

APPRECIATING what we have

So much to be thankful for

BY ZEV KRENGEL



From left to right: Rabbi David Masinter, Zev Krengel and Rabbi Michael Katz

The following is adapted from an address by Zev Krengel, National Vice-President of the SAJBD, at this year's Miracle Drive launch.

At last year's Heritage Day carnival in Pretoria, a wide array of communities, reflecting the rich diversity of the South African population, joined in marching from the CBD to the Union Buildings. Each community, ours included, had its own float, but all were part of one big march, moving together towards a common destination. As I have often stressed, this is one of the great things about post-1994 South Africa. We live in a country that sees no contradiction between being patriotic citizens while simultaneously affirming one's own cultural identity.

Unfortunately, not every day is Heritage Day. South Africans returned from their December vacation to the realities of an economy in distress, a nation in uproar, and a sudden outpouring of racist venom. But, if there are real causes for concern, this is no reason to despair. All countries have problems, many of them much worse than ours. We also forget how South Africa has overcome far more

formidable challenges in the past.

I well remember the turbulent 1990s, when political violence threatened to engulf the country. Despite this, South Africans succeeded in negotiating a peaceful, democratic solution. Amidst all the criticism of the government, we forget that in the same week in which President Zuma delivered his State of the Nation address, he was taken to the Constitutional Court by opposition parties. This testifies to the enduring strength of our young democracy, where a robust civil society, free press, political opposition, and independent judiciary combine to ensure that no-one is above the law.

In this environment, South African Jewry is thriving as never before. Whoever spends time in this special community appreciates its uniqueness, vibrancy, and care. We have a phenomenal Jewish infrastructure, catering for every aspect of Jewish life. Some 85% of Jewish children are educated in the Jewish day schools, something decisive in our assimilation rates being so strikingly low. Nor are we a community that is concerned only about its own needs. Most of our



communal and business organisations have outreach projects, but what truly impress me are the individuals that strive to make a positive difference.

For nearly two decades, my role at the SAJBD has been to build bridges between our community and the broader society, and I can attest that I am mostly pushing against an open door. We tend to fixate on the nasty exceptions, but should recognise that they are a minority. At tonight's Miracle Drive, all the men are wearing yarmulkas. While some will take them off afterwards, it will be because they choose to do so, not out of fear of what might happen to them. This is decidedly not the case in European countries, despite them being amongst the world's most liberal and human rights-orientated. There are huge disparities between ourselves and other Diaspora countries regarding anti-Semitic activity and when incidents do occur we have the tools with which to respond: legislation and bodies which protect South Africans from hate and discrimination, such as the Equality Courts and Human Rights Commission.

Nevertheless, South Africa does face serious challenges and if we are to meet them we must do so as a united nation. For that to happen, we must foster a culture of respect between all our peoples. Recently, I was part of an Active Citizens initiative calling on South Africans to sign on to a Code of Courtesy. Co-written by myself, James Motlatsi and Bobby Godsell, it calls on people to respect the dignity of their fellow citizens when expressing their views about the country and its future. I urge everyone to sign on to this Code of Courtesy, which can be found on the Active Citizens website – www.citizens.za.com. ■

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