The Union of Orthodox Synagogues (UOS) has appointed an ombudsman to tackle complaints and issues raised following the recent public outcry over kosher food prices and kashrut certification.

Kenny Rabson, the chief executive of Discover Invest Employee Benefits, who is also a member of the UOS board, has been appointed ombudsman to handle what appears to be a festering discontent among a number of its clients and members of the public.

Rabson’s task will be to address and resolve issues and complaints specific to the manufacturing food space and kosher certification, with added attention given to smaller manufacturers to ensure that they are treated fairly.

At the time of going to print, the full terms of reference were still being drafted, but Rabson said he would be fulfilling the role of an ombudsman to ensure that issues raised were dealt with speedily, reasonably, respectfully, and with the utmost fairness.

The UOS board called an urgent virtual meeting last Sunday morning following a string of attacks and complaints online and in the media from aggrieved and dissatisfied consumers, manufacturers, and other industry players.

The complaints focused mainly on the kashrut department, the high cost of kosher food, as well as the increased kashrut fees levied to manufacturers.

Disgruntled callers to ChaiFM accused the kashrut department and the UOS under which it falls of alleged underhandedness, greed, and a lack of transparency. They went as far as far as accusing it of not acting in the best interests of the community.

The furore was sparked following the Beth Din’s recent removal of a company’s kashrut licence, accusing it of a contractual breach following ongoing non-compliance. The owner of Housefield, George Georgou, accused the kashrut department of “holding him to ransom” for refusing to pay increased fees for kashrut certification.

In a bid to stem the tide of complaints, the UOS has appointed Rabson to act as the link between the kashrut department and its clients.

In an interview with the SA Jewish Report shortly before going to print, Rabson said, “The ombudsman will address the impasse between the kashrut department and the client looking for a hechsher.

“The reality is there are people out there who are unhappy as providers of products, and we need to make sure they are happy and that we resolve the issues. We have to look at strengthening governance and doing a better job for our clients, because it’s in our interests to have as many kosher products available.”

He said his role was to make sure that anyone with an issue with the kashrut department is dealt with fairly and efficiently to achieve an outcome that’s good for everybody.

He added: “We will consider bringing in other experts on a case by case basis. The terms of reference will allow us to call on independent people for advice where required.”

“The UOS takes these complaints seriously. It’s an organisation that is there to serve South African Jewry, and it has a crucial role to play. There were a multitude of issues raised, and we will be working through them,” Rabson said.

Rabson stressed that the UOS was a non-profit organisation that didn’t turn to the community to raise funds.

“I believe we will come out of this stronger, and everyone will benefit. Each member of the board believes strongly in doing their best in the interests of the community. We need to strive continually to make sure we are highly regarded by our clients and the community.”

The board includes: Harold Novick (chairperson) chief executive of Golden Catering Suppliers; Beny Porter, chief executive Legal&Tax Services; Steven Isaacson, chief executive Kervo; Kenny Rabson; Brad Sifris, chief executive Altrack; Tony Ellis, attorney at AM Ellis Attorneys; Saul Sackstein, director National Flag; Lawrence Brick, director NetFlorist; Adrian Chiger, owner Vusani Property Investments; and Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein.

UOS appoints ombud, saying it has ‘nothing to hide’
NYC mayor regrets outbreak after Hasidic funeral

With tension high between Orthodox Jews and New York officials, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio issued a regret on Tuesday for how he had handled a large Hasidic funeral in the pandemic’s early days.

In April, after a large funeral for a local rabbi in Brooklyn drew thousands of Orthodox Jews into the streets of Williamsburg, De Blasio visited the scene himself and called out “the Jewish community.” His tweet was widely criticised, and damaged what had been a relatively close relationship between the mayor and the city’s Orthodox community.

Now, with Orthodox neighbourhoods again among the city’s virus hotspots and residents chafing at restrictions imposed to curb the disease’s spread, De Blasio says he regrets what he said — and how he said it.

“I look back now and understand there was just more dialogue that was needed,” De Blasio said at a press conference on Tuesday. “I certainly got very frustrated at times when I saw large groups of people still out without masks. I certainly want to express my regret that I didn’t figure out how to do that better.”

The comments came in response to a question about a call he held with Orthodox leaders from Williamsburg and Queens on Monday night, which he said was meant to “reset” the relationship between city government and Orthodox communities.

Union leader apologises for ‘count your gold’ comment

A prominent trade-union leader and ally of former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has apologised for telling a Jewish former Labour parliamentary party to “count your gold”.

Len McCluskey, the general secretary of Unite the Union, made the remark about Peter Mandelson in an interview aired on BBC on Monday.

“I stopped listening to anything Peter said,” he said. “I was just more dialogue that was needed,”

McCluskey was responding to protests on social media and by British-Jewish groups, McCluskey said he was referencing Mandelson’s stint in banking rather than his ethnicity.

“Let me say that language is important, and I apologise to Peter Mandelson and anyone else if mine has caused him harm,” said McCluskey.

Reports of a large wedding planned for Monday in the Satmar Hasidic community in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, were met with fury over the weekend. New York Governor Andrew Cuomo even issued a special order blocking the event at which 10 000 guests were expected, which was later curtailed to include family only.

So when a Twitter account with the handle @SatmarStrong posted a video of a large wedding with thousands of people not wearing masks, it quickly racked up thousands of views and dozens of retweets. Except, it wasn’t real.

The video was taken at the wedding of Satmar Grand Rabbi Zalman Teitelbaum’s grandson in 2006, according to Abby Stein, a transgender activist, and Meyer Labin, a writer and activist. Both at the wedding, they said, and criticised the tweet for spreading disinformation.

The @SatmarStrong Twitter account was created this month, and had only 19 followers as of Tuesday. Multiple users said they were blocked by the tweet for containing lies, and it was later deleted. The account has no other tweets.

Two cemeteries and a monument vandalised

Two Jewish cemeteries and a Holocaust memorial were vandalised in Greece.

The most serious incident, which involved the smashing of several headstones, occurred at the Jewish cemetery on the island of Rhodes on 11 October, the Politismiksa news site reported on Monday.

In a separate incident in the northern city of Thessaloniki on 26 October, “With Jews you lose” was painted on a monument for 50 000 of the city’s Jews killed during the Holocaust, according to a report on Monday on the same news site.

The third incident occurred at the Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki on 10 October. The perpetrators of that incident wrote “death to Israel” on the entrance gate to the cemetery.

“It’s clear that in spite of the steps that have been taken in recent years, there is still much to be done to combat racism and intolerance,” the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki said.

Earlier this month, antisemitic slogans and graffiti reading “Jews get out” were scrawled on the stone fence of the Jewish cemetery in Nikaia, a southwestern suburb of Athens. The graffiti included the phrase “Juden raus,” German for “Jews get out,” and the symbol of the elite SS Nazi force.

*All briefs supplied by JT A

**Shabbat times this week**

**Starts**  
18:03 — Johannesburg  
18:49 — Cape Town  
17:54 — Durban  
18:12 — Bloemfontein  
19:15 — Port Elizabeth  
18:10 — East London

**Ends**  
23:12 — Johannesburg  
23:48 — Cape Town  
22:54 — Durban  
23:12 — Bloemfontein  
24:15 — Port Elizabeth  
23:10 — East London

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ack in March, COVID-19 began to bring the hearts of the South African Jewish community because of a party held thousands of kilometres away. At that time, many were unaware that a pandemic was even a possibility, but now, with the losses so many have endured, parties have once again contributed to a rise in COVID-19 cases.

A small gathering of university students has led to about 40 Johannesburg Jewish families going into quarantine, and parties celebrated over Sukkot and Simchat Torah have further added to the spike in cases. In its newsletter on Friday, 16 October, Hatzolah reported 31 new cases that week, and 52 active cases in the Johannesburg Jewish community.

Professor Barry Schoub confirmed to the SA Jewish Report that one particular function "became a super-spreaders event, transmitting the infection into families of the participants". Schoub is emeritus professor of virology at the University of the Witwatersrand and the former director of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.

A letter was sent to the community by Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and leading health professionals saying that these new infections included "a number of hospitalisations". The letter went on to say that "the majority of these cases may have come from private social gatherings and not from shuls or schools. We urge our community to be extra vigilant at this time so that the increases we see are not developing into a full-blown second wave in the Jewish community."

Dr Anton Meyberg, a top Johannesburg pulmonologist operating from the Netcare Linkfield Hospital, said, "The impact has been dramatic and massive. We are definitely seeing it in the hospital already. I wouldn't call this a 'second wave' as we are still seeing more than 1 000 cases a day in the country, so we're still in the first wave."

"I would say that parties where people were irresponsible in their behaviour precipitated an upsurge in the community. This led to a 'mini lockdown', and multiple people have been admitted to hospital. If people don’t wear masks and don’t follow guidelines, these are the ramifications. You can’t simply blame 22-year-olds – they need to be responsible, but they don’t always fully understand the ramifications of their actions."

"People have become lax in their actions, and I understand it isn’t always easy, but this surge has shown

Another health professional in Johannesburg, speaking on condition of anonymity, said it was thanks to Meyberg’s quick response that the surge had hopefully been contained.

"He put at least 40 families into quarantine, the professional said. A community member, also speaking on condition of anonymity, said the upsurge created "quite a bit of mayhem, as families had to be split up, and people generally got a big shock".

She said she knows that the university students’ gathering wasn’t a ‘wild’ event, and that the young people involved are responsible, upstanding members of the community who may have felt their party was safe because it was a circle of fewer than 10 people.

This can be compared to the more than 80 positive cases in Cape Town after a cheap drinks event at the club Tin Roof. At the time of writing, this doubled to 13 COVID-positive cases in the first two weeks of October.

"All over the world, second waves involve younger people and university students more than the first waves," said Johannesburg pulmonologist Dr Carron Zinman. But, she pointed out that "We aren’t out of the first wave, and this isn’t even the beginning of a second wave."

Doctors are clear that although community leaders and institutions have poured massive amounts of funds, time, effort, and brainpower into keeping shuls and schools safe, if people drop their guard at home or at social events, the virus will still spread in the community.

Hatzolah’s Darren Kahn said the increase in positive cases fits the eb and flow of the virus that the organisation had witnessed since the peak, and there was a similar spike after Rosh Hashanah.

"We are more concerned for the week ahead, to see the effects two weeks post-Sukkot," he told the SA Jewish Report.

"There has been some confusion as to the duration of the quarantine period, and whether quarantine is necessary for people who have previously been infected or have had a positive antibody test," said Schoub. "At present, the durability and effectiveness of immunity after infection is unclear. It’s also not known whether the persistence of symptoms – the so-called “long COVID” – is a sequel to the original illness or a second infection."

"There does appear to be long-term immunity following more severe coronavirus infections such as MERS and the original SARS of 2003. However, immunity following infection with the common-cold coronaviruses is short-lasting and ineffective, as is the case with many other human respiratory infections."

"Studies of protective antibodies following COVID-19 infection haven’t been definitive, with milder cases having only short-lived and low levels. The antibody tests performed in routine clinical laboratories aren’t for neutralising antibodies, and may not well indicate protection. Indeed, some of the proven second infections have turned out to be more severe than the first illness. A further public-health concern is that second infections could spread the virus."

"Regarding the timing of quarantine – 14 days is based on the upper limit of the incubation period of the infection," he said. "The majority of infections do take place before 10 days, and the South African health department took a decision to reduce the quarantine period to 10 days for convenience of messaging. However, 14 days remains the period recommended by most international authorities, and should be generally adhered to wherever possible."
ANC calls for release of Palestinian prisoner on hunger strike

NICOLA MILTZ

The African National Congress (ANC) has called on the Israeli government to release a suspected Palestinian terrorist who has been on an indefinite hunger strike in protest over his detention without trial.

Maher al-Akhras, 49, who is allegedly a member of a terrorist organisation, hasn’t eaten for 87 days. He is in a critical condition in a bed in Kaplan Medical Center in Rehovot, south of Tel Aviv.

Israeli authorities identified him as a prominent activist in the Palestinian extremist group Islamic Jihad. A terrorist organisation outlawed by the European Union, United States, United Kingdom, Israel, and others. He has denied membership of this group.

He was arrested in late July, and has been held in administrative detention, which allows terror suspects to be held indefinitely without trial.

The ANC in the Eastern Cape has compared his detention to that of political prisoners detained without trial during apartheid. The party’s international relations committee in the Eastern Cape issued a statement on 19 October urging the Israeli government to release Al-Akhras immediately “on humanitarian grounds”.

“Administrative detention is what the apartheid government referred to as ‘detention without trial’ and like the apartheid practice, it means to intimidate and victimise,” the statement said.

The statement, signed by Lindswel Zula, the chairperson of the international relations sub-committee and minister of social development, contained several grammatical and spelling errors and even spelt Al-Akhras’ name wrong.

Al-Akhras, a West Bank Palestinian, is being held in custody for the alleged purpose of administrative detention, which is often used against Palestinian terror suspects.

Israel has indicated that he will probably be freed by the end of November when his administrative detention ends.

According to reports, Al-Akhras drinks water and has refused all medical treatment. It’s understood his health is deteriorating rapidly. Al-Akhras’ possible death could ignite further tension between Israel and Palestinian factions in Gaza and the West Bank.

Maher al-Akhras

Naji Abbas, from Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, told the SA Jewish Report his condition was severe.

“Maher is at great risk of death. He refuses any treatment or medical tests, and monitoring from the medical train in Kaplan hospital in Israel. He is generally lucid, he is also periodically confused, very dizzy, cannot move his legs, stand, or change position in his bed and he is very rapidly deteriorating, and he complains of severe chest pains and may die any day. We call for his immediate release,” said Abbas who specialises in prisoners’ rights.

Abbas said Israel was holding more than 300 Palestinians in administrative detention.

According to the Shin Bet domestic security service, administrative detention is responsable for up to 85% of its terror in the West Bank, Al-Akhras is involved in Islamic Jihad which “seeks to destroy Israel.”

“The intelligence was received that Al-Akhras was a prominent activist in Islamic Jihad, involved in activities that endangered public safety,” the Shin Bet said in a statement.

Israel’s military prosecutors have decided not to renew his administrative detention, which is due to expire on 26 November. The High Court of Justice declined to release Al-Akhras before the release deadline. Instead, it offered a compromise: Al-Akhras could end his hunger strike now, serve out the rest of his sentence, and his administrative detention wouldn’t be renewed afterwards unless new information came to light.

Al-Akhras refused, vowing to continue striking unless he was granted immediate and unconditional release.

According to the Times of Israel, Al-Akhras lives in Silat Al-Daher outside Jenin. He has been arrested five times for alleged involvement in Islamic Jihad, according to the Shin Bet. He is the father of seven children, and owns one of the largest dairies in the West Bank. It was reported in Haaretz that in 2005 and 2019, he pled guilty to membership of a banned organisation. The newspaper said that court filings stated that he had attended Islamic Jihad marches and posted extremist material on Facebook.

His wife received a permit from Israeli authorities to visit him during the day, before returning to the West Bank each night.

On 29 September, the courts ruled Al-Akhras was too weak to remain in Ofer Prison, where he had been detained. He was subsequently transferred to the Kaplan Medical Center, where he has remained ever since, according to his lawyer, Ahlam Haddad.

Islamic Jihad’s Quds Brigades, which have committed numerous attacks against Israeli citizens, threatened Israel in the event that Al-Akhras died from his hunger strike.

Islamic Jihad has carried out numerous terror attacks against Israelis, including suicide bombings, and sees Israel’s destruction by military force. Having close ties to both Hezbollah and Iran, Islamic Jihad lauds martyrdom and rejects any truce or compromise with the “enemy.”

At the time of going to press, the department of international relations and cooperation had not responded to questions about whether it supported the ANC’s call.
For weeks, Israelis have been taking to the streets in increasing numbers demanding Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s resignation. They’re angry with the government’s handling of COVID-19 infections and the economic impact of the pandemic. But what’s really at the heart of these protests is political dissatisfaction.

Netanyahu, Israel’s longest serving prime minister, is currently on trial for fraud, bribery, and breach of trust — charges he denies. His opponents, both within his coalition government and in the opposition, believe every decision he makes is marred by personal interest.

Without fail, come any Saturday evening, his critics are waving flags and posters at many of the country’s intersections, smiling down from bridges, and shouting outside the Knesset parliament. A sense of purpose has united the demonstrators: “We are not going to be pushed back!”

As for ultra-Orthodox Israelis, the protest has come to mean something different to different people. While some placards have declared unemployment as a virus, others have called for an end to the coronavirus outbreak and its economic impact. But for many Israelis, especially those on the political right — waging a long-running battle to control Jerusalem via the ultra-Orthodox Shas party - the rallies have come to mean different things to different people. While some placards have declared unemployment as a virus, others have called for an end to the coronavirus outbreak and its economic impact. But for many Israelis, especially those on the political right — waging a long-running battle to control Jerusalem via the ultra-Orthodox Shas party - the rallies have come to mean different things to different people.

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US Saffers back Biden in "vote of their lives"

TALI FEINBERG

"This is the existential election," says Elan Burman, one of numerous South African Jewish immigrants who describe an atmosphere of fear, anger, and division ahead of the presidential election on 3 November. They hope for a better America based on values they hold dear.

Burman has lived in the US "for a total of 11 years, off and on" and currently lives in the suburbs of Washington DC, which he refers to as "the heart of the political morass".

Avi Peripyal, who has lived in Chicago for nine years, says, "Regardless of affiliation, people see this as being the most important and consequential vote of their lives." Hyton Wener, who has lived in New Jersey for 14 years, says, "People are nervous. They fear some sort of 'civil war' especially if [President Donald] Trump loses."

Burman says he will cast his ballot for Biden/Harris. "For a country that has touted itself as a paragon of democratic virtue, there is nothing that I could do other than to vote for the most decent Democrat," he says. "I worry about the far left of the Jewish community locally and globally," he says. "On most accounts, the most generous reading is that Trump is a lot of shamans who go into winning an election that though arguably legal, disenfranchise voters and discredit the notion of one person, one vote."

He says there are numerous issues at play in this election. "Should the US pursue an isolationist 'America-first' approach, or does it have a role to play in promoting and supporting progressive ideas throughout the world? Should the country pursue hardline capitalist policies, or ought the wealthiest country on earth do a better job in caring for its least fortunate as a matter of policy? Should a country be driven by science or populist sentiment?" He says that climate change is even being debated here alarms me no end," says Burman.

"It's imperative that the South African Jewish community recognise the growing tide of white supremacy in the US, and what this means for the Jewish community locally and globally," he says. "On most accounts, the most generous reading is that Trump has done nothing to stop the scourge, while others contend that he is actively fueling these supremacist flames by appealing to raw nationalism." Wener says he will also vote for Biden/Harris. "Although the country is divided, the hope is that if more people come out to vote, change can happen," he says. "I also believe that many centrist voters will swing against Trump. Many of them are voting for anyone but Trump."

"South African Jews need to understand that this election shouldn't be won on one issue," Wener says. "Trump is an egocentric racist who is tearing at the fabric of America. His strong-arm tactics, blatant disregard for science, and belittling of anyone who doesn’t agree with him isn’t an example for the rest of the world, especially our children."

For Wener, the president’s tweet saying, "Don’t be afraid of COVID’ is personal, as he lost his father to the pandemic. "In the US alone, more than 225 000 have died from coronavirus. His constant downplaying of a global pandemic is a slap in the face for those that have died, as well as their families left behind to pick up the pieces," he says. "On most accounts, the most generous reading is that Trump response was simply unforgivable."

Other South African expatriates in the US are experiencing a similar shift. Cyril Wayburne, who has lived in the US since 2016 and resides in DC, which he refers to as "the heart of the political morass," says, "Most of all, the president should unite Americans. Trump doesn’t even try. He doesn’t behave with civility, and embarrasses our country. His character and behaviour is enough for me to write him off as a candidate. He’s a bully, and a bad example for our children. People are tired of the hate and division. They want a president and government that won’t cause our blood pressure to rise whenever we turn on the television."

Peripyal says he will also vote for Biden/Harris, and he thinks they will win. "As polarised as this country is, I think the majority of folks understand that Trump’s presidency has been, on the whole, detrimental to our health, democracy, climate, and image abroad. We all lose if the world becomes further divided, and democratic values continue to erode." He has a close group of Israeli expatriate friends who he, says, "were once Trump supporters until just recently. While they think Trump has been ‘good for Israel’, they now realise that the rest of his actions are egregious enough to call it quits. One friend said that the deadly consequence of his COVID-19
The Kretzmer from Kroonstad who made Les Misérables sing

TALI FEINBERG

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erbert Kretzmer, who wrote the lyrics for the English version of Les Misérables, died in London on 14 October, nine days after his 95th birthday.

Known to family and friends as “Herbie”, he was born in Kroonstad, south of Johannesburg in 1925. He was one of four sons of Jewish-Lithuanian immigrants who ran a grocery shop and later a prosperous furniture store. “Herbie always said we were just a little ‘okey’ from Kroonstad, and he didn’t know why people imagined he was something more than that,” says his niece, Linda Rosenberg.

Almost all of Herbie’s paternal cousins, grandparents, uncles, and aunts were murdered on 8 August 1941 (in the Holocaust), “wrote Michael Kretzmer, whose late father was...
The vital relevance of our past to the present

JORDAN MOSHE

History reverberates through the present, and the way our memories are formed depends on how we perceive our past. “We’ve been made increasingly aware of the extent to which the past is present in our physical landscape, our political discourse, and our education,” said Shadi Gilbert, professor of modern Jewish history at University College London.

“Let’s become a subject of heated debate. What goes on when history enters the public realm?” Black Lives Matter, Rhodes Must Fall, and the Black student movement have shown the extent to which the past persists, posing questions about what happens when history enters the present public space.

Together with Jonathan Jansen, professor of education at Stellenbosch University, Gilbert unpacked the facts of collective memory in a webinar hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre last week.

“Professor Maurice Halbwachs suggested that even our personal memories are formed by group memory, not by needs and desires that don’t enter the public space. But that it’s driven less by a faithful replication of the past but more by the need to find a way to tell a personal story in the present. “Memory isn’t an inevitable process but formed through a selective process of viewing the past and often shaping it with our present needs and interests,” she said. “We pick what documentation of the past than by the need to find a way to tell a personal story in the present. “Memory isn’t an inevitable process but formed through a selective process of viewing the past and often shaping it with our present needs and interests,” she said. “We pick what how it should be remembered have varied across time and groups, and there is very little agreement about what meaning should be drawn.”

Different approaches to commemorating the Holocaust are evident in the variety of ways in which it is presented in museums globally, Gilbert said. “They remember the past in different ways,” she said. “Official memory in Israel was torn between the need to remember and the desire to forget.”

In 1948, Israel moved to do away with the image of the Boer of Jaffa, but the Holocaust had proven its resilience, and Jews regardless of state, Jews would always be vulnerable. “This posed a real challenge of how to narrate the past,” said Gilbert. “In early years, you see Israelis Holocaust commemoration making heresies about the past and challenging the story, emphasising rebirth. The Holocaust is placed on a continuum of Jewish life and after, and Israel becomes part of that narrative.”

The American approach differed considerably immediately after World War II. “There was a conscious decision by American Jewish leadership to avoid speaking about what had happened to avoid drawing attention,” she said. “Jews were emigrating to the United States, and it was better they didn’t draw attention to themselves.”

This turned around in the 1980s, but where Holocaust memorialist and museums were built, their motivation differed greatly. Said Gilbert, “The main themes were American ideals. Liberty, pluralism, and democracy were placed at the centre. They preserved American ideals and enabled Americans to realise their own idealised reasons for being, providing a way through which to mediate the past.”

“It’s neither good nor bad, but it’s inevitable. Grappling with the past involves stepping back and untying the relationship between history and the way it’s narrated in the present.” According to Jansen, the situation is equally complex in South Africa.

“I often puzzled by the way in which South Africa is at times obsessed with memorials, whether they build statues or buildings,” he said. “Since 2015, we’ve watched how people have responded to dealing with their past through interacting with these memorials.”

“Before 2015, we were aware of statues like Rhodes, but we just walked past them on campuses. Suddenly students are throwing away the accent, it sets off progressively the most violent episode in the history of higher education here, and calls for a de-colonisation of the university space.

“When did a statue become such a sudden obsession?”

In the weeks that followed the Rhodes statue incident, students took to attacking anything that resembled the statue, whether they were buildings or statues, he said. “Since 2015, we’ve watched how people have responded to dealing with their past through interacting with these memorials.”

“I’m often puzzled by the way in which students are treated; they are made to feel guilty. They feel that the commitment to the past is intolerable to have Rhodes statues in South Africa. The situation is equally complex in South Africa. “Before 2015, we were aware of statues like Rhodes, but we just walked past them on campuses. Suddenly students are throwing away the accent, it sets off progressively the most violent episode in the history of higher education here, and calls for a de-colonisation of the university space.

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“When did it happen that the Rhodes statue was a proxy for deep discontent in post-apartheid society.

“I don’t think it actually had to do with Rhodes,” he said. “No one was troubled by the statue for decades. Students were grievances with a corrupt government and rampant inequality. The tax wasn’t about the statue but what it represents institutionally, coupled with leasing out because a democratic promise of 1994 wasn’t kept.”

“The indiscriminate nature of the attacks reflects a fatal disconnect between politics and pedagogy. You cannot even ask how the statues can be repurposed, something I tried to discuss with students. There was no appetite at all, and thus no place for learning – they wanted it burned.”

“It’s an extremely dangerous thing regardless of whether politicians or religious groups think that this is a useful thing to do.”

“The politics of memory in South Africa are highly selective and contradictory, Jansen says. “Rhodes’ statue came down, but when discussions about renaming the university went ahead, the senate decided to keep the name because of brand value,” he said. “If the principle at stake is that it is intolerable to have Rhodes remembered so prominently, why is the name being kept?”

“The Rhodes scholarship is another example.

“Some students who were at the heart of the protest were the same ones planning to be funded to study at Oxford with a Rhodes scholarship,” said Jansen. “This makes no sense. If this is a principle, there must be consistency. You cannot pick and choose.”

The statue of Cecil John Rhodes

Universities contemplate a changing Middle East

STEFAN GRUZ

In an age when Israeli tertiary institutions are frequently targets for boycotts, the universities of Haifa and the Free State have bucked the trend and cemented a partnership.

The two universities signed a memorandum of understanding to collaborate closely in 2018. On 14 October, they held a joint webinar to discuss university shifts in the Middle East.

Topics included the prospects of a nuclear-armed Iran, the legacy of the Abraham Accords signed between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and China’s military base in the Horn of Africa.

“The Palestinian movement is at a crossroads,” said Dr Eben Coetzee from the University of the Free State. “There is a realisation that it is not going to be a game changer in an international context.”

He pointed to the Abraham Accords as a “game changer” in an international order primed for these developments. “The Palestinians have worked to create a broad Arab and Muslim alliance against Israel,” Zelkovitz said, “and have asked those states not to normalise ties with Israel until there is a permanent agreement on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.”

The UAE and Bahrain agreements mark the collapse of the Palestinian conception of negotiations.

“The accords have prompted yet another attempt at reconciliation between Hamas in Gaza and Fatah in the West Bank. Incompletely talks took place in Turkey, which forms an anti-Israel axis with Iran and Qatar. Both parties are riven with factionalism and sectarianism, which will make implementation difficult.”

Said Zelkovitz, “The Palestinian movement is at one of its lowest points ever. And it seems the Arab world doesn’t care. As a younger generation takes over in the Gulf, they lack the commitment to the Palestinian issues of their parents. The Palestinians need a new strategy to answer the onset of normalisation.”

The UFS’ Professor Theo Neethling analysed the significance of China’s military base in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa, its first outside Asia. He outlined how the base is used for counter-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, intelligence gathering, protecting Chinese citizens in East Africa, peacekeeping operations, and counter-terrorism.

He also described China’s footprint in North Africa, especially its ties to Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco. Both parties are also involved in arms, agriculture, and infrastructure.

“Under the base is a Chinese expression of power in the Middle East and North Africa, and a springboard for its ambitions,” Neethling said. “I spoke to presenters discussed social media in China, Hezbollah, and Iran’s presence in the royal families in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, contemporary Iraqi conflicts, futures in the Middle East, managing identity politics, and the politics around the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.”

The Haifa-UFS partnership is only set to gain in momentum and significance.
online fame is the currency of our youth, say social-media experts who admit that while it can be dangerous and a damaging road to travel, it can also act as a force for good. 
Youth today measure their validation based on the number of followers they have on platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok.

“It’s the currency they deal in,” said clinical and forensic psychologist Pam Tudin, a youth and social-media expert. And they will go to great lengths to acquire it in the ever-changing digital world — the only world they know.

Some even purchase Instagram followers and likes for pictures.

“On a good day, a teen is tussling in terms of their self-esteem. There are so many areas in which they feel they come up ‘less than’. If you have fame online, you can somehow overcome some of those feelings of inadequacy,” she said.

However, psychologists agree it’s a dangerous achievement for a lot of teens because sustaining it is exhausting.

“Many have a deep feeling inside that at any moment, they are going to fall off the edge of the cliff,” said Tudin, and then the real struggle of who am I without this fame? is ‘very hard for them to deal with.’

This feeling can be the same for ordinary youth in different suburbs, and those who have already hit the big time on YouTube — megastars with mega followers who your children scroll, follow, and like with religious enthusiasm every day.

Ever wondered what your child is doing in his or her room for hours on end? They are downloading YouTube videos of their favourite online content creators from sporting stars, fitness enthusiasts to pranksters, dancers, and performers; or they’re gaming themselves or watching famous YouTubers play their favourite game. It’s likely highly that your kids are dreaming of becoming famous on YouTube too one day.

With a big enough follower base, vlogging — posting videos online — can prove to be highly lucrative. YouTube original content creators are generating massive revenue, and kids are locking their lips with envy. If a YouTuber reaches 1 000 subscribers and 4 000 watch hours within a year, they can monetise their account with advertisements.

“Let go of the wagging finger approach and focus on the ongoing legacy of excellence” in Jewish education and give of himself in a broader way.

Rabbi Ricky Seeff, formerly the principal of King David Victory Park Primary School (KDVP), has taken up his new position as general director of the South African Board of Jewish Education (SABJE). This makes him responsible for the financial and operational management of 11 Jewish schools, including nine King David’s schools, and for the vision and strategy of the board.

At the helm of KDVP, he revamped the school organisationally and introduced future-focused infrastructure like the media hub. He was an inspirational leader.

Describing the primary school as being in an “excellent place”, he says the board is an avenue for him to be able to contribute to the “ongoing legacy of excellence” in Jewish education and give of himself in a broader way.

He will share the title of general director with Rabbi Craig Kacev until 2020.

Kacev, who Seeff describes as a leader and mentor, has held the position for the past 17 years.

Seeff doesn’t envision making major changes in his new position. “The schools are excellently run, operationally, financially, and educationally, with tremendous professionalism and robust processes on all levels. They are excellently enhanced by partnership with the board,” he says.

But, he stresses, the educational landscape is changing worldwide, and “we will need to ensure we are innovative, creative, and community-oriented to make sure that our reputation and impact continues”.

“The priorities for me are to investigate areas of potential education, that innovation in order to make King David an industry leader in deep, thoughtful, future-focused education, and to enhance the scope and impact of the Jewish education offering,” he says. “We are investigating the addition of a chumash curriculum in the coming year, and will ensure that our students have a deep-rooted connection to their Judaism, intellectually and emotionally.”

There is no doubt that Jewish education has been affected by emigration and a shrinking community. But, Seeff says it’s not a crisis: “King David’s numbers have remained largely constant, or within a 3% variability, for the past 10 years, and we will continue to respond successfully to the ever-changing needs in the community for well over 3 000 students in our schools.”

“In spite of the challenges of 2020 that independent schools have faced, our community has remained resilient, and we will emerge stronger in the future,” he says.

There are a number of excellent schools in Johannesburg, but none are able to offer what King David does. A King David education is far more than our excellent academic results. It transcends pure academics. What makes our schools special is the connection to community, the connection to a shared history, and the self-belief we imbue in our students that they can have an impact on the world in remarkable ways.”

Seeff emphasises the importance of community and values at this time. “Noah’s Ark is a paradigm for how to survive a world in chaos,” he says. “One needs a safe place, surrounded by family and community, in which one focuses on values and what’s really important in order to weather the storm. After 2020, we need community and community institutions more than ever, and I believe that the SABJE plays this role in the lives of our families. The board is a critical asset that I’m proud of, and I hope, in years to come, you can be as proud of the board as I am.”

* Each King David campus has schools which are viewed independently due to their size and management structure.
Herzlia donates data, routers to matric partners

It is a relief to see the stress of COVID-19 and finals, at Herzlia High School in Cape Town, have raised sufficient funds to buy data and routers for 108 matric students at Gardens Commercial High School (GCHS), Herzlia’s partnership school.

Under the banner of “Two Schools, One Goal”, 108 routers (valued at R600 each) and R75 000 worth of data (valued at R600 each) was donated to GCHS, and R40 000 worth of data (valued at R1 000 each) was donated to the Stellenbosch High School, as announced in “Schools, One Goal”, 108 (GCHS), Herzlia’s partnership school.

Recently, along with a message for the matric students at Gardens High School, we were informed that your schooling came to an abrupt stop. We were fortunate enough to continue schooling online and still we are overwhelmed by it all. We felt it was our responsibility to help out in any way we could.

Initially, we struggled to define our exact goals. We wanted to help out, but we weren’t sure how. We began by making contact with your school, which told us that data was an immediate concern.

We spoke to a couple of matric students who shared their struggle of being unable to access online learning resources and lessons. This set us to work.

“Ambassador, email correspondence, meetings, and phone calls, we found a company willing to donate all 108 Wi-Fi routers, and began to fundraise through a back a buddy page to meet a negotiated MTN data deal.”

“We managed to raise enough to give each of you 20GB of data for the next three months, and a Wi-Fi router. The routers have been donated to GCHS, and should be returned at the end of the year for the following matric year to use.”

“We hope you take this opportunity to access online resources, past papers, pre-recorded lessons, and study for finals to the best of your ability. We hope that we have made a difference.”

Yeshiva College High pays tribute to a true tzaddik

High school students of Yeshiva College gathered on the field with a heavy heart on Thursday, 15 October, for a socially distanced tribute to late South Yeshiva Rabbi Avraham Tannzer Zt’l, Tannzer Livracha.

In the introductory speeches, Rabbi Tannzer was described as a walking, living pizkei avot - the embodiment of Jewish values. It was fitting, that the giant who internalised pizkei avot had a passion for teaching its deep wisdom.

And so, on the first Thursday back at school, the previous talmidim (students) of Rabbi Tannzer sat on the field of the school he had nurtured with love and learnt pizkei avot for an aliyah of his neshama.

It was a moment of deep pain for the loss of the tzaddik, who was also a mentor and friend, but one of great appreciation. As every student looked from the nursery school behind them to the glorious Yeshiva College Shul to their right, they understood that the beautiful school and Torah education they were privileged to receive was the fruit of Rabbi and Robbietz Tannzer’s labours of love. Indeed, they are their infinite legacy.

Letters

HUNTER’S INCLUSION ON ACADEMIC PANEL GIVES HIS AGENDA LEGITIMACY

It was distressing that Mitchell Jaffe Hunter, a vehement supporter of the University of Cape Town’s (UCT’s) Israel-boycott campaign, was given centre stage on a panel on Jewish history in South African public life. The panel was part of recent South African Jewish history held by the Kaplan Centre at UCT with the Institute of Jewish Studies of University College London.

Hunter is a member of South African Jews for a Free Palestine, which supports and lends legitimacy to the Boycott, Divest, Sanctions (BDS) movement’s noxious antisemitism. He was given an unduly elevated platform on a panel that included representatives of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), the South African Jewish Museum, and the South African Holocaust Centre, none of whom were invited to submit papers or abstracts. Hunter was the only one of the session’s panellists to have a paper abstract, based on his MA thesis, included in the conference.

The organisers acknowledged that they were fully cognisant of his BDS activities. When we contacted Professor Mendelsohn to raise our concerns, he claimed that though the conveners had discussed Hunter’s BDS background, the panel discussion wasn’t explicitly related to Israel so gave no cause for concern.

We are astounded by the inability to understand the legitimacy they lent him and his divisive and dangerous political agenda. We were surprised, also, to read an email to participants claiming, “It is news to us that he is one of the leaders of the IUCT academic-boycott effort,” and to learn of Professor Gilbert’s “surprise” that the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) didn’t make contact with him about the issue. Did Mendelsohn fail to discuss our concerns with his co-convenor? At no point did he recommend we contact her, also, given their partnership, it never occurred to us to do so.

Contrary to Gilbert’s claim that we are trying to “curtail the academic freedom exercised at the conference”, neither the SAZF nor the petition circulated by Dave Kaplan of “concerned citizens for academic freedom”, called for the boycotter not to present at the conference. Having championed the fight for academic freedom at UCT alongside the SAJBD, the SAZF strongly upholds academic freedom.

However, we always call out those who work to delegitimise the Jewish state and harm South African Jews. For this reason, we welcomed the conference organisers, asking them to ensure that, in light of the political campaigns to boycott Israel and Israelis from academic and public life, the panel should be balanced by input on the panel discussion from an Israeli academic. They rejected our request on the flimsy grounds that Israelis appeared on other (unrelated) panels.

It’s deeply ironic that we are accused of being boycotters when we call out those who advocate for boycotts of Israel.

They would use the privilege and cloak of academic freedom to deny the same to others. Academic freedom doesn’t operate in a vacuum, and shouldn’t be abused in pursuit of political agendas. It’s thoroughly reprehensible to work with the enemies of the Jewish people, inside against South African Jewry, and advocate that Israel doesn’t have a right to exist.

The Kaplan Centre ought to be cognisant of its responsibility to the South African Jewish community. The conference has no mandate to increase the risk of dangerous outcomes for South African Jews in the real world beyond the ivory tower.

– Rowan Polovin, SAZF national chairperson, Johannesburg

~ Saved South Africa

Mandy Wiener

How Whistleblowers Saved South Africa

SHIMONI’S ANALYSIS OVERLOOKS JEWS WHO WEREN’T ANC SUPPORTERS

Gideon Shimoni questions whether Jewish values Torch Commandos, Springbok Legion, Black Sash, Operation Hunger, and the South African Institute of Race Relations. Many Jewish businessmen also pushed against racially discriminatory laws.

And, why overlook those Jews in the parliamentary opposition, and the fact that Helen Suzman wouldn’t have been the sole Progressive Party member of parliament for many years without Jewish support in her Houghton seat? I know from my own extensive political canvassing that other immigrant groups like Greeks, Italians, and Portuguese were largely National Party supporters, unlike most Jews.

It’s a mistake to accord exclusive anti-apartheid virtue to Jews like Joe Slovo and Ronnie Kasrils, who would gladly have engaged in communist repression if it weren’t for the fall of the Berlin Wall. Where were their voices when their beloved Soviet Union persecuted Jews and crushed revolts in Eastern Europe? – Jack Bloom, Johannesburg

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That damn kitten

My parents were married for 55 years, and fought for most of them. And then, when my mother died three years ago, my father realised there was nothing left worth fighting for.

He passed away last week. At the funeral, I heard a story that I didn’t know. I knew, of course, of one of their arguments as if they had persisted all their married life, but somehow, I missed the closing chapter. It’s amazing what we learn after the death of a loved one. This is what I heard at the funeral.

The backstory is as follows: it’s a Jewish custom that on Yom Kippur, married men wear a kittel (a white robe made of cotton). My mother’s family came from Germany, and it was her tradition for men to wear the kittel on Rosh Hashanah as well as Yom Kippur. Each year, my mother asked, pleaded, begged, bullied, bribed, and then threatened my father into wearing it on Rosh Hashanah. He always refused.

The fight generally started a day or so before and continued the whole way to shul. Once there, he would grudgingly take it with him in the men’s section, but not put it on. My mother, not one to give up, would pursue him in her loudest “psst”, until everyone but not put it on. My mother, not one to take it with him to the men’s section, shul. Once there, he would grudgingly make sure that he put it on. "The. Argument would take place to this point, she would invariably him in her loudest “psst”, until everyone but not put it on. My mother, not one to give up, would pursue him in her loudest “psst”, until everyone.

What I didn’t know was that the first year of Rosh Hashanah following her death, my younger brother walked into shul to see my father wearing his “damn kittel”. He was shocked, and after debating whether to say anything, he decided that he needed to. And so, he put the question to my father. “How come you’re wearing a kittel on Rosh Hashanah this year when you refused to do so year after year?”

My father, not one for deep explanations, without stopping to consider the answer, waved away his question with a gesture and said, “What’s the point of arguing, she isn’t here anymore.”

For him, it simply just wasn’t fun anymore. People often use the expression “oil and water” or “fire and water”. My parents were fire and fire. Passionate, argumentative, and all consuming. To be in their presence was to be buffeted in their warmth and infused with their light. It could also sometimes be a little too hot to handle, but I suspect that this was felt more by their children than by others.

A common refrain at the shiva house this week is that the death of my father was the “end of an era”. Indeed, in many ways it is the journey of his life from a childhood of poverty in Pilgrim’s Rest, to putting himself through university by working underground in the mines, to building a family, business and legacy along with my mother. She was the product of damaged survivors. This all formed the “seed” of a generation which wasn’t easy, but which was clear about what was important.

They were part of a generation that was clear about what was worth fighting for.

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