

Remarks by Trustee Alexandra Lulka Rotman Delivered at Board – Jewish Heritage Month – May 2024

Good evening. Thank you to Trustees Chernos Lin and Laskin for sharing all of the incredible work done by our Jewish Heritage Committee.

Jewish heritage month in May is usually a time for celebrating and recognizing the contributions of Ontario and Canada's Jewish community to our society. It is a month of important, visceral milestones on the Jewish calendar - Yom Hashoah, Yom Hazikaron, and Yom Haatzmaut where Jews come together to recognize and celebrate their historic and modern heritage as an ethno-religious group.

This year, our committee intentionally chose to tailor our programming to our youngest students, to keep the content and the celebrations light and fluffy.

But tonight, I speak before you with no desire for celebration - because to me it is not May. Today, and every day, for the last 7.5 months is October 7th. That black sabbath, the final day of a major Jewish holiday has been called 'the Jewish 9/11' and the events of that day have sent shockwaves through the Jewish world. I find no appetite for a hora or platitudes this evening when there are as we speak, still over 120 innocent lives - including a 14 month toddler, Kfir, and his 4 year old brother Ariel, - being held hostage somewhere in the depths of Hamas terror tunnels in Gaza. Their only crime was being a Jew born and living in their ancestral homeland.

I want to be clear; the 7th of October was not just an Israeli tragedy, it was a Jewish tragedy. It was also a tragedy for Jewish Canadians. 8 Canadian civilians were murdered in a cold blooded pogrom on that day as Hamas terrorists stormed into sovereign Israeli territory and stalked innocent agricultural communities, going door to door. The 8 Canadians murdered that day were:

Vivian Silver, 74

Netta Epstein, 21

Shir Georgy, 22

Adi Vital-Kaploun, 33

Ben Mizrachi, 22

Alexandre Look, 33

Tiferet Lapidot, 23

Judith Weinstein, 70

Of these 8 innocent Canadians murdered in cold blood, I personally have 1 single degree of separation from 3 of them.

Tonight, I want to hold space for them. I also want to hold space and recognize the brave Jewish students, families, teachers, staff, and my fellow trustees, who continue to process the trauma of the last seven months, and who have also had to gird themselves against the unprecedented and unacceptable tidal wave of hate that has swept through our country, and even seeped into our school board. Tonight, I see and recognize the Jewish student who has lost friends since October 7th and has encountered a deluge of Iranian state sponsored antisemitism on social media, the Jewish teacher shunned by colleagues since October 7th, and the Jewish families who have had near incessant conversations about their safety in Toronto at their kitchen tables. I see you.

October 7th is a part of Canadian Jewish heritage. It is a deep scar for many of us. Toronto's Jewish community is the largest in Canada, with deep ties and connection to half of the world's Jews who reside in their indigenous homeland. I recall the impact that October 7th had on my own family, and the sleepless nights and near constant communication with my sister and her family, who reside in Tel Aviv. Since then, a Jewish school in my neighborhood was targeted by a bomb threat. A Jewish business in my ward was firebombed. My news feed is saturated with antisemitic incidents from across Canada and around the globe.

For too many in the Jewish community here in Canada and around the world, we are still in the middle of this nightmare, and our future remains uncertain. Where do we go from here?

Education is the business of forging peace. As Maria Montessori said, "establishing a lasting peace is the work of education. All politics can do is keep us out of war." If you've been around for a while, I am sure you've heard me use this quote before - I believe it is the cornerstone of my mission, of my role as an educator.

In our board, we bring together the diversity of our city, a microcosm for our world. It is our obligation to use that opportunity to forge a better future, to dispel misinformation, to unlearn hate, and to build bridges.

Jewish tradition tells a story of a great and wise rabbinic sage who was known for having the answer to every question - there was no question he had been posed that he did not have an answer to. One day, a clever student devised a plan to stump the rabbi. He caught a butterfly in his hands and brought it to the Rabbi. Is the butterfly alive, or dead? He asked. If the rabbi said dead, he would open his hand and let the butterfly escape, and if the rabbi said alive he would crush the insect in his hand. The rabbi pondered it for a moment, and replied - the answer is in your hands.

And that is the message I want to close with tonight: The actions this public school board has taken and will take will shape what Jewish heritage in Toronto will look like for decades to come – the future of Jewish life in our city is in our hands.