International Conference Centre, Durban, South Africa (September 3, 2001) -- My dear colleagues,

I am writing this letter to you from Durban, South Africa, where the United Nations is holding its World Conference Against Racism.

You will no doubt have read news media reports about the vile antisemitic material which the United Nations has allowed to be distributed freely throughout the grounds of the U.N. World Conference Against Racism, in open contravention of its Conventions and Declarations against hatred and vilification. I have no doubt that you will have been as shocked and disgusted as were all of the Jewish delegates.

I am writing to you today as one Jewish person to another, to try to express the depth of despair that the entire caucus of Jewish organizations here has felt. Imagine: at a U.N. conference against racism, one of our delegates – Willy Weisz – was to speak of his experiences in Vienna under the Nazis in 1938, but Palestinian Arabs shouted him down.

Here in Durban we have heard more than echoes of the past. We have seen faces contorted by the same hatred of the Jewish people, of equality and democracy that helped destroy the League of Nations and bring on world war more than 60 years ago.

But I also want to offer a modicum of hope. Through the persistence and alertness of the Jewish groups represented here, we have taken action.
In Durban, more than 100 senior representatives from 15 Jewish organizations gathered to try to repel a concerted assault on our uniqueness as a people, on our common Jewish history, and on the legitimacy of Israel. The Palestinians and other Arab-Islamic groups here have undertaken these assaults in force; they have been orchestrated and carried out with the indifferent knowledge of U.N. officials.

We and other delegates have been bombarded by Nazi-like propaganda, by caricatures, by hate material, by physical and verbal assaults and by intimidation. And all within sight of U.N. officials, all in clear and open violation of the charters, conventions and declarations which define the very purpose of the world body.

Our enemies have tried to deny the historical uniqueness of the Holocaust both to Jews and to the rest of the world; to accuse Israel of hideous lies such as ethnic cleansing, racism and Nazism; and to erase the reality of antisemitism as history’s longest hatred and the status of Jews as its sole target.

We have experienced attempts to incorporate into the language of U.N. documents words that deny us the right of self-determination as a people, wild charges of genocide, of crimes against humanity, the deliberate murder of women and children, apartheid, and more.

We in B’nai B’rith International to Durban from the four corners of the world and joined with our Jewish colleagues from other organizations. B’nai B’rith helped work to establish the United Nations, and has pressed for equality for Jews and respect for the Jewish people. We are now engaged in a crucial outreach to government delegations and the worldwide news media to expose the antisemitism and barbarity of this assault against the Jewish people and Jewish state.
We followed the process leading to the Durban conference since it began several years ago; we attended every regional meeting and preparatory conference except the one held, inappropriately, in Teheran; we made our voice heard on every available stage.

Unfortunately the voices raised against us are backed and supported by enormous forces that have tended to overwhelm our efforts. Worse, these hateful, hate-filled voices have benefited from the silence or half-hearted efforts from many who claim to work for human rights, who claim to have learned the lesson of passivity in the face of evil.

We have enjoyed some conspicuous victories and agonized over some desperate failures. We have been frustrated in the preparatory conferences and at Durban that many delegates simply will not listen. But at the same time, we have been encouraged that some governments have made it absolutely clear that they will never bow to such immoral pressures, no matter what the geopolitical consequences.

We will continue to resist this assault against the Jewish people. And we – you, all of us – must succeed! Maybe not in Durban, but ultimately the world must see that no people – not the Jewish people nor anyone else – can suffer such calumnies and assaults without each people and each nation fearing for its future.