

Presidential Acceptance Speech NSW Jewish Board of Deputies AGM 2010

It is an honour and privilege to stand before you this evening and accept the nomination as President of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies in this its 65th year.

I want to begin by paying tribute to our outgoing President Robin Margo SC. Robin has done an outstanding job on behalf of each of us - and our entire community. Robin's exceptional ability to grasp and retain information, his absolute dedication to justice and human dignity and his remarkable patience are but some of the strengths he brought to the position. Robin's principled approach to everything he did and the dignity which he gave to each person with whom he connected was of great benefit to our community and quickly appreciated by all.

Robin has had some very trying times during his tenure but was always willing and able to consult widely, adapt his own position to that which was the consensus position – but without ever backing down on his own core beliefs.

The community owes Robin a huge debt of gratitude. It is impossible to convey the enormity of the task he has performed and often in very trying circumstances.

Thank you Robin. Please accept this small token of our appreciation for all you have done. It is a piece of artwork we obtained at the Shalom Gamarada exhibition last month.

The community has some tremendous challenges that lie ahead. The new antisemitism we face is in many ways unprecedented. We therefore need unprecedented mechanisms and effort to respond.

There are no indices of measurement of the new antisemitism, according to Irwin Cotler, Professor of Law at McGill University. Cotler argues that classical antisemitism is discrimination against Jews as individuals, and that the new antisemitism, in contrast, "is anchored in discrimination against the Jews as a people—and the embodiment of that expression in Israel. In each instance the essence of anti-Semitism is the same—an assault upon whatever is the core of Jewish self-definition at any moment in time."

Historian Bernard Lewis argues that the new antisemitism represents the third, or ideological, wave of antisemitism, the first two waves being religious and racial antisemitism.

If we add this to the feelings of disconnect prevalent in many of my generation and those that follow, we have our work cut out for us going forward.

The Board of Deputies is uniquely placed in our community to deal with these and many other challenges we face. As the only democratically elected representative body of the community, with 61 constituents, we speak as the roof body of the NSW Jewish Community and work closely with organisations such as our federal counterpart, The Executive Council of Australian Jewry, The Jewish Communal Appeal, The State Zionist Council, and others, to strengthen and improve our community. I want to make particular mention of the Jewish Communal Appeal. If anybody here tonight has not yet supported this year's appeal please do so – to whatever extent you can afford. The JCA plays a vital role in funding its 21 constituents, including the Board, and also supplies planning and facilitation services for the benefit of our whole community. The work it does is unique in Australia and sets us apart from most major communities in the world.

As the representative and roof body of the Jewish Community in NSW we are rising to these challenges in many ways.

Our advocacy training program in Jewish High Schools, through BJE and with Jewish University students, a vision of former president David Knoll, is bearing tangible fruit. The Board's Talking About Israel courses have been over subscribed and have now had over 350 participants in the last year complete a 10 hour program - making them more effective advocates on behalf of the community.

The number of young deputies elected in last year's elections to serve the community is unprecedented and bodes well for our future.

We have developed relationships with sectors of civil society, the unions, the education sector, other religious and ethnic groups, NGO's and members of local and State Parliament in a far more strategic and meaningful manner than ever before. Our Education secretariat has developed a tremendous reputation in the sector.

Much of this has only been possible through the professionalization of our organisation.

This organisation has grown immensely in the last decade. Those who have been a part of it can be truly proud.

But there is much yet to be done and it will be my commitment to do the best that I can – even if I am not a lawyer! – to ensure that we lead, represent and develop our community in a professional manner and with complete integrity.

I would like to announce tonight two further examples of projects we will be undertaking going forward. The Board will be embarking on an 'Engagement Project'. The idea is to better engage with each of our deputies, and our constituents, to better understand the issues and concerns they have. This will better enable us to represent and advocate on your behalf.

The second initiative is a very exciting project to bring the Sydney Jewish community further into the digital age. I would like to announce that we will shortly be launching a new web portal for the Jewish Community of Sydney. JewishSydney.com.au will be a resource available to all communal organisations, synagogues, schools and businesses servicing the Jewish Community. It follows on from previous Board of Deputies projects such as the Guide to Jewish Sydney what was produced for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and reproduced for the last Maccabi International Games in Sydney. All communal organisations will be able to list events, shiurim, public lectures, concerts and anything else they would like to publicise. It will hopefully act as a central hub for the NSW Jewish Community and visitors alike.

This past week we read the Parasha of Shoftim, Judges. There we learn in detail that the pursuit of justice is an integral part of Judaism. Righteousness and justice are to be pursued through righteous means. Noble causes supported or achieved by questionable means no longer remain so noble. Since human justice is always tainted and influenced by preconceptions, prejudices, beliefs and societal pressures it can safely be said that there are very few of us who can claim to understand or achieve total justice.

Yet the Torah bids us to pursue that almost unattainable goal. It is the Torah's policy to fully recognize the frailties of human beings and yet at the very same time not to compromise its spiritual standards for human behaviour and values. The Torah sets for us goals and definitions. That we may be incapable of easily achieving those goals does not alter the obligation placed upon us to attempt to reach them.

Likewise we have an obligation to strive for justice. We have an obligation to strive for a more inclusive and harmonious society. We have an obligation to strive for a fair and balanced perception of Israel and the Jewish Community. And we have an obligation to ensure the safety and well being of our community.

The team that joins me as elected officers, committee chairs and on the Executive tonight, as well as those who have been elected to serve as Councillors of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, bring a wealth of experience, talent and passion. I include also those who were not successful in an election this evening but have a huge amount to offer. The quality of candidates tonight is something to be proud of.

The challenges may not be easy. We may be hard pressed to achieve our aims. Together though we have the best chance of doing so and I hope you will continue to work with me and the team that joins me tonight in doing what we can to strengthen our community and ensure that its physical and political security is never compromised.

Thank you.

Yair Miller
August 17th 2010