

PESACH MESSAGE

PRESIDENT MARIE VAN DER ZYL

NISAN 5784

This coming Pesach, we will join together for the Seder, and the youngest among us will ask the traditional Four Questions.

But for many of us there will be another question, unspoken and unanswered.

How can we celebrate being redeemed from slavery, when Hamas still holds 130 men, women and children in the most vile captivity? How can we celebrate our freedom when our brothers and sisters are not free?

The horrors of October 7th, when terrorists from Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other groups engaged in a pogrom, murdering more than 1,200 people and dragging more than 200 into Gaza, remain etched on so many of our minds.

The Board of Deputies, alongside our communal partners, organised a vigil outside Downing Street just 48 hours after this pogrom, to pay tribute to the dead and to those held captive. So many people attended that Whitehall had to be closed to traffic. The following month, we held a rally in Trafalgar Square for the hostages. Some 15,000 people came to stand as one with the families of those held in Gaza. Many other events have been held, in London, Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow.

Every week that Parliament is in session, we have been holding vigils outside Parliament, to ensure that those who walk in the corridors of power do not forget the ordeal of those taken captive. And we have initiated a campaign entitled Adopt a Hostage, where we invite synagogues and communities to “adopt” a named hostage, to publicise their plight and give support to their families. I want to thank all of the more than 90 communities which have joined so far; if your own community has not yet joined us, I hope you consider doing so.

There has been a sudden and alarming upturn in antisemitism in the UK following the 7th October massacres. We have received many reports of children and teachers being challenged in non-Jewish schools. That is why we have published advice for families teachers and headteachers in such schools. We also held online talks, addressed by Government ministers for parents of Jewish children at non-Jewish schools and one for parents of students at university. Both were attended by thousands of concerned parents. We have also heard from many people who have been facing increased challenges in their workplaces, which is why we have also produced guidance for those who may be in such situations in their jobs.

Following the BBC's refusal to label Hamas as terrorists we campaigned for the corporation to change its approach and held a meeting with Director General Tim Davie which left him in no doubt as to the strength of feeling in the Jewish community. The BBC now refers to Hamas as being proscribed by the government as a terrorist group.

There is still, however, far more to be done. The Board of Deputies will continue this work on behalf of every Jew in the country, quietly and behind the scenes when appropriate, and more vocally when required.

On a personal note, this is the last Pesach message I will be writing to you, as I will soon be completing my second – and final term as President of the Board of Deputies. I would like to thank the many people who have helped me to represent British Jews over the past six years. It has been a privilege and an honour to serve our community.

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