

So How Does The Board of Deputies Protect Your Freedoms All Year Round?

For many people in the community, the work of the Board of Deputies still remains relatively unknown. They express surprise when they hear about the breadth of work done by the Board – not so much what we do, but that it is the Board that is undertaking these vital activities. Perhaps it hasn't occurred to them that the rights and freedoms we enjoy as British Jews haven't simply materialised, or that it is the Board that works tirelessly to preserve these entitlements. Our challenge for the new decade will be to ensure that British Jewry recognises the huge amount of work that is being done on its behalf and, in so doing, we hope that more and more people will involve themselves with our activities; by representing their Synagogues or Organisations as Deputies, by supporting our work or simply by sharing their concerns with us.

It is easy to take our ability to function freely as a community for granted. But it requires extraordinary effort to safeguard these freedoms, affecting every aspect of our lives as Jews in Britain, from the youngest to the oldest, across the religious spectrum. All manner of consultations, legislative changes, policy decisions and public debates have the potential to impact on the community, from organ donation and assisted dying, to Shechita, child protection and charity law changes. Only the Board works across all of these areas to ensure that the community's views are formulated and represented effectively.

Only recently, for example, anti-circumcision campaigners sought to challenge the practice of **Brit Milah** at the time of the inquest into the tragic death of a baby following his circumcision. Our intervention, to place before the court the best possible expert testimony, helped the grieving family by explaining that the circumcision was not a factor, but also helped the general public to understand that the practice is properly and responsibly conducted in this country.



The campaign against **Faith Schools** has gathered pace in recent years with a number of secularist groups seeking to portray them as divisive and damaging to relations with other communities. Against this backdrop, the Board has consistently championed the right of Jewish parents to choose schools with a Jewish ethos if they so wish. And where they do, the Board's '*Pikuach*' service (run with UJIA) is responsible for assessing standards in Jewish education, while our experts work with OFSTED and with Government on issues concerning curricula and admissions. We are also working to ensure that our schools' contribution to cohesion and citizenship is recognised, by establishing linking initiatives with other faith schools.

Where **Marriages** are conducted in synagogues around the UK, the Jewish community is one of only two ethnic or religious groups that has special dispensation to solemnise civil marriages alongside a religious ceremony. All of the authorisations and the administration which makes them possible, are done by the Board.

There are many places around the UK which once had vibrant Jewish communities, which moved away or died out, leaving only **Jewish Cemeteries** as a reminder of their existence. Often these communities predated today's synagogal organisations and burial societies, and so these cemeteries would be at risk of neglect and disrepair, but for our intervention. At the end of 2009 the Board of Deputies created a new charitable company to take on the legal title to a number of these properties, and to help secure funding for their future upkeep, not only as important historical sites, but as the final resting places of our forebears.

Our community has a proud reputation of tolerance and **Building Relationships** with other communities, and the Board is an integral part of making this happen. We know that the best way to tackle religious prejudice is to begin by creating a greater understanding of what it means to be Jewish in younger members of society; which is why we're so encouraged by the incredible success of our travelling 'Jewish Way of Life Exhibition', designed to teach some of the most fundamental aspects of Judaism to non-Jewish school-age children all over the UK.

Our 'Seeing Jewish Way of Life Tours' for older students are also effective in tackling grassroots prejudice. These and other initiatives are driven by our dedicated professionals and Deputies, who devote themselves to building understanding, co-operation and respect with other faith and ethnic communities.



Without question, one of the key concerns for British Jewry in recent years has been the disturbing increase in **Antisemitism** and we continue to engage in this unrelenting fight on several fronts. We are fortunate as a community to have the CST working on our behalves to secure our physical safety, and we work extremely closely with them to use our political weight to make relevant representations at the highest levels of Government. We are active participants on the Government's cross-departmental task force on antisemitism, holding to account those who need to challenge prejudice in all walks of life. Equally, we assign a great deal of resource to a less publicised yet equally important form of antisemitism found in the workplace, or indeed in schools and on campus. Prejudice is of course rarely a simple issue and it can be difficult to know what to do if you've been made to feel uncomfortable about being Jewish, without actually having a specific incident to report. Have you suffered from inappropriate comments made by a work colleague or a teacher; or more simply, a lack of sensitivity or understanding, such as when an employer refuses to allow time off for religious observance? If so, give us a call.

It is also, a sad reality that **Extremism** is on the rise - predominantly on the far right and among Islamist fundamentalists, and the Board is at the forefront of the campaign against these intractable ideologies. We regularly make representations to the Government on their strategy to combat these problems and consistently take strong positions on organisations and individuals who we consider

exacerbate them. We welcomed the Government's recent decision to ban the extremist groups, al-Muhajiroun, Islam4UK and their affiliate groups, and we continue to advocate for the exclusion of purveyors of racist and violent ideologies when they seek entry into the UK. Similarly, our public campaigns against the British National Party and other far-right groups reflect the fierce opposition in the Jewish community to their intolerable manifesto of racism and prejudice.

Alongside all the work we do for our community in the UK, we are of course, always driven by the fundamental Jewish principle that, 'Kol Yisrael Arievim Ze La Ze' - 'all Jews are responsible for one another.' We continue to represent the UK at the World Jewish Congress & European Jewish Congress, ensuring that responses to **International Issues** are properly co-ordinated. This synchronised activity was perhaps demonstrated most effectively at the recent Durban Review Conference, where antisemitism and demonisation of Israel were exposed and challenged on the world's stage, at the United Nations. The Board regularly meets foreign Ambassadors to the UK to discuss issues of importance such as sanctions on Iran and Holocaust restitution, as well as the rights and freedoms of smaller Diaspora communities, for whom our intervention in matters of concern can make a real difference.



It goes without saying that the one international issue which dominates the thoughts of our community is the hostility that is shown towards **Israel** and those of us that support her. Our role is to speak for British Jews, who overwhelmingly support Israel's right to exist within secure borders and at peace with her neighbours. We therefore seek to represent that view in two ways. Firstly, by ensuring that you have the tools to counter anti-Israel invective, with initiatives such as our **BUYcott** campaign, and by giving you the information you need to write letters to the media and lobby your MPs. Secondly, whether behind the scenes in formal or informal meetings, or at our regular Board meetings, we ensure that Government ministers at the highest levels understand and hear the overall sentiments of the community.

Remember that the Board is here to represent you - so if there's something that you feel strongly about then why not let us know...

The Board of Deputies of British Jews
6 Bloomsbury Square, London WC1A 2LP

T. 020 7543 5400 F. 020 7543 0010 E. info@bod.org.uk W. www.bod.org.uk