

A night to REMEMBER

In public and behind the scenes, a smashing success

BY WENDY KAHN

THE SOUTH AFRICAN JEWISH BOARD OF DEPUTIES' phones have not stopped ringing, and glowing messages have been sent on email, social media and, of course, while queuing at the shops, over Shabbat tables and in our internal and external meetings.

It is not often that we attend functions with three presidents: president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma; former president of SA, Kgalema Motlanthe; and president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder. Then there were the other dignitaries: Cabinet ministers, members of Parliament, 14 ambassadors, over 40 members of the media, and several representatives of international Jewry (including from the World Jewish Congress and American Jewish Committee).

There were also leaders in the areas of business, sports, the arts and politics, and most importantly, over 1 000 members of the community and the national and international ChaiFM listeners.

The social media has been abuzz with the powerful and profound speeches that formed the cornerstone of this unforgettable conference. To rapturous applause, the charismatic Dr Bernard Henri Levy made his pivotal statements about the BDS movement: "Today's BDS movement only pretended to be conducted in the name of peace, democracy and human rights, when in reality it was seeking Israel's destruction through political means." Ambassador

Ronald Lauder spoke passionately about racism and anti-Semitism.

The speeches were memorable, the event slick and professional, the evening 'trending' on social media, and most importantly, the food was delicious! But that was really just the beginning of the incredible success of the SAJBD 'Gathering Voices' Conference. The activities that took place in the 'wings' prior to and around the event were the truly remarkable successes of 22 November.

Two important meetings took place that day: one involved the SAJBD's National Executive Council, where its new leadership was elected; and the other was the African Jewish Congress' Biennial Conference. Lauder addressed delegates from Botswana, Kenya, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, SA, Swaziland, Zambia and Zimbabwe: "Every place you are; you are the face of Judaism. We stand with you and are proud of the AJC."

During the course of the day, pivotal meetings were taking place around Johannesburg. The SAJBD leadership, together with Lauder and his delegation from the World Jewish Congress, met with key political figures. At a meeting with Zuma, issues of concern to South African and global Jewry were raised. Earlier in the day, a meeting was held with ANC secretary-general Gwede Mantashe and the newly appointed chairperson of the ANC's International Relations

Committee, minister Edna Molewa. The WJC/SAJBD delegation joined with head of the African Jewish Congress Ann Harris, who met with the chairperson of the African Union Commission Dr Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma to discuss ways in which African Jewry together can engage with this important continental body. Meetings with Tokyo Sexwale in the morning and minister Jeff Radebe later in the day provided important fora for discussion and debate.

While guests arrived at the conference and were sipping their tea and eating their cheese and crackers, much activity was taking place behind the curtains. No fewer than three protocol rooms were operational, each with a flurry of security, media and protocol personnel. The parking lot behind the stage was crammed full of motorcades each dropping its charges safely in time for the event.

And then there were the special moments, such as the meeting in one of the side rooms with French ambassador Elisabeth Barbier and Dr Levy. And the VIP dinner that lasted late into the night, as Jewish communal leadership had an opportunity to informally engage with government, diplomats, media, political parties and international Jewry.

The night was a true gathering of voices and I'd like to end with a quote from one of these voices that I believe was the 'JF Kennedy' moment of our conference. The recipient of the SAJBD Chief Rabbi Cyril and Ann Harris Human Rights Award, Leon Levy, was one of the six signatories of the Freedom Charter, signed in Klipfontein in 1955. Concluding his speech, he appealed to everyone in the venue to look inwards and find some way that s/he can contribute to our country.

And while there are extraordinary memories, powerful speeches, and pivotal meetings, the true message is what we can take forward to make a difference. That was the loudest voice. **IL**

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