

Opening Comments by Robin Margo S.C. at NSW Jewish Community Gathering at Central Synagogue, 6 June 2010

The Jewish community of New South Wales gathers again today on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and, as a people who know what it is to love a special land, Israel, that is very dear to us, we pay our respects to their elders past, present and future.

As our guests this evening are members of the Federal Parliament, the President of our federal representative organisation, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Robert Goot, will welcome them formally in a few moments.

I wish to make only a few opening remarks on three matters.

First, it has been suggested by some in recent days that the Jewish community has expressed no regret about the deaths and injuries suffered on one of the six ships that were lawfully commandeered by Israel while trying to run the lawful maritime blockade. You and I know that is not true. For Jews, unlike the death worshipping elements in Hamas, every person is made in the image of God and the loss of any life is a tragic loss. We do not however condemn the soldiers of Israel for defending themselves from vicious, life threatening attack by a group within the larger body of peace activists who, it is now plain to anyone able to read, hear and see, were seeking violent confrontation from the outset.

Secondly, I can tell you that communal leaders, state and national, their professional staff and advisers, have set everything else aside since the incident and have been working round the clock to counter the campaign of lies and distortion it engendered. That campaign is but one part of a global campaign to delegitimise the State of Israel and the Australian Jewish community is recognised, not least by the World Jewish Congress, as one of the most effective diaspora defenders of Israel against it. Most of that work is strategic and happens out of the limelight but you can rest assured that it is being done and will continue to be done.

Thirdly, and last in these remarks, I want to say why this format of gathering was decided on, rather than an outdoor rally of the kind Sydney has seen on the past two Sabbaths and may see more of.

The decision was a complex one, made after consultation with the professional public affairs staff and the Public Affairs Committee of the Board of Deputies, with the nearly 30 members and consultants of the Executive of the Board, with Executive members of the ECAJ, with members of the State Zionist Council of NSW` and of the Zionist Council of Victoria, with politicians and with individual communal leaders both in Australia and Israel. It was also informed by focus group data collected in Australia by professional consultants.

In the time available, I will mention only three considerations, and those only in summary form:

- Ideological warfare is not military warfare, like in Lebanon or Operation Cast Lead, and the threat of delegitimation, though very serious, is not like the threat of physical destruction. It is different in kind. You can be perfectly right for military reasons and nonetheless be wrong footed and completely outsmarted in a propaganda war of ideas and impressions.
- To be effective, the response to an ideologically driven propaganda war demands, to adapt Leon Wieseltier's description of statecraft, a "*measured and empirical attitude, the search for strategic opportunity, the enlistment of imagination in the service of ideals and interests*". One has to think with one's head, not simply with one's heart.
- Gatherings like those Sydney has seen the past two Saturdays may cater to the heart and passions of those participating, but that does not make them effective public relations. In fact, our empirical research suggests the opposite, that the average Australian is put off by noisy street demonstrations about foreign issues. In time of war, such objections would carry no weight against the need to express solidarity. But this is a time for canny hasbara.
- A few who disagree with that analysis were earlier today urging a rally outside the Turkish consulate. Canny hasbara on the other hand needs to take account of the fact that Turkey is currently a member of the Security Council, a resolution of which will be required to impose further sanctions on Iran, and that Turkey's land and air space is vital to coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. These are matters for Israel and her Western allies to address. We should not unthinkingly pour oil on fire.
- I urge you therefore to keep yourselves informed, from websites such as talkgaza.com, to write letters to your local representatives and to newspapers, to make informed comments on blogs, to circulate good articles you come across not only to your Jewish family friends, but especially to non-Jews you know and respect, and who respect you.

And now I ask Robert Goot AM S.C., President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, to introduce our guests.