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SAJBD launches R9-million fund for food aid countrywide

JORDAN MOSHE

When President Cyril Ramaphosa announced an extension of the national lockdown, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) realised it had to come up with a strategy to help.

While the Board recognised the importance of the restrictions, the painful reality that thousands of people would risk starvation as a result meant it had to do something impactful.

“We understood that people in our country were going to face a lot of hardship,” says Wendy Kahn, the national director of the SAJBD. “We understood it was time to co-ordinate an outreach initiative.

“There’s a lot of distress around us, and this is a time that our community can make a difference.”

To this end, the SAJBD announced this week the creation of a R9-million fund to feed the communities most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this initiative, thousands of desperate people across the country will have their basic needs met through the supply of food parcels.

Kahn says that the SAJBD wanted to create a conduit through which the Jewish community could donate food to those who needed it most, and through which it

could ensure that the food would reach the beneficiaries directly.

“We have seen the most incredible initiatives launched by community members and organisations,” says Kahn. “People who are really able to improve the lives of those around us and alleviate the hunger crisis we are seeing.”

The Board has involved itself in numerous initiatives to support the Jewish community since the onset of the lockdown, but it was equally vital to assist the broader community. This includes establishing numerous CANs (Community Action Networks) directly linking donors with communities in need. Nearly two thirds of CANs operating in Gauteng are run by members of the Jewish community, with thousands having already benefited from these initiatives.

Says Kahn, “It’s important to be concerned with what’s going on beyond us – the real crisis of hunger. That’s why we’ve taken the outreach we are already involved in and elevated it to another level to help people across the country.”

The Board’s fund has been made possible largely by a generous contribution from an anonymous donor, with the balance given by various Jewish organisations and community members.

“Every cent of that money will be utilised in addressing the hunger in our country and to make sure that the food is taken directly from our organisation to those who need it

most,” says Kahn.

“Initially, we will be operating in six provinces in both rural and urban areas. However, once the fund becomes properly operational, we will reach hundreds of thousands of South Africans in need.

“The Board has a long history of being involved in outreach initiatives, including the xenophobia crises, floods, fires, or other disasters. Our community is incredibly generous, and is committed to improving the lives of people around us. At difficult times, the Board has created a framework for the community to become involved in alleviating the distress of others.”

This project is being run in collaboration with the Angel Network, a non-governmental organisation which has helped to feed, clothe, house, and educate more than 30 000 citizens across six provinces since its establishment more than four years ago.

“Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, the needs have been overwhelming,” said Angel Network founder Glynne Wolman. “While we prefer to give a hand up, it’s currently all about handouts in order to save millions from dying of starvation.

“Never before has the need been so great from so many who have so little. This donation will give them hope and provide them with the lifeline they so desperately need.”

The partnership will ensure that the

Board can establish the most effective way of distributing supplies, with the Angel Network well-connected with various suppliers able to meet the charity’s needs.

“The extent of need is devastating,” says Wolman. “People literally don’t know how they are going to feed themselves. Our suppliers are travelling everywhere to deliver food. We just need to give them a name, cell phone number, and an address, and they’re there within a day.”

People from across the spectrum are appealing to the Angel Network for help. Whatever their nationality or race, Wolman maintains that it’s imperative to assist them. The organisation has about 90 beneficiaries, through which it has provided for more than 80 000 people.

“White, black, local, or foreigner, there is no divide in a situation like this,” she says. “People are people, and everyone has to eat.”

“We’re taking calls and managing distribution 14 hours a day. I have no ‘to-do’ list. The calls and messages start pouring in the moment the day begins. We’re all doing what we can under the circumstances.”

The SAJBD’s fund is yet another initiative by the Jewish community to assist those who are struggling within and without the community. Among others, it follows the recent establishment of Gesher, a relief fund launched by Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein, which offers interest-free loans to small businesses in the community that are battling to survive.

iShuk, another recently launched initiative, also aims to support Jewish businesses suffering in the current economic climate. The brainchild of the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), it provides a unique opportunity for community members to support local businesses.

“The concept is simple, and is one that has worked successfully in other places,” says Benji Shulman, the head of public policy at the SAZF.

“Many businesses have no access to their customers at the moment, so we ask the businesses to give an iShuk offering – a special – that will allow people to use their services after lockdown has ended.”

Businesses in the community can register on the platform, after which the public can review and purchase the various deals on offer. Vouchers are valid for 12 months, and the businesses which sign up incur no registration fees.

“People can be part of helping our small businesses stay afloat,” says Shulman. “We are a community of entrepreneurs, and we have to find whatever way we can to protect our small businesses at this time. Go onto the website, and use the money you’re not spending on petrol to help small businesses survive so that we’ll still have them around in future.”

- To contribute to the SAJBD fund, contact Kahn at wendy@sajbd.org
- Visit the iShuk platform at <https://ishuk.co.za/>

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Photo: Ian Ossendwyer

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16:53	17:44	Durban
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17:06	17:59	Port Elizabeth
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Great grandmother makes miracle recovery

TALI FEINBERG

“There were days when the doctors didn’t think she would make it. They would come in some mornings and ask if my mother was still alive. They told me this after she recovered. It’s a miracle.”

So says Capetonian Daylene Segall, whose mother Millicent (Milly) Bodill contracted COVID-19 at the age of 78. The great grandmother had put herself into lockdown in her home a week before the national lockdown commenced and had left home only once to collect her pension. Her family suspects that this is when she got the virus.

“It’s a miracle because she is asthmatic and elderly. In addition, she had been in hospital for a different reason three weeks before she got the virus, and during that hospital stay, her heart stopped twice. So she was already weak before

she caught the virus,” says Segall.

Her mother’s diagnosis came as a complete shock, and soon afterwards, Segall began to write daily updates on Facebook. “I wanted people to realise that this virus is serious, and it can happen to anyone,” she says.

In her first update on 11 April, she said, “If you think COVID-19 can’t hit your family, you’re wrong! Even if you go out only once, this could be your story.”

She described her mother’s symptoms. “She started with a headache, then experienced extreme

waves of nausea, and lack of hunger. Next, her fever spiked, and she was put on oxygen and a drip. Then, in spite of not having much fluid intake, she needed to pass water excessively. These have all subsided. The new symptom is that everything tastes bitter – her taste buds have been affected – and she is extremely tired.”

Every day was different. On some days, her mother’s oxygen was low, and her symptoms of nausea, taste change, and tiredness persisted. Segall struggled to communicate with her

mother, who had only an old cell phone to make calls, and couldn’t understand why her daughter didn’t visit her.

On 19 April, her mother developed a secondary infection, and was put on antibiotics. She continued to be stable, but on 21 April, Segall reported, “I spoke to my mom this morning, and she sounded all sleepy. I could hardly understand a word she said. I phoned back at about 09:30, and she sounded even worse than earlier. She wasn’t able to talk to me at all, but complained of a severe headache.

“Her doctor said her breathing wasn’t good, and they had done more blood gas tests. The bottom line is she has gone back four or more steps, even though it is ‘day 12’ since she has been diagnosed, and probably day 17 or 18 since being infected.

“The doctor said each person is different, and they are all still learning about this terrible virus. He spoke of a ventilator and my heart just sank. He said he hoped she wouldn’t need it, and asked how I felt about it. How do you answer that question? I told my mom everyone was praying for her recovery, and all the while the tears were rolling down my face.”

The next day, 22 April, Segall wrote, “It really

is a roller coaster ride,” as her mother made a dramatic improvement. Yet on 23 April, she again began to decline, possibly needing a blood transfusion. The next day, her mother was unsettled and emotional, but stable.

She continued to improve, but on 27 April, she needed oxygen. Her breathing was laboured as her one lung had been damaged by the virus. Finally, on 30 April, in a miraculous turn of events, she was allowed to go home.

“It was incredibly emotional. I didn’t know if



Millicent (Milly) Bodill (in red) surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren

I would ever see her again,” says Segall, her voice betraying emotion. In a video that has since gone viral, staff clap as her mother is wheeled into an ambulance that transported her home. She was tested again for COVID-19, and the results came back negative. She is isolating at home with a carer, and remains weak, but is gaining strength every day.

Bodill was treated at Mediclinic Milnerton Hospital. Speaking to *Mediclinic South Africa* magazine, Bodill said, “I’m a survivor. I’m a miracle. I was truly at death’s door because I was so sick, but my doctor said to me, ‘Fight with me, and I will see you through’, and he did. The nurses also fought so hard, the whole staff waged war for me. Everyone is working hard for the patients here, and I want the world to know.

“I want uncle Cyril [President Ramaphosa] to know that it’s the doctors and nurses on the ground that are the true heroes. I want him to acknowledge these special people at every hospital, how they are saving lives like mine. I also want people to know that you can survive. I was very ill, but the staff fought. They spent hours helping me. And I have come out on the other side.”

Torah Thought

Be respectful – it’s a *mitzvah*

The portion of Bechukotai contains the warnings of the tragedies that may befall the Jewish people if they stray from the ways of the Torah. The section begins with the words, “*Im bechukotai timasu* (If you consider my laws loathsome).

The obvious question is, does anyone really consider the *mitzvot* “loathsome”? Understandably, there are those less committed to the dictates of the Torah and less religiously observant, but do they despise Torah and *mitzvot*?

Perhaps the verse isn’t referring to the hatred of *mitzvot*. Perhaps it refers to the cynicism that some may have towards more observant members of the community.

We can be proud of our strong *ba’al teshuva* community in South Africa (the return of secular Jews to religious Judaism). I, too, am a *ba’al teshuva*, and, like me, you may have encountered a degree of hostility, scorn, and derision from friends or family members when you embarked on your journey of self-growth. Thank G-d, my immediate family was supportive.

All too often, when people choose to become more observant or to take on additional stringencies in their Torah observance, they are met with contempt. You may have chosen to dress more modestly or refrain from listening to certain types of music. Rather than being shown respect and admiration, you may have been ridiculed and accused of fanaticism. You have probably even been asked, “Are we no longer good enough for you?” or “Do you think you’re better than us?”

The Torah is telling us to be more tolerant and respectful towards each other.

And, of course, it works both ways. Those who have chosen a more religious lifestyle must show tolerance and understanding of those who haven’t embraced such a lifestyle.

Thus, when Hashem speaks of a time when you “consider my laws loathsome”, perhaps He doesn’t refer to direct hatred of the *mitzvot* but rather contempt of those who adhere to a religious lifestyle. However, if

we really think about it, such an interpretation doesn’t veer dramatically away from the simple explanation of the verse. You see, if we despise people for their diligent observance of *mitzvot*, we are effectively despising Hashem, who gave us the Torah and commanded us to observe *mitzvot*. Surely none of us want to be defined in such terms?

If you aren’t perhaps as religious as your fellow person, don’t despair. By respecting his ways, you are according the greatest respect to Hashem and His Torah.

We have just celebrated Lag Ba’Omer, a day that symbolises Jewish unity. Unity doesn’t denote sameness. However, we need to realise that we are all the children of Hashem and, thus, one big family.

Let’s draw inspiration from this reading and from Lag Ba’Omer, and be more respectful and tolerant towards our brothers and sisters.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Rodney Richard,
Emmarentia Shul



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Highlands House ramps up testing after 12 residents test positive

TALI FEINBERG

“Getting the diagnosis that I was positive for COVID-19 was an indescribable shock,” says Highlands House resident David Myers (77). “It’s a feeling that will stay with me forever. Knowing that I’m in such a high-risk category, it felt like a death sentence.”

However, “As the days went on and I continued to be asymptomatic, I thought, ‘maybe I can get through this’. I’m now on day nine since my diagnosis, and I couldn’t have been better cared for,” he told the SA Jewish Report on Monday, 11 May.



Highlands House residents enjoying Valentines Day on 14 February (before lockdown)

Myers is one of 12 residents of Highlands House Home for Jewish Aged in Cape Town who tested positive for the virus after another resident who tested positive died on 2 May. Since then, the home has conducted 460 coronavirus tests in four days, and has the results for 457 of them, says Dr Leon Geffen, appointed by the home to oversee the crisis.

Geffen, who is doing the work voluntarily, has been on the panel of the World Health Organization Infection and Prevention Control Guidance for Long-Term Care Facilities, and is working with the Western Cape health department to develop an action plan for older people during the COVID-19

pandemic.

He addressed concerned community members in a webinar on Sunday, 10 May, explaining that the home has 188 residents, with an average age of 83 years old. It has 250 members of staff, many of them outsourced.

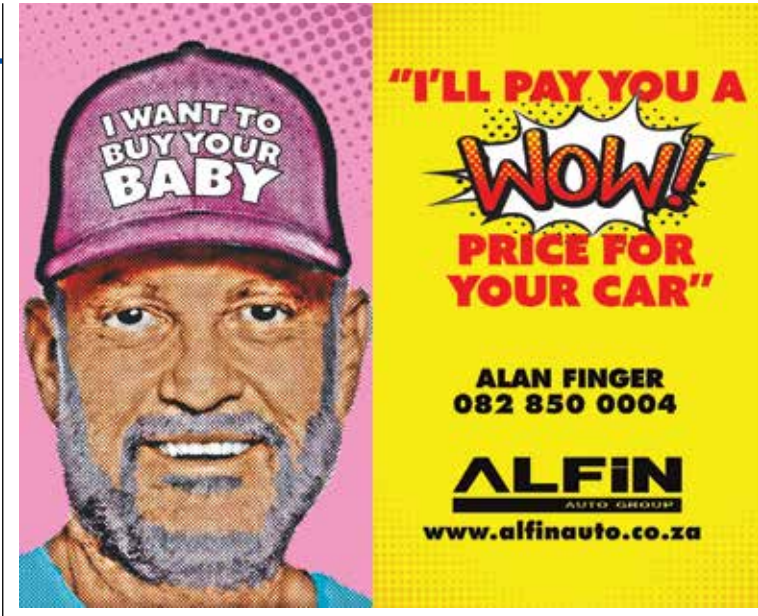
All staff members were tested for coronavirus, and 26 tested positive. This means that there are a total of 38 positive cases at the home among residents and staff. This number may increase.

It’s unclear how the virus entered the home. In a statement on 4 May, the home’s management said,

for other symptoms. They have been issued three masks each, which are compulsory at all times. They are using alcohol-based sanitiser, and there is one dispenser for every three rooms.

Residents have also been issued masks, and have been told that when they leave their rooms to use the ablutions, they are to wear their masks. Should a staff member enter their room, they should put on their mask.

Some gaps in staff, especially in nursing, haven’t been filled as it’s impossible to find nurses at this time. After a number of kitchen staff tested positive, an entirely new kitchen staff



lower levels of oxygen.

Asked if COVID-19-positive residents who don’t eat or drink because of nausea and appetite loss will be put on a drip to prevent dehydration, he explained that the home isn’t a hospital. If family would like the resident to go on a drip, they must ask for the resident to be taken to hospital.

Geffen says that 140 meals are served three times a day to residents’ rooms. Those that have tested negative can use communal showers. Those who have tested positive can’t use these communal areas.

Myers says he is in isolation in his room, where he is seen by a doctor once a day, and is monitored closely by nurses who test his oxygen levels and temperature. He is brought meals three times a day. He can’t shower or bathe as there is no bathroom attached to his room, but he washes with water from his sink. In the greater scheme of things, he understands this is a sacrifice that has to be made.

“I know people have been critical [of Highlands House], but I don’t think they are fully in the picture,” he says. “The team have been unbelievable, and I can’t praise them enough.” His daughter, Caryn Gootkin, agrees that she couldn’t ask for better care. While her father’s diagnosis came as a shock, she says she has been put at ease by the doctors caring for him and the management of the home.

Two other (COVID-19-negative) residents told the SA Jewish Report that they were satisfied with their care, and felt safe at the home. One family member of a

(COVID-19-negative) resident expressed satisfaction at the home’s management of the crisis. However, she said communication with residents could improve as she often had to inform her mother of the protocol. A family member of a COVID-19-positive resident said he was also satisfied with the care his mother was receiving. Both family members said they would like the residents to be able to leave the confines of their rooms, but understood the difficulty in allowing this.

Asked why staff are allowed in and out on crowded public transport when other models exist, like at Jewish aged home Beth Shalom in Durban that keeps staff on site or at a nearby location, Geffen says many are primary breadwinners and primary carers in multigenerational families, and need to be at home. He says accommodation for staff that have tested positive and need to isolate may be provided, but cannot elaborate further.

Meanwhile, the granddaughter of Hannah Ruditzky, the 88-year-old resident who died on 2 May, describes her grandmother as a woman who had “a beautiful life”, and a proudly traditional Jewish home.

“She had Shabbos at her home every Friday night without fail. She lived for her two great grandsons, and was always knitting toys for children at various hospitals. She had the busiest social life, and worked as an administrator at a local shul until she was 80 years old. We will honour her memory by continuing the Jewish traditions she loved so much.”

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Esteemed Wits University academic at the centre of an international anti-Semitism row

NICOLA MILTZ

A highly respected professor at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is at the centre of a raging international war of words over anti-Semitism and freedom of speech following widespread criticism of his past writings.

Acclaimed African academic Achille Mbembe, 63, has been accused of being anti-Semitic in countries like Germany where he is a popular public figure. He has been further criticised for trivialising and relativising the Holocaust in his writings; equating the state of Israel with apartheid; and questioning Israel’s right to exist. Mbembe says the “shameful allegations” against him are unfounded.

“I’m not a mere abstraction, but an actual human being with a name and a history,” Mbembe, who was born in Cameroon and obtained his PhD in History at the Sorbonne in France, told the *SA Jewish Report*. He is professor at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (Wiser), and his academic focus is on social science and post-colonialism. He has written extensively about contemporary politics and philosophy.

“The politician, the bureaucrat, and their allies who are waging a campaign against me aren’t scholars. I doubt they care who I am, where I come from, and what I stand for. I bet many are unable to pronounce my name correctly,” he said.

For several weeks, the eminent philosopher and historian has been the subject of a heated argument in Germany. The debate was triggered when Mbembe was invited to deliver the opening address at one of Germany’s most popular cultural festivals, the Ruhrtriennale, in August. The festival has since been cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the debate over Mbembe’s invitation caused a mudslinging battle of wits.

In late March, the spokesperson of the Free Democratic Party in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Lorenz Deutsch, called for Mbembe to be barred from giving the festival’s opening speech. He criticised Mbembe for aligning himself with the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) camp, something taken very seriously in Germany where the German parliament has declared the BDS movement to be anti-Semitic.

Mbembe told the *Jerusalem Post* that “this politician [Deutsch] has been waging a relentless racist campaign of defamation against me”.

Dr Felix Klein, the German government’s Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight Against anti-Semitism, entered the fray, demanding that the festival’s organisers rescind the invitation.

Klein’s involvement raised the ire of a string of left-leaning Jewish scholars who in turn called on German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer to replace Klein.

They described Mbembe as “one of the most important intellectuals in Africa” and said Klein’s attempt

to frame Mbembe as an anti-Semite was “baseless”, calling the attack a witch hunt. They said “unjustified allegations” of anti-Semitism interfered with freedom of speech, especially when it came to controversial issues like Israel.

Meanwhile, another academic organisation, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, countered this with a show of support for Klein.

The long-winded and highly nuanced affair has generated a significant amount of media coverage internationally.

The intellectual, who lives with his partner and fellow academic, Professor Sarah Nuttall, and their two children in Johannesburg, has vehemently denied all the allegations.

Referring to his accusers, Mbembe asked the *SA Jewish Report*, “Why should anyone give them credibility on scholarly matters when internationally recognised scholars, each of whom is a specialist in the field, have condemned their misuse of the necessary struggle against anti-Semitism for political and ideological purposes?”

Mbembe told the weekly *Die Zeit*, “Everything I have ever written or said rests on a single foundation, namely the hope for the development

of a truly universal community from which no one is excluded.” He added that anti-Semitism was a “terrible crime”.

In another interview, he said it would never occur to him to contest Israel’s right to exist.

“The truth is that although I am committed to Palestinian equality and freedom, I have no relationship whatsoever with BDS.”

However, over the past ten years, Mbembe’s record in this area speaks to the contrary.

In 2010, he was a signatory to a University of Johannesburg petition, backed by BDS-SA, calling for academics to support the call for the university to terminate its relationship with Israel’s Ben-Gurion University.

Two years later in 2014, he wrote the forward for an anti-Israel ebook titled: *Apartheid: The Politics of Analogy*. In it, Mbembe writes, “The occupation of Palestine is the greatest moral scandal of our times, one of the most dehumanising ordeals of the century we have just entered, and the biggest act of cowardice of the last half-century.” ... “And since all they are willing to offer is a fight to the finish, since what they are willing to do is to go all the way – carnage, destruction, incremental extermination – the time has come for global isolation.”

He again aligned himself with a BDS-backed campaign in 2015, which called on academics to sign a declaration supporting the rights of Palestinians, and pledging not to accept invitations to visit Israeli academic institutions or participate in Israeli conferences.

In 2016, Mbembe wrote a lengthy essay titled, “The Society of Enmity” in the publication *Radical Philosophy*, in which he has been accused of equating Israel with the former apartheid regime, and minimising the Holocaust.

Then in 2018, he supported

the actions of BDS-SA against the inclusion of Israeli and Palestinian academics who were mostly involved in peace work in a conference at Stellenbosch University. The story was widely reported in the *SA Jewish Report*.

Mbembe and Nuttall, who works with him at Wiser, threatened to boycott the conference “as a non-violent strategy for ending the occupation”.

Rowan Polovin, the national chairperson of the South African Zionist Federation, said Mbembe’s claim that he did not support BDS actions was “simply not credible”.

“Over the past decade, Mbembe has been at the forefront of some of the most vicious BDS assaults on academic freedom globally. Mbembe’s claim that he is merely critical of Israeli government policies and not the existence of the Jewish state is disingenuous. He should dry his crocodile tears over academic freedom after consistently attempting to deny these freedoms to Israelis.”

Mbembe obtained his doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris, and has enjoyed a sterling academic career. He has held visiting professorships at several prestigious American colleges. In Germany, Mbembe has been honoured many times for his work, and has received numerous international academic awards.

He told the *SA Jewish Report* that since his public statements on the issue, “I have left it to people of goodwill to judge for themselves.”

Then in 2018, he supported

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Then in 2018, he supported

Elderly Israeli left in limbo

TALI FEINBERG

“My father-in-law was due to go on aliyah before the lockdown, and is now stuck in Joburg with only a chair in his house as he has sold everything. He is alone, he is 74 years old, and his wife made aliyah before the lockdown,” wrote Moran Orlik in a plea for help on the Joburg Jewish Mommies Facebook group two weeks ago.

The stark situation demonstrates how lives are in limbo as a result of the coronavirus crisis shutting down air travel. For Orlik’s father-in-law, Moshe Orlik, it is truly a case of “man makes plans, and G-d laughs”.

Two weeks later, nothing has changed for Orlik. He says, “I bought a ticket from El Al to go on aliyah on 23 April, and the flight was cancelled. There was going to be a flight on 4 May, but it was also cancelled without any notice. In the meantime, we sold all our furniture. I’m left with a mattress and a small fridge. No one is helping, no one knows when there is going to be a flight. It’s a terrible situation. I’m ‘on hold’, and I have a pet that I’m taking with me. It’s terrible. Really, I don’t know what to do.”

His son, Guy Orlik, says that Moshe and his wife were supposed to head back to Israel as returning citizens after living in South Africa for 30 years. At the last minute, his father decided he wanted to bring his beloved dog with him to Israel, and would stay behind to organise this. In the meantime, his wife went ahead and found them an apartment in Bat Yam.

But then, coronavirus hit, South Africa went

into lockdown, Moshe’s flight was cancelled, and he is well and truly stuck in Johannesburg. “All because of the dog!” says his son with a smile, before adding that it’s a worrying situation. His father has health problems including diabetes and high cholesterol, is short on cash after spending his savings on his original flight, and there is no real solution in sight.

There is talk of a special flight coming to South Africa from Israel to bring back South Africans, and then heading back there with the 30 or so Israelis stuck here. However, it’s very expensive, and his father wouldn’t be able to take his dog. So even if it happens, possibly in June, Moshe will most likely not be on it.

In the meantime, the elderly grandfather is frustrated, worried, and bored, keeping himself busy by playing solitaire on the computer, but is unable to use social networks because he isn’t computer savvy. His family check in on him constantly. The fact that he isn’t a new *oleh* [immigrant] but a returning citizen puts him in greater limbo because his case doesn’t technically fall under the Israel

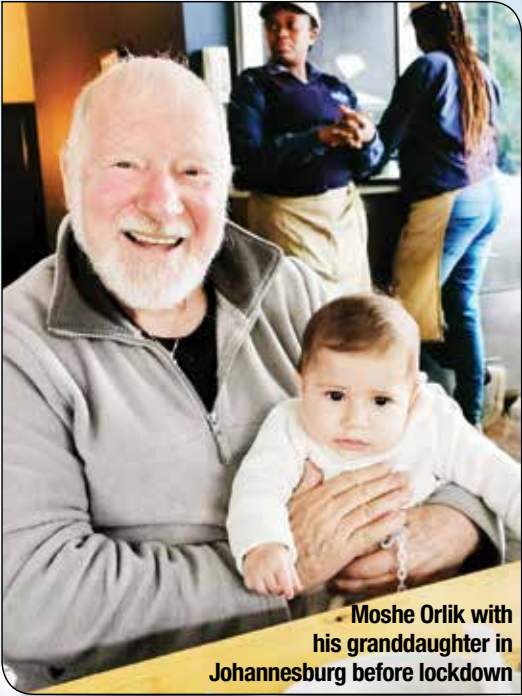
Centre’s aliyah department.

Liat Amar Arran of the Israel Centre in Johannesburg says, “The last El Al flight was on 30 March. It took 14 *olim* to Israel. We approached all the *olim* and offered them a place on this flight until it was fully booked.”

“It’s not only *olim*, many Israelis want to get back home,” says Arran. “At the moment, there are no flights. The skies are closed.” Meanwhile, they haven’t stopped helping people make aliyah.

“Israel wants to make sure that people are making aliyah the right way, that it’s not rushed. We don’t want to push people who have no support with their absorption. It needs to be done properly, with the correct documents, living situation, and so on.

“Furthermore, if anyone landed in Israel now, they would be put in quarantine for 14 days in a hostel, not their own accommodation, which isn’t easy. We are constantly working with our *olim* to complete the process, so when the skies open again, they are ready to go. We are working around the clock to make it happen.”




Moshe Orlik with his granddaughter in Johannesburg before lockdown

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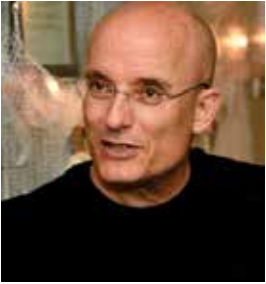
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Doing good is good for you too

When our community looks back on the time of COVID-19, it will remember being entertained, informed, and educated by SA Jewish Report-hosted webinars, or as they are known, ‘SAJR lockdown events’.

No, I’m not about to start honking my own horn because, truth be told, the exceptional work done in these webinars has been that of SA Jewish Report board chairperson Howard Sackstein, Dan Stillerman, and our newspaper’s board of directors. Every one of them has given freely of their time and effort.

What they have achieved appears to be unique the world over. I’m not saying that Zoom or YouTube webinars are unique, in fact they are a dime a dozen these days, but what our team has done is to extend our media company into a whole new platform. This Tuesday’s education panel was the 18th of our webinars. There have been at least two to three every week since lockdown began.

Our smallest panel had 2 000 viewers, and our largest so far has attracted 20 000 viewers. These numbers are astounding. They don’t just represent our community, but Jewish people from around the world and the greater South African society. In interaction with the audience on the webinars, people have introduced themselves as from the United States, Canada, Costa Rica, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Israel.

Howard and the board have managed to gather experts in their field. For example, on Tuesday night, they had the likes of Adam Habib among other influential voices speaking about education, and previously, Stephen Koseff and Colin Coleman talking about restarting the economy. So it goes on.

In the latter webinar, last Tuesday, Finance Minister Tito Mboweni wanted to engage with the panel but because there was no space for him in the audience, he couldn’t join in. And just as soon as that event was over, the presidency called for a copy.

In the process, large amounts of money have been raised for those in need, and people have been incredibly generous. These events have facilitated the setting up of more than 30 Community Action Networks (CANs) and, in so doing, hundreds and hundreds of needy families have been helped.

During the webinars, various charities or non-governmental organisations have been brought on screen. Whenever Afrika Tikken was on, it raised about R200 000 in donations from the webinar alone. Since the beginning of lockdown, this particular organisation has provided 40 000 families with month-long feeding packs so that they don’t need other sources of sustenance. That’s astonishing!

Another organisation that has been invited to the lockdown events is Afrika Awake, which provides food parcels for refugees who would otherwise starve as they don’t have access to government help.

I’m sure, like me, you are impressed by the innovation of these webinars, which not only give us something entertaining and informative to do during lockdown, but also raise so much money for those who don’t have any.

For Howard, I know it’s about doing good. When he came up with this idea before lockdown, he called on Dan, who he knew had a Zoom licence. The rest is history, as this inimitable team have kept going with passion and tenacity without earning a personal cent from it.

I’m not hearing them complain or speak about being frustrated about the lockdown. I’m not hearing them blame others for the fact that they are stuck behind four walls and can’t do what they want to do. I guess this is simply because they are so busy doing something good.

I totally appreciate that as time goes on and there are still such heavy restrictions on our lives, people get more and more frustrated. And when the government does something they don’t approve of, it makes them reconsider their support for the national plan of action against COVID-19.

People have already started pushing the boundaries of the law. A sense of frustration has led some to flout the law. I can’t say I’m surprised. We are all feeling it. It seems like a never-ending lockdown, with financial and other pressures growing, and there’s no end in sight.

But is spending time criticising the government and other authorities a worthwhile use of our time? Is bucking the system and potentially making vulnerable people sick worth it?

Or can we do something to help the situation, thereby being the change we want to see in the world?

You don’t have to look too far to find something worthwhile to do.

Every week in the SA Jewish Report we bring you stories of the people I call “COVID-19 heroes” who are doing phenomenal things for the good of our community or the greater society. All these people could use your help.

On our front page this week, there is a story about the South African Jewish Board of Deputies offering R9 million for outreach programmes to help those in our country in dire straits. The people involved need help packing parcels, getting food, distributing – I can’t say exactly what. However, help is always needed. Just reach out if you can.

I know it’s easy to say it’s about attitude, and when it all gets on top of you, it doesn’t seem possible to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Trust me, I understand. But staying in that dark place doesn’t help you, and it certainly won’t make lockdown easier for you.

So, let’s be inspired by Howard, Dan, and the hundreds of people who have made COVID-19 an opportunity to help others, and do something worthwhile and good.

Let’s all do something, whether it’s collecting food from neighbours to give to those in dire need, helping to pack food parcels, or making a donation. Let’s lend a hand!

Shabbat Shalom!
Peta Krost Maunder
Editor



Asymptomatic COVID-19 carriers a serious threat to the elderly

OPINION

BARRY KAGANSON



As our understanding of coronavirus develops, it has become clear that asymptomatic carriers could be the biggest threat to containing the virus, most notably in senior living communities, due to the high susceptibility of the elderly to the virus. Given the asymptomatic nature of many carriers, testing for COVID-19 is a critical weapon vital for protecting the elderly.

It’s becoming clear that the biggest battle the medical community is facing is in identifying carriers. Previous screening strategies focused on identifying symptoms, however a lot more can be done.

Pre-symptomatic transmission – people who pass on the virus before they show any symptoms of COVID-19 – has been well documented. The incubation period for COVID-19, which is the time between exposure to the virus (becoming infected) and the onset of symptoms, is on average five to six days, however it can be up to 14 days. During this period, also known as the “pre-symptomatic” period, some infected people can be contagious. Therefore, transmission from a pre-symptomatic case can occur before the onset of symptoms.

Senior housing and care providers in South Africa have to act quickly before they start to discover high rates of asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic cases among residents and staff in their communities.

To protect residents in senior living communities, testing combined with stringent containment measures is vital. Until now, most risk-mitigation strategies in senior living environments have been focused on identifying symptomatic people – those with raised body temperature, a cough, and so on, as well as restricting visitor access. However, this doesn’t deal with the real risk of asymptomatic transmission via staff.

Many staff who work with the elderly in senior living communities make use of public transport to get to work, and run the daily risk of becoming infected. It’s therefore imperative for senior living communities to take other steps to mitigate this risk by, for example, housing all such staff on site to reduce commuting and thereby protect the virtual “bubble of safety” around its senior living communities.

However, as lockdowns in South Africa are progressively eased, the staff of more industries will return to work. In spite of the nation’s best efforts to be prepared, we need to accept the fact that infection levels in South Africa will rise in coming weeks. In fact, Professor Salim Abdool Karrim,

currently leading South Africa’s ministerial advisory committee on COVID-19, has warned that South Africa’s COVID-19 infection rate will probably peak only toward the end of winter 2020. While the residents of senior living communities remain in effective lockdown, even minimal exposure to commuting staff could pose a threat. The fact that infected staff could well be asymptomatic poses a “silent threat” which requires serious consideration.

Given that infection rates are due to escalate, all retirement communities should have a joint containment and testing strategy in place among their commuting staff. One such successful model we’ve implemented is that all commuting staff are housed on site, or nearby, to prevent them having to commute. They are “quarantined” for seven days prior to commencing their 14-day shift. During this quarantine period, they undergo nasal swab testing by a private pathology lab, and the results are received within 24-48 hours. This ensures that once staff commence their 14-day shift, particularly in the high-risk care environment, it’s reasonably certain, medically and symptomatically, that they aren’t COVID-19 positive.

We believe that this maintains a “safety bubble” around our communities, which greatly reduces the chances of transmission by asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic staff. The fact that staff reside on site during their 14-day shift and are also not commuting during their seven-day quarantine, reduces their own risk of infection. This is important because a test is done at a single point in time, which wouldn’t be helpful in the case of staff who commute daily and are therefore at daily risk of infection.

The quarantine gives us the opportunity to stabilise the staff environment, obtain clear test results, and prevent any infected persons from entering our communities. It also gives us a reasonable period since the last possible exposure to reduce the probability of a “false negative”, and a reasonable time after the test before a work shift starts to receive the test results.

With proper identification and quick mitigation, we believe the spread and impact of this disease can be limited among the elderly in senior housing and care facilities.

• Barry Kaganson is chief executive of Auria Senior Living, which develops, owns, and manages a portfolio of senior living communities throughout South Africa.



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Crisis before curfew: for GPs it's a complicated life

OPINION

DR DANIEL ISRAEL



“I usually feel grateful for the dozens of dependents I’m able to ‘parent’ in life. Today, I’m wondering whether I should have just stuck to a more conventional job.” These are the words that tick through my mind as I head out at 08:30 on Lag Ba’Omer morning for a quick jog before arrival at my practice by 09:00.

A common experience for many a parent these days, this morning hasn’t run smoothly in our home. My four wonderful real children are blessed to have online school activities for Lag Ba’Omer this morning, which has crashed my internet and delayed my exercise routine into the last half hour before curfew. Yet another stimulus for turning patient commitments into their common current COVID-19 frenzy.

For most South Africans, navigating one’s way through this crisis has become a skilled game of walking a tightrope, with family and personal demands on the one side and the increased difficulty of generating a consistent income on the other. Doctors have additional dimensions to this chasm, dimensions that are often overwhelmingly challenging but are also often inspiring.

When the *SA Jewish Report* asked me to share some of these dimensions, I took up the challenge in the hope that insight into doctors’ lives would deepen the compassion and understanding in our community that’s already so evident.

Mid-March 2020 brought a wave of anxiety to general practitioners in our community. As travellers infected with COVID-19 returned to South Africa from abroad, our first panic was to protect our staff, patients, and ourselves from the walk-ins who came to see whether they had the virus.

I scrambled for personal protective equipment to no avail. Eventually, I pleaded with one of the dentists to sell me a box of simple surgical masks. That box was the only available barrier between our busy medical team and the virus. We washed reused masks daily, but little did doctors know then that it was more important for patients to be wearing the masks than medical staff.

With the calming of the storm during lockdown and the reduced incidence of cases in our practice, we have faced new challenges. I’m privileged to be a member of a WhatsApp group of about 120 GPs who share a plethora of resources, ideas, personal support, and even unbeatable humour during this crisis. This Gauteng GP collaboration has become our GP army barracks and base camp. It’s the single most valuable tool that keeps us all connected, in-sync, and practicing the same evidence-based medicine.

“How many people are you seeing today? I’m 70% down!” “How on earth do I remove a splinter in a telephone consult?” These are common themes I encounter on the

group daily. The “stay home, save lives” campaign has wonderfully delayed the progression of this pandemic in our country. But it has also created a reluctance in patients to engage in-person with their healthcare professionals, often irrationally so.

Every day, I receive calls from patients about uncontrolled glucose readings or home-monitored high blood pressure. The government has allowed repeats on scripts to prevent patients unnecessarily coming into hospitals, but I believe the possible consequential risk of allowing chronic conditions to derail is far more worrying.

The transition of stage 5 to stage 4 has thankfully seen a return of the normal amount of patients to our rooms. Focusing in, I’m confident that our surgery is safe, with constant disinfection, mandatory masks for all, screening and separation of all remotely suspicious cases, and no-touch policies. I know that all my colleagues are following the same protocol. We are all encouraged by the daily return of our patients to our practices, but the challenge

remains to encourage our patients to remain engaged. Consider that the mortality rate of diabetes may be 4% compared to the 1.5% of COVID-19. Responsible medical care is about mitigating greater real risks too.

It would be unjustified to describe COVID-19 as just a crisis. It has also been a time of great opportunity for me as a GP. I have committed myself to carrying my staff through this storm, in spite of the financial pressure involved. It’s a wonderful blessing that doctors are able to continue employing staff throughout the lockdown because we are essential. This experience has strengthened my appreciation of the value of commitment to those who are committed.

COVID-19 has sparked an unprecedented camaraderie and support between doctors in South Africa. GPs work together as a team, no longer competitors.

Extraordinarily, specialists are willing to lend a hand. The thirst for evidence-based knowledge and academic growth is higher than I have ever seen, even within the non-university environment of the private sector. The medical fraternity’s commitment to kindness and the well-being of humankind spreads to – or possibly even stems from – the broader South African public, the likes of which we haven’t seen since 1994.

As we turn the page of autumn onto our usual busy winter season, I know that this COVID-19 experience is bound to escalate. I’m deeply encouraged, though, that this lockdown has allowed GPs to prepare our practices to care for our patients safely without inferring risk on them.

By applying the principles of social distancing and sanitisation as well as safe engagement at work, we will embrace this time and ensure that our patients and practices remain healthy. The cherry on top will be if I’m able to keep fulfilling my own children’s needs and get my jogging done in the mornings without technology crashes before curfew.

• *Dr Daniel Israel is a family general practitioner in private practice in Johannesburg.*




Dr Daniel Israel and Dr Vikki Davidoff at their rooms in Melrose North

Turning fifty shades of grey at Jaffa

OPINION

SUZANNE BELLING



Sitting in the spacious grounds and picturesque gardens of Jaffa, the Jewish retirement home in Pretoria, it’s hard to imagine the 75 residents doing anything more than sunning themselves and chatting as pigeons in the garden peck at their feet and the yellow lovebird sings from the aviary.

The only other time I have been in lockdown and had to obey rules was when I was a teenager in boarding school. But the consequences of trying to beat the rules relating to the prevention of COVID-19 are infinitely more serious than staying up for a midnight feast.

Yes, we sit on the patio and chairs are demarcated to permit the prescribed spacing between people. To a casual observer it appears as if we are having some R&R. But there is too much rest and not that much relaxation, as nerves are beginning to wear thin.

Jaffa is in lockdown. It was in this situation for the residents’ safety well before President Cyril Ramaphosa implemented stage 5. People over the age of 60 are more at risk, therefore Mark Isaacs, the director of Jaffa, introduced many precautions in good time. The stage 4 changes have barely been noticed.

In our seventh week of lockdown, I’m growing accustomed to the daily routine with mainly meals, tea, and more tea. But at least we are treated to home-made biscuits or cakes.

We now anticipate a good few weeks – or even months – until the all-clear is given.

Social distancing is observed continuously. In the dining room, which has been extended to include a major part of the spacious lounge,

only two people are permitted to sit at a table for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There is no longer a buffet table; no board games or card games are permitted as these can transmit the virus if handled by infected people; the conference room which was crowded for regular movies and music has been cut down to accommodate only 15 people at a socially spaced distance; no outside volunteers or lecturers can enter the home; and residents who are specialists in their fields divide their presentations into two sessions. The same applies to films.

Exercise is held in the garden with chairs widely-spaced, and the same applies to the patio and lapa. The library and in-house shop only allow one resident or patron at a time. The popular twice-weekly Bingo session has come to an end, as have walks to the beautiful bird sanctuary and park across the road from Jaffa.

Shopping is done by designated staff members, wearing gloves, masks, and transparent visors. Orders are brought in and sprayed with disinfectant. Of course, I received the wrong hair colour, and we are witnessing 50 shades of grey without weekly visits from

the hairdresser as Jaffa has its own salon now manned by the residents and occupational therapy staff. There are do-it-yourself jobs. I even cut my own fringe.

Jaffa residents may not take out their cars, and most of us have disconnected our batteries. We are driven to essential doctors’ appointments by a geared-up designated driver. She used to take people on leisurely shopping trips, to the gym, even to buy clothes.

No more. It’s my grandson’s birthday this week, and I have to buy a present by proxy. Of course, it goes without saying that I can’t even see my children and grandchildren, except on video phone. Mother’s Day was a non-event.

But we can’t complain. We are cared for, and Jaffa is caring. Isaacs watches over us like a concerned parent, even though he is many years our junior.

Nursing staff, carers, waitresses, office, and housekeeping staff wear visors, masks, and gloves at all times. There are no more buffet tables to help oneself to the delicious array of salads – everyone has to be served by an appropriately clad server.

In this apparel, in the dining-room where the waitresses line up, they resemble characters out of *Star Wars* instead of the staff of an aged home!

Nearly every week there is a socially spaced house meeting in which residents are apprised of the situation regarding the Jewish community and Jewish aged homes in the major centres.

Residents who left the home to visit family before the lockdown aren’t allowed back in until it’s lifted. “I couldn’t even come back to fetch my winter clothes when it got cold,” said a friend who is staying with her daughter in

Johannesburg, and can’t leave.

Seniors who are in good health aren’t permitted to enter the frail-care section where we used to visit to cheer up patients.

Jaffa previously resembled a luxury hotel, but everything has changed. Now, notices are on every board and door, and red strips demarcate sitting places.

Recreationally, Jaffa folk miss cards and tile rummy the most.

They applaud Isaacs for going the extra mile in taking precautions. He even performs errands himself, like taking cell phones in for repair and other favours for residents who can’t venture outside. He also makes himself available 24/7, like when the lifts are out of order. Even then, the number of people in the lifts is limited, which means climbing the stairs, although this is well-nigh impossible for those with walking aids.

If family members want to bring something for their parents, they have to drop it outside with security guards – all this while moms and dads have brief conversations from behind locked gates. One daughter even brought a deck chair for her mother to sit on while these “prison-like” visits transpired.

Baruch Hashem, there have been no COVID-19 cases within the Jaffa precincts. But everyone is taking strain. But at least we aren’t alone, and there is always someone available for a chat. We are like family, but, at the end of the day, we miss our families.

• *Suzanne Belling is a journalist and was the editor of five different newspapers. She is also an accomplished author, having written a number of biographies. She now resides with her husband, Michael, in Jaffa in Pretoria.*



The kitchen staff at Jaffa – from left Mpho Mokoka, Zanele Khanyile (kitchen supervisor) and Emelda Monyela

Education ‘will never be the same’

JORDAN MOSHE

COVID-19 has irrevocably altered the face of education as we know it. Schools and universities will have to find ways to navigate a blended approach to learning, the classroom, and computer sharing in a new reality of learning.

This was the consensus of 15 educators, psychologists, and teaching experts who participated in a *SA Jewish Report*-hosted panel discussion on Tuesday evening about the new frontiers of education.

“We will never go back, and education won’t be the same,” said Michelle Lisoos, EdTech strategist and managing director of Think Ahead Education Solutions. “We will be creating new partnerships and moving forward with a new system that prepares our children and is more equitable for all.”

The situation has brought a massive shift for teachers and students in Jewish schools, said Rabbi Craig Kacev, the outgoing director of the South African Board of Jewish Education (SABJE).

“Teachers have managed to implement major change in moving from the classroom to online platforms,” Kacev said. “It’s tremendous what they’ve done in such a short time.

“We’ve learned about students’ capabilities, including their ability to learn independently. We’ve watched students who were introverted in the classroom come to the fore in this method of learning. The shift is still taking place.”

Andrew Baker, the principal at King David High School Victory Park agreed, saying that the current mode of online teaching was the very opposite of the school’s typical methodology.

“We’re not a distance-learning institution,” he said. “We’re in the business of face-to-face, intensely personal, relationship-based education.”

Fortunately, staff and students have risen to the occasion. “The entire staff shifted over a matter of days to a 100% online platform,” Baker said. “We were designing a curriculum we never thought we’d design in our lives – we were never



Photo: Ian Ossendryver

trained to do it.”

The shift hasn’t worked in every student’s favour, however. Meryl Malkin, the social worker at King David Linksfield, stressed that it isn’t a one-size-fits-all situation. “Distance and online learning are very different from online schooling,” she said, meaning that schools have had to adapt their material. “Everyone will find a different way to learn. Many students are keen to get back to school, while others are more comfortable at home.

“School is about way more than pure academics,” she said. “A lot goes on at school that some students absolutely need like culture, identity socialisation, and structure. Some really need it, and some don’t. It depends on the student.”

Even when the crisis has passed, the changes wrought by COVID-19 will remain with us, said Lisoos.

“We don’t know when we’ll go back to school, [but when we do] we’ll have a different kind of teacher, a different curriculum, a different kind of child. We need to look at technology as an enabler of education. We can’t just push content.

“We’ve seen the education sector as one of the slowest to embrace technology. Some schools who have championed it for a while were using it meaningfully. We’re not judging whether it’s better than

school. We’re using it as a stop-gap in a global crisis to find a way forward.”

Lisoos believes that our new reality gives us a unique opportunity to teach youngsters a new set of skills.

“For years, we’ve talked about giving our children 21st century skills,” she said. “Now we need to look at skills for a post-COVID-19 world. We can’t underestimate the skills our children are learning in this environment.

The outgoing vice-chancellor at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), Adam Habib, said that the discussions taking place at schools were the same as those at universities.

“We’ve been experimenting with online education for at least five years, but it accounted for only 15% of the academic base,” he said. “Over the past month, we’ve

shifted almost 100% online.”

Habib stressed that Wits wasn’t offering online teaching but remote learning. “Our academic programmes aren’t configured for online,” he said. “We have emerging remote learning on an online platform, taking our curriculum and adapting it slightly to an online format.”

He said that a number of students and staff were opposed to the move, aware that many students lack access to devices and internet connectivity. “Some people will be left behind,” Habib admitted. “About 85% of our students have devices.”

“Social justice doesn’t mean going to the lowest common denominator. It means being conscious of inequality, and assisting those without access.”

For this reason, Habib said, Wits procured 5 000 laptops for students in need, and provided 30GB of data to every registered student. Over the past month, the student participation rate has been 86% – above that of typical lecture-based participation.

“We anticipated far more problems, and have been astonished at how well it has gone, but that doesn’t mean it will be perfect,” Habib said. “It means that in some form, the online format is here to stay. We need to come to terms with this. I don’t think we’ll ever go back to learning solely in the classroom, nor will it be only online.”

As we go forward, education will use a blended learning system, Habib said, with university programmes relying on digital and personal interaction.

“The old world in higher education is gone, whether we like it or not,” he said. “The new world is yet to be born, and we’re going to go through harsh birth pangs in the next 24 months.”

Letters

BDS COALITION CREATED TO UNIFY PRO-PALESTINIAN MOVEMENT

South African Jews for a Free Palestine (SAJFP) is disappointed with the *SA Jewish Report*’s ill-informed and biased report on the South African BDS Coalition, titled, “BDS-SA splinters as global body backs new group.”

SAJFP is a committed member of the South African BDS Coalition, currently run by an elected interim committee until the formal launch of the coalition. The coalition comes out of years of discussion about the importance of creating a cohesive Palestine solidarity movement in South Africa. While there are many solidarity organisations that operate across the country, activists have long felt the importance of connecting and unifying them.

In a vibrant, democratic, and transparent movement, there has to be space for disagreement and debate. Instead of congratulating the South African BDS Coalition for taking a principled stand on sexual harassment, the *SA Jewish Report* offers a story that would be better placed in a tabloid, presenting South Africa’s Palestine solidarity movements as puppets of their “international masters”. Solidarity with the dispossessed and the exploited is a cornerstone of Jewish ethics, and not a sign of weakness.

Contrary to the unfounded comment in the report, the South African BDS Coalition isn’t personality driven. It includes younger students, older activists, and, importantly, Jewish people like ourselves who are committed to a secular and democratic Israel/Palestine.

We know full well that our Jewish identity doesn’t preclude criticism of Israel and Zionism when violations of human rights are committed. In this regard, Rowan Polovin would do well to note that all members of the South African BDS Coalition interim committee are deeply opposed to anti-Semitism, and have joined the BDS movement as part of their broad commitment to social justice and equality for all. In fact, Omar Barghouti’s video that you refer to specifically explains that the BDS movement is opposed to all forms of racism, including anti-Semitism, yet the *SA Jewish Report*’s report makes no mention of this fact. – **Allan Kolski Horwitz, SAJFP representative**

The SA Jewish Report tried at length to get people from within the BDS and the organisations around it to talk to us last week. However, nobody was willing to give their perspective, explanation or views.
– Editor

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Street Store brings global recognition to our doorstep

TALI FEINBERG

“Tzedakah defines who we are as Jews,” says advertising extraordinaire Mike Abel. His agency, M&C Saatchi Abel’s, Street Store initiative was recently selected as a finalist in two categories of the Fast Company 2020 World Changing Ideas Global Awards.

“The first Street Store took place in 2014. It was an idea by a creative director and copywriter

team at M&C Saatchi Abel to provide a way to restore dignity to those in our society who are most in need, namely the homeless,” explains Abel, who is founding partner and chief executive of M&C Saatchi Abel and M&C Saatchi Group South Africa.

The concept is simple. People hang donated clothes on cardboard hangers and drop shoes into boxes, and the homeless help themselves. It’s a dignified “shopping” experience, and is

the world’s first rent-free, premises-free, free “pop-up clothing store” for the poor, all on the street.

“What started as one Street Store in Cape Town in partnership with our client, The Haven Night Shelter, has evolved into a global initiative that went open-source for anyone to download a toolkit to create their own Street Store. Today we are almost at 1 000 Street Stores globally,” says Abel.

Fast Company named the Street Store as a finalist in the “best idea from the Europe, Middle East, and Africa region”, and also in the creativity section. Fast Company is arguably the world’s leading business media brand, with a focus on innovation in technology, leadership, world-changing ideas, creativity, and design.

“This is a great achievement for us and for South Africa as it continues to show how creativity can play a vital part in the offering of solutions to some of the biggest issues facing humanity,” says Abel.

“These awards look at initiatives from around the world and the largest brands. For a creative company at the tip of Africa, being recognised by such a large-scale publication and award is monumental. It also shows how important the Street Store is in uplifting society and those in need. In addition, we were up against the likes of R/GA, Gucci, P&G, Nike and so forth, so as I like to say that while we were recognised by Fast Company, we were keeping very good company too.”

The concept of the Street Store has evolved since its inception. “Last year, it partnered with Home Suite Hotels to get a Street Store hanger in each room. Travellers are prompted before they travel to bring clothing they want to donate and leave it at the hotel for future Street Stores. We plan to roll this out into global hotel groups,” says Abel.

Initiatives like the Street Store are a key part of his agency’s ethos “which has always been about creating a space where we don’t just create ads, but go beyond this and do further good in society”.

“This has been why we have also been involved in designing the award-winning Nelson Mandela Tower of Light in Port Elizabeth. The Tower of Light’s 27 stories represent the 27 years Mandela spent in prison. On climbing the 81 metres to the building’s top to reflect on Mandela’s life, visitors will hear audio recordings of key moments such as the Rivonia Trial, his speeches, and sounds of Qunu in the Eastern Cape where he grew up.



“We’re excited about this project, even more so because Port Elizabeth is where I was raised and where my family has been for generations. To be able to give back and uplift the community is an incredibly proud moment”.

Abel says a large part of his career has been about transformation. “Finding ways to give back and always making sure that in everything I do personally – and we do as an agency – we do to uplift South Africa. If you look at the Street Store and what it stands for, you can see why we call it one of our ‘force-for-good



In both photographs: Homeless people ‘shopping’ at a Street Store in Cape Town (before lockdown)

initiatives’.”

He believes in the ethos of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and the fact that it’s our duty as people – not just as Jews – to help where we can. “South African Jewry has a huge social conscience,” he says. “I’m in awe of the myriad of philanthropy and outreach programmes that have defined us, and our deep commitment to helping those who need it. The Lubner’s Afrika Tikkun is a shining example, as are newer initiatives like Bradley Stern’s Cans with Purpose and Alan Browde and Gidon Novick’s SA Harvest trucks and food distribution.”

Being in lockdown means that Street Stores can’t be hosted on the streets. “But just because we’re locked down doesn’t mean that homelessness goes away. In fact, once we’re out of lockdown, there might be more homelessness and people in need,” says Abel.

“So, we’ve just launched our ‘Lockdown Street Store’. Given that we can’t host a physical Street Store, we’re asking people to take the time while they are at home, clean out their cupboards, and fill some black bags with clothing. Once we’re out of lockdown, we’ll let them know where to drop them off.

“Can you imagine the difference we could all make in South Africa if we just filled one black bag with clothing we don’t need but someone else does? It could improve the winter comfort of so many people.”

Abel says his agency will continue to go “onwards and upwards”, even in these uncertain times.

“As an agency and as a group, we’ve been extremely lucky to have a mix of clients who are still providing an essential service during the lockdown, which means we continue to work, albeit remotely. At the same time, we have clients with international teams, and we have been invited to do work for their international brands.

“We believe we continue to offer value to our clients. Now more than ever we need to be there for them to guide them through this tough time until we reach more predictable,

safe shores. This is our new normal.”

The agency is also involved with Baphumelele Orphanage, and Bethany House, a women and children’s shelter. “We have been a key patron and advisor to the group #ImStaying almost since its inception, and given our commitment to contemporary art on the continent, we have been involved in the

creative strategy for the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa from when it was a concept to launching the gallery and beyond.

“I remain inspired by the huge heart of our community in rallying to the challenges of all South Africans,” Abel says. “We often come in for unfair criticism based on prejudice and ignorance – as is the case with Jewish communities around the world – but it never dampens our spirit of giving, philanthropy, or the huge passion, interest, and enthusiasm we have for the things we do.”

One bag full, one big impact

TALI FEINBERG

“Sometimes it takes just one of something to make a difference for just one person. The following quote by Mother Teresa carries weight for us: ‘If you can’t feed 100 people, then feed just one.’ It was this awareness that gave rise to One Bag Full,” says Jessica Kempen.

Together with her sister and two friends, she started the initiative based on a simple nursery rhyme, “Baa baa black sheep”, but with a far-reaching vision.

“Our challenge was to collect items in just one bag. The name came from a nursery rhyme, but instead of three bags full, you need just one bag to make a difference,” says Kempen.



The One Bag Full team in action: Kelly-Anne Hodge, Kaylin Simmons, Jessica Kempen and Gina Kempen

She, Kelly-Anne Hodge, and Kaylin Simmons are all 28 years old, and met when they were studying at the University of Cape Town. Together with Jessica’s sister, Gina Kempen (21), they worried what would happen after the initial two-week lockdown period when things returned to “business as usual”.

“One Bag Full is intended to be the third line of defence after lockdown ends, providing collected items for those in need,” she says.

They noticed that social media was awash with challenges of doing one thing a day during the lockdown, so they asked people to collect just one item per day – be it a piece of clothing, a book, an activity, or non-perishable food – and put it in a bag.

“It was initially focused on leveraging that competitive, ‘challenger’ spirit and encouraging people to clear out their homes,” Kempen says.

“Every day at 10:00, we used Instagram to announce the ‘item for the day’. Followers knew that something would be announced at the same time each day.

“In a time of so much uncertainty and no structure, this created something concrete for people to look forward to. We wanted to set up a network of people who could challenge each other and cheer each other on. We hit the ground running with this concept given the speed at which lockdown occurred,” says Kempen.

“All four of us are Cape Town born, raised, and educated,” Kempen says. She and her sister attended United Herzlia Schools, and she now works as a management consultant at Deloitte in Johannesburg. Her sister and Simmons now live in the United Kingdom.

“Kelly-Anne is a project manager for Signatura. While all of us are either full-time employees or studying, it was evident before the lockdown started that those less fortunate needed help. With extensive reach in our respective networks, we knew there was something we could do to make a difference no matter how big or small that difference would be.”

They intended to deliver the collected items after lockdown to Siyakhula in Langa, which supports children via educational programmes. “But with the

extension of lockdown, we had to rethink our focus to address the immediate and pressing issue of hunger. We have thus continued the collection challenge along with collecting funds to feed the hungry in Langa. We can’t do this alone, and have worked with Rise Against Hunger Africa (RAH), the African arm of a global organisation which aims to eradicate hunger worldwide.

“RAH provides nutritionally balanced meals for hungry people for R2.90 a meal. Meal packs contain rice, soya, dehydrated vegetables, as well as 23 other vitamins and minerals. For just R8.70, one can provide three meals a day. Through our networks and theirs, we have raised in excess of R120 000, and have attracted more than 750 followers to our

Instagram account @onebag_full. We have been able to provide 31 300 meals to the Langa community in just four weeks. We also challenged our followers to help us make 5 000 sandwiches, going back to our initial ‘challenger’ concept in order to get people involved.”

As they have expanded, they have been able to help more organisations and needy individuals in Langa than originally intended. Their collection drive is continuing, and they will announce drop-off points for the “one bag full” in coming weeks.

Kempen says that the response to their collection challenge and fundraising has been “incredible – even overwhelming

at times. We have support from South Africa, the UK, Australia, even Hong Kong.

“We couldn’t do this alone,” she says. They have also been supported by Chad Nathan (@gingerwithagopro), who accompanied them to Langa on their first visit to document the day and share the cause with his extensive network. Corona Care donated Simba chips, independent groups collected money, and a restaurateur helped cook soup. “The South African spirit is incredible,” Kempen says. “You really do get by with a little help from your friends.

“This is like a full-time job. We are all either balancing two full-time jobs now or a full-time job and studies,” Kempen says. “It’s difficult to switch off, especially since visiting Langa and seeing what’s required on the ground.”

For the team, “There’s no ultimate goal, we aim to ensure that no one is locked out even though we are in lockdown. We want to act as a bridge between our community and networks in an area that may feel overlooked or forgotten. We adapt with the needs of the community.”

Kempen says that wherever you are in the world, you can help. “Get involved by donating. The beauty of our weak exchange rate is that foreign currency goes far when converted into rands. For £5.20 (R118) you can provide people with three meal packs a day for a whole week!

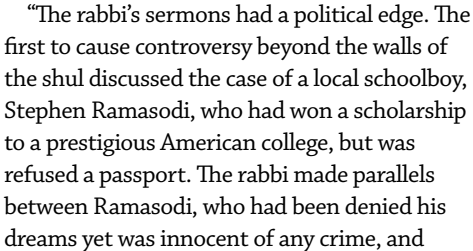
“Our Jewish and Herzlia upbringing encouraged awareness of *tzedakah* as well as giving back to those less fortunate. This was further engrained in us by our parents, and has made us conscious of what we have and many don’t have. From what we have seen during this bizarre time, there is a real Jewish spirit of caring and providing for others.

“Kelly-Anne and Kaylin, who went to Rustenburg Girls, share the same sentiment of selflessness and charity, yet are of a different faith. Overall, we are connected by kindness and compassion toward our fellow man.”

• To support, visit: www.onebagfull.com or @onebag_full on Instagram

TALI FEINBERG

“I was one of the last boys in Port Elizabeth

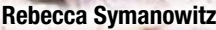


“Ungar received very little support from the local Jewish community other than from liberal Jews in Johannesburg and Cape Town. But on

Bergman stayed in touch with the rabbi until his death. “He was a rabbinic Jewish prophet before his time. No other rabbi spoke out in the 1950s,” he says. “He stood alone against a terrible injustice against every Jewish moral. While many Jews in the struggle didn’t act as Jews, Rabbi Ungar spoke out as a Jew.”

JULIE LEIBOWITZ

R25 keeps a child alive for two weeks, says Marilyn Bassin, the founder and trustee of



She would like to continue it for a few months, but through different ventures like baking cupcakes or selling lemonade. "Same cause, different things," she says, pointing out that it's far too soon to know what she'll do for her next birthday.

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Is the fight against COVID-19 like a real war?

JORDAN MOSHE

The United Nations believes that coronavirus is the worst global crisis since World War II, its staggering toll on life and disruption of normality sure to leave an equally indelible mark on history.

Like soldiers in uniform, healthcare workers man the guns on the frontline, and carry out an arduous campaign against an unrelenting enemy as we rally behind them in spite of our losses.

But if we can draw parallels between the hardships, maybe we can draw hope from the Allied victory of May 1945 for this global medical conflict.

Observed on Friday last week, VE Day, also known as Victory in Europe day, celebrated the 75th anniversary of the official ending of the war and the surrender of the Nazi forces to the Allies. Beyond bringing an end to a six-year conflict, VE Day illustrated that light will eventually shine through the darkness, no matter how tortuous the path to victory may be.

Although VE Day celebrations were muted this year, the experience of those who served in the forces and witnessed that long-awaited victory may just shine the light that we so desperately need.

“I often think about the war,” says Barney Gordon, a 97-year-old ex-serviceman who served with the Allies during World War II. “It was like an adventure for us youngsters who volunteered. What I saw in Europe will forever remain in my mind.”

Gordon signed up towards the end of 1943, enlisting as a wireless operator tasked with managing communications between divisions and command.

“I didn’t have my parents’ permission, I just did it,” says Gordon. “I spent some time in the desert in Egypt before they shipped us off to Italy to join the American Fifth Army.” He would spend almost two years in northern Italy, attached to armoured divisions forming part of an effort to rout the German forces out in an advance heading for Austria.

Says Gordon, “We didn’t see much action until Florence. We moved up the line and were the first troops to relieve the Allied forces in Florence as we chased the Germans, coming up to Bologna in the north.”

“As a wireless operator, I didn’t see much action. They kept us at the back to maintain lines of communication. Our airforce was always overhead and kept busy, but I was always eager to do my part and played my role as best I could.”

Like Gordon, veteran Ivan Sive was also determined to contribute to the war effort against the Nazi regime. An airforce pilot, he joined the force after matriculating in 1943, and after eight months of training, qualified as a navigator cum bomber.

“I was posted on transport command,” recalls the 94-year-old veteran. “I spent my time flying between Swartkops and Cairo, transporting supplies and bringing back personnel who had been injured.

“It was no short trip. The plane lasted two hours in the air before it had to be refuelled, so it would typically take us four days to get from Swartkops to Cairo.

“However as long as it took, the thought that I was part of an effort to support and transport our boys was exciting and significant. It was an adventure, and I was involved in an important campaign that lasted until the end of the war.”

Gordon also experienced some difficulty. After being hemmed in by heavy snowfall on the Apennine Mountains, his division moved towards the commune of Tarvisio in early 1945. It was here that Gordon witnessed something which he remembers vividly until today.

“The Americans had pattern-bombed the place in December after having received intelligence that the Germans would be holding a meeting there over Christmas. The area

had been flattened, and you could hardly recognise the buildings. Many Italians had been killed, and those who remained weren’t welcoming, to say the least.

“As we passed by, they hurled rocks at us, and shouted at us to leave. They had had enough, and wanted it all to be over. I still remember their faces, hearing them cursing at us. It had been a long war, and the end couldn’t come soon enough.”

Fortunately, the war drew to a close rapidly from there, with Germany capitulating in May 1945. Both Gordon and Sive recall fondly the festivities which marked VE Day.

“Because Germany surrendered, we turned back and didn’t even get to Austria,” laughs Gordon. “We returned to Milan, and held a victory parade on a racetrack outside the city.

“It was over, we were elated, and we wanted to go home. Many of the guys flew back, but I



Ivan Sive in uniform

Veteran Ivan Sive (left) with Lieutenant Colonel William Bergman, chairperson of the Johannesburg branch of the South African Jewish Ex-Servicemen's League



stayed on, befriending quite a few Italians while I waited for the ship to transport us. We shared chocolate, told stories, and I picked up some Italian. I went back to visit them in the seventies, but sadly almost all of them have passed away.”

On the anniversary of the fateful day, both men think back to the men with whom they served, many of whom didn’t come back.

“I think of my colleagues who didn’t come home, and the prisoners of war who were taken,” says Sive. “I think of those men who fought, and those who made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure that the world could remain free.

“I think of the sacrifices people made, sacrifices many people today don’t fully appreciate. I can’t blame them, but an effort needs to be made to remember wherever we can.”

Sive says that when it comes to any war, there’s always risk involved.

“In 1939, fighting was the only option,” he says. “Victory had to be achieved at all costs.”

“World War II reminds us how vital global co-operation and joint efforts really are. It seems we’ve forgotten the principle of caring about one another. Today, perhaps more than ever, we need to learn from the past and secure a better future by working together towards victory.”

What Holocaust heroes can teach us now

JORDAN MOSHE

Holocaust survivors had universal life lessons in endurance, bravery, and hope. In spite of the circumstances that ripped their lives apart, countless individuals strove to strengthen their communities and help others, leaving a legacy to inspire us even in our darkest moments.

This was the empowering message conveyed by Holocaust educator Sue Hampel, the co-president of the Jewish Holocaust Centre in Melbourne last Wednesday. Hampel, a virtual guest of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, spoke about building cohesion in challenging times and the lessons learnt from the Holocaust.

“Yom HaShoah was so different this year,” said Hampel. “I kept thinking about Holocaust survivors whose experiences have taught me so much about resilience, the human spirit, and the heights to which humanity can rise. Their stories are inspiring. We know tragedy can bring out the best and worst in people.”

Their stories and courage in the face of adversity serve to inspire us in our most challenging moments in the time of COVID-19. Though no situation can be compared to the Holocaust, there are many lessons we can learn from survivors to help us when times are tough.

To illustrate this, Hampel spoke of the bravery of medical professionals who tended to patients in the Warsaw Ghetto

She conveyed how dire their reality was. “A third of Warsaw’s population lived inside 2.4% of the city’s space, so that’s roughly nine people per room. Hunger and disease were rampant, and if you tried to escape, you were shot on sight.”

In spite of the appalling conditions and risk to their own lives, doctors strove to save lives, using their professional status as healthcare workers to assist those most in need. They often faced terrible dilemmas.

“One would have been choosing between professional and personal commitments,” Hampel said. “Should they look after their patients under any circumstances, even at the risk of their own lives, or should they look out for themselves?”

Countless stories are told of medical staff smuggling people off train platforms moments before deportation, pretending that they needed medical care. Some doctors even broke the limbs of patients to prevent them from being deported, transferring them to the safety of the hospital.

Halina Rotstein, who practiced as a doctor in Warsaw, risked her life numerous times to save babies, smuggling them off the train platform after their parents had been deported. She also performed numerous surgeries in spite of the lack of resources, and tended to patients until the day she was deported to Treblinka.

“By all accounts, she was an amazing, selfless doctor,” said Hampel. “She was offered at least two opportunities to leave the ghetto. Her children had already been smuggled out, but she offered her Aryan papers to a nurse and stayed inside. She refused to abandon her



Sue Hampel

patients.”

According to historical records, Rotstein remained committed until the end, accompanying 900 patients and 50 other hospital staff to Treblinka in September 1942.

A fellow doctor who survived recalled, “Halina went to the wagon voluntarily to be with those needing her help. This is how she understood her duty.”

A similar devotion was shown at the Czyste Hospital for infectious diseases, where staff continued to tend to those infected with typhus in spite of the risk of contracting it themselves. Up to 40% of physicians became infected with typhus and many perished, yet they remained loyal to their patients.

“The doctors and nurses constantly risked infection with serious diseases in their work,” said Hampel. “This is poignant when you think about what’s happening today, and the doctors who are committed to saving lives.”

Even medical education continued, with a secret school established in the ghetto to train students to assist the sick.

“The Germans allowed ghetto physicians to conduct a sanitary course to prevent infectious disease,” Hampel said. “The doctors transformed the course into a medical school with more than 400 students at different levels. They developed a fully-fledged programme for training future doctors in spite of very limited medical supplies.”

Though few doctors survived, those who did went on to practice medicine after the war.

Other examples of resilience under hardship included the cultural and spiritual resistance shown by communities. Many strove to keep a vibrant theatrical and literary life alive during the Holocaust, putting on performances to keep spirits up. This was well-illustrated by communities in Vilna and Theresienstadt.

“These communities were built in very challenging times,” said Hampel. “In a time of darkness, there was obviously the need for some normality. Cultural endeavours like operas, cabaret, and theatre were

popular public activities, and a multifaceted range of programmes was established to counter Nazi efforts.

“Initially, these events were boycotted because people said you couldn’t make theatre in a graveyard,” she said. “But life was stronger than anything, and in the shadow of death, ghetto theatre flourished.” A vibrant puppet theatre, symphonic orchestra, even a musical school were just some of the projects sustained to maintain the sense of cultural defiance.

Many also strove to maintain spiritual life under the circumstances. The last Pesach seders were conducted in Warsaw in 1943, held against a background of machine-gun fire and burning buildings. The ghetto was liquidated shortly thereafter, after a failed uprising.

“They knew they were surrounded, but they decided it was still important to celebrate Passover,” reflected Hampel.

Hampel believes there are many universal lessons we can draw from these examples of heroism and determination, even under our present circumstances.

“We’ve learned to adapt culturally to a lot of new things,” she said. “It’s amazing the way that culture brings people together. Galleries and theatres may be closed, but entertainment continues online. We’ve found ways to maintain things in spite of our challenges.”

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We, the teachers

OPINION

Once, most of us were all able to snigger (with no small feeling of relief), “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” But now, how the mighty have fallen! Every home is now a school, every parent a teacher, disciplinarian, curriculum expert, maths maven, Hebrew grammar genius, and *woordeskate* (vocabulary) wonder.

We all beat our breasts now with equal amounts of fervent prayer and humility: “Oh, how we have wronged you, O teacher of my child! How wondrous are your deeds! How much we need you and appreciate the eight hours of bliss we used to enjoy from 07:30 each morning. And, how we wish to return to those times!”

We speak in jest, but the pressure exerted on parents who are now expected to eke out a living in disastrous economic environs as well as be teachers is enormous, and for most of us, they aren’t pressures we are embracing.

I’d like to suggest a slight paradigm shift as we approach Shavuot.

The famous Beit Halevi makes a powerful observation about the two experiences Jews had at Mount Sinai. The first, with which we are all familiar, is the sound and light, Spielberg production, with lightning, thunder, and special effects. However, the Beit Halevi points out that the effect of this experience was short lived – 40 days later, the Jews were worshipping the Golden Calf.

Forty days after that, however, Moshe ascended Mount Sinai for the third time, and the Torah emphasises that this time, he had to do all the work. Instead of receiving a pre-carved set of tablets, he had to make his own. Also, the Torah tells us that for the first time that he didn’t eat or drink for 40 days and nights, he suffered thirst and hunger (which isn’t mentioned in the first experience).

But that second experience lasted. It made an impression because the individual played the primary, active role in the education process. In a metaphoric and literal act, Moshe had to carve out the space in himself to receive Hashem’s word. Moshe had to sweat to learn.

And unsurprisingly, this second Sinai experience became the core of what it meant to be a Jew – we invested the effort, time, and resources into educating ourselves. We toiled. In fact, that became the term for learning – we didn’t want to “learn” Torah, but to “toil in Torah”. We valued the effort, as we learn in the Ethics of the Fathers, “no pain, no gain”. And we valued the toil because it was transformative. We realised that learning is redemptive, that the give and take of an active mind changes the whole personality.

We wanted to be active learners. We wanted to activate ourselves.

And we wanted our children, families, friends, and communities to be active learners. We wanted them all to activate themselves.

How much has changed!

Over the past 150 years, the patterns of Jewish education have shifted from parents setting the standard as models of self-education and constant effort and growth, to a new outsourced model. The saintly Chofetz Chaim noted in the early 1900s that the old parental model had simply evaporated, and we now outsource our own inspiration to a “good speaker in shul” (read entertaining, eloquent, diverting) and our children’s “education” to teachers and schools.

Our kids are unable to model their growth and learning on ours, so none of this is redemptive, none of it is transformational, none of it is real, toiling, self-growth, and change.

Until now. Until COVID-19.

Now, we have no shul, no thundering orator, enlightening and lightening our mood.

Now, we are toiling with our kids, and for the first time in ages, we have the potential to



let it change us, let them see that change, and learn that it can be done.

This is the paradigm shift we can choose to embrace this year – to become, “we, the teachers”. First of ourselves, then of others.

For this reason, this Shavuot, the

academy is offering a transformative process. Instead of a passive, sit-back experience, we would like to recreate that original, long-lasting Sinai experience: the empowerment of each individual to teach.

Please join us in deciding the topics you

RABBI RAMON WIDMONTE



wish to share with your family, and we will co-create the material and coach you in a pre-Shavuot *tikkun leil* experience (learning Torah all night on Shavuot) on Saturday evening, 23 May, from 20:00 until 24:00 on Zoom and Facebook, so that come Shavuot night, you can embrace yourself as teacher-learner-grower.

Please suggest the topics for our final session that night – the Great Debate – where you set the agenda. Afterwards, a full downloadable guide will be available to help you share, discuss, debate, teach, learn, and grow with your family.

Because, strangely, at least in this respect, this is how things are supposed to be. Join us!

Send your suggested topics to info@theacademy.org.za and make sure to put ‘Shavuot topics’ in the subject bar.

• *Rabbi Ramon Widmonte is the dean of the Academy of Jewish Thought & Learning.*

Jewish trends tell a tale of three cities

TALI FEINBERG

Did you know that Joburg Jews have more financial challenges than Capetonian Jews, but they are also much more likely to employ domestic staff than their coastal counterparts?

While the South African Jewish community is a cohesive one in many ways, these are some of the fascinating differences between its population centres revealed by the recently released Jewish Community Survey of South Africa (JCSSA).

At the same time, Jews may be spread out across the country, but they also live close together. The JCSSA shows that more than half of the respondents live in just four postcodes of South Africa, and three-quarters of the entire Jewish population lives in just sixteen postcode areas.

“In short, the key differences between Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban relate to age and religion,” says Associate Professor Adam

Mendelsohn, the director of the Isaac and Jessie Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town.

However, he doesn’t believe age and religious differences make these communities “separate”.

“There’s still a spectrum of religious identity in each city, a lot of movement and connection between all three cities, and more in common than not. In reality, there have always been differences between [and within] these communities,” Mendelsohn says.

Does this mean that local communities could come into conflict with one another? “This data does suggest that there is some divergence – and potential areas of tension – between them, particularly relating to matters

of religion,” says Mendelsohn. “There are still many things that most but not all South African Jews agree on, but we can expect further flare-ups around matters where cities are pulling in opposite directions.”

Regarding the tendency of the community in Johannesburg to be more religious than in the other cities, Mendelsohn says, “A lot has been written and is being written about why Johannesburg has become more religious. A variety of factors have been at work for a long time. In Johannesburg, this pattern has often been traced to the influence of several charismatic religious leaders and movements that took

for example, young people in search of a larger and more vibrant Orthodox community have moved to Johannesburg.”

From the JCSSA report, it’s clear that Joburg has the youngest population. This is probably related to it being a more Orthodox community, with 30% of its members aged 18 to 40 compared with 16% in Cape Town, and 7% in Durban, which has the oldest population.

Of the Jews living in Johannesburg, 34% are aged 60 and above. In Cape Town, the equivalent proportion is 46%, and in Durban, 58%. In Durban, 20% are retired, compared with 18% in Cape Town, and 12% in

This is particularly prevalent in Johannesburg, with 80% of Jews saying that more than half or all of their friends are Jewish. In Cape Town, the equivalent proportion is 60%, in Durban, it’s 48%.

There are other differences. Joburgers, for example, may be facing a greater financial struggle. A total of 28% in Johannesburg describe their socio-economic well-being as “just getting along” or “poor”, compared to 23% in Cape Town, and 18% in the remaining areas. At the same time, 51% of respondents in Johannesburg employ at least one full-time member of staff at home compared with 32% in Cape Town.

The survey suggests that there has been movement from Johannesburg to Cape Town over the past five years: 3% of Joburgers lived in a different part of South Africa five years before the survey, compared to 6% of Capetonians. “It’s likely that a net Jewish population flow away from Johannesburg towards Cape Town took place over this period,” surmises the report.

A total of 37% of respondents said that they were likely to move from their current location in the next five years (whether to a different suburb, city, or abroad), and the top reason given for wanting to live in a different part of South Africa is to seek a better lifestyle.

Asked if he thinks this trend will continue, Mendelsohn says, “We can assume that migration to Cape Town and Durban will continue, particularly among retirees. But this flow isn’t unidirectional. There is clear evidence of people moving to Johannesburg for work, in search of a particular religious experience, or because their friends have moved there.”



root in the 1970s and 1980s.

“Others look back further, and suggest that each of these communities have always had a different character, in part because of the scale and nature of the Lithuanian Jewish immigrant population in each, and the dominant ethos of the city itself,” he says.

In addition, “The relative success of the progressive movement in each centre has its own history, again in part reflecting the key role played by particular individuals in each setting. Irwin Manoim’s new book on the history of the progressive movement in South Africa explains much of this divergence. To a certain extent, the religious trajectory in each city has become self-reinforcing,

Johannesburg.

The study offers fascinating data on religious identity in the different population centres. In Johannesburg, almost half of the respondents (48%) described themselves as either Orthodox or strictly Orthodox, compared with 22% in Cape Town, and 28% in Durban. In Cape Town, 40% described themselves as progressive or secular, compared with 18% in Johannesburg.

Intermarriage statistics also offer insight into these differences. A total of 12% of all Jews in South Africa are intermarried: 6% of Joburgers, 18% of Capetonians, and 29% of Durbanites.

The South African Jewish community appears to be close-knit across the board.

Shavuot relies on us to give it meaning

OPINION

RABBI SAMUEL LEBENS



In the book of Leviticus (chapter 23), all of the Biblical festivals appear. Each festival has its own date, sacrifices, and a distinctive ritual. Rosh Hashanah has its Shofar. Yom Kippur has its afflictions of the soul, such as the fast. Pesach has its matzah. Sukkot has its booths, and its lulav and etrog. What about Shavuot?

Shavuot is different. First of all, we're not told what the date is. The reason for this difference is straightforward. We were commanded to count 49 days from Pesach to Shavuot. In ancient times, the length of each month wasn't firmly fixed.

Accordingly, the festival couldn't be given a set date in the calendar. It would depend upon how long the months of Nissan and Iyar would be. Its date is not its own. Its date is tied to Pesach. Second, unlike the other festivals, the Torah gives Shavuot no distinctive rituals (other than its sacrifices).

The other festivals all have a story. The Torah doesn't tell us that Rosh Hashanah is a day of judgement, or a new year, but the shofar easily conjures the image of a people coronating their King. Yom Kippur, we're told, is a day of atonement. The Torah makes clear, repeatedly, what matzah is supposed to symbolise, and that Pesach is about the exodus from Egypt. Sukkot, we're told, commemorates our living in booths in the wilderness. But what about Shavuot? We're not told. Shavuot is a festival in search of an identity.

According to the rabbis, Shavuot remembers the revelation at Mount Sinai. This teaching generated its own rituals: learning Torah all night so as not to be late for the revelation; the reading of the ten commandments, a recreation of the revelation; decorating our shuls with flowers to commemorate the eruption of flowers on the rocky mountain. But why is all of this hidden in the Torah itself?

Another question: every year we begin the Book of Numbers the Shabbat before Shavuot. Why? The Book of Numbers is called Bamidbar, which means



"in the desert". Why do we have to enter the desert and open the book of Bamidbar before we can stand on Shavuot to receive the Torah? Why did the Torah have to be given in a desert?

One midrash teaches that G-d first came to the sea. But the sea fled. After that, G-d came to Mount Sinai, but even that didn't work. Just like the sea, the mountain ran away. But, when G-d came to the wasteland of the desert, it praised Him. It didn't flee. Indeed, G-d appeared just one time to the people at Mount Sinai. But he dwelt with them, in the tabernacle, for 40 years in the desert. In other words, you have to be a desert if you want G-d to dwell in your midst. For all of the razzmatazz of splitting sea, and for all the pyrotechnics of Mount Sinai, we should remember to make ourselves like deserts.

Alternatively, according to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, we had to learn that our peoplehood doesn't depend upon a government. Our peoplehood doesn't depend upon a building, or a homeland. Our peoplehood depends solely upon the Torah. Even without the temple, or belongings, or sovereignty over our land, we would remain G-d's people. Even in a desert, we have Torah.

Finally, according to the Maharal of Prague, if we care only about the law, we create a society worthy of destruction. "This is commemorated by the fact that the Torah was given in a place of destruction, namely, the desert." (Hidushei Agada BM 30). The

written Torah isn't enough. Law isn't enough. Instead, we must embody the spirit of the law to make the desert bloom.

There's a midrash in which a king had two servants. "He gave each of them a small measure of wheat and a small bunch of flax." One of them took the flax "and weaved a cloth, and took the wheat and made flour, which he sifted, ground finely, kneaded, and baked into bread, placed on the table, and spread the cloth over it". The other one did nothing with his gift. But the King wanted his gift to be used. So, too, "when the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, it was given to them as wheat with which to produce flour, and as flax with which to produce a garment".

We are not supposed to leave the Torah on the bookshelf. We are supposed to engage with it.

The Torah was given in a desert because, if we don't enter into a partnership with G-d, doing something with the gift that he gave us, then the Torah itself can be a source of destruction. It can wither the soul into a wasteland. This is the association between Bamidbar, the desert, and the Torah.

Moreover, Shavuot cannot have an identity unless we, G-d's partners in revelation, are involved in giving it its meaning. That's the essence of Torah. It's a living tradition that calls upon us to stand up and engage with it; all the time making room in our hearts for a relationship with G-d. Shavuot couldn't be the festival of the Torah until we said that that's what it was; until we took the flour and made it into bread.

• Rabbi Samuel Lebens is an academic philosopher and Orthodox rabbi. He is also a research fellow in the philosophy department of the University of Haifa. He will be speaking at eLimmud on Sunday, 17 May, at 17:00 on "An Argument for Creation".

A magical Zoom Lag B'Omer

"We had a magical and mystical Lag B'Omer this year," says Rabbi Yossy Goldman of Sydenham Shul. Participants delved deeper into the insights of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, one of the heroes of Lag B'Omer, and were treated to the veiled mysteries and sleight of hand of Illusionist Ilan Smith. But the highlight was a live video link to the small mountain town of Meron in the Upper Galilee of Israel, the home of Rabbi Shimon's ancient tomb.

Up to half a million visitors flock to Meron annually on Lag B'Omer to pray at the gravesite of the saintly rabbi. It's the biggest event of any kind in Israel, with music, singing, dancing, and an incredibly festive atmosphere. This year, with Israel's lockdown easing slowly, the authorities allowed only about 500 locals to attend the sacred site.

Sydenham's Rabbi Yehuda Stern arranged a live chat with Rabbi YY Halperin, the Chabad *shaliach* (emissary) in Meron, who Zoomed in on the tomb, explained its significance, and shared his blessing from the holy place.



Illusionist Ilan Smith

From Kumzitz to Zoomzitz with Sandton Central

What happens when your shul's annual Lag B'Omer Kumzitz gathering can't take place because of lockdown? Naturally, you arrange a Zoomzitz instead.

Chabad's Sandton Central Shul has attracted people from all over to its bustling bonfire, braai, and Kumzitz entertainment in the past. Not allowing coronavirus to put a stop to this, Rabbi Ari and Batya Kievman contacted musician Rephael Perkel, who generously came on board. Community members brought their home braais to Zoom, roasting marshmallows, and sharing in the celebrations with songs, stories, and camaraderie.



ORT Jet powers business rescue

ORT Jet's Business Rescue Initiative has helped 52 businesses to access government funding and other relief measures since the lockdown began.

Expert panellists help businesses to navigate the documentation needed to access funding and other relief measures. A "creative thinking panel" has also been established to create out-of-the-box solutions.

ORT Jet is working closely with other organisations, like the Rambam Trust and

Gesher Fund, to give business owners the best all-round facilitation possible.

Says Helene Itzkin, ORT Jet's head of department, "We have a team of exceptional mentors who meet businesses regularly and guide them through the financial opportunities available."

Since the start of the lockdown, ORT Jet has also hosted 16 webinars on a range of topics, such as the importance of corporate culture at this time, and "Lockdown, a time of progression, not regression."

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And we thought arresting surfers was bad

However irrational you think that South Africa’s approach to COVID-19 might be, we aren’t alone. In spite of myriad global experts, there isn’t a country in the world that isn’t bumbling along making decisions on the fly while pretending to their citizens that they have a handle on the situation.

If we are fair (which we probably aren’t), the complexities of each decision and the interconnectivity of a social and economic network makes it almost impossible to get everything right. No matter how logical a decision might be in isolation, when zooming out, there is a great chance it will look more than a little bizarre. Much like the short-sleeved T-shirt and open-toed shoe restrictions do.

Last week, my son asked me to replace the fan in his room. It’s strange, but even in winter, he needs this to help him sleep. When I went online, however, it turned out that I could buy him a heater but not a fan. I have no idea why the heating element apparently made it acceptable, but there you have it.

In Tel Aviv, during the easing of lockdown, people were allowed to swim in the sea but not stop on the beach. Dawdling wasn’t tolerated. The logic was sound, and based on the idea that it was acceptable to swim for exercise or stress, but the authorities didn’t want people socialising on the beach. In practice, however, it just sounded odd.

I have no way to explain what happened in Nigeria, however. According to the BBC, two hotels in that country were demolished because they defied the rules of lockdown. I’m not making this up. I read the article twice, checked that it was the real BBC, and then tried to see what I was missing. And I still have no idea why they were hosting guests when it was prohibited

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



according to Nigeria’s COVID-19 laws. The state governor, Nyesom Wike, who supervised the demolition, claimed that the operators had “flouted” an order to close.

And we thought arresting surfers was bad?

In the United States, land of the free, a hairdresser was arrested and spent days in jail because she chose to open her salon. In England, Piers Morgan is considering getting a temporary construction job for himself and his sons so that he can see them (he isn’t really, but he did Tweet that to make a point). The rules are so complex and convoluted that very little makes sense.

Because no one really knows how best to achieve whatever it is that we are trying to achieve.

More challenging than the state of total lockdown is the period in between. We know this from politics. It’s significantly less challenging to maintain a position on the far right or far left of the political divide than to exist in the messy middle. The middle requires thought, contemplation, and decision. And as South Africa tries to get back to a functioning economy that balances the health risks of its citizens with economic reality, it’s more likely that many of the regulations will seem to be irrational.

Some countries have responded better than others to the COVID-19 crisis. Only the perspective of time will determine which is which. In the meantime, I’m going to try and cut the South African government some slack. Even if the T-shirt thing continues to confound me.

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

Community focus on financial aid



ABOVE BOARD

Shaun Zagnoev

There has been considerable activity on the South African Jewish Board of Deputies’ (SAJBD’s) COVID-19 Jewish community platform over the past week. While the site continues to provide regular and up-to-date medical advice (I highly recommend Professor Barry Schoub’s most recent podcast, titled “COVID-19: Looking into the future?”), there has been growing emphasis on assisting community members with financially-related advice and information. This includes guidelines on what is required to access economic relief from government programmes and the banks. Our most recent podcast in this area is by Investec’s Adam Orlin.

A second area of great activity on our website and Facebook page concerns the ongoing involvement of community members in hunger relief. On a daily basis, we have been posting write-ups accompanied by pictures of individual projects headed by Jewish people run under the CAN (Community Action Network) banner in and around Johannesburg. Check these out to see what our community is doing and where you could get involved.

Over the past weeks, the Pretoria Council SAJBD, working with council member Ciska Lewis of the Union of Jewish Women, has been rendering substantial assistance to its own constituents and the wider community. One of its projects is to deliver bread daily to needy families in the Silverton area and nearby townships. There have further been food deliveries to Moot area squatter camps, University of Pretoria residential students, and the various

Sunnyside-Up Projects, bulk deliveries of badly needed hygiene materials to the elderly in the Sunnyside precinct and two local orphanages, and donations to the Pretoria Chevrah Kadisha. Kudos to our northern neighbours for once again rolling up their sleeves and getting the job done.

The Board continues to consult regularly with its counterparts around the world, sharing information and drawing practical lessons from one another. It was largely through this that we knew what steps to take right at the beginning to reduce infection in our community. Discussions have now been taking place on how the various countries are dealing with the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions. International Jewry also has to deal with the threat of the predictable outbreak of conspiracy theories blaming Jews, Israel, or both for the COVID-19 crisis. The Board has shared information on what is happening on this front in South Africa with other organisations working in the field. Fortunately, it hasn’t surfaced to any great extent locally. We continue to monitor the situation carefully, and ask that anyone who does become aware – online or in other circumstances – of COVID-19-related anti-Semitism to please let us know on sajbd@sajbd.org.

• Listen to Charisse Zeifert on Jewish Board Talk, 101.9 ChaiFM, every Friday from 12:00 to 13:00.

This column is paid for by the SA Jewish Board of Deputies



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