
Any community dedicated to
heaven will endure forever

TALMUD, Ethics of the Fathers 4:14



כל כנסיה שהיא לשם שמים

סופה להתקיים

פרקי אבות ד:ד

23 September 2019

The Honorable Gitanas Nauseda, President of the Republic of Lithuania
The Honorable Saulius Skvernelis, Prime Minister

Dear Mr. President,
Dear Mr. Prime Minister,

I write to you with a deep personal connection to the heritage of Lithuanian Jews. Many South African Jews are descended from Lithuania, including my own great-grandparents, all of whom were born in Lithuania.

I write to you with a plea that the National Congress Center project, with its plan to construct a Convention Center and Concert Hall over the historical Old Jewish Cemetery in the Snipiskes section of Vilnius, be reconsidered and abandoned. I am astounded that Lithuania would even consider desecrating an ethnic cemetery, and even more so, one of such historical significance.

The Old Jewish Cemetery contains the remains of thousands of Jewish residents of Vilnius from the 16th through the 19th centuries. Among them are the remains of some of Vilnius' greatest authors, whose works are studied to this very day in Lithuania, in greater Europe, in Israel, and especially by the heirs of Lithuania's Talmudic academies here in South Africa. The Talmudic academies here, in the United States, and in Israel number well over 20,000 students. They study regularly the works of such great scholars as Rabbi Elijah the Gaon of Vilna, R. Zelmele of Volozhin, R. Moshe Rivkes, and R. Abraham Danzig, all of whom were buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery of Vilna.

As is well known, in 1971, under Soviet domination, a Sports Palace was built over a section of the Old Jewish Cemetery. The graves under the Sports Palace were demolished, never to be recovered. The headstones throughout the cemetery were removed (and often used for construction purposes), but hundreds of graves remain – as proven by recent archaeological surveys and underground radar penetration investigation.

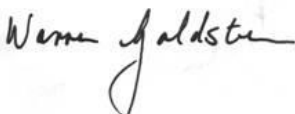
One would have thought that this desecration would have been rectified with the establishment of Independent Lithuania in 1900-1991. Instead, the Old Jewish Cemetery, paid for in full and in perpetuity by the Jewish community of Vilnius, was not restored to them. The Sports Palace, now abandoned and an eyesore, should be demolished. The Old Jewish Cemetery should be restored with trees and greenery and dignity, with a proper gate around the cemetery. Let it forever remain a memorial to the vibrancy of Jewish life in Vilnius.

In effect, we are calling for a change of venue of the Congress Center project. Surely there are other appropriate sites in Vilnius for the construction of a Convention Center and Concert Hall that will not involve the desecration of a Jewish historical site, one of the few remaining Jewish sites in Vilnius to have survived the Holocaust.

In 2015, the Deans of the leading transplanted Lithuanian Talmudic academies in the United States and Israel, all of them distinguished rabbis and scholars of Lithuanian descent, issued a ban against any further desecration of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Vilnius. They indicated that Jewish law forbids the construction of any public facility over a Jewish cemetery. They called upon the Lithuanian government to restore the dignity of the Old Jewish Cemetery to its former state.

Surely by agreeing to a change of venue, Lithuania will earn the admiration of democracies throughout Europe and indeed the world. It would reaffirm Lithuania's commitment to human rights, and especially to the rights of minorities to maintain the sanctity of their holy sites.

Yours sincerely



Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein

Chief Rabbi of South Africa