During 2021, the WJC established a task force on religious freedom (the Task Force). The task force is chaired by Jonathan Arkush and staffed by Petra Kahn Nord. The task force has prioritized the protection and defense of Shechita and Brit Milah.

In December 2021 the Task Force learned that an ‘Animal Welfare Bill’ (hereafter referred to as ‘the Bill’) ['Eläinten hyvinvointilaki'] was scheduled to go to the Finnish Parliament in March 2022. The Bill would impose mandatory pre-stunning and would effectively outlaw Shechita in Finland. Beyond Finland, the measure would be of concern to anyone who cares about Freedom of Religion and Belief and will bring Finland into conflict with the new EU strategy on fighting Antisemitism and fostering Jewish life in Europe.

At an early stage the Finnish Jewish community reached out to the Task Force for help. The priorities were to assist in drafting a critique of the Bill for submission to parliament as part of the statutory process of consultation, funding for local advocacy and for international supporters to intervene with key political figures in Finland to urge them to make changes to the draft legislation to remove this threat to Jewish practice. To its great credit, the WJC responded positively.

The Task Force in cooperation with the Jewish community of Finland engaged Janne Huttunen, Senior Advisor at Rud Pedersen Public Affairs, in January 2022. The Task Force reached out to Shechita UK, which is highly experienced in defending Shechita, which drafted a thorough paper which exposed the failings and inconsistencies in the Bill, which was then translated into Finnish and submitted for the purposes of the consultation process. The Finnish Jewish community specifically asked for interventions from the governments of Germany, Austria, USA, and UK as well as the EU and UN and at a later stage from the government of Israel.

Mr. Huttunen continues to work with relevant MPs and civil servants seeking amendment to the Bill which would preserve the right to practice Shechita.

The WJC has enabled letters to be sent from Jewish communities in Europe and from the WJC to the former Finnish Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Jari Leppä, endorsing the contents of the consultation paper from the Finnish Jewish community and strongly supporting the community’s position.

The Task force has at every stage worked closely with the Jewish community of Finland and Shechita UK. A letter from President Ronald S. Lauder was sent to the President of Finland, Mr. Sauli Niinistö. Mr. Niinistö was said to have reacted strongly in our favor.

Letters urging the governments of Germany, Austria, UK, and Israel to intervene have been sent from the WJC and Shechita UK. Mr. Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief and Ms. Katharina von Schnurbein, European Commission Coordinator on combatting Antisemitism, have both been briefed about the situation and have assured
us that they would intervene. It is known that the UK Government has intervened at Ministerial level, and it is believed that other Governments in Europe have done so, but as yet we await confirmation.

In February 2022 the Finnish Jewish community, after months of rejected meeting requests, conducted a meeting with the civil servants and the Minister of Agriculture. According to the community the Minister was clearly indifferent to any effect of the Bill on the small Jewish community in Finland.

In February 2022, I was in Israel, where I conducted meetings with the most senior Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials with responsibility for diaspora and religious issues. This has and will continue to help shape the responses of the Government of Israel both in relation to Finland and elsewhere.

In early March 2022, the Israeli Minister of Diaspora Affairs, Mr. Nachman Shai, sent a letter to the Minister of Agriculture urging him to “rethink this legislation and ensure that the final draft contains an exception that protects and safeguards the Jewish way of life in Finland”.

The war in Ukraine has intervened and dominated politics in Finland, so that advocacy efforts were paused in March 2022. We have not been made aware of any developments regarding the Bill during this period.

The Minister of Agriculture, Mr. Jari Leppä, recently left his position. Mr. Antti Kurvinen will be his successor. The Finnish Jewish community hopes that this will effect constructive change.

The Task Force continues to be actively engaged with both the local community and internationally. At this stage the status of the Bill with regard to Shechita remains in the balance. The Task Force will continue to work hard to bring about the necessary change in the legislation and will keep the Executive Committee informed.

Jonathan Arkush
Chair
April 2022