

September 2015 / Tishrei 5776

Message from the President



This is my first Rosh Hashanah as President of the Board following my election in May and I have much to do in order to continue the fine work we have been doing over the past 12 months.

It is a year which we can look back to with some pride in our accomplishments. We have worked closely with the Government to ensure that our community is protected against the evil of antisemitism. The good relations we have fostered led to Home Secretary Theresa May and Communities and Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles attending our monthly Board meeting to reassure our community in the wake of the terrorist attacks against Jews in Paris in January.

This trustful relationship proved its worth in July when a small antisemitic group on the far right threatened to rally in Golders Green. We felt that the whole community should demonstrate its united resolve against bigotry and the Board, in partnership with the London Jewish Forum and anti-fascist organisation HOPE not Hate, together with the support of the Community Security Trust, formed Golders Green Together to turn a hateful occasion into a positive outcome for our community. The result was that all races and faiths in Golders Green came together to celebrate both their unity and diversity while behind-the-scenes work with the Government and police led to the rally being moved to central London – well away from the Jewish community that the racists were hoping to intimidate. The long-term work of the Board in building alliances and deepening mutual respect and understanding often goes unsung, but this episode demonstrates the benefits that it brings to our community.

We also acted against attempts to boycott Israel and antisemitism masquerading as anti-Zionism and have won some important battles – including against Rev Stephen Sizer, who has now been effectively disciplined by the Church of England after one rant too many. We also took prompt action against an anti-Israel conference at Southampton University and the conference was cancelled following representations led by the Board. We have been very active against those calling for boycotts, divestment & sanctions.

Our document, 'A Better Way than Boycotts' highlighted a more constructive path to peace in the Middle East and has been very well received by major non-Jewish bodies in Britain and abroad.

Of course, my election was not the only one in May. There was also the small matter of a General Election. Ahead of this the Board produced its Jewish Manifesto – the most comprehensive ever produced which covered 14 areas of interest including religious freedom, antisemitism, Israel, education, social care and social Action – all produced after consultation with more than 300 organisations and individuals. The Jewish Manifesto and its 10 Commitments which encapsulated the key aims of the document was sent out to every parliamentary candidate. We received videos of support from all three main party leaders supporting the Manifesto and its pledges.

In education, we have been working hard to maintain GCSE Ivrit and Biblical Hebrew and we are promoting Judaism through our Jewish Living Experience exhibitions and tours, in which thousands of non-Jewish children learn about our faith every year.

We have also been reaching out through Jewish Connection, which is supporting small communities all over the UK needing pastoral and social care, networking and advocacy support from the mainstream of the community.

In 5776 we will be pushing ahead with our new, dynamic team of Honorary Officers, dedicated Deputies and professional staff. Jewish core beliefs and practices are not currently threatened in the UK and that is the way we want to keep things – we must retain our ability to continue to practise brit milah and shechitah and there should be an understanding of the importance of these traditions. Our relationship with the Muslim communities of the UK will be a priority. Jews have an important role to play in showing to them and other faiths that it is not only possible but admirable to combine British values with adherence to religious tradition, and that these two things are not mutually exclusive.

We will be working with the Government to safeguard the security of our community and the continuation of that productive relationship is a priority, particularly in light of the shocking rise in antisemitism. The fact that the Government has pledged millions of pounds to enable effective security to be provided outside schools, synagogues and other institutions is welcome but cannot hide the grotesque fact that such vigilance is still required because hatred of our community remains in some, albeit very limited, corners in our society.

I hope that 5776 is a peaceful one for members of our community. We will continue to represent your interests as only a democratically elected body can.

May this New Year bring you and your families health and strength, and may it be peaceful for Am Yisrael.

Jonathan Arkush