

Control of Touro Synagogue Awarded to Newport Congregation

Description

“This decision is extremely important,” began Partridge Snow & Hahn partner, Steven Snow, who represents the congregation. “This decision will ensure that the nation’s oldest synagogue will continue to serve as a public place of worship forever.”

The congregation that has worshipped at Touro Synagogue, the nation’s oldest synagogue, has been in a dispute with a New York City congregation over the ownership of the synagogue and colonial-era silver bells valued at \$7.4 million. The bells, called “rimonim” in Hebrew, adorn Torah scrolls and were made by colonial silversmith Myer Myers. Per this ruling, congregation Jeshuat Israel is now legally able to sell the bells for the purpose of creating an endowment that will enable it to preserve the historic synagogue located in Newport, R.I. as a place of worship, while maintaining the structure and its historic purpose.

The 130-member congregation and the Touro Synagogue, struggling for financial survival, arranged in 2012 to sell the bells to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, but the sale of the bells had been aggressively opposed by New York City-based Congregation Shearith who had sought ownership of both the bells and Touro Synagogue, and sought to evict Congregation Jeshuat Israel from the synagogue. In this recent ruling, not only did the federal judge find that Congregation Jeshuat Israel owns the bells and may sell them, but that the New York congregation, on account of its efforts to gain ownership of the synagogue and evict Congregation Jeshuat Israel, should be removed as trustee of the charitable trust holding Touro Synagogue. Congregation Jeshuat Israel will be appointed the new trustee.

Touro Synagogue, dedicated in 1763, is a national historic site and a symbol of religious freedom. It was visited by George Washington, who sent a letter to the congregation in 1790 that is considered a historic statement in support of the nation’s commitment to religious liberty.

The ruling Monday by Federal District Judge John. J. McConnell in the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island follows a bench trial that concluded in September 2015. Steven Snow of Partridge Snow & Hahn represented the Congregation Jeshuat Israel, alongside a team from Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel that included Gary Naftalis, Jonathan Wagner, Tobias Jacoby and Daniel Schumeister.

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