

PESACH MESSAGE

PRESIDENT MARIE VAN DER ZYL

NISSAN 5781



This time last year I wrote in my Pesach message about the pandemic which had suddenly overtaken all of us and which was already taking a heavy toll on the Jewish community. I am very sad that one year later this terrible virus is still claiming lives in our community and affecting the way we live.

Once again, Seder Night will not be the packed, joyous family event we all love. We will, for the second time, be holding intimate events with our closest family and then only if we are lucky enough to live in the same house or bubble. My thoughts are with all of you who are alone at this time or unable to see your nearest and dearest. This past year has taken a toll on all of us but I have seen great acts of generosity and kindness. In some ways, this terrible situation has brought out the best in people – from the small things, like a grandchild baking for her grandparents who are shielding, to those such as Captain Tom, whose fundraising made millions for the NHS, before his sad passing earlier this year.

Now, with millions already vaccinated and infection rates falling, we have a sacred duty to ensure that lives are saved. Every death in our community has been a tragedy for someone's family. We must ensure that we do everything to save lives. This is the most fundamental imperative of Judaism.

Over this year, the way the Board of Deputies operates has changed, with home working for our staff and Zoom for our plenary meetings. Our online BoDCast events have engaged thousands of people from across the country and across the world and our achievements have continued to grow.

We continue to work with all parts of the Jewish community to ensure that they have access to the best available information about the Coronavirus pandemic and make decisions about when to open and when to close facilities. This has included working with the Cabinet Office to get guidance translated into Yiddish for sections of the Charedi community who do not have English as a first language.

We have been working tirelessly to ensure that the Labour Party, under its new leader Sir Keir Starmer, acts firmly and decisively to excise the antisemitism which had flourished under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. On this, good progress has been made but we need to see even more.

We have also worked hard this year on ensuring that Jews do not face hatred online, by coming up with proposals to ensure that new Online Harms legislation protects us all from abuse social media platforms. Online is the new frontline in the fight against antisemitism – and not just antisemitism, but misogyny, anti-Muslim hatred, homophobia and racism and bigotry against other religions, ethnicities and minority groups. We are working hard to ensure we are better protected. In the meantime, we have acted to stop antisemites selling their poison online by working with Amazon to ensure Holocaust denial works are removed from its platform.

We may be the Board of Deputies of *British Jews* but some of our most important and successful work has been in support of a group which are neither British nor Jewish. The Chinese Uyghur Muslims are subject to terrible persecution, and I was not the only one to see echoes of the Holocaust in their treatment by the Chinese authorities. I wrote to the Chinese Ambassador following a harrowing interview on the Andrew Marr Show and as an organisation we worked tirelessly to persuade MPs to support the Genocide Amendment to the Trade Bill, which would allow Uyghurs to get around the broken UN system and be able to take their call for justice in a British court.

In a year in which the world mourned the racist murder of George Floyd in the USA, we felt a responsibility to ensure that our community was one in which Black Jews and Jews of Colour do not feel alienated. To this end we set up the Commission on Racial Inclusivity in the Jewish Community with Stephen Bush as Chair. We hope that the recommendations that the Commission makes will make our community a model of inclusivity in the coming years.

Despite the tragedy in the world there have been some beacons of light in the past 12 months. I have seen our community come together like never before. Despite the physical distance, we have been looking after each other and this is has been so necessary and heartwarming. We have also seen remarkable progress in Israel's relations with its Middle East neighbours. The Abraham Accords were signed between Israel the UAE and Bahrain. We also saw an agreement with Morocco. One of the highlights of my years was lighting the Chanukah candles in an online event with the ambssadors of the UAE and Bahrain – something I never thought I would see.

We have been enduring difficult times. It is my earnest wish that we all stay safe and look forward, as we always do at this time, to better days ahead.

Pesach Sameach to you and your families from everyone at the Board of Deputies

Marie van der Zyl

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President, Board of Deputies of British Jews