



NOVEMBER 2019

The SAUPJ has had a year of highs and lows. We welcomed Rabbi Emma Gottlieb from Canada who came to join the team in Cape Town, and bade farewell to Rabbi Hillel Avidan who has retired after serving this community so well for over 3 decades. It was Rabbi Avidan who brought me into communal life when he included me in his team organising the amazing WUPJ Conference in South Africa in 1997.

Prominent South African Progressive Jews have left this world – most recently Sir Donald Gordon who was a world-renowned Philanthropist and benefactor to many of our Shuls. The SAUPJ family was dealt a blow with the sudden death of Harold Sandak-Lewin, a former Chair of the SAUPJ who worked so tirelessly to forge a relationship between South African rabbinic students and the Geiger College.

We celebrated with Rabbi Julia Margolis as her shul was opened – and we wish Beit Luria much success in fulfilling the hope that every Jew should be able to find a sacred space in which to worship. Her tiny congregation has huge potential and we know Beit Luria will go from strength to strength.

Our very own legend, Reeva Forman, was recently awarded the “Certificate of the Highest Honor” by the WZO, for her work in Israel. Reeva is the driving force behind the Temple Israel Heritage Centre which advocates for people’s rights and dignity. It also serves as a home to the history of Progressive Judaism in South Africa.

From the newest Shul, Beit Luria, (founded in 2019) to the oldest which is Temple Israel in Hillbrow, (founded in 1933), we are a small but committed group of people for whom affiliation to the World Union is of utmost importance. We try, but do not always succeed, to keep our members informed of the WUPJ and the work it does around the world.

This year has seen the first signs that a long-held dream may be fulfilled. Rabbi Sa’ar Shaked has made much progress in our attempt to start a Rabbinic Academy and Higher Education Institution in our region. In the late 1980’s Rabbi Adi Assabi z’l wrote documents and tried, unsuccessfully, to get it off the ground. Harold Sandak-Lewin made inroads with the Geiger College following which Rabbi Robert Jacobs made an attempt to establish something under the name “Beit Limmudim”. None of these attempts were totally successful, and in fact some may say they all failed miserably. Now finally Rabbi Shaked is in touch with Rabbi Nathan Alfred and we are hopeful that this time the dream will become reality. We can no longer easily afford to bring in rabbis from overseas without substantial donations from members. We also cannot afford to send our potential rabbinical students to colleges abroad and so the need to “home grow” rabbis has become urgent and necessary. Of our 11 congregations 5 are currently without Rabbinic leadership which makes hold a community together that much more difficult. However, we carry on regardless, with good attendances at our services.

Progressive Jews in South Africa are a minority, within a minority, within a minority. We comprise approximately 10% of the Jewish population which itself comprises about 1.2% of the white population, which comprises about 9% of the population of South Africa. 6000 Progressive souls in a country of 55 million means our voice is seldom heard.

We live in a country where BDS is given a voice and is increasingly strong and where senior Government Ministers are calling for the withdrawal of our Ambassador to Israel and the closing down of our Embassy there. The University of Johannesburg has joined in a boycott against Israeli Universities and up until a



few days ago it was feared that the University of Cape Town would vote to do the same. Fortunately, due to the incredible efforts of the South African Board of Deputies, this crisis has been averted.

But there are definite positives for us at the tip of Africa. Anti-Semitic incidents are lower in South Africa than in any other country in the world, hate speech is dealt with immediately through intervention and physical attacks are unknown. In the past few years a number of hate speech cases have been taken to the Human Rights Commission and these are expertly handed on a pro bono basis by the top legal experts in the country.

All these communal issues are dealt with by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies. They are the body that is mandated to look after ALL the Jews in South Africa, regardless of their religious affiliation. We are very fortunate in that during the past 3 ½ years I have managed to develop an outstanding relationship between the Board and the SAUPJ which has led to a situation where the Board consults with the SAUPJ on Communal issues and where our values are taken seriously and into consideration before many decisions are taken. The Board is also mandated to be the liaison between the Jewish community and Government.

Many in our Movement have queried why I should be concerned with working with the Orthodox as opposed to going it alone and having our own liaison between ourselves and Government – the feeling is that we should be important enough to be speaking on behalf of the Jewish community. My response to that is that it simply is not feasible. The amount of money it would take to have full time staff, a liaison officer in Parliament and a media department could never be raised by us. The SAJBD themselves struggle to keep going financially and we, with a budget of less than \$10,000 per year, would find it impossible.

Religiously we must not be influenced by the Orthodox in any way, shape or form but when it comes to communal affairs we need to be supported by, and offer support to our Orthodox brethren so as to benefit from the incredibly important role they play in ensuring the safety and well being of Jews in this country.

In the past year we have noticed that there are an increasing number of instances where Orthodox members of the community wish to assist us but have been “threatened” by the Orthodox Beth Din. One of these is the injunction that no Progressive Rabbi may say a Hespel at an Orthodox grave, another is the Sofer who has been told he will no longer be allowed to work as a scribe if he writes a Torah Scroll for a Progressive Shul. The SAJBD have come to our assistance and have facilitated meetings with the Orthodox Beth Din to try and resolve these (and other) issues so that we get to a point where we are treated with respect. My aim in this is that the Orthodox individual should have the right to choose whether to work with the Progressive community, and not to feel threatened if he or she decides to do so. I am very confident that before my term of office ends in July 2020 I will have made great strides in the right direction.

I am sad that I am unable to be at the Biennial in Chicago however it was a great honour to see many of you in New York earlier in the year when the WUPJ honoured “our own” Leslie and Stanley Bergman. Lesley and Dee, Stanley and Marion are the jewels in our crown and we are immensely proud of all they have achieved.

The SAUPJ wishes the URJ much success at its Biennial and extends hearty Mazeltov to Rabbis Naamah Kelman and Levi Weiman-Kelman on their being honoured as recipients of the Rabbi Richard G Hirsch award, and to Rabbi Danny Freeland, President of the WUPJ 2014-2019, for the special tribute being



paid to him. It was an honour and privilege to work with Rabbi Freelander whose support to me was highly valued.

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NATIONAL CHAIR, SAUPJ