

Address by Robin Margo S.C., President of the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies to Solidarity Gathering at Central Synagogue on 11 January 2009

We acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we gather this evening, the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation, and will never forget that just over 70 years ago Aboriginal Australians organised a demonstration in Melbourne against the atrocities of the Reichspogrom, also called Kristalnacht.

I welcome my co-hosts Robert Goot, President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, Dara Podjarski, the Associate Director of the Zionist Federation of Australia and Dr Ron Wiseman, Sydney representative of the ZFA and Vice President of the State Zionist Council of NSW, and Aviva Kogus, its Executive Director, who represent the Council this evening as its President, Frank Levy, is in Israel.

This gathering has been convened by the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies, the State Zionist Council, the ECAJ and the ZFA not to fan the flames of conflict, but:

- To express solidarity with the people and government of Israel in their just defensive war against Hamas, to stop continuing rocket attacks by Hamas on residents of Israel and to stop the smuggling of arms into the Gaza Strip
- To express our empathy, not merely sympathy, given our own history, with the legitimate desire of Palestinians for self-determination
- and to express our hopes that Palestinians will support leaders who reject extremism and will resume work – because work is required - towards peaceful co-existence with Israel, for the benefit both peoples.

We acknowledge with gratitude the messages of support we have received from Australians of other faiths, some of whom have travelled from Newcastle or further afield to be with us this evening. We particularly appreciate their friendship and support at times like these.

We are grateful also for the attendance tonight of members of the main political parties, and of mayors and local councilors, and for the messages of support received from others who are away in this holiday season or were not able to attend in person for other reasons.

We thank Paul Keen, President of Central Synagogue, and his Board for making this venue available and Rabbi Levi Woolf, Rabbi Jeffrey Kamins and other Rabbonim for lending their support.

Welcome too to other communal leaders and members of communal organisations, and to all who have come this evening.

Last, but not least, we welcome Eli Yerushalmi, Deputy Chef de Mission of the Israeli Embassy, who is the main speaker this evening, Tamar Newman, immediate past Chair of the Zionist youth Council, representing our young adults, and Noga Gulst, a resident of Sderot, who will also each say a few words this evening.

As you will see from the programme, we also have with us this evening the choir of Central and other young people who will be singing and reading from the Tehillim (Psalms).

Please stand now for the Australian Anthem.

[After the singing of “Advance Australia Fair”, Robin Margo continued as follows.]

A few hours ago the funeral took place in Melbourne of Gregory Sher, a Jewish Australian soldier and hero who was killed while on active service in Afghanistan against the Taliban and their Al Qaeda allies. The ideology of those enemies of Australia and the free world is the same, in all presently relevant respects, as that of Hamas, Hezbollah, the present government of Iran and Islamic extremists in other countries, including as we have unfortunately seen in recent days, in Australia, and the threat they present is not only to Israel but to the fundamental values of democratic countries throughout the world. Israel has the misfortune to be on the front line at present in that struggle and, by expressing solidarity today with the

people and government of Israel, we show our support also for the fundamental values, including freedom from religious extremism and tyranny, that Australian diggers in Afghanistan are defending on behalf of us all.

Hamas is so committed to annihilation of Israel and a culture of death that it willingly uses women and children as human shields. Hamas legislator Fathi Hamad recently boasted on Al-Aksa TV:

"Palestinians formed human shields of women, children, the elderly and the mujahedeen in order to challenge the Zionist bombing machine. It was as if they were saying to the Zionist enemy: We desire death like you desire life."

If any further confirmation were needed that Hamas is committed to a culture of death, one has only to consider one of its most prominent leaders, Nizar Ryyan, who was killed by Israel in recent days. Ryyan not only used his own wives and children as human shields – to protect himself - but was a man so filled with hatred, and who so glorified violent jihad, that he sent one of his own sons, 14 years of age, in an attempt to commit murder by suicide of Israeli civilians, a mission that resulted in two civilian deaths.

Adding evil to evil, he and his son were then honoured and praised for that by Hamas and its supporters and held out to the children of Gaza as examples they should strive to emulate. For anyone with normal human feelings, it is difficult to imagine anything more perverse than desiring the death of anonymous civilians more than the life of one's own child. One cannot talk peace to a man who hates you more than he loves his own child.

Genocidal extremism must be fought. There is no alternative. And while criticism of Israeli is not always antisemitic – anyone who knows Israel will tell you that the most critical debate about its actions and policies takes place in Israel itself and that is the life blood of democracy - thoughtful people everywhere ought to be very concerned indeed at the genocidal, antisemitic language that has been a feature of recent demonstrations against Israel in many countries, including at some of the demonstrations in Australia. Looking beyond the present conflict, the greatest need of the children of Gaza and the West Bank is to be protected from indoctrination with genocidal hatred for Jews, which has long been the practice of Hamas and those who share its perverse ideology.

For us and the people of Israel, however, war is an evil necessity, not something to be glorified. We draw comfort and hope from the fact that, although Hamas ruthlessly suppresses any dissent in Gaza, and has been executing suspected dissidents throughout the current conflict, many Palestinians, whenever and to the extent they have been allowed to do so, have shown that they too desire peace and a normal life and opportunities for themselves and their families. It is difficult to pursue peace while a war rages but it has never been more important to keep our hearts open and our hands extended to those on the other side of this conflict who, like us, desire peace.

We pray for the safety of all the people of Israel, men, women and children, of every faith and race, who have been targeted for 8 years, and continue to be targeted, by rockets deliberately fired into civilian areas by Hamas and other proxies of Iran.

And we pray also that all innocent people in Gaza, men, women and children, of every faith and race, may be spared further suffering and be healed and comforted as Ishmael and his mother Hagar were in the desert by the God of Abraham, Who is also the God of Isaac, Jacob and Ishmael.

We earnestly hope also that

- Egypt will exercise greater responsibility towards the citizens of Gaza, with which it shares a common border (a fact often ignored when Israel is accused of restricting the entry of goods into the Gaza Strip from its territory)
- that Egypt and other Arab countries will oppose the extremism of Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran and join their voices to those of other moderate Arabs and Muslims

- and that the United States, under its new President, Barack Obama, will actively work again with all well-intentioned parties to help Israelis and Palestinians put a permanent end to conflict between them.