

September 2020 / Tishrei 5781

Message from the President



This has been a year like no other. The global pandemic has affected life more in a short space of time than any other event in peace time.

Of course, the effects have been experienced worldwide with hundreds of thousands dead and millions more badly affected by this virulent virus. We are a small community but we have been hit heavily. Sadly, our death rate has been more than double that of the general community and we have lost some wonderful people since March, taken from us way before their time.

It has been a time to mourn but also a time to act. The Board of Deputies lobbied hard to ensure that local councils could not cremate bodies without first consulting with the families of the deceased. This was a fine example of collaboration between Jews and Muslims who shared the same concerns. We collaborated closely with other community organisations to ensure that UK Jews are received all the help and information possible in the emergency, using all of our resources for the benefit of those affected. We collated a document bringing together all of the special guidelines for Passover this year and devised a card for members of the community to print off, fill out and post through the letter box to neighbours, letting members of the local community know that people are available do a food shop or even just to speak to someone on the phone who is self-isolating. No less importantly, our team has had the sad but necessary duty of collating the deaths we have endured so that we have an accurate record.

Last year, we were in the midst of Labour's antisemitism crisis. Twelve months on and Labour are, in the words of new leader Sir Keir Starmer, "under new management". We set out our Ten Pledges on anti-Jewish racism in January and they were enthusiastically adopted by the new leadership team. The progress we have seen is very encouraging. The scourge of antisemitism has not disappeared from the Labour Party but the determination to address it and take action where it is needed, as in the case of the sacking of Rebecca Long-Bailey, gives all of us reason to be optimistic after a dark few years.

Even Coronavirus could not completely overshadow the worldwide movement which developed rapidly in response to the racist murder of George Floyd. We in the Jewish community felt we needed to formulate our own initiative. The result is the Board of Deputies' Commission on Racial Inclusivity in the Jewish Community which is being chaired by distinguished journalist Stephen Bush. We need to make sure that we are accepting of people of all backgrounds and I look forward to making progress on this most important of issues.

Those who know the Board of Deputies will understand we work on a diverse set of issues – indeed so much that it is impossible to list everything in a short message.

We exist to ensure that the UK's Jewish community can live freely, happily and continue to practise our traditions.

We are passionate about protecting our religious freedoms, whether the right to circumcise our baby boys in accordance with our tradition or to ensure that employees are able to take time off for Jewish festivals and follow their Jewish traditions within the law.

Our interfaith activities have certainly made the news – for example our support for the Chinese Uyghur Muslims currently suffering oppression in China, has raised awareness of the problems

Through Pikuach, we supervise religious education in Jewish schools, and, pandemic permitting, we travel the country with the Jewish Living Experience exhibition, educating non-Jewish children and adults about our way of life.

We engage with Government ministers, MPs, local councillors, diplomats, faith leaders and with a huge variety of public bodies on behalf of the community we represent.

We can only do this work with the help of communities across the UK, so I thank you for all the support that you all give. Let's hope the New Year truly does bring health and happiness to all of us.

Shana Tovah.

Marie van der Zyl

President

Board of Deputies of British Jews