting in Jerusalem.

"While the Israeli Supreme Court has permitted the Wiesenthal Center to move ahead, an organization with high-minded goals like those of the Museum of Tolerance cannot be satisfied with mere adherence to the law."

The leaders of the tiny Reform Movement in Israel have previously voiced opposition to the construction of the museum at the site.

The dean and founder of the Wiesenthal Center rejected the Reform rabbis resolution as being part of a misguided "PR campaign" against the planned site of the museum.

"The Supreme Court's ruling was not only a legal decision but a moral one which talked about the importance of having such a museum in the center of Jerusalem," Rabbi Marvin Hier said in a telephone interview from Los Angeles.

"We are not building on the Muslim cemetery but on a Jerusalem municipal car park which for the past 50 years has served Jews Christians and Muslims, including Reform Conservative and Orthodox rabbis as well as priests and imams," he said.

The unanimous High Court ruling noted that no objections had been lodged back in 1960 when the city put a parking lot over a small section of the graveyard, and that for the past half a century the site has been in public use.

It said that alternative proposal put forward by planners -- including reburial of the bones or covering up the old graves -- were "satisfactory" in trying to find the correct balance between religious attitudes for respecting the dead and the legal requirements.

In keeping with the court's decision, construction work has resumed at the site, with the exception of the small area where the human remains were found.

The several hundred year old bones in question were found on 12 percent of the planned museum site

The American planners are now working with the state-run Israel Antiquities Authority on a method of either removing any human remains for reburial or installing a barrier between the building's foundations and the ground below which would prevent graves from being disturbed in the area.

The Wiesenthal Center had long offered to pay for the burial of the bones that were found in the area, or to cover the area before building but these proposals were rejected by the Islamic group opposed to the construction at the site.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1235410717617&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull>