

4th June 2018

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

For the attention of Marie van der Zyl, Deputies President

Dear Marie,

Re: humiliation

When launching your campaign to be President in March, you cautioned that Jewish traditions were under threat. The front page article of the Jewish News (24 May 2018) was a not dissimilar warning by one of Britain's leading rabbis of the lapse of Jewish values. Senior Reform Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner said: "Judaism teaches that one of the most serious things is to humiliate someone in public, ..." Your joint letter with Jonathan Arkush in the Jewish News (31 May 2018) endorsed her call for civility.

Although she was speaking in connection with the repercussions following on from abusive reactions to the shootings in Gaza, what she said applies in the context of all human interactions, at all times. The Jewish tradition gives great stress to reverence for parents and these combined eternal values cannot be disregarded - especially at significant family occasions like weddings. A week ago we watched the Royal wedding showing two families united with an abundance of goodwill and gaiety, and the happiness of all was a joy to behold.

But the Rabbi's words put me in mind of the wedding I attended at the West London Synagogue in April 1998. It was your second union, this time to my step-son Darrell van der Zyl, and the humiliations heaped on your new mother-in-law on that occasion were appalling and contrary to all Jewish teachings.

The wedding and the reception were both marred by incredible acts of malice toward the family into which you were marrying. The van der Zyls were excluded from any photographs or video with you as the bride. Worse was to come at the reception, which, presciently, I did not attend. The seating plan, which traditionally puts the bride and groom close to the respective parents, placed your new mother-in-law, Nikki van der Zyl, at the far end of the top table, away from her son, daughter and anyone she knew. The groom's speech should always include a special 'thank you' to those who raised them and

maybe even include some special joyful memories about them. But Darrell in his speech did not mention anything about his own family, even his late grandfather Rabbi Dr Werner van der Zyl, who had been the senior rabbi at West London Synagogue. He displayed no gratitude to his own family but, instead, was profuse in his praise for your family. (This was remarked on by some guests who assumed Darrell's mother was dead.) The fact that there are no photos of the two families together, and none of you with your new mother-in-law and sister-in-law sums it up. It was altogether a deliberate affront to your new husband's family, an abandonment of accepted wedding etiquette and a total rejection of Jewish culture and traditions. At the end you ignored the hand of friendship that was offered to you but told your new mother-in-law you had got what you wanted. The humiliations of that day can never be forgotten and my step-son has never shown any contrition for what happened.

The call for the community to ensure that debates are 'less angry' and should be 'guided always by high standards', is worthy but the best way to establish a standard is by modelling the expected behaviour yourself. Rabbi Werner van der Zyl, my distinguished father-in-law, was humble and self-effacing and approachable and always spoke up effectively and forcefully against inhumanity and injustice.

You have pledged that you would be an advocate who would "stand up for our traditions and to defend our human rights". As the new President, a rereading of the Board of Deputies dicta, which I have previously cited, may give you pause for thought.

Yours sincerely,

George Rooker
Historian

encl. Auschwitz Remembered