

## **Habonim Dror South Africa in 2014**

Report on a visit by Julian Resnick, Mazkir World Habonim Dror  
January-February 2014

I arrived in South Africa five months into my term as Mazkir of World Habonim Dror. Over the past five months since I took office I have tried my utmost to live up to the tasks I have set myself as Mazkir:

- To act on my priorities for Habonim Dror Olami (HDO): the constant improvement of our education, in terms of content, pedagogy and strategy and supporting those in our movement who decide to make their home in Israel, so that our goals of continuing to make a contribution to a progressive Israel and the Jewish People are met to the best of our ability.
- To build a clear and cogent picture of the "state of the movement" throughout the world as a prerequisite to moving it forward in an age where there are major doubts being expressed as to the relevance of Zionist Youth Movements.
- To report honestly on what I find, based on both a commitment to honesty and transparency and as a statement about the culture I believe we must all be part of if we wish to continue to be a beacon of ideological commitment to the Jewish State and to the Jewish People.
- To act upon my findings and understandings in such a way as to enable Habonim Dror to continue to make the contribution of leadership it has made historically to the Jewish People and Israel

The background to this particular trip was a growing unease among some within the organized Zionist world as to the ideological positions Habonim Dror South Africa was taking with respect to Israel and the general Zionist cause. To be honest, there existed prior to my visit to South Africa an unease within World Habonim Dror too as to where the South African movement was heading.

The accusations being leveled against HDSA were broadly that:

- They were in bed with the BDS movement
- Chanichim were being fed a Palestinian narrative
- The movement was no longer Zionist and had moved out of the broad tent which the South African Jewish Community has long been proud of.

This was the background against which my journey to SA has taken place over the past two weeks. For the sake of transparency allow me to state from the outset for the benefit of those who may not know me and who read this report that

- I grew up in HDSA which had a major role in molding my intellectual and emotional life
- I have lived in Israel since 1976
- I have been a JAFI shaliach three times, in 1981 in San Francisco, in 1994-6 in London and in 2010-3 in NYC; twice connected to Habonim Dror and once to the Reform Movement
- I am a member of Kibbutz Tzora, where my wife and I have brought up our three children, two of whom are currently studying at the Hebrew University
- I am a Zionist without any ifs and ands or buts

I would like to start with my conclusions about HDSA and then talk about how I arrived there. HDSA is, in its own words in a flyer received by parents in recent days:

**"a proudly left-wing Zionist movement. For HDSA being a Zionist is more than just supporting Israel's right to exist as a Jewish State. It is about striving to better the State of Israel, strengthening its democracy and moral character. Regarding the Israeli Palestinian conflict, we have long supported and continue to support, a two state solution, in a negotiated settlement which guarantees security and basic Human Rights for both Israelis and Palestinians"**

The flyer goes on to stress HDSA's commitment to both Judaism and Equality and Service to Humanity.

The thrust of the argument against HDSA, and I met with some of the major detractors of the movement, is that its positions, its education and its statements strengthen the hands of those who would harm both the Jewish People and Israel. The HDSA position is that **the real existential threat to the State of Israel is the ongoing occupation which, in the analysis of the present leadership of the movement, must lead inevitably to both the moral disintegration of Israeli society and isolation from much of the international community.** As young South Africans born into a society which was perilously close to total isolation and moved back from the brink of civil war and bloodshed possibly on a genocidal level, the backdrop to this analysis is clear.

I spent many hours meeting with the leadership of the movement and am confident that the following is true:

- **HDSA is a Zionist movement, albeit with a Zionist approach which is not shared by most of the South African Jewish Community**
- **HDSA is opposed to the BDS movement**
- **HDSA sees itself as a youth movement with a "counter culture" ethos**

- **HDSA is, as it always was, irreverent and culturally alternative in its approach**
- **HDSA sees education as a process which involves analysis via critical thinking, followed by a path to activism thereby fulfilling the goal of taking responsibility for society**
- **The balance in terms of life paths of most members in HDSA has, at this point in its history, swung towards taking responsibility for building a New South Africa (ironically, most of its detractors in South Africa have made the same decision - or minimally made a decision different to the one I made when I decided that my home would be Israel as an activist expression of my Zionism)**

So, why has HDSA been found guilty by some members of what I continue to believe, is one of the finest Jewish communities to ever develop in the Diaspora? I would suggest the following reasons:

- HDSA has been guilty "by association". Some of the more powerful leaders who came out of the movement over the past decade have moved on ideologically and are now counted among those who would harm the State of Israel. This guilt by association is a powerful tool especially as the ethos in Habonim Dror is that we do not denounce our former madrichim because they have changed ideologically. This has meant that the present leadership has not and will not attack former madrichim. Selective use of facts, which I believe has been a chronic phenomenon among HDSA detractors, has added to this. When a former Mazkir of the movement is attacked, and rightly so, by the Jewish Community for his present stances on BDS, no mention is made that when he was in HDSA he insisted that senior Madrichim sign a register committing themselves to Aliyah, a register which at that stage of his ideological development he himself was the first to sign. Individuals go on ideological journeys. That is why there are HDSA members today living on settlements on the West Bank and also heads of major corporations; light years away from former commitments to end the occupation or to socialism. There are former members who fought for Israel in the Yom Kippur War, were devastated by what they went through and have moved away, but these are fewer in number than those who fought, stayed and are actively involved in trying to change Israeli society.
- HDSA has been the object of a very dubious campaign which has used many of the tools of master propagandists: the spreading of rumours, cropped photographs, the lifting of lines and parts of documents, half truths, exploiting the power of using both words and images out of context, failing to mention that some material is for madrichim only. The word on the street is that this has changed from an unorganized gut response from people who feel strongly

about Israel and are champions of the cause, to something more insidious and organized. Into this category falls misidentified flags, false rumours about Palestinian flags, a photograph of 20% of the banner used in the Sayarim Peace Tekes, a photograph of a young teen from Kayalitsha from the Equal Education group who arrived on the campsite with a BDS shirt with the insinuation that this is what is generally worn on the campsite (the photo was taken before he was asked by a HDSA madrich to remove it), a page of maps taken from the Sayarim Conflict seminar which is used to give chanichim the ability, in the words of the Mazkir of HDSA, to "understand how the **other side** builds their narrative"; a paragraph which seems to suggest that we stole their land, but which after a long conversation between myself and the **20 year old** who wrote the Conflict Seminar booklet, is clearly the result of poor judgment in the choice of words and not an attempt to suggest that our State is built on stolen land. It is interesting that the individual who presented these "facts" to me, decided not to present as well the concluding (Sikkum) activity of the seminar which clearly states a Zionist answer to the conflict and warns of how we may lose what we have if we take the maximalist position on land; the leaking of materials garnered for reportage to the SAZF to crucial figures in the formal education system thereby undermining HDSAs position in this system (**prior to it being presented formally which begs several questions**).

- HDSA has been attacked by those who either do not understand or choose to "not understand" the language and idiom of movement culture. This has always had a strong Anarchist feel and a language disrespectful of main stream cultural boundaries especially those around what is termed crude. Here there has been, in my opinion, a deliberate conflation of material which is only seen by madrichim and the suggestion has been that the material in question is in the domain of chanichim. If it has reached this domain it has only been because it has been placed there by those who would harm the movement. While the educational material which I am responsible for today does not include any form of crudity, I have to admit that when I was a twenty something in HDSA, I too indulged in this Anarchic behaviour amongst peers. **In one or two instances the material has undisputedly crossed the line**, but as I pointed out in a meeting with some senior members of the formal education community, one corrects 19 year olds, one does not run them out of town!!
- Powerful elements in the Jewish Community have a clear political stand on Israel which, valid as it is (and I believe in the validity of positions which I do not hold), is intolerant of other, competing Zionist narratives about what the future of the Israel should look like. I have to clarify something here: most of the lay leadership I met with both in Cape Town and in Johannesburg not only were extremely fair, but were also clear about the need which they feel HDSA

meets in the Jewish Community. Because of my hesitance to name names and mention individuals who I believe are not honest brokers in the situation HDSA finds itself in, I will just say the following: as much as I was impressed by many of the leadership in the community and their tolerance, openness and in fact willingness to combat the spreading of half truths and lies, there are others in the community who have an agenda: to destroy HDSA at all costs.

- HDSA has not been prepared to understand the anxieties of the Jewish Community and have been fundamentalist in their behaviour preferring the value of freedom of speech and expression over any tactical or strategic behaviour. Here it is important that my position is clear: HDSA has not wavered in its values driven approach in an environment where it is not clear that this has been a clever thing to do as it has been exploited by those more cynical than HDSA, both among those who would hurt Israel and among those who purport to defend it.
- The senior HDSA leadership has not understood that to participate in the community it needs to change its style, not substance, in certain community forums. This is crucial as style suggests substance and a sophisticated leadership style is crucial to prevent misinterpretation of substance by those with a benevolent approach to HDSA, but who are persuaded by those motivated by malevolence, when style can be confused with substance.

Before moving on, I must reiterate something I mentioned in passing a few moments ago: **the South African Jewish Community, especially the SAZF and SAJBD, is led by individuals whose behaviour towards HDSA has been impeccable in this fraught situation and I personally want to thank them and assure them that we at HD Olami see them as both honest brokers and appreciate the difficult positions they have placed themselves in on our behalf. If this has not always been appreciated by the leadership of HDSA, please accept both apologies and my thanks.**

What needs to be done? Clearly this document has little value if it is merely a refutation and does not suggest action:

- The key players connected to this situation have to be honest brokers and, if we identify players who clearly have an anti HDSA agenda and whose role is to be the neutral party, we have to ask hard questions of these players and their possible role in exacerbating a complex problem (here I feel duty bound to mention that the term "bullying" was used by a number of both young people and adults to describe the behaviour of a few teachers within the formal education system whose personal ideological commitments differ from those held by young people from HDSA. As an educator find this appalling)
- Those of us who wish the balance in HDSA to shift from building life paths in social justice work to life paths where our members actively participate in

building a democratic Israel as we move into a complex phase in our future, have a responsibility to increase the number of members of the movement who spend serious amounts of time in Israel. HDSA chaverim must be given the chance to see progressive Human Rights work in Israel which could form a part of their own futures. Rather than using the withdrawal of funds as a sanction against HDSA, we must increase funding to make this happen. (I was saddened that funding is being blocked even though I was informed before my departure from Israel that this would not be the case prior to a process which included my visit).

- HDSA would do well to accept the offer which is on the table from a number of parents, who are in large also former members, who are willing and able to form a P and F (Parents and Friends) body which has proved enormously useful in other Habonim Dror movements around the world. This body would have no power of decision making with regards to any of the processes in the movement, but could clearly help in sensitive issues of PR, clear up misunderstandings, bring questions from the general parent body in the community to the leadership and advocate for HDSA
- HDO has to find the way (together with JAFI and other partners) to ensure that we send shlichim who are adequately prepared and have the ability to work with the members of HDSA in this complex environment

My firmly held belief is that the greatness of the Jewish People and our civilization is that we have always lived with a culture of dispute at the core of how we deal with issues that divide and often enrich us. The Talmud included minority opinions, midrashim were the norm and not the exception, destroying those who disagreed with us was never our modus operandi.

I believe that if we do not have a place for HDSA within our tent, we do not have a place for at least 50% of young Jewish people in the Western Diasporas, which are to a large extent today almost the entirety of our Diasporas. I have no intention of saying goodbye to these young people as, if I do, I say goodbye to a large part of myself.

Finally, one of the most telling remarks about the impact presently of HDSA on young Jewish people came from a senior staff member of one of the Jewish schools. She said that when her class tackles any subject, Jewish or general, the ability to engage and discuss, to comprehend and analyze, is markedly higher among those who are members of youth movements and none more so than those who are in HDSA.

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