

WUPJ PRESIDENT'S REFLECTIONS

Faith, fanaticism and the future

PETER KOHN

ISRAEL, the United States and, to a degree, Australia are exceptional societies, as historically they openly welcomed arrivals fleeing religious persecution, observed Rabbi David Saperstein.

The World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) president made this point in a March 12 dialogue at Temple Beth Israel (TBI) during his visit to Australia for the UIA Progressive Appeal.

In conversation with Rabbi Gersh Lazarow, TBI's senior rabbi, US-based Rabbi Saperstein, his country's former ambassador for religious freedom, addressed issues of faith, fanaticism and the Jewish future.

"That's what Israel is ... people chose to go and build up the land ... When you make contributions ... through the UIA, it comes to the World Union to voice our efforts to make Israel the kind of country most capable of welcoming new immigrants."

On rising levels of political extremism, Rabbi Saperstein said in an era when many select the news they consume from the 24-hour cycle according to their ideologies, "I suspect most of you are the kind of people who actually do expose yourselves to different viewpoints, who are interested in hearing different perspectives."



Rabbi David Saperstein (left), in conversation with Rabbi Gersh Lazarow at Temple Beth Israel. Photo: Peter Haskin

Addressing Israel and the Jewish future, he said, "We in the Diaspora do not have a right to impose decisions on Israelis ... but we have the responsibility to speak out, and we do it out of love ... whether we're doves or hawks."

"Every Jew I know who really cares about Israel recognises today that Israel continues to be surrounded by forces that can militarily destroy [it] ... only Israel's strength, enhanced by the support of nations including my own nation ... stand in the way ... And yet we also know that Israel's destiny depends on it remaining a Jewish, democratic state. That has been sharply drawn into question by actions we have seen..."

"We in the Reform movement in the United States ... believe the occupation [of Palestinians] is inimical to Israel's security and wellbeing."

Urging support for the UIA Progressive Appeal, Union for Progressive Judaism co-president David Knoll said during a recent visit he experienced the best of Israel "that lives the values of its Declaration of Independence".

UIA Victoria president Hayley Southwick commended the UIA Progressive Appeal's Israel initiatives which, she said "embody the same strong values of the Progressive community and support projects such as aliyah, absorption and youth at risk".