

The Board of Deputies of British Jews
1 Torriano Mews
Kentish Town
London NW5 2RZ

20th September 2018

For the attention of Marie van der Zyl, Deputies President

Dear Marie,

The recent High Holy Days, reminded me of when - fifty years ago - I recorded the complete Yom Kippur Service of the West London Synagogue. The overflow service was held in the Westminster Methodist Hall and led by the Senior Minister, my father-in-law Rabbi Dr Werner van der Zyl. It was his retirement year and the recordings I made in October 1968 will remain forever as a unique archive of inspiration, not just for his grandchildren, great-grandchildren and other generations, but for the whole Jewish community.

Rabbi Sacks in his essay *Seven Principles of Jewish Leadership* said: “The phrase ‘Jewish leadership’ is ambiguous. It means leadership by Jews, but it also means leadership in a Jewish way, according to Judaic principles and values. The first is common, the second rare.” And he stressed “Leadership is about the future. ... Before you can lead, you must have a vision of the future and be able to communicate it to others.”

Rabbi van der Zyl was one of the rare ones; he was foremost a man of integrity; a visionary and a man of action, a doer. He had witnessed the dark past, but was an optimist who enthused the young and built a college for the future.

But Rabbi Sacks also astutely observed “There is a right way for future Jewish leadership to go, and a wrong way. The wrong way is to emphasize antisemitism and the assaults on Israel ...”

The 5779 new year greetings published in the Jewish press show a growing awareness of the danger of all forms of hate, not just antisemitism. Rabbi Nicky Liss notes that “We have also seen a rise in hate speech (primarily on social media) at both extremes of the political spectrum.” Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg highlights “... the growth of xenophobia, hate speech and violence worldwide. We will survive only if we confront our bigotry ...”

Rabbi Danny Rich, Chief Executive of Liberal Judaism, writes nostalgically about how he was “brought up in a Jewish home where difference and debate were welcomed ...” He deplores how “in the past year the British Jewish community has appeared unable to model such civilised debate.”

Jonathan Goldstein of the Jewish Leadership Council says “We are determined to stand up to hatred.” While that sentiment is welcomed, informed action is needed, not only words, lest it become just another platitude. All forms of hate must be directly challenged and it was encouraging to see Labour’s Luciana Berger receiving the prestigious Jo Cox Award at the No2H8 Crime Awards in central London (13 Sep). The awards recognise those at the forefront of tackling hate against all communities. Their website states:

The theme for the 2018 No2H8 Crime Awards is 'Upstanders and Not Bystanders', reflecting on the need for individuals everywhere to challenge intolerant behaviour, bigotry and hatred safely wherever and whenever it occurs.

We must all have the courage to speak out against hate and division, especially when it is present in our homes. Unlike the home life which Danny Rich remembers, your home, led by a noxious letter writer like your father Barry Kaye, would likely have been devoid of tolerance. I do not know which extreme end of the political spectrum Mr Kaye gravitated toward (he had been a Labour Party member), but it emboldened him to write hate letters and make threats of violence. Yet, given his detestable behaviour, he claimed to be “mentor, teacher and guide” to his grandchildren, your children. How were their young minds influenced?

With maturity, if we are honest, should come the capacity to accept the truth about the past. If we do not accept it - or distort it - we can create false memories, which are always damaging. Admitting your father’s part in writing hate letters and the detrimental impact it has had, is very long overdue.

Yours sincerely,

George Rooker,
Historian