

Address at the Opening of the Centenary Conference of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies

7 September 2003

President of the South African Board of Jewish Deputies, Mrs Bethlehem,
Chairperson of the Board, Mr Gaddin,
Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris,
Distinguished delegates and guests,
Fellow South Africans,
Ladies and gentlemen:

The Centenary Conference of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies constitutes an important moment for national celebration. As the Conference is aware, in 1880 there were about 4 000 Jews in South Africa. By 1899, this number had grown to 24 000.

This rapid increase, especially from Lithuania, occurred as a result of the anti-Semitic programs in Russian-Ruled territories following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881. After a long struggle for the birth of a non-racial and democratic South Africa, we have arrived at the situation where we can say without hesitation that, at last, today's generations of South African Jews are assured that, in this, their home with other South Africans, they face no threat of anti-Semitic programs.

This, surely, must be a cause of celebration for all of us, given the painful experience of the Jewish people, which includes the Holocaust.

This Centenary Conference is an occasion for celebration because, held a few months before we mark our Decade of Democracy, it provides us with an opportunity to salute the many patriots drawn from the Jewish community, who played an important role in the struggle to free our country from racist domination and tyranny.

All our people are involved in an exciting process of the reconstruction and development of our country. Among the South Africans who occupy the front ranks in this process of renewal are members of the Jewish community who are making their contribution in many fields, including politics, our system of governance, business and the professions. The Centenary Conference therefore also gives us an opportunity to pay tribute to these South Africans who are helping to create a new world of peace, prosperity and happiness for millions of South Africans.

This includes those who are playing an important role within the non-governmental sector who are reaching out to the poor and the marginalised.

History has placed an obligation on our country and people to make an important contribution to the renaissance of Africa, a continent that has experienced the enormous challenges to sue for peace, stability and democracy and the eradication of poverty and underdevelopment.

This Centenary Conference of the Jewish Board of Deputies gives us the opportunity to salute the many members of the Jewish community who are playing an important role in the multifaceted struggle for the renewal of our continent.

This applies also to those who are making an input into the effort in which our country is engaged, to make whatever little contribution it can to the global striving to build a world free of wars, hatred, oppression and poverty.

In all these senses, this Centenary Conference is therefore, not only a conference to celebrate the birth of Jewish Board of Deputies in 1903. It is also a conference to celebrate the fact that history gave South Africa the Jewish community which has played and is playing the important roles of which we have spoken, and which is an integral and inalienable part of all the people we speak of as South Africans.

Our Constitution proudly proclaims that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white. It belongs to the Jewish South Africans as much as it belongs to whom South Africa belongs, have a common obligation to work together to solve the problems we face, and a shared right to own the advances and achievements we have made and will make.

A hundred years ago, the newly arrived Jewish South Africans were described as uitlanders. As Nazism gained tin strength in Europe during the 1930's and early 1940's there was pressure on the government led by Jan Smuts to restrict or prohibit Jewish immigration.

As you will remember, Sarah Gertrude Millin wrote of the wife of a member of Smut's cabinet, who advised: "You should tell Jews not to make themselves prominent and seek public positions. You know what times are. It isn't liked when Jews are prominent. It isn't liked in the Cabinet."

Happily the days when a section of our population was viewed and treated as uitlanders, when it wasn't liked when Jews are prominent, are over and gone forever. While it is true that all of us should be permanently on guard to confront and defeat any anti-Semitism that may emerge in our country, we must draw strength from the fact that our experience of racism as a people, has taught us the important lesson never again to allow racism to take control of our lives.

From its foundation a hundred years ago, the Board of Deputies elected to stay out of all political decisions that did not directly affect the Jewish people. Clearly of South African Jewish Board of Deputies must continue to focus on all matters of concern to our Jewish population. But it must also concern itself with other matters that are of concern to the future of our country and all its people.

The people of the Board represents a leads are both Jewish and South African, cannot but be concerned about their future both as Jews and as South Africans. It is itself both Jewish and South African.

As we were preparing this address, we came across a report published by a Jewish organisation in California discussing what it described as a poll conducted by "the London-based Institute of

Jewish Policy Review and the Chaplain Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Cape Town."

The report stated that "more than 60 percent of South Africa's estimated 100 000 Jews do not see a long-term future for the community there.... Only 22 percent believe there will be a substantial Jewish community in South Africa 20 years from now...." It goes on to say "the fact that the overwhelming majority of South African Jews believe they will not emigrate, does not mean they feel they are better off, either individually or as a community, since the demise of apartheid."

It further reports "a pervading sense of unease" among our Jewish population. It speaks of "a perceived increase in anti-Semitism."

This report evokes serious concern. We have an obligation to respond to this reported pervading sense of unease. We have a duty to understand its origins and what it is that characterises today's South Africa, which results in the majority of Jewish South Africans feeling that the Jewish people have no long-term future in their own country.

In this regard, I would like to say firmly and without equivocation that our government would be pleased to spend as much time as may be required, to discuss the concerns of our Jewish community with its representatives, so that both the government and all other South Africans are empowered to act decisively to address the concerns of the Jewish section of our population.

Clearly, the government has a responsibility to ensure that all our people, regardless of their colour or race, do not fall victim to marginalisation, fear and disempowerment. Certainly we cannot claim to be a government of the people of South Africa if we allow any situation to persist, which plunges any section of our diverse population into a state of permanent despair.

I come from a movement for national liberation that is now 91 years old. Throughout the nine decades of its existence, this movement has sustained the vision of a non-racial and democratic South Africa. Its members and supporters have perished and made other painful sacrifices to ensure that ours becomes a non-racial and democratic country.

Having led the struggle for the defeat of the apartheid system, when we negotiated the Constitution according to which our country is governed, it insisted that the words must be included, that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white.

Were it ever to abandoned these positions, it would cease to be itself. It would turn its back on the unknown numbers of patriots who perished in the struggle for a non-racial South Africa. It would alienate itself from the millions of South Africans whose definition of freedom is freedom from racism, including anti-Semitism.

And yet it may be that there are some things we have done or not done which have led to the pervading sense of unease that has reportedly led the majority of the South African Jewish population to feel that they have no long-term future in the country of their birth. Whatever these

acts of commission or omission may be, let us confront them together, driven by a common commitment to transform the common patrimony into a winning nation, united in its diversity.

Many people present here might have read the article that appeared in the Johannesburg "Star" on August 28, this year. It was written by one Luke Mills and appeared under the heading "An Englishman in love with South Africa." After commenting on some of the negative sentiments he has heard from South Africans or read about South Africa, this Englishman, Luke Mills, who now lives and work in Cape Town, writes:

"Just as people have different tolerance levels of risk, they also have different rewards they need. For me, money is not the most important thing in life. I took massive salary cut to come here. But in London lived in a tiny flat, battled my way to work on the tube and had to drive for two hours to get to the country. Here I wake up in a sunny old house, drive five minutes to work and walk up the mountain in my spare time.

"But that's not the main reward for me. Without wanting to sound like a bleeding heart liberal, I get a kick out of feeling like I'm doing something useful, helping to bring investment to a tough, resourceful scarred, happy country. It's a place that no one wants to fall, where I feel like I can make a difference. I'm not sure I felt like that in the UK.

"So for now I'm staying out. It may not be forever - the world is a big place and time is short. And things can change. But it will do for now. In fact, it will do nicely."

Mr Mills quotes a 30-year-old American woman, Kristen Tremeer, who has lived in South Africa for four years. She says: "I think people who left didn't give it a chance. They didn't try hard enough to change their attitude."

I too feel as Luke Mills feels that ours is a tough, resourceful, scarred and happy country. Like him, I feel that there are many among our people who can and are making a difference, who are doing something useful.

These are South Africans, and some foreign friends, who know the problems our country faces, but who are also convinced that they cannot and should not pass the responsibility to others to solve these problems, while all they do is to complain and criticise.

Among those in our country who think as Luke Mills does, are people attending this Centenary Conference and others who belong to South African Jewish community, whose contribution to the emergence of the new South Africa this Centenary Conference should celebrate.

Together, we share a common concern about the situation in the Middle East. The violence and terrorism have gone on for too long. The suffering that both Israelis and Palestinians continue to experience is not anything to which we should get accustomed, treating it as a permanent feature on the global human map. A just peace is the only thing that we should consider a permanent and desirable outcome.

Accordingly, we have supported and support the Road Map designed to move the Palestinians and Israelis forward to a just, stable and permanent peaceful settlement of the conflict in which they are enmeshed. This includes the vision of a two state solution, which must give the Palestinians their own independent homeland, and guarantee the safe existence of Israel and Israelis within secure borders, and in conditions for peace.

Our government will continue to do everything in its power to promote this outcome, including maintaining the necessary contact with both the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority, as well as all the Israelis and Palestinians who are working in difficult conditions to create a climate conducive to a speedy resolution of this extremely costly conflict among people who should live together as friendly neighbours.

Our government, the Jewish Board of Deputies and other Jewish organisations, our Muslim community, people of other faiths, and all South Africans have a sacred obligation to work together to everything necessary and possible to promote the earliest possible resolution of the conflict has imposed a life of despair among Israelis and Palestinians who are, to all of us, brothers and sisters.

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies now begins its advance towards its Bicentenary. Whatever we may wish, most of us will not be here when it celebrates that historic moment in the year 3003. As you can see, I do not share the pessimistic view that the South African Jewish community has no long-term future in their country of birth.

None of us can tell what South Africa and the rest of the world will look like a hundred years hence. It may even be difficult to say where we and the rest of humanity will be, two decades from now. But this we can say, that, in good measure, that future will be determined by the kind of people about whom Luke Mills wrote, those who feel that they can make a difference.

I would like to believe that, by then, our country will have confirmed its historic role as a place where the demon of racism, including anti-Semitism, would have met its match. I would like to believe that together we would have done the things that we must do to build a winning nation out of a multiracial, multiethnic and multi-cultural society.

I entertain the hope that, together, we would have done the things we have to do, to end poverty and underdevelopment in our country, proceeding from a common realisation that poverty is not merely a problem for the poor and marginalised, but an urgent challenge confronting those who occupy positions of advantage in our society, both black and white.

I share the dream with the ordinary people everywhere in Africa, that the vision of an African Renaissance will have acquired concrete expression through a decisive advance of our continent towards its renewal.

Everyday, like so many of our people, I pray that by then, both Israelis and Palestinians will be living in conditions of peace, mutual trust and co-operation, using their enormous talents to improve their lives. I trust, and am confident, that this outcome would communicate the

important message to all Jewish people, citizens of Israel and other countries, including our own, that the Holocaust and the Russian programs of the 19th century will never recur.

I am proud to say that, whatever the opinion polls may indicate, the Jewish South Africans represented and led by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, will play an important role in the achievement of these outcomes.

On behalf of our government and our people, I am privileged to congratulate the South African Jewish Board of Deputies on its centenary. I wish the Board long life, convinced that it will continue to make a difference, as we engage the difficult struggle to build a new South Africa and a new world.

The Jewish community will soon be celebrating its High Festivals, I am please to wish you all a Happy New Year, full of happiness, peace prosperity and well being over the East.

We congratulate the Board on the convening of this Centenary Conference and wish this important convention success.

Thank you