

Speaking before the **PARLIAMENT OF THE PEOPLE**

Voicing our community's feelings in an effort to make a difference

BY WENDY KAHN



IN 2012, A BILL WAS INTRODUCED IN THE PARLIAMENT of South Africa calling for the labeling of certain Israeli goods as 'Products of the Occupied Palestinian Territories'. Our community was outraged and raised the issue in many different forums: political, legal, and through street protests.

At the height of our frustration, when we felt that our voice was not being listened to, I had the great privilege of being introduced by Sol Cowen to the wonderful Joan Fubbs, an exceptional leader in our country. Joan is a senior ANC leader and the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Trade and Industry. She sat with me for a considerable time, listening carefully to the reasons that our community felt so offended by this glaring singling out of Israel for punitive action, and she asked me if I would agree to speak to her portfolio committee on this issue. She turned to me and said the following pivotal words, "We are your parliament; we are the people's parliament". And for the first time I understood the role and relevance that our community can play in shaping our future. Thus, together with Avrom Krengel, we presented our arguments in Parliament, took

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questions, and engaged with the parliamentarians, resulting in a series of further processes with a good outcome.

Our constitution ensures that public participation takes place in Parliament. Over the past months several important issues have appeared in parliament and the SAJBD has embarked on a process of interaction that has provided our community with an important voice. We have treasured the opportunity to make comment on issues that have direct relevance to our community, as well as our country.

First, we participated in the Constitutional Review process, making a submission on issues around hate and the stance that our government takes on this. We also made a submission on the Department of Justice's National Action Plan on Hate and we will engage extensively on the Prevention and Combatting of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill which will be tabled in parliament in the coming weeks. Still to come, the SAJBD is currently final-

izing a submission on the 'Green Paper on International Migration', addressing the treatment of refugees which is an issue close to our hearts as a community.

During Operation Protective Edge in July/August 2014, our community was the target of aggressive threats, incitement to violence, and anti-Semitic abuse on social media. Working closely with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL)'s Cyberhate Department, we have embarked on a long and frustrating process of trying to force Facebook to release the identities of the fictitious personalities that threatened some of our leadership and members of SA Jewry. We have learned many lessons that we have shared with government and civil society when the 'anti-social media' apparatus targeted South Africans earlier this year, initiated by the Penny Sparrow vitriol and escalating into an avalanche of hate in electronic media.

We embraced the opportunity to make a submission to parliament on their proposed amendments to the Film and Publications Act, with reference to Cyberhate. Following our submission, we were

invited to present in parliament, which we did alongside other key stakeholders such as the SABC, Google, the Internet Service Providers Association, SA National Editors Forum, and the Press Council of SA. I shared our 2014 case study, the very real issues that exist in trying to respond to these threats, and our proposed changes to the legislation.

The process was heart-warming in terms of the excellent questions that were asked by Members of Parliament, the real willingness to engage, and the warmth with which our participation was embraced. I felt that there was a genuine receptiveness to our insights and contribution. The media interest in our contribution was encouraging, with our presentation being broadcast on TV news and in newspapers around the country, and of course social media.

I truly felt that I had entered what Joan Fubbs called "The Parliament of the People". ■