Meeting with Mayor Tau could smooth communal relations

VANESSA VALKIN

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies met with Johannesburg Mayor Parks Tau (pictured) this week to express their distress at some of the recent decisions he had made to partner with BDS-SA, a group the Board believes have been responsible for creating a climate of hate against Johannesburg and South African Jewry.

The Board pointed to Tau’s decision to lead a march at BDS-SA’s Israel Apartheid Week held in early March as well as the City’s partnership with BDS for its newest creation, Palestinian Solidarity Week (PSW), a series of lectures held later in March, including hosting senior aide to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah’s deputy commissioner for international relations, Dr Husam Zolmot.

Last year Tau was keynote speaker at the opening of Israel Apartheid Week, whose organizers have been vitriolic and vocal in their criticism of Israel and, according to the Board, have led to South African Jewish students being referred to as “F***ing Jews” and “F***ing Kikes.”

“Forsus, BDS has degenerated into pure anti-Semitism,” Zev Krengel, president of the Jewish Board, told the Jewish Report.

The Board said it had no issue with Tau’s support of PSW but what had upset the community was that the BDS-SA logo was included in the PSW material.

At the meeting, which was attended by Tau and Krengel as well as the Board’s director, Wendy Kahn, and Gauteng vice-chairmen, Robbie Fisher and Gigi Wolf, the leaders had an opportunity to express their unhappiness about various other issues as well.

They noted that the mayor, despite being invited to many Jewish events in the city, had not attended any. “You haven’t come to a single Jewish event and we invite you continuously,” Krengel told him at the meeting.

They also discussed the mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat’s visit to South Africa in March, when the Johannesburg mayor’s office had said Tau was not available to meet with Barkat.

“When the mayor of Jerusalem goes to New York, he meets with Mayor Michael Bloomberg, why would Mayor Tau not meet with Nir Barkat?” Krengel asked.

The mayor defended himself, saying his office had tried to set up a meeting with Barkat at a time that worked for Tau but that Barkat had already left South Africa.

While Tau said at the meeting that he and the ANC were pro-Palestine and a two-state solution, the Board said they too were supportive of a two-state solution, but felt that Tau’s support of BDS was not in line with this goal.

“We understand his support of a Palestinian state but it does not have to come at the expense of Israel and at the expense of local Jews,” said Krengel. “BDS might sell themselves as a pro-Palestinian lobby but they are anti-Semitic.”

Jewish Board director, Wendy Kahn, told Jewish Report that not only is BDS anti-Semitic but the group does not support an Israeli state. “We want an Israeli state side by side with a Palestinian state but that’s not what BDS wants.”

The City of Johannesburg passed a resolution in January to twin itself with Ramallah and a large official delegation went to Ramallah. The board expressed their dissatisfaction that Tau passed through Israel but did not make time to meet with any Israeli officials on his way into the West Bank.

The Board said it was hoping there would be much more interaction between the Jewish community and the City of Johannesburg and the Mayor’s office going forward. The meeting ended on a positive note with plans for improved and open communication.

The Mayor’s office could not be reached for comment.

FRENCH JEWISH ‘SAFE HAVEN’ DOESN’T LOOK SO SAFE ANYMORE

MICHAEL BELLING

The outlook for Jews in France is gloomy, according to Professor Henry Green, of the University of Miami, Florida, speaking at the Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre last Sunday. In his talk, titled “Charlie Hebdo and the new face of anti-Semitism”, Green, a professor of religious studies and international director of the project, Sephardi Voices, said that for French Jews, three-quarters of whom fled North Africa, France was always considered a safe haven.

Numbering 500,000, the French Jews are the second largest Diaspora community after the United States, and comprise almost one per cent of the French population today.

Rising anti-Semitism over the past decade—feeding off the debris that sweeps out of the Middle East and the recent Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, France’s 9/11, has shaken their roots,” he told the audience.

France has a Muslim population of nearly five million. “Saggarfying poverty, segregation and unemployment, are the trinity for the overwhelming majority,” Much of the anti-Semitism comes from this part of the population.

“Insecurity, fear and unpredictability have become the new normal for Jews of France,” he said. “In 2014, 51 per cent of all racist attacks targeted Jews.”

“To understand what is happening in France is to understand the Sephardi Jewish experience,” Green said referring to the rise of Jew hatred there. Green has devoted himself to collecting the stories of the “forgotten exodus” of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East, in a similar way to Steven Spielberg’s chronicling the tales of Holocaust survivors.

Within the space of a generation after 1948, over 850,000 Sephardi Jews were displaced from their countries in which Jewish communities had lived for centuries, even thousands of years, half of them from the North African Maghreb.

“There has been minimal activity in collecting their personal experiences, giving communities to voice their concerns about communal and cultural loss and dissimulating their experiences,” he said.

“Their stories are heartbreaking and filled with trauma.”

Their displacement “cannot be reduced to anti-Israel venom,” he said. It began earlier than 1948 with the “acrid fertilizers” of the