

## **Board of Deputies of British Jews President Marie van der Zyl speech at welcome breakfast for Israel President Isaac Herzog**

*London, 23 November 2021*

It is a privilege to be with you here today in the presence of His Excellency, Isaac Herzog President of the State of Israel, First Lady Michal Herzog, her Excellency Ambassador Tzipi Hotovely, his Excellency Ambassador Wigan and honoured guests.

Before I start can I express deepest sympathies to the family of Eli Kay (grandson of Rabbi Shlomo Levin and Rebbetzin Lynddy Levin) following his tragic and brutal murder last Sunday.

As President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the representative body of British Jewry, I want to say something this morning about the wonderful relationship we British Jews have with Israel.

Of course, to the British Jews here today it will seem strange even to attempt to put this deep sense of allegiance with Israel into words. I think I speak for everyone here when I say that Israel is our birthright – a place which seems like home every bit as much as does Edgware, or Radlett, Manchester, or Leeds. Physically it is only a four-hour flight away. Emotionally, it is even closer.

Recent research conducted by the Institute of Jewish Policy Research put this intangible feeling of affinity into numbers. Ninety per cent of us in the Jewish community expressed pride in Israel's cultural and scientific achievements and even more, ninety-three per cent, say that Israel forms some part of our identity as Jews.

Although nearly all of us feel this sense of oneness with Israel as Jews, this does not mean we all agree on everything Israel-related. Just as the Knesset is a forum for varying views, so is our community here. As such, the political spectrum there is echoed by UK Jews here. The fact that there is a broad coalition in Israel now from the Right to the Left and with Jewish and Arab parties too, means that somehow our entire community can feel even more connected. It is not an exaggeration to say that we are inspired by the way the Israeli Government can park its disagreements and get on with governing the country in the interests of all its inhabitants.

Covid has hit both the UK and Israel hard. Not only has there been sickness and death in both of our countries but those of us with family and friends in Israel have been unable to visit our loved ones until very recently. Many in our community have been used to annual visits and holidays. Zoom has had to be a substitute, but it cannot give us the warmth of an embrace, neither can it replace the sights, sounds and smells of Israel itself. We are so happy that we can resume visits and that our relationships can be renewed. I'm particularly excited for our teenagers who will once again be able to become acquainted with Israel as part of the hugely successful MASA programme, administered by our colleagues at the Jewish Agency and UJIA. In return we have proudly welcomed the ShinShinim – the Israeli Scout gap year students who for many years have come to the UK to learn more about us and strengthen our connections to Israel.

With the real spectre of antisemitism in the UK – particularly noticeable during the Gaza conflict earlier this year - we all see Israel as a haven. It is a country Jews can turn to in times of need – the one place in the world we don't need to justify our religious beliefs or our commitment to Zionism.

Israel gives us something which our great grandparents in the shtetl or communities in the Middle East never experienced – a sense of security – a feeling that there is somewhere in the world we can call our own.

And knowing this we want to do our bit too. We at the Board of Deputies stand by Israel in times of trouble.

I spoke at a demonstration with Jonathan Goldstein we held in solidarity with Israel, organised by our friends at the Zionist Federation, and I was proud to do so. I personally asked the UK Prime Minister to proscribe Hamas as a terrorist organisation. Our organisation has campaigned against antisemitism in Palestinian textbooks and against Iranian state sponsored hate. We have fostered links with Israeli minorities. We have held events with the Druze community. We have celebrated the Ethiopian Sigd festival and supported the LGBT community in Israel with young representatives from both our communities.

We hear much about special relationships in this country but the relationship between this community and Israel is unique. Israel gives us so much – a sense of security, of pride, of self-respect and dignity as Jews. Israel has changed us all. We wouldn't be the same without you.