

News and Local

A California county calls off 'American Christian Heritage Month' after fierce backlash

By Sue Fishkoff

(J. Jewish News of Northern California via JTA) — Two months after proclaiming that July would henceforth be known locally as “American Christian Heritage Month,” the board of supervisors in El Dorado County, California reversed course.

The county’s elected governing body recently unanimously rescinded the proclamation following backlash from local Jews, the American Civil Liberties Union and others who said it inappropriately advanced the idea that the United States is a Christian nation.

“I commend the board for reflecting on and revisiting the proclamation, and I applaud them for rescinding it,” Rabbi Evon Yakar of Temple Bat Yam in South Lake Tahoe said after the vote. Yakar was one of several local residents who spoke out against the proclamation at the board meeting where the proclamation was rescinded. “I believe they did a good thing in reflecting on the divisiveness this caused.”

Marla Saunders, a massage therapist in South Lake Tahoe, said she was “verklempt” after the decision, using the Yiddish term meaning “overcome by emotion.” Saunders, who is Jewish, had started an online petition calling on the board to rescind the proclamation. The petition had more than 1,000 signatures as of Sept. 19.

“I am definitely teary with joy,” she said.

The five supervisors in El Dorado County, a rural area with 200,000 residents south of Lake Tahoe, voted on July 18 to mark every July as American Christian Heritage Month. The vote passed 4-1, though one supervisor maintains that she actually abstained but was recorded as an “aye.”

The language of the proclamation is taken from the platform of the Constitution Party, a conservative political party formed in the 1990s that advocates for hands-off governance and Christian values. Coming at a time of rising Christian nationalist sentiment across the United States, the proclamation stated that there have been “attempts to change and distort our history.”

The purpose of the proclamation is “to recognize the impact of religious beliefs on America’s history,” according to the text approved at the July meeting. The proclamation cites several prominent references to God inscribed in the country’s national institutions, monuments and founding documents, and states “that the rich spiritual and diverse religious history of our nation, from its founding to the current day be affirmed.”

“Be it further proclaimed, that any effort to remove, obscure, or purposely omit such history from our nation’s public buildings and educational

resources be rejected in the strongest manner,” the document says.

The proclamation was introduced by Supervisor John Hidahl, who said before the vote, “This great nation was founded not by religionists but by Christians. Not on religions but on a foundation of Christian principles and values,” according to the Sacramento Bee. The proclamation, he continued, is “clearly stating: don’t forget our history.”

The proclamation’s critics said it violated the principle of the separation of church and state and promoted one religion over others. In an Aug. 25 letter to the board of supervisors, the ACLU of Northern California said the proclamation “conveys that the County supports, promotes and endorses specific religious beliefs and, as such, violates the California Constitution.”

The state constitution contains even more stringent requirements regarding the separation of church and state than the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution, which prohibits federal laws “respecting an establishment of religion.” The California Constitution states that “Free exercise and enjoyment of religion without discrimination or preference are guaranteed.”

After last month’s vote rescinding the proclamation, Angelica Salceda, the ACLU of Northern California’s director of democracy and civic engagement, said her organization is “happy” about the new vote.

“The resolution suffered from constitutional infirmities,” she said in a statement. “The county has no business supporting, promoting, or endorsing specific religious beliefs. We think this decision is good for all residents of El Dorado County.”

El Dorado Supervisor Brooke Laine, who said that her abstention in the July vote was incorrectly recorded as an “aye” and that she also “regretted” her indecision, put the matter on the board’s agenda for last month’s meeting. After 45 minutes of public discussion, the board rescinded it, 5-0.

“I very much regretted the initial vote and my participation in it,” Laine said again noting that community members used their public comment time to both oppose and support the resolution.

“At the end of the day, it was agreed by the board that there was a reason the Founding Fathers created a separation between church and state, and that we had blurred that line, although it was not our intention,” she said. “It felt like we got it right this second time. I commend my colleagues for recognizing and correcting” the mistake.

Public pressure and media coverage contributed to the board’s eventual decision, Laine said, as did the “threat of litigation” from the ACLU. “We

Happy Tears

By Lauren Sachs

Lauren holds a bachelor’s degree in English and Psychology, and a Master’s Degree in Social Work, from the University of Michigan. After completing advanced clinical training at Yale University, Lauren worked as a therapist and consultant in a variety of settings. During her time in Jewish Toledo, Lauren has received the Harry Levison Young Leadership Award and the Shining Light Award, and is currently a board member of the Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo. Lauren is also the author of a forthcoming book about her late husband, his joyful approach to life and work as an oncologist, and how examining his life helped her better cope with her grief.



In the wake of my husband’s death, I slowly came to understand and embrace the concept of accepting my feelings. It took quite a long time to realize that I could work through the pain more readily by allowing my emotions to wash over me instead of fighting to push them away or out of conscious awareness. With guidance from my therapist, I also came to learn that through acknowledging my emotions, I could start down the path of healing. A tangential lesson, one of the most profound lessons of my loss, came

both through this exercise in exploring my feelings but also through my yoga practice. During my yoga classes, our teachers often asked us to “surrender.” Taken at face value, to surrender might simply mean we should use the breath to go deeper into a particular pose. Still, the greater concept of surrendering has to do with letting go and finding acceptance, not just in yoga class but also in life more generally.

As I surrendered to the reality of my life without Brad and let my feelings flow, I discovered a new and deeper level of emotional expression. Indeed, I came to a place where I felt my feelings so fully that my heart seemed more open than it had ever been in my life. This shift in my daily life also seemed to correspond directly to my yoga practice. Aside from my yoga teacher’s instructions to surrender, our practice taught us to let our hearts “burst open.” The physical manifestation of this idea is to use posture, breath or meditation to literally open and focus energy in the center of your chest. But the idea of awakening the heart is also akin to a metaphorical opening of the heart and all its related capacity for love, gratitude, compassion and so on.

For me, loss has led me down a path of powerful emotional discovery. While some of these emotions are obviously painful and difficult to tolerate, having an open heart is akin to seeing the world with fresh eyes. Three years after losing my husband, I am more receptive to all that life has to offer, embracing all the possibilities and feeling a greater sense of understanding of myself, along with more empathy for those around me. Losing Brad so suddenly truly caused my heart to burst open, both literally and figuratively. Though the torment of loss started this process, I now feel that my heart is so much more receptive to the joy of life and the potential for new and ever-evolving love. In this way, I am grateful for the growth caused by my grief. Just as the pain of childbirth gives way to the beautiful potential of new life, I have found strength I never knew I had which has propelled me down the path of a revitalized existence. I will continue to use this strength to live and love fully with an open mind and open heart, surrendering to my future without fear and with a newfound curiosity for all that life has in store.

couldn’t afford that,” she said.

In a caveat to his praise of the board’s new decision, Yakar added that the supervisors didn’t correct their fundamental error, which was promoting the idea of America as a Christian nation.

“This was not about celebrating one group’s heritage” in the vein of Pride Month or American Jewish Heritage Month, he said. “This is about the clear use of language in the proclamation that our country was founded as a Christian country, and that is what we are celebrating.”

That important nuance should have been explicitly discussed by the board last month, Yakar said, adding, “I don’t feel the supervisors went far enough to

address that.”

Saunders added a cautionary note too, saying that some opponents of the proclamation wouldn’t have come to last month’s board meeting if law enforcement hadn’t been there. “They wouldn’t feel safe,” she said.

But still, she said, she’s pleased with the result of the vote.

“We beat back hate and division,” she said. “The way the community came together made me more optimistic about our country and the county I live in.”

A version of this story originally appeared in J. Jewish News of Northern California and is reprinted with permission through JTA.