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# south african Jewish Report

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## Wedding leads to a number of COVID-19 cases

TALI FEINBERG

Buffets of canapés and dessert, the sharing of snacks and dips, and horah dancing – allegedly without masks – were just some features of a Jewish wedding held at the height of the second wave in Cape Town, from which a number of community members contracted COVID-19. And while this was one wedding or social gathering that broke the law and flouted restrictions, there have been others.

The daughter of a Johannesburg rabbi and the son of a prominent Johannesburg Jewish family got married in early January 2021. Our source says that under the chuppah, “a man made a speech where he bragged about how his shul was circumventing COVID-19 laws by having people ‘enter secretly through the back’. The general feeling was that his community was more concerned about flouting health precautions in order to conduct Jewish ceremonies than protecting the community from the virus,” the source says.

He says there were about 60 guests, and at first, things seemed safe. “I wasn’t worried as I was sure that there would be a strict protocol that would keep everyone safe.

“On arrival, the staff sprayed hand sanitiser, a registry was filled out, and everyone was wearing masks.” Then things began to shift. “From what I saw, once the bridal party had their makeup on, they didn’t wear their masks. I wasn’t too worried, as there was still social distancing in place. But in the room where the groom was signing the *ketuba*, there were snacks and dips which everyone was sharing. I thought this was a bit irresponsible.”

He says that at the chuppah, the guests were seated far from each other to create social distancing, but “by the time the horah dancing started, the whiskey was flowing and by now, hardly anyone was social distancing or wearing masks.

What also really worried me was the fact that the caterer served the canapés and dessert as a buffet, where guests shared sushi soy dips, finger-food dips, a self-service ice cream machine, and other foods that were obvious virus-spreaders.”

The venue’s owners insist, however, that “no alcohol was served by the venue in any part of the venue. Neither the staff, nor the independent wedding planner, nor the caterer saw any alcohol consumed.” They say staff enforced mask-wearing, and that only family participated in the dancing.

According to the source, “A few days later, I felt very run down and had an extremely sore throat and sinuses. I tested positive for COVID-19. As a healthy person, I have had no serious complications, luckily, but I still had a rough time. After I got sick, I heard from a secondary source that a lot of people at the wedding had caught COVID-19, including the bride and groom.” Another source says that at least two guests have since been in hospital with COVID-19.

“What I saw at this wedding was a general attitude of laxness when it comes to something so serious,” says the source. “The wedding could have been pulled off safely if they had considered a few obvious fixes: simply postpone the wedding until after the second wave; hold the horah dancing outside or cancel it entirely; and the caterer should have had better COVID-19 protocols such as separate dip containers for each person and plates of food rather than buffets.”

The caterer told the *SA Jewish Report* that she felt pressured into catering the wedding, but “it should never have taken place”. At first she thought she would drop off the food, but was then told to do “normal” catering in the style that the couple wanted. She emphasised that the main meal was plated. She was also asked to cater for the Shabbat dinner and the *sheva brochas*, but refused. As far as she knows, both those events went ahead. She says a number of rabbis attended the wedding.

Another source recalls being told that it

would be a small wedding of 40 people. “The venue was excellent about sanitising, taking temperatures, and registering – it even gave everyone their own pen to write their details. Everything was legally permitted, but I think the lesson our community needs to learn is that at some stage, guests dropped their guard. Being careful 90% of the time isn’t necessarily enough.”

Yet another source who only attended the chuppah says, “The bottom line is that assurances were made that this wedding would be done in a safe way. I’m not entirely sure those assurances were kept.”

Professor Efraim Kramer, the head of the division of emergency medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand who has worked tirelessly to ensure the safety of the community during the pandemic, didn’t mince his words. “Those members of our community who continue to ignore and deny the reality of death and destruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are playing a critical game of Russian roulette with their lives and the lives of others.

“They are breaking the law of South Africa, and Jewish law, and therefore acting simply like criminals, nothing less, bringing shame and disgrace on the Jewish community as a whole. It’s a pity we don’t excommunicate anymore.”

“If these facts are true, then it’s a great disappointment,” says legal expert Professor Michael Katz, a member of the board of directors of the Solidarity Fund. “It may have breached the law, and it’s a danger to human life and health.”

Tzvi Brivik, the chairperson of the Cape South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), says, “We are very disappointed to learn that a wedding took place under these circumstances. Super-spreader events such as what this could potentially have become are precisely why the second wave of the pandemic has been so devastating to our community and South Africa as a whole.

“Any event which takes place now must meet level-three regulations – there is no compromise. Each

Continued on page 13>>

## Back to school ... briefly

Most children – including Taila Sitsakis and Michaela Grasko (pictured above) – went to school for an orientation session, and then headed home for online learning. See pages 4, 6, and 16.



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# Poll shows British Jews feel more welcome after Corbyn replacement

CNAAN LIPSHIZ – JTA

In an annual survey of British Jewish adults, two-thirds said Jews have a future in the United Kingdom – the highest level of confidence since 2015. And the portion of British Jews who said they felt “unwelcome” in the UK fell from 53% last year to 18% in 2020. The “Antisemitism Barometer” survey, conducted in November and December by King’s College London for the Campaign Against Antisemitism watchdog group, shows that British Jews are “back from the brink” following far-left politician Jeremy Corbyn’s replacement as head of Labour, a man who many British Jews believe is antisemitic, the campaign said on Sunday, 17 January. The survey of 1 846 British Jews found that 66% agreed with the statement that Jews have a future in the United Kingdom, with 24% saying they strongly agreed. Just 12% said they disagreed, and only 2% strongly disagreed. About 22% neither agreed nor disagreed. This is a 13-point increase over last year’s poll, in which 17% disagreed with the statement. In 2018, the year when respondents were most pessimistic, a full

quarter of British Jews said they thought the UK held no future for Jews. Just 50% of British Jews said they agreed that Jews had a future in the country. The survey didn’t detect change across the board. Antisemitism has caused 41% of respondents to consider leaving the country over the past two years, virtually the same result as last year. The campaign said that the result showed British Jewry was still “scarred” from the Corbyn years, although it could also reflect the fact that changes within Labour have taken place within the timeframe in the question. Compared to only 22% and 20% of respondents who felt welcome in the UK in the 2018 and 2019 survey, 57% agreed with the statement in 2020. About a third of them strongly agreed about feeling welcome. The share of those feeling unwelcome shrank from 52% and 53% in 2018 and 2019 to only 18% in 2020. Corbyn, who has called Hamas and Hezbollah his friends, and who in 2013 defended a mural depicting Jewish bankers playing Monopoly on the backs of black



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men, was replaced in an internal election last year. His successor, Keir Starmer, has apologised for Corbyn’s handling of the proliferation of antisemitic sentiment in Labour’s ranks, and promised to address it. The Antisemitism Barometer Report included surveys with British non-Jewish adults in an attempt to ascertain antisemitic sentiment. Of 1 853 non-Jews, “Twelve percent have entrenched antisemitic views, affirming four or more antisemitic statements,” the report said. That figure conforms with the findings of the Anti-Defamation League’s antisemitism indexes for 2014, 2015, and 2019.

# Morocco second Arab country to get elite support for Zionism

RON KAMPEAS – JTA

A Moroccan institution has with official government backing signed an agreement with the United States (US) state department to combat antisemitism and anti-Zionism, the second such agreement in the Arab Middle East. The agreement, signed on 15 January by El Mehdi Boudra, the president of Association Mimouna, and Elan Carr, the US state department’s envoy to combat antisemitism, signals the far-reaching ambition of the Trump administration’s Abraham Accords to normalise the acceptance not just of Israel, but Zionism. The memorandum of understanding says the sides “intend to work together to promote best practices for combating all forms of antisemitism, including anti-Zionism and the delegitimation of the state of Israel” and “for combating other kinds of intolerance and hatred, including Islamophobia”.

The agreement is similar to one signed in October between Carr and a Bahrain institution. In both cases, the signing organisations aren’t government bodies



Photo: Paul Bruinooie/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images

Princess Lalla Joumala Alaoui and Jason Guberman

but have the blessing of the royal family. Association Mimouna was founded in 2007 by Muslims who sought to preserve the country’s Jewish heritage. The Abraham Accords, brokered by President Donald Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and his top Middle East envoy, Avi Berkowitz, have encompassed four countries. In addition to Bahrain and Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Sudan have agreed to normalisation with Israel. Each of the countries has in recent years, to varying degrees, had good relations with Jewish organisations and quiet but friendly relations with Israel. By nudging the relations into the open and by effectively getting ruling elites to bless Zionism, the architects of the Abraham Accords hope to set an example that will erode Israel’s isolation in the region. The agreement “reinforces the partnership between our two countries in the fight against all forms of intolerance and the promotion of peace and mutual coexistence”, said Morocco’s ambassador to the US, Princess Lalla Joumala Alaoui.

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## Torah Thought

### The lesson of the three loves

On Shabbat morning, 10th Shevat 5710, 28 January 1950, the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, left this world. One year later, the seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe formally accepted the leadership of Chabad-Lubavitch (this Shabbat marks 71 years). From the very start, it was clear that he meant to carry on his father-in-law’s work to reach out and embrace every Jew, no matter how geographically or spiritually distant from their people. No matter where you go in the world, there is a very high chance you will find Chabad. One of the first things the Rebbe instituted after his father-in-law’s passing was the concept of sending emissaries to all corners of the world. The concept is deep and simple. The Rebbe wished to reach every Jew on the face of the earth and to inspire them to connect to their heritage. But to reach every Jew is a task impossible for a single

human being. So he raised an army of young men and women and said to them, “I empower you to act in my stead. When you go out – to Alaska or to Johannesburg – it will be as if I myself am going there, as if I myself am giving that class, koshering that kitchen, or visiting the sick in hospital.” At a gathering marking the first anniversary of his father-in-law’s passing, the Rebbe delivered a Chassidic teaching, *maamar*. The impact lives on today. Here’s a free translation of a small part (courtesy of chabad.org). “Here in America, people like to hear things expressed in the form of a statement, preferably a provocative and shocking statement. I don’t know if this is the best approach, but as our Sages have said, ‘When you come to a city, do as its custom.’ The three loves – love of G-d, love of Torah, and love of one’s fellow – are one. One cannot differentiate between them, for they are of a single essence. And since

Rabbi Pini Pink, Chabad Greenstone



they are of a single essence, each one embodies all three. This is our statement, if you see a person who has a love of G-d but lacks a love of Torah and a love of his fellow, you must tell him that his love of G-d is incomplete. And if you see a person who has only a love for his fellow, you must strive to bring him to a love of Torah and a love of G-d, that his love toward his fellows should not only be expressed in providing bread for the hungry and water for the thirsty, but also to bring them close to Torah and to G-d. When we have the three loves together, we will achieve redemption. For just as this last exile was caused by a lack of brotherly love, so shall the final and immediate redemption be achieved by love for one’s fellow.” The lesson to us is clear – even more so in the times we find ourselves with all the negativity in the world – we have to make sure to counter it with love.

South African Jewish Report

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# Vaccine refusal isn't personal, it affects others

NICOLA MILTZ

While people around the world line up for vaccination against COVID-19, only 53% of South Africans plan to get vaccinated when it becomes available to them. This is according to a recent Ipsos poll conducted in partnership with the World Economic Forum.

Vaccine hesitancy within and without the community poses a real threat to being able to stem the coronavirus pandemic.

“This would indeed be a major headache for planners if the aim is to reach 67% of the adult population in order to achieve herd immunity,” Professor Barry Schoub, the chairperson of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 vaccines told the *SA Jewish Report* this week.

would take the vaccine. Not tomorrow. Today,” said Johannesburg doctor Anton Meyberg, who is working at the coalface of the illness.

“The sooner the better. It’s considered *pikuach nefesh* [preservation of human life] at the highest levels to get vaccinated to protect ourselves and our fellow man,” he said this week amidst growing vaccine hesitancy.

While the country scrambles to secure enough doses to obtain herd immunity – a situation in which most of a population is immune to an infectious disease, giving indirect protection to those who aren’t immune – the question is whether all this effort and money amounts to nought when scores of people are reluctant to get the vaccine.

Johannesburg pulmonologist Carron Zinman told the *SA Jewish*

anyone to refuse something that could save your [or a loved one’s] life.”

Experts insist that nothing has more effectively contributed to the health of humankind than the provision of clean water and administration of vaccines.

The enormous pressure on vaccine manufacturers to produce an effective and safe vaccine as soon as possible is widely documented in the light of a devastating pandemic which has claimed more than two million lives.

In less than a year, manufacturers have been able to produce about 10 different vaccines which are in widespread use throughout the world. This contrasts with the 10 to 20 years it took to produce the vaccines of yesteryear, Schoub said.

“Public opinion on COVID-19 vaccines has ranged from the eager ‘why the delay?’ to the hesitant ‘I’m unsure about that vaccine’, to the militant ‘anti-vaxers’

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legitimate concerns in the minds of many anxious citizens”, said Schoub.

Much of the vaccine hesitancy centres on a fear of side effects, especially unknown, long-term side effects. There is also uncertainty about whether the vaccine will be successful against mutations of the virus, and lack of understanding about the differences between the various vaccines.

Anti-vaxers, Schoub said, “are a different breed”.

“Fortunately, they are a relatively small minority in this country, but they are, at the same time, a rather vocal minority, who exploit social media to spread wild and wonderful tales.”

Some of these tales include that COVID-19 is the result of 5G radiation and COVID-19 vaccines contain embedded microchips from Microsoft’s Bill Gates; or that the vaccine can alter our DNA.

“These folk will obstinately cling to these tales and refuse to listen to reason, preferring the comfort of conspiracies,” said Schoub.

It also doesn’t help when people in prominent positions voice their fears based on unscientific, unproven misinformation.

Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng sparked outrage last month with some of his bizarre comments about the “devil vaccine”, and a handful of public servants have also voiced seemingly illogical concerns.

Realising the importance and urgency of herd immunity, certain politicians including Julius Malema and Blade Nzimande have recently encouraged people to listen to science and get the jab.

Schoub said vaccine-hesitant people “do have very legitimate and understandable concerns” about the new COVID-19 vaccines.

“Sometimes their opinions are coloured by anti-vaxer stories; sometimes it’s misinformation; but usually it’s [as a result of] a lack of correct, scientifically validated information. Often, hesitancy is merely reluctance to be a guinea pig,” he said.

“Often, just seeing their friends, neighbours, or relatives being vaccinated, and being reassured that they are hale and hearty after the vaccination while boasting of now being immune to infection is enough to dissolve their hesitancy,” he said.

Careful and non-condescending messaging is important, he said. “For example, the fact that the mRNA vaccine contains absolutely no DNA and cannot alter one’s DNA, and is, furthermore, very rapidly disposed of in the body after its work of stimulating immunity is done.”

Experts agree that it’s important to educate the public about the rigour with which vaccines are monitored for safety and efficacy, from the clinical-trial stage through to international and national licensure, all of which needs to be publicised.

An often-heard objection to the COVID-19 vaccine is the mantra of human or individual rights. “I will choose what’s done to my body”, people say. The choice, however, said Schoub, isn’t between getting vaccinated or not getting vaccinated. The choice is between the perceived risk of getting vaccinated against the real risk of getting the disease.

“There’s no neutral position. Moreover, with infectious diseases, the choice to refuse a vaccine isn’t a choice for the individual alone, it’s also a choice affecting others.”



The reality is that we need 40 million adult South Africans to be vaccinated so that herd immunity can kick in and put an end to the cycle of pain and suffering. However, uncertainty, fear, and dread surround immunisation against COVID-19 in spite of a considerable amount of research that reinforces the effectiveness and safety of the vaccines.

“There is no doubt in my mind that I

*Report* she felt as if COVID-19 was winning the war. “Sadly, people haven’t modified their behaviour enough to control this deadly disease, and no one wants to stay locked away for the foreseeable future. Vaccination is our only hope of halting COVID-19 in its tracks.”

She said that by the time the vaccine is accessible in South Africa, it will have proven its safety and efficacy.

“It makes no sense whatsoever for

with their science-fiction conspiracies,” he said.

In tackling the “vaccine refusal problem”, it’s important to distinguish vaccine hesitancy from anti-vaxers, he said.

The breakneck speed at which vaccines have been developed and put into use, as well as the uniqueness of the platforms which have been used to construct these vaccines – some completely new to humans – “has raised

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# Acceptance as back-to-school goes back online

JORDAN MOSHE

Jewish schools are resuming online teaching, and while the situation is causing some frustration, parents have expressed support for the schools’ caution.



From playschool to matric, most students in the community began the school year this week. Following the government’s announcement that the opening of public schools has been postponed to 15 February, Gauteng Education MEC Panyaza Lesufi appealed to private schools to do the same to avoid putting strain on the province’s struggling health system. Consequently, Jewish schools such as King David, Yeshiva College,

Maharsha, Hirsch Lyons, and Herzlia have opted to continue with online lessons following an initial two-day orientation held on campuses early this week. “We brought the kids onto campus on different days for orientation, and

then will be moving online for three days,” says Rabbi Shimon Pinski, the principal of Maharsha Boys Primary. “We will assess the situation towards the end of the week after the government gazette has been finalised. “We’ve seen the positivity of kids studying at school in spite of all difficulties. We are vigorously keeping all protocols laid out by government, and following the recommendations

of Professor Barry Schoub and Dr Michael Setzer. We hope that our postponement will end soon, and we can get our kids back to school depending on numbers, regulations, and doctors’ advice.” “Our nursery school will be open on campus from this week, with all protocols in place, but Grades 1 to 12 have gone online after an initial orientation,” says Rabbi Steven Krawitz, the academic principal at Hirsch Lyons. “We’re waiting for the government to clarify the way forward for private schools.” Andries van Renssen, the executive director at Herzlia, says parents’ reactions to the way in which the school has reopened have been mixed, though they are generally much more favourable towards in-person teaching. “During orientation, it was clear how excited the children were to be back and how eager they were to start the learning process,” he says. “Teachers and management are making a real effort to create the safest possible learning environment.” These efforts are clearly being recognised by parents across the schools, in spite of the frustration the situation is causing. “Infection numbers are very high



at the moment, and schools are using good systems to cope with the pandemic,” says Adina Roth, whose seven and 11-year-old children attend King David Victory Park (KDVP). “I trust King David, and I feel it’s wise to wait for a while until things are a little bit safer. “The school hasn’t tried to sugar coat anything, and it has made its commitment to in-person teaching clear, which I find reassuring. Expectations have to shift in a pandemic, and we can’t carry on as normal when people are dying.” Nonetheless, Roth firmly believes that online teaching is no substitute for the classroom experience. “It’s not just about receiving knowledge but the interactions which come with learning,” she says.

“It’s challenging on a personal level when you need to help the younger ones with their classes and work at the same time, but there’s a bigger picture here. We need to deal with the situation and support the school.” Lara Jersky, whose son began Grade 1 at King David Ariel this week, says that she felt nervous at the thought of him going back to school in person. “The orientation was good, but I feel more secure that my son will be at home from school for now,” she says. “Yes, it means some stress for me in terms of work and looking after him, but we’ll have to see how it goes. In-person school is an added stress, so I’m happy with the way things are for now. “Of course, human interaction is gold for kids, and it’s what we want, but schools are definitely doing the right thing.”

## Delayed results make university placements a nail-biting wait

JORDAN MOSHE

As if university applications weren’t stressful enough, COVID-19 has made the anxiety worse for potential first-year students. Matrics of 2020 have no choice but to wait for their results to be released late next month before they can finalise their plans for the year, leaving them in a very uncertain position. Because of the pandemic, both the National Senior Certificate (NSC) and the Independent Examination Board (IEB) exam results will be released in late February. While universities are still proceeding with first-year admissions, the delay leaves students little time to make alternative plans in the event that they don’t secure a place. “The 2020 matric exam results are expected to be released on 23 February 2021 for both public and IEB schools,” Buhle Zuma, senior communications officer at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), told the *SA Jewish Report*. “Only once these results are released will the university issue firm offers to successful applicants. Unsuccessful applicants will also be notified.”

A provisional offer is made based on Grade 11 results, an indication that the applicant stands a good chance of being admitted to their chosen programme should they maintain their academic performance. However, a provisional offer doesn’t represent final admission. Only final matric results determine placement. Once an offer has been made, prospective students are urged to accept the offer to study at Wits within two to three days. However, if the offer comes in closer to the commencement of term, matriculants need to secure their places within 48 hours. The University of Cape Town (UCT) has adopted the same approach, offering conditional offers of admission based on Grade 11 results and/or trial exam results. According to head media liaison, Nombuso Shabalala, 44 600 prospective first-year students have applied to study at UCT in 2021.

“The overall number of first-time entering applicants for admission has increased by about 42%,” she says. “UCT has the capacity to enrol 4 200 first-year students in 2021.” The academic year will commence on 15 March at UCT and on 8 March at Wits for undergraduates. The situation leaves many students anxious about their study plans. Odeleyah Ozeri, who matriculated from Hirsch Lyons High School last year, applied to study law at Wits based on her Grade 11 results, but has no idea what the future holds. “Since applying, I have heard nothing from the university,” she says. “My anxiety waiting for results to know if I have secured a place at university rivals the anxiety I had when

actually writing the final papers. “I can only hope that if I don’t secure a place to study law, there will still be enough time to apply for something else.” Fellow Hirsch Lyons graduate, Tamar Levy, has applied to both Wits and UCT for a BSc Architecture, General BSc, and BSc Urban and Regional Planning. Although she hasn’t yet had a response from UCT, she says that she has been provisionally accepted at Wits and has potentially received a scholarship, subject only to her final results. “I’m slightly nervous about not receiving an offer from UCT. However, I’m confident that I put my best foot forward when presenting my creative portfolio,” says Levy. “I don’t have a backup plan, but if I don’t get accepted at UCT, I will accept my offer at Wits.” If accepted to UCT, Levy will relocate to live with her grandparents in Cape Town, another arrangement she can’t finalise yet. “The delay has affected planning, as I can’t let my grandparents know whether I’m coming or not,” she says. “Still, it isn’t a major issue as it’s an easy move given that everything I need is already set up there. “I feel uneasy and panicky about university due to the weight of these marks and anxiety about having a secure place to be this year.” Yeshiva College graduate Daniel Ralph also feels mounting anxiety, having applied to study accounting and a BCom Financial Science at Wits and at the University of Pretoria. “As time goes on, I begin to get more anxious as my results are only coming in a while,” he says. “I’m confident I did well, although there is still a chance that even if I did well and get enough points, I won’t be able to get in. “I’ve been accepted [provisionally] for the BCom at both universities, but I’m waiting for my matric results to see if I get into the other degrees and will then choose what I want to do. I know I have a place to go to and a degree if the worst comes to the worst.” Although both universities will be adopting a blended approach to learning this year, much of the interaction for undergraduate students will take place online, a reality which is less than ideal. “I’m not eager to study online as I found it immensely



difficult this past year,” says Ozeri. “I’m most disappointed about the fact that I will probably not be able to have the experience of physically meeting new people in a university environment. “After the stress of matriculating and lockdown, my mindset is that it can only get better.” Ralph, Rudnick, and Levy agree. “I definitely feel a loss seeing we won’t attend first-year classes on campus,” says Levy. “I feel it will be harder to make friends at university and to get a feel for university life, given that it will be online. “However, I value the health and lives of the people in my country, and would rather not risk increasing the infection rate by attending in-person lectures.”



# Farewell to rabbi who was jack of all trades, master of everything

TALI FEINBERG

On 12 January, Rabbi Desmond Maizels and his wife Esther welcomed a new granddaughter into the world. But *simcha* turned to sorrow when he passed away suddenly three days later, at the age of 71.

“The devastating news this morning of the passing of Cape Town’s senior *dayan* has hit our community like a thunderclap,” said a shocked and devastated Rabbi Asher Deren.

“He was a towering lighthouse, beaming the light of Torah’s wisdom, which he single-handedly brought into the homes and lives of literally every single Jewish family in Cape Town, South Africa, and thousands more across the world on a level unparalleled in our time,” said Deren.

His passing brought about a rare moment when all sectors of the South African Jewish community joined in grief, putting aside religious, ideological, and political differences.

Rabbi Maizels was born in Port Elizabeth in 1949. He graduated from Grey High School in 1967. He studied two to three years of medicine at the University of Cape Town while also being hostel-master of the Herzlia hostel. He then went to Israel for his *smicha*, studying for six years. It was there that he met his *be’sheret* and life partner, Esther, a formidable teacher, educator, and leader in her own right.

“He was a strong believer in getting certified in anything that you could. He always said you never knew when you were going to need it. He went to yeshiva in Israel, and he knew he would go back to a place where he was going to do *shchita*, and the brissing, and being the *sofer*, and being a *dayan*, and writing a gett ... anything he could get his hands on, he got a certification for,” says Rabbi Doron Chitiz.

“He told me how he was in Israel during a war and all the bus drivers and truck drivers were drafted. He wanted to help in the army, and he had done some years of medical school, but it wasn’t enough. But they said, ‘There was something we saw in your application, that you have a truck drivers’ licence.’ He landed up being the only Egged bus driver in that area, and a truck driver for the bakery right by the yeshiva where he was learning. He was so proud that he was able to help in his beloved Israel in the middle of a war.”

As a young rabbinical couple in Bloemfontein, the Maizels quickly made a powerful impact on the small community. “I remember having braais together – he even joined us in playing rugby,” said Mike Bellon. “And having Chanukah parties all over in the Free State, schlepping everything but the kitchen sink. That’s how he connected with the community, especially when it lost track of its *yiddishkeit*.”

“Rabbi Maizels and his wife created the opportunity for many of us from Bloemfontein and other small towns to travel to Israel and learn as much as possible,” said Joanne Klass. “They took a group of us in 1981 when I was 14 years old. I was so happy to meet him again in Cape Town when he officiated our wedding in 1992. This was so special, as he had a connection with my

family from Bloemfontein and my husband’s family from Oudtshoorn, where he made regular visits. He then did the baby naming of our daughter in 1998.”

Many families around South Africa and the globe have similar stories of Maizels being there for their family through every life-cycle moment.

After about eight years in Bloemfontein, the Maizels family moved to Cape Town. Serving as rabbi of the Camps Bay Shul for more than 30 years, he built up a diverse and dedicated congregation with the support of Esther and their children Hillel, Ora, Yael, and Gila.

“Rabbi Maizels’ first official duty on arrival at the Camps Bay Hebrew Congregation in 1994 was presiding over the funeral of a young family – Judy (née Biderman ) and Adi Tzur and their two babies who tragically died in a motor accident,” says Jonathan Biderman-Pam. “His empathy as a young rabbi of their families and our community has never been forgotten.”

“People from all levels of observance came to the shul. It felt like a real community of friends,” said Daniel Barnett. “And although Rabbi Maizels begged in every sermon for everyone to do a bit more, he didn’t judge you if you didn’t.”

Rabbi Maizels was also a *dayan* on the Cape Town Beth Din, and head of its kashrut department, a *sofer*, a *shochet*, and a renowned *mohel*. He would travel to locations like Hong Kong and Sydney especially to bris the sons of Camps Bay congregants, and he brissed thousands of boys, often two generations in the same family.

“He achieved international renown and fame for his deep understanding of kashrut, as well as his tenacity and innovation in making as much kosher food as possible accessible to the community,” wrote Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein. “He would travel to all corners of the globe, inspecting factories and finding solutions. That was his greatness. He was a man who found solutions because he wanted people to have access to kosher food in the best and easiest way possible.”

Rabbi Chitiz recalled, “I was at the Yeshiva of Cape Town from 2008 to 2010. Rabbi Maizels took me with for *shchita* one Monday morning, and it was the experience of a lifetime. Everyone knows of his kindness towards people, but few have seen his care and sensitivity towards animals – even animals he was about to slaughter. It was done with care, a sense of purpose, and dedication, as was everything else he did.”

He was a mentor to many, and a number of senior rabbis called him “my rabbi” in tribute. “As a young rabbi, the rabbinate is intimidating. One needs a great deal of support. Rabbi Maizels was one of those sources of support for me,” wrote a heartbroken Rabbi Sam Thurgood.



At the wedding of Amy and Ryan Salkinder

“Often, a key point in his stories was finding a clever solution to an intractable problem – whether it was joint purchase of *shchita* equipment with the Muslim community to make it affordable, or his proud discovery of a farm that grew bug-free cauliflower. He scheduled much of his life around plane trips for factory inspections, and would shift things around so that he could do multiple countries in one trip and save the factories money.”

“He symbolised what a true rabbi should be,” said Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft. “I remember he would drive from Cape Town to Oudtshoorn through the night, arrive at 03:00, have a short sleep, do the *schita* and then drive back to Cape Town in time for a bris. He did everything for the mitzvah, not for himself.

“He wasn’t afraid to challenge others about what was good for the community. That’s one of our greatest losses, that he was the living example of a true Torah Jew and leader. And he was able to talk to everyone – often in impeccable Afrikaans and isiXhosa – from the garage guy to the professor, to anyone in between. He had an ability to be everyone’s rabbi and friend without compromising true Torah values.”

His legacy lives on in the thousands of lives he touched.



Rabbi Maizels at the Bris of Rafael Sevel

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## Holding out for that vaccine

If you had asked me in September last year whether I would willingly have the vaccine against COVID-19, I would have told you I wasn’t sure. I was dubious about it, concerned about the long-term effect it might have. Not being a scientist, I wondered how it was possible to know the impact on our bodies the vaccine would have in 10 to 15 years.

However, if you ask me now, my answer would be an unreserved, “Hell yeah, bring it on!”

That vaccine is our chance to reclaim our lives. It’s our chance to no longer live in fear of getting or spreading a deadly virus. It will enable us to work towards getting our economy back on track, among other positive things.

It’s now clear that top scientists the world over have made sure that these vaccines are going to help and not harm us. So, I feel confident the vaccine is the best way forward. I only wish we could get it sooner.

I have heard all the fearmongering stories (see page 3) and I believe them to be just that. However, it’s concerning that there are so many who aren’t willing to have the vaccination.

To successfully stem this coronavirus, two-thirds of the population must be vaccinated. If we don’t manage that, we won’t be able to achieve herd immunity. While having the vaccine will prevent you from getting very sick, you can still spread the virus.

At this point, there are some in our community working around the clock to get vaccines for South Africa. Most important is our Absa Jewish Achiever Kia Community Award winner, Professor Barry Schoub, who is the chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 vaccines. This same man was retiring to the coast when he was called back to help guide our communal leaders through what later became a pandemic. So much for retirement, considering that he now holds one of the most pivotal positions in the country in combatting this virus.

I trust he will do the right thing. He appears to be handling the situation with aplomb.

Discovery Chief Executive Adrian Gore is also in the hotseat, working with the government to get vaccines here as fast as possible.

This week, we asked a selection of South Africans who now live in Israel to write about their experience of being vaccinated. These pieces (pages 10 and 11) reiterated for me just how much we need these vaccines fast.

This is especially so because there are those in our community and in the greater population who simply won’t abide by the COVID-19 laws set down by the government.

Now, I totally understand that we are frustrated with this situation. I was so sure that by now this pandemic would be behind us and we could move into 2021, getting back some semblance of our normal lives. I certainly don’t want to be home bound or not able to have a social life.

More than anything, I wanted my son who is starting a new school to be able to meet his teachers, experience the school, and make new friends. Well, for now, that looks like it isn’t going to happen.

Yes, it’s frustrating, but we have to safeguard ourselves, our families, our community, and our country from more deaths and more people getting very ill. It’s as simple as that.

We can’t play G-d, do what we want, and expect to survive unscathed. It won’t happen. This deadly virus is just waiting for us to slip up.

Pulmonologist Dr Carron Zinman, who is working around the clock to save lives, says 90% of her patients in hospital could have prevented getting the virus. Knowing this, we can’t make up our own rules.

At the *SA Jewish Report*, we keep hearing stories (see page 1) about people flouting COVID-19 laws and making themselves and others sick. To be honest, I don’t get any pleasure in publishing such stories. I can assure you that not one of our reporters do either. Who wants to make people feel uncomfortable or bad about being caught out? We don’t. We also don’t want people swearing at us and threatening us because they don’t want us to write about what they have knowingly done.

The people behind weddings, parties, and social events like these are responsible for making people sick, and may well be killing people. When they flout the law, do they think about this? Do they wonder how they will live with themselves if someone should die?

So, we continue to write about it because if we can, in our small way, make people realise that by doing this they are risking their own and other people’s lives, then we are doing our job.

We all want to celebrate simchas in the larger than life way that us Jews do. I would love to dance the horah with friends and family in celebration.

Who would have thought just how much we could long for a hug from a sibling or parent? Who would have thought that a *l’chaim* with your whole extended family could be something a person would yearn for when they live in the same country?

I so miss all these experiences, but they aren’t going to be available to me for a while. So, like all of us, I just have to suck it up and wait until we are vaccinated and given the green light to go ahead.

I don’t know when this will be, but if we hang tight, the time will come. Please, let’s do what we have to in order to stay healthy so we can be here and be healthy when that day comes.

**Shabbat Shalom!**  
**Peta Krost Maunder**  
**Editor**



# The variant that scuppered our new-year hopes



OPINION

DR DANIEL ISRAEL

Since its arrival, COVID-19 has challenged physicians to gather evidence and make firm decisions. This isn’t a behaviour to which good evidence-based doctors are accustomed.

A fair, scientific development of a pathway of care is usually the exploration of an idea, an attempt to falsify it, and only when it proves reasonable, recommending it.

When the National Institute for Communicable Diseases announced a new variant of the SARS-COV-2 virus on the shores of South Africa that had three mutations in its spike proteins that could possible lead to a different disease picture for our population, I took the position of simply raising an eyebrow. This meant that I noted the transparent efforts of the South African government in contributing to international knowledge, and I labelled this finding in my mind as probably not significant. Many of my colleagues adopted the same approach.

Viruses mutate. The SARS-COV-2 virus had shown little mutation since its appearance, and a mutation such as this seemed inevitable.

Furthermore, mutations in viruses often result

flow oxygen and intravenous steroids almost every day. Doctors are trained to be saviours, and it feels disempowering so often to have to shift into the role of empathy only because all other options are exhausted.

I’m encouraged, however, by more community members becoming more cautious with regards to the virus. Fear drives caution, and caution saves lives. So, fear has been positive.

I’m also encouraged by the countering statistics reported by Dr Mary-Ann Davies from the department of health, Western Cape, where the probability of death over a 30-day period was compared between the two waves. The study concluded that there was “no difference in mortality by age group between the waves”. This reliable evidence seems contrary to what we have experienced on the ground, but it’s worth noting as a beacon of hope.

The tentacles of the spikes of this variant have reached further than expected – into our schools, shuls, and places of work. We all realise that hope for a new reality as we began 2021 was a pipe dream.

I don’t think anyone predicted the level of

restriction COVID-19 has re-imposed upon us. I have been flooded with the question, “Should my kids be going to school orientations and younger kids back to pre-school?” We learnt last year that with the correct controls, schools aren’t cesspools of COVID-19 spread. In fact, they are probably the safest place for our kids to be. Nevertheless, I have adopted

the position that over this brief spike, other than short safe orientation days where I believe guards are up and the probability of lax behaviour is low, we shouldn’t be sending our kids back to school yet.

I’m aware of the tremendous strain that home schooling is placing on families – emotionally, financially, and logistically. However, after a long meeting with a group of academic doctors who advise one of the community schools, I agreed that it made no sense to send young children to school. Unfortunately, they are poor adherers to social distancing and scrupulous behaviour, so it isn’t wise to go back to school in the face of a more contagious variant when hospitals are near capacity and ventilators are unavailable.

The value we give to life – even one life – overpowers the tremendous inconvenience we are experiencing. The status quo isn’t a long-term solution. As soon as health facilities are coping well

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The value we give to life – even one life – overpowers the tremendous inconvenience we are experiencing. The status quo isn’t a long-term solution. As soon as health facilities are coping well

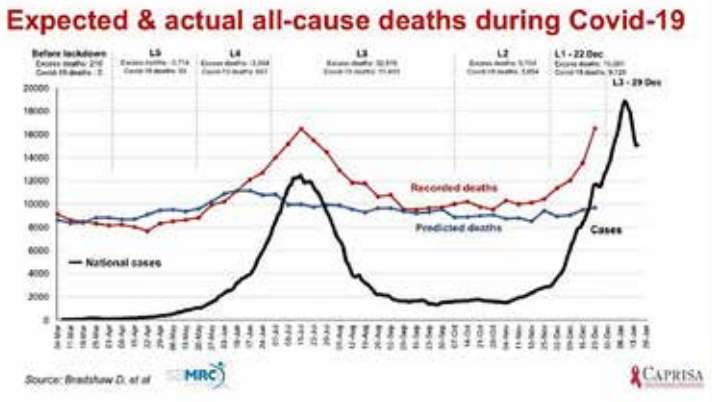
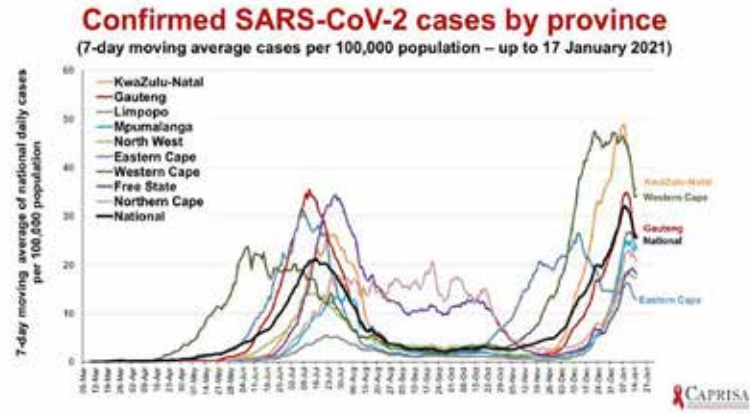
After some convincing, I manage to send them off for a PCR test, and perhaps 20% to 30% of these patients’ swabs are coming back positive.

Professor Salim Abdool Karim, the chairperson of the government’s Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, cited this week that a working group had demonstrated over a sample of 100 000 cases that the new variant (officially named 501Y.V2) is 50% more transmissible than last year’s variant.

It explains why so many more patients are accessing their doctors and testing positive now. Eighty percent of analysed new cases in hotspot areas are indeed the new variant. We can blame Rage and irresponsible behaviour for this devastating second wave in South Africa, but the reality is that this variant should share part of the responsibility.

This has been a difficulty week in our practice, and we aren’t alone. Every day or two, a patient of the practice or a patient related to a patient of the practice has succumbed to this dreadful virus.

We have admitted a patient to hospital for high-



again, I believe children should return to school with safety measures in place.

The second wave in South Africa has been devastating for so many in our community. Now is the opportunity for each of us to reach out in support of those personally infected and affected.

Let’s take this variant as a cue to a better type of approach and formidably march forward in our determination to overcome this pandemic and get ourselves back to normal life. I look forward to “variants” of novel treatments, newer and more efficient screenings, even vaccines.

• Dr Daniel Israel is a family practitioner in Johannesburg.



# No end to pandemic until everyone is vaccinated – Israeli minister

JORDAN MOSHE

"The price of vaccines is so ridiculously low in comparison to the terrible economic damage of every day of a national closure. The argument [of cost] is a nuisance. We have to find a way to vaccinate the whole world."

So said Dr Asher Salmon, the head of the department of international relations at the Israeli ministry of health. He was addressing more than 200 journalists in an online international media briefing held on Thursday, 14 January, and hosted by the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs.

"We won't get rid of the pandemic without vaccinating every community in the world," he said. "All of us should do the best we can to get it done."

To date, about two million Israelis have been vaccinated, and more than 100 000 of them have already received their second dose of the Pfizer vaccine. This while the country is currently in another hard lockdown with more than half a million active cases of the virus.

Salmon outlined Israel's vaccination campaign in detail, explaining how the Jewish state had made the necessary preparation for its country-wide immunisation project.

"We started to investigate vaccines quite early," he said. "In April, we had our first calls with Astra Zeneca. We then had discussions in summer with Moderna, with whom we came to our first agreement. Pfizer came into the practical line quite late, but it was willing to push into Israel a substantial amount of vaccine quite early."

"It was clear that we'd have to prioritise groups of individuals in the country. We decided to begin with medical personnel, but at the same time begin vaccinating everyone above 60."

"While many European countries started with older ages [over 75], we decided to start with younger groups as we needed to create a shift in people's understanding that it's the right thing to be



Dr Asher Salmon

vaccinated."

First responders such as ambulance drivers and police have also been among the first to receive the vaccine, some of them getting the shot at the end of the day after those with appointments have received their dose.

"We always try to find out how many doses are left to diminish waste," said Salmon. "People are being vaccinated at stadiums and other community centres, so we send paramedics and police brigades to these places at the end of the day to get a shot. Nearly 90% of fire brigades across the country have been vaccinated just by using this standby system."

Beyond wastage, Salmon explained that logistical issues also proved a considerable hurdle.

"The Pfizer vaccine should be stored at -80 degrees," he said. "It was clear that we needed a designated storage space. We decided to have a national storage space at the logistics site of Teva, the largest pharmaceutical company, from which we ship the doses daily."

"When the vial is defrosted, it has a short shelf life and needs to be used within 120 hours. We try not to pass 96 hours, and aim to keep it at -2 to -8 degrees in that time."

The vaccine is also extremely sensitive to movement, making shipping another challenge. According to Salmon, each week's distribution plan is prepared at the weekend, with each of the 350 vaccination points across the country receiving a shipment three times a week in the early hours.

"We needed to create smaller cases for distribution," he said. "A standard Pfizer case has 960 doses inside, so we had to create smaller cases to distribute across more remote locations."

"It was also evident that we had to create an accurate information

system to document side effects and administration. People can book an appointment online or via an app, and the national central registry gets information about every person vaccinated and each individual receives a notice that they have been vaccinated and are told when to go for the second dose."

As part of Israel's national campaign, call centres have also been established. These enable the ministry to reach out to the elderly and ultra-Orthodox communities, field questions from the public, and remain in contact with healthcare practitioners who may have questions about the vaccination.

The Arab population is also a priority, Salmon said.

"We are putting a lot of effort into creating trust and getting the Arab population vaccinated," he said. "We are running vaccination programmes in every centre from north to south, even in Bedouin villages in the Negev. It's a big challenge to convince Arab families to bring elderly people for vaccination."

As for citizens of the Palestinian Authority (who are not Israeli citizens and therefore not eligible for vaccination), Salmon stressed that the government has an interest in getting them vaccinated as soon as possible.

"It's important from a humanitarian point of view and because they are our closest neighbours," he said. "About 100 000 Palestinians pass into Israel daily, and it would be impossible to get rid of the pandemic without seeing them vaccinated. Right now, we are vaccinating Israeli citizens."

"We are aware of a major effort being done for the Palestinians," Salmon said, "and a big contract is being signed with Russia next week to get millions of vaccines to the Palestinians in coming weeks. I do believe they will be vaccinated before some European countries."

Salmon stressed that the vaccine rollout owes much of its success to co-operation between the ministry of health and health maintenance organisations (HMOs), and the flexibility of Israel's approach.

"We are working as a multi-agency taskforce," he said. "We not only bring healthcare providers to the table but also the police, ministry of defence, and many other agencies. The process is centralised but also gives a lot of responsibility to HMOs running community efforts, including clinics."

"Every agency or body has its own strength and you must use it properly in a centralised system."



## Friends' 12th annual celebration streamed in splendour

**UJC FRIENDS OF THE UJC CAPE TOWN**  
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More than 150 guests logged in from around the globe on Thursday, 29 December, for the 12th annual celebration of the Friends of the United Jewish Campaign Cape Town (Friends). Patrons and friends connected from overseas and South Africa, and were joined by local top donors for this uniquely South African affair.

The event, which has become a highlight of the summer season in Cape Town and is usually held at a unique and distinctive venue, was held online this year due to the pandemic. It didn't detract from the usual splendour, and even though guests weren't able to connect in person, the sense of community and connection could be felt by all. The year-end event was graciously hosted by Western Cape Premier Alan Winde, and was livestreamed from his beautiful residence, the historic Leeuwenhof Cape Dutch home built in 1665.

Premier Winde welcomed all to our Cape Town event, and spoke about the humanity that South Africans have displayed towards each other in facing the challenges that COVID-19 has presented.

Guests were then treated to an hour of entertainment by the Cape Minstrels; comedian Nik Rabinowitz; Carina Rubin-Frankal (the producer of the film *My Octopus Teacher*); pianist Gabriel Sieff; musician and chazen



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Choni G; and songstress/storyteller Dani Bitton, all beautifully tied together by master of ceremonies Africa Melane.

Marco van Embden, the chairperson of the Friends and the David Susman Community Foundation (DSCF), addressed the guests and shared Friends' remarkable 12-year journey. The focus of the annual Friends event is to raise funds for the DSCF and celebrate Jewish life in the Mother City. This foundation was established in 2007 - with great foresight - as a financial safeguard against any unforeseen adverse events our community may face in the future.

The COVID-19 pandemic was just such an event, and 2020 marked the first time it was called upon to aid the community in a significant manner on many levels. The DSCF's board of trustees approved a disbursement from the fund in support of the COVID-19 emergency campaign launched in Cape Town to assist our communal institutions in covering the additional and ongoing costs forced upon them by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We thank our patrons, friends, donors, and loyal supporters for standing with us and sharing our vision for a stronger, more resilient community. Their support allowed us to answer the call to action when it came.

We would also like to thank our generous annual sponsor, Investec, which has supported us since inception 12 years ago.



# Confession of dark 80s days causes shockwaves

TALI FEINBERG

A culture of bullying, racism, toxic masculinity, sexism, homophobia, corporal punishment, indoctrination, and militarisation. “k\*\*\*r-hunting” on the weekends, and army “cadet” training at school. Parents who sat silently, and teachers who were taught not to think or question. These were just some of the factors of Christian National Education described in a letter by Ben Horowitz, published in *Daily Maverick* on 6 January 2021.

Horowitz wrote the piece as a letter to his peers ahead of their 40th matric reunion. “I hope we don’t celebrate the disgusting culture that so many of us embraced. We matriculated from a government institution designed to mould white boys into pawns of the apartheid government. The environment encouraged us to be sexist, homophobic, and racist. Christian National Education normalised militarisation and prepared us for conscription into an army that was defending apartheid. Our experience is shared by tens of thousands of white South African men of our age,” he wrote.

Describing how he was bullied and in turn joined a group of bullies “to survive”, he recounted how they beat a black man into unconsciousness. “We were sexist. We were trash. Gay people suffered our scorn, vitriol, and violence even more than women and, dare I say, maybe even more than black people.” He wrote that while he has worked to become a better person, he still has to “check himself” for bullying tendencies.

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report*, Horowitz says it was empowering to share the painful memories with his wife and children and the wider community, and encourages other families to have similar conversations. He said at his school there wasn’t much antisemitism because there were so many Jewish students, but it was also part of the wider culture. He questions why more Jewish parents didn’t object to the toxic environment of these schools and stand up to apartheid as a whole. But, he acknowledges that the apartheid government was powerful and controlled education, even sending inspectors to these schools.

Horowitz’s experience isn’t unique. “[His article] is absolutely accurate, and whether one was at any of the public boys’ schools, it was exactly the same,” says a community member speaking on condition of anonymity.

“I have spent many years in psychoanalysis, processing my school days where I was a popular influential leader,” he says. “I don’t feel comfortable revisiting those days of mayhem and hatred, and thank goodness, have processed the fact that we all loved school but never visited it again for 30 years or so because of the shame and repressed anger that emerged in our adulthood. Thank G-d I had Habonim, where I learnt and then practiced proper values of humanity, which I hopefully integrated into my life.”

Jonathan Ancer wrote of similar experiences at school in a blog post in October 2020. Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report*, he says, “I have mixed feelings about my school years. On the one hand, I did make good friends and it wasn’t all bad. But, on the



Ben Horowitz

other, it was terrible. There was a pecking order, and boys who were bullied became bullies themselves. Anyone who was different was victimised. There was a culture of bullying and violence which was tolerated by the staff and sometimes even encouraged.”

At the same time, “Many people who went through school during apartheid still hanker after the ‘good-old days’. I think a lot of people who graduated from government schools and were fed apartheid propaganda have struggled to find a place in a democratic South Africa. They haven’t been able to unlearn the ‘education’ they received.”

Then there is the psychological impact of being in such a system. “The impact on these men as teens cannot be underestimated,” says Lauren Jacobs, a Cape Town clinical psychologist.

“Their teen brains were still developing, and their need to fit in with the peer group was important. These men were both victims and perpetrators.

They were victims of a system of conformity, and victims of a syllabus that was skewed to present history in a certain way. And they were perpetrators, of small and large offenses, hence their expression of guilt and shame. By not standing up for the rights of disenfranchised fellow students and disenfranchised black fellow South Africans, they were complicit.”

“Their traumatic experiences pushed their still-malleable brains’ trajectory into a defensive mode geared to promote survival,” she says.

This had an impact on them then and into the future. Possible effects include disconnection from others and cognitive dissonance, intrusions, and distortions. They could have difficulty regulating emotions, leading to acting out self-harming behaviours such as addiction, thrill-seeking, violent rage and depression, anger, and questioning fundamental beliefs. “I salute these men for sharing their vulnerability. As a clinical psychologist, I see that much has shifted, yet there is much that still needs to shift,” she says.

Beverley Lester, who grew up in South Africa, and is now a psychotherapist in London who has explored these issues in her writing, emphasises that “brutal environments brutalise us, and bystanders are also brutalised. We were guilty by association, there’s no escaping that.” In addition, schools were “aggressive” environments, enforcing the status quo.

Assistant sociology professor at George Washington University Fran Buntman grew up in South Africa and now lives in Washington, D.C.

Her research interests include institutions of punishment and power. “One of the most important things that explains South African society, past and present, is that masculinity is too often defined as requiring domination,” she says. “Domination can manifest itself without violence, but even if violence isn’t explicit, the threat of violence is never far away. I think some of the white schools, especially all-boys schools, unofficially “contracted out” violence by allowing older boys to be abusive to younger boys.”

She went to a co-ed school, and says that while the culture may have been milder, it was similar. “There were a few progressive teachers, especially in history and English. One teacher organised a secret small group to meet with black students in a church, and we did poetry together. But another teacher was violent against a girl who was my friend, and it was shocking, not normal. To say the least, rebellion and resistance weren’t accepted, so my anti-apartheid beliefs made me an object of suspicion and an outsider.”

She also went to veld school, as did Ancer. Veld school was a camp for school children held in the outdoors, alleged to have been used by the National Party government for political indoctrination.

“I think that’s where I saw the most naked and extreme ideologies of Christian National Education play out. I realised that however much I deplored in my school, we weren’t the worst off. The *swart gevaar* [black danger] mentality and need to think of white society as under siege was baked in.”

Buntman had a boyfriend who went to a prestigious all-boys school, and shared two memories with her. “After we watched a movie that showcased the violence of the British public-school system, he shared that it was a lot like what he experienced in school. I asked him why he hadn’t told his parents. He replied that his father had gone to the same school and knew about the abuses that went on. The second memory was that he lost his virginity to a girl considered a ‘slut’ who he and his friends ‘took turns’ on. He was ashamed but also proud that at least he said something nice to her, whereas the other boys didn’t.”

“The 1980s was a dark chapter in South Africa’s history. This filtered down to schools,” says Ancer. “There has been a strong reaction on social media to Horowitz’s essay. There were some ugly responses and, unsurprisingly, there were denials. Too many people resorted to their old familiar bully boy roles, which I think made his point,” he says.

A few people did take responsibility for their behaviour. “I hope Ben’s piece encourages more people to talk about our school days,” says Ancer. “We have a difficult and messy history, and we shouldn’t run from it.”

# Nutrigenomics could take the weight off our diet plan

TALI FEINBERG

You may find it mysterious that you and a friend eat and exercise in a similar way, but you have totally different body shapes. Or the fact that you follow a medical professional’s plan to the letter, and still don’t lose weight. Genetic testing may unlock the secrets to these questions, as well as how to manage health, fitness, and disease.

“I was a dietitian. In our training, we learned that the formula for losing weight is to reduce kilojoules and increase exercise. But when we went out into the world and tried to treat our patients this way, it was a complete failure,” says Yael Joffe, the founder and chief science officer of genetic testing company 3x4 Genetics.

“They would come back to us and say, ‘I did what you told me to do, but I still haven’t lost weight.’ The only response was that they were lying or cheating on the plan. It was a cycle of failure and destroyed self-esteem,” she says.

Disillusioned and at a loss, Joffe left dietetics and went back to university, doing her PhD in genetics and obesity, specifically looking at obesity in South African women. She learned that while 99.9% of our DNA is identical, it’s a “language” or “alphabet” that has “spelling changes”, and those changes determine how we respond to our environment.

She realised that genes play a vital role in how we gain and lose weight. By gaining the “self-knowledge” of our genes, we can know what our limits or strengths are and work with those.

“The concept of weight is so complex. Our genes explain what drives us, and that each of us have our

own sense of what hunger is. Snacking or binging have a huge genetic component, tied to our origins as hunter-gatherers. Often, children will display eating behaviour that is influenced by genes, as they haven’t been exposed to psycho-social issues around food. Then we see people who do extraordinary amounts of training for the Comrades Marathon and are still overweight. That’s very much influenced by their genes,” she says.

Understanding our genes isn’t a magic pill to lose weight, Joffe says. Rather, it will help us and our medical practitioners understand what might be acting as obstacles. It will help us to understand what our realistic weight is, and how to adapt our behaviour to manage it.

“Some of us will never be slim because our genes are acting against us,” she says. “So instead of looking at what society, the media, and even the medical profession says, it’s about having that self-knowledge that a strict diet would set you up for failure.”

Joffe works with about 500 health practitioners around the world, training them to understand nutrigenomics – the impact of genes on nutrition. “Genetics isn’t a world by itself, it will help you and them make better decisions about your health because it’s a vital piece of your own unique puzzle.”

Another pioneer in the industry is Danny Meyersfeld, the founder and chief executive of DNalysis Biotechnology. “One of the key findings of the Human Genome Project [the global collaboration responsible for unravelling our genetic code] was the



Leigh-Ann Silber

strong interplay that exists between the genes we carry and the environment in which we live,” he says. “In many cases [not all], our genes aren’t our destiny. Rather, we can modify our gene expression in order to take control of our own health outcomes. A nutrigenomics test allows us to better understand the workings of the critical biological pathways within our cells. If these pathways aren’t functioning optimally, it will in many cases predispose an individual to chronic disease. By tailoring our diet, lifestyle, and nutrients to our specific genetic variations, we can proactively manage these health risks.”

When asked the question of the moment – if people’s varied responses to COVID-19 could be because of our genes – he says, “There is very little doubt that genetic variation between individuals will affect our response on a few levels. First, it’s believed that genetic differences in certain cell surface proteins affect the ability of the virus to enter our cells. Second, our immune response and ability to fight off the virus is largely genetically determined. Some individuals will be better at mounting an immune response to the infection to defend against it.”

Regarding Jewish genes, he says, “We know there are certain diseases that are more prevalent in the Ashkenazi Jewish population such as certain cancers, Tay-Sachs disease, and Gaucher’s disease. It’s believed that

this is due to a population bottleneck of just 350 Jews that occurred in Europe about 700 years ago, followed by a rapid population increase. This ‘founder effect’ caused certain genetic variations to become more prevalent in all descendants.”

Looking to the future, he says, “It won’t be long before whole genome sequencing is a commonly used tool in the diagnosis and management of disease, and personalised medicine tailored to one’s genes is a routine and integral component of clinical medicine.”

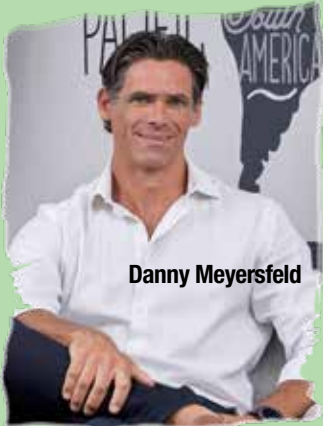
Leigh-Ann Silber, a registered dietitian at InteliHEALTH Registered Dietitians and the co-founder of Just THRIVE says, “One thing I have learned working in this field for many years is that there’s no such thing as one-size-fits-all nutrition plan. For example, people with a specific gene variation have shown to be wired to want to eat more and be hungry more often. I have noticed that intermittent fasting isn’t the best method of weight loss for people with this genotype – higher protein and regular meals benefit them the most. With this insight, we can design plans specific to that individual with greater success.”

She is excited about translating science into practice in the form of personalised nutrition.

“Nutrigenomics is a tool in the wider picture of how our body works. It’s not a fad diet or a magic wand, it empowers individuals with more detailed information on how their body works,” she says. “Together with our external environment, history, lifestyle, diet intake, microbiome, food availability, food preferences, and so on, we can be better empowered to make choices that ensure a longer, healthier life.”



Yael Joffe



Danny Meyersfeld



# ‘Long COVID’ wreaks devastation on lives and livelihoods

TALI FEINBERG

When Cape Town opera singer Belinda Silbert caught COVID-19 in March 2020, she says she was in “excruciating agony that was indescribable”. “I was screaming constantly. My skin was on fire, my back pain was incapacitating, it was impossible to walk to the bathroom, my blood pressure was all over,” she told the *SA Jewish Report* this week. “The sinus pain and headaches were horrendous.” Silbert, who is 55, has never been the same since. After slowly regaining her strength and a brief “honeymoon period”, she was hit by the virus for a second time in



December. “It was even worse this time, affecting my breathing very severely. I also had heart palpitations. It’s been three weeks, and I’m coming off the cortisone only now. I also had antibiotics. I think it will be a long and slow journey ahead. I don’t remember what it’s like to feel normal, to speak without being breathless, to drive without my leg shaking.” Both of her children were also affected by the virus. Her teenage son in Cape Town had uncontrollable temperatures and vomiting, and her daughter overseas (in her 30s) landed up in hospital and is still battling with recovery nine weeks later. As an opera singer and consultant, she hasn’t been able to work, and fears for the future. “I’m doing breathing exercises, but I’m not sure what the long-term repercussions will be for my career.” She’s certainly not alone in having what has become known as “long COVID”. Cape Town resident Rebecca Bryer, 58, tested positive five and a half months ago, and she still can’t smell a thing. “If my husband makes a braai, I wouldn’t know about it. I can’t even smell garbage, and changing babies’ nappies is a pleasure! The other day I was cooking something and forgot about it. I never smelled the burning smell,” she says. Bryer tested positive for the virus on 22 July 2020, and spent 28 days in isolation as her symptoms refused to let up even after the mandatory 10 to 14-day quarantine period. Generally fit, healthy and full of energy, the virus attacked her energy levels, digestive system, appetite, and senses of taste and smell. She battled with coughing and lay only on her stomach to assist her lungs. Now, her sense of smell shows no signs of returning. Her sense of taste has returned weakly. “I need to add a lot more salt or chilli to my food to taste it.” Her energy and fitness levels aren’t what they were, and she struggles with strength in her fingers. She still battles with what she calls “porridge brain” and memory. Like Silbert, other family members have also suffered devastating effects. Her brother, a dentist and orthodontist in Jerusalem, caught COVID-19 in March. After a harrowing time in hospital, he was discharged to a rehabilitation facility with the expectation that he would make a full recovery. But while there, he suddenly suffered a stroke as a result of the virus’ insidious effects. He is now completely paralysed on his left side. Unable to work and support his wife and five children, he requires full-time care and his life has been destroyed by the virus. The “long COVID” or “COVID long-haulers” are a source of concern and investigation in the pantheon of COVID-19,” says Dr Darren Levin, a general practitioner (GP) practicing

in Camps Bay, Cape Town. “I have a few patients in my practice who haven’t yet returned to their baseline health after COVID-19, but based on the numbers we have seen in the second wave, I’m expecting many more. “The global literature varies, but it seems to show that anywhere from 35% to 50% of people who have had COVID-19 take longer than two to three weeks to return to baseline health and a fairly high proportion of those people report ongoing problems with reduced exercise tolerance and post-exercise fatigue for a number of months,” he says. Ongoing fatigue seems to be the most common problem for COVID long-haulers, in which “normal amounts of work, mental effort, daily household and parenting duties, and even mild exercise result in extreme fatigue,” Levin says.

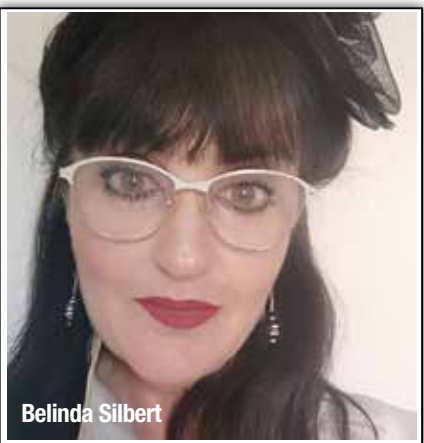
“Some people experience ‘brain fog’, with a prolonged effect on their cognitive abilities. They struggle to focus for as long as they did before, to plan and conceptualise complex tasks, and often struggle to return to normal capacity at work. Many people still experience shortness of breath, muscle aches, and headaches for weeks after their illness.”

There are no clear-cut ways to avoid the long-term effects of COVID-19. “At the moment there is no specific recipe that can help everyone, and no specific treatment other than rest and reducing responsibilities and stressors,” he says. “In general, it’s always a good plan to try and maximise the healthy lifestyle factors you can, so eating “clean” – less processed foods, following a more plant-based or Mediterranean diet – and reducing or stopping alcohol intake. Also, have a health check with your GP to make sure that COVID-19 hasn’t unmasked an underlying health problem or worsened an existing one,” he says.

Dr Solly Lison, a family physician in Cape Town, says, “This virus is very devious and unpredictable. Long COVID happens with no pre-warning. “It usually presents as fatigue, and taste can take weeks before it returns. People even need ‘taste training’ occasionally. Brain fog and mental and emotional changes can be problematic. Residual cardiac effects may occur, like inflammation of the cardiac muscles, requiring long-term treatment,” he says. “Lung damage may result in chronic respiratory symptoms. Chronic coughing, shortness of breath, nausea, abdominal pains, bowel disturbances, and chronic renal failure may occur. Some abnormal liver changes and possibly diabetes may spring up unexpectedly. Being too active too soon can strain muscles, including cardiac muscles.”

While some shrug off COVID-19, Bryer and Silbert beg others to take it seriously. Bryer says that because she wore a mask around others in the days preceding her positive diagnosis, none of her close contacts became infected.

Silbert says that support groups for COVID long-haulers will be essential in future. Many such groups have emerged on social media, but she emphasises that “people tend to focus on the negative [on these groups]. It’s important not to be ‘mutually traumatised’. Support groups must be there to uplift and offer supportive information, but they must not replace doctors. However, I’m glad these groups exist.”





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South African Board of Jewish Education ועד התיכון היהודי בדרום אפריקה

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**(Half-day position)**

The SABJE is looking for a dynamic Jewish Educator to create meaningful campaigns, content, activations, and professional development around the PJ Library books. This individual would work closely with the PJ Library champions and Principals across all PJ Library affiliate schools and communities.

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# Towards some form of normality

PERSONAL STORY

DAVE BLOOM



When the text message popped up on my phone at the end of December, I gave a huge sigh of relief. The message was from my medical-aid confirming that I was booked for the first of two COVID-19 vaccinations in two days’ time.

It had taken some time to get through to the overloaded phone lines to make the booking. The announcement by the government that the first batch of Pfizer vaccines had arrived in Israel triggered a rush by many to be first in line.

I finally reached an operator who took my ID number. She agreed that I qualified as an over 65-year-old, and with calm efficiency, offered me an appointment within 48 hours at 19:25, which was immediately confirmed by that text message. The process was, to my delight, actually working. My wife and I were among the first tranche of the Israeli population to “qualify” for vaccinations as most of the seriously ill cases and deaths had occurred in our age group.

With many swirling thoughts in my mind about events during 2020, the initial confusion, fear of the unknown, and the isolation from two full lockdowns spanning nearly four months, I was now focused on the forthcoming appointment and the first sign of hope that we might be at the beginning of the end of a traumatic year.

We drove through the eerily quiet streets to the vaccination centre, and arrived well in time. It was set up in a deserted shopping mall with seating spread out to observe social distancing protocols and a couple of desks to register those with bookings. We were quickly accepted and given a printed number and then sat to watch on large screens as the numbers and nurse locations were called. Within five minutes, our numbers came up and we were ushered into the premises of what was probably a converted shop with several cubicles. Our nurse, Hana, was chirpy even after a long day at her station and after a few clicks on her laptop to check our records, we received our jabs and were told to wait 15 minutes to ensure that there were no untoward side effects.

I looked around at the people before and after their injections, all sitting dutifully and quietly with their masks on, glued to their smartphones – typical of most Israelis – and wondered what each of their stories could tell. When was the last time they saw or hugged their grandchildren? How were elderly singles dealing with the isolation and loneliness? How were they managing financially?

The whole process took less than 30 minutes, and we were in the car headed back home. Both of us had absolutely no side effects from the jabs, but we did feel a mixture of pride in our health system and pleased at how efficient and quick the process had been.

Mainly I felt as if a large weight had been removed

on the other, the daily infection rates and the number of seriously ill and dead are at record levels.

Israel has been vaccinating more than 150 000 people a day, but on 17 January, more than 4 000 deaths were reported since the start of the pandemic, which is a low percentage by world standards but for a small country of 8.5 million, it was still a grim milestone.

There is new uncertainty about the efficacy of the vaccinations against the various mutations that have arrived in Israel from South Africa, Britain, and possibly Brazil. I’m concerned that some people in Israel remain resistant to the very idea of being vaccinated at all, based on everything from conspiracy theories to just blind ignorance.

Copious articles have been written and spoken about in the Israeli media referring to the “zig-zag” of government policy in handling the COVID-19 pandemic. The country is amidst its fourth election campaign in two years, and many have referred to the government’s policy in handling COVID-19 as tainted in many cases by political expediency.

Much finger-pointing has been done at the ultra-Orthodox and Arab communities, who have openly ignored many of the lockdown regulations, questioning why the government has chosen to treat them with kid gloves. Why weren’t our airports controlled more assertively? Why weren’t the tracking, tracing, epidemiological, and policing resources made more efficient to isolate people infected and needing quarantine, as well as deterrent fines implemented?

Why were all decisions regarding the education system made often literally the night before, leading to children being told that schools would be closed and they were to do distance learning from the following morning? These and many other questions are still to be answered, but the “bottom line”, as they say, is that Israel is making significant strides in immunising its population.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said that all Israelis above the age of 16 will be vaccinated by the end of March, which puts the country in a much stronger position to start opening its economy. That timeline would probably make Israel the world’s first country to immunise most of its population from the pandemic.

In 10 days’ time, my wife and I will receive our official “green” vaccination certificates. We will be able to return to some level of normality, going to the theatre, restaurants, the beach, visit family and friends. While it will still require caution and social distancing as more data is collected on the vaccine’s ability to protect and avoid distribution of the virus, we will be projecting the clichéd “smile from ear to ear”. It’s a bittersweet feeling at a personal level as we realise that so many around the world wait to receive their vaccinations. We look forward to the day when the vaccine is implemented globally so that we all will share a sense of security and well-being.

• *Dave Bloom was born and grew up in Zimbabwe and made aliyah in 1973 with a Habonim Garin to Kibbutz Nir Eliyahu. He worked with Reuters for nearly 25 years and for the last 20 years has been a partner in a financial services software company as well as a personal historian – helping people to record their life stories.*

# Vaccine – the answer to our prayers

PERSONAL STORY

STEVE LINDE



As Israel led the world in inoculating its citizens against COVID-19 – earning the new title, “vaccination nation” – I got my first Pfizer shot on 23 December and the second on 13 January at Jerusalem’s Pais Arena, with Maccabi Healthcare Services, one of Israel’s four health funds. The process was super-efficient, taking less than half an hour in both cases. I recalled the prayer of gratitude by Rabbi Naomi Levy I had read a day earlier on Scribe:

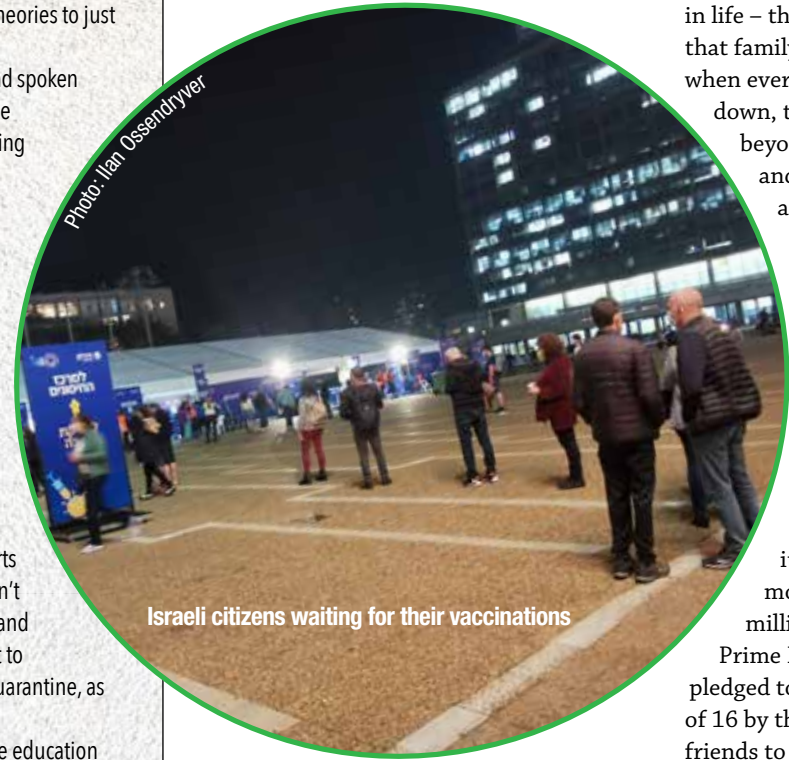
I am blessed to do my part to defeat it. Let this be the beginning of a new day, A new time of hope, of joy, of freedom And most of all, of health. I thank You, G-d, for blessing me with life For sustaining my life And for enabling me to reach this awe-filled moment.

A Facebook post by my friend, Neichu Mayer, drove the point home. “The year 2020 has taught us some very important lessons in life – that caring is the best profession, that family and community are all you have when everything else in life turns upside down, that the world is connected far beyond borders, that suffering and pain and the collective desire for health and healing unite us more than our common economic interests, and most importantly, when we care enough and share enough, we can triumph over our biggest and darkest fears together!”

While Israel seeks to stem an alarming rise in coronavirus cases during its third tightened lockdown and braces for its fourth election in two years on 23 March, it has succeeded in vaccinating more than two million of its nine million citizens, more than 25%!

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has pledged to vaccinate all Israelis over the age of 16 by the end of March. Having lost several friends to COVID-19, including our beloved Hebrew teacher in Durban, Issy Fisher, my heart goes out to those who are suffering from the disease, grief, and psychological and economic hardship. My prayer is that we will start seeing the light at the end of the tunnel by Passover. This is a time to help one another and be grateful for what we have. An attitude of gratitude is a powerful antidote to our current woes.

• *Steve Linde is the editor of the Jerusalem Report and lives in Jerusalem. He hails from Durban.*



Israeli citizens waiting for their vaccinations

**A prayer for receiving the COVID vaccine**  
I have been praying for this day and now it is here!  
With great excitement, a touch of trepidation  
And with deep gratitude  
I give thanks  
To all the scientists who toiled day and night  
So that I might receive this tiny vaccination  
That will protect me and all souls around this world.  
With the pandemic still raging

# Second jab – the first step towards the sunrise

PERSONAL STORY

JULIAN RESNICK



Exactly one year ago today, I was in Varanasi, a holy city in India on the banks of the holy Ganges (or Ganga) River. One of the powerful visual and emotional elements of the visit is the many ghats, steps of stone slabs along the riverbank where pilgrims perform ritual ablutions.

Of all the ghats, the one which has been imprinted in my memory is the Manikarnika Ghat, where public cremation ceremonies take place.

So, death was in the air this time a year ago, but it was foreign, exotic, distant, at the other end of a camera lens. It wasn’t part of my daily life, thankfully. And after the one cremation we did observe at the ghat, we could walk into the winding alleyways and have a delicious lassi and move on to the next exotic experience we had come to India for.

How things have changed for all of us, everywhere. The global pandemic, which has my really little grandchildren using words like “corona”, “lockdown”, and “Zoom”, as if these have always been a part of young children’s vocabularies, has changed my life beyond belief over the past 10 months.

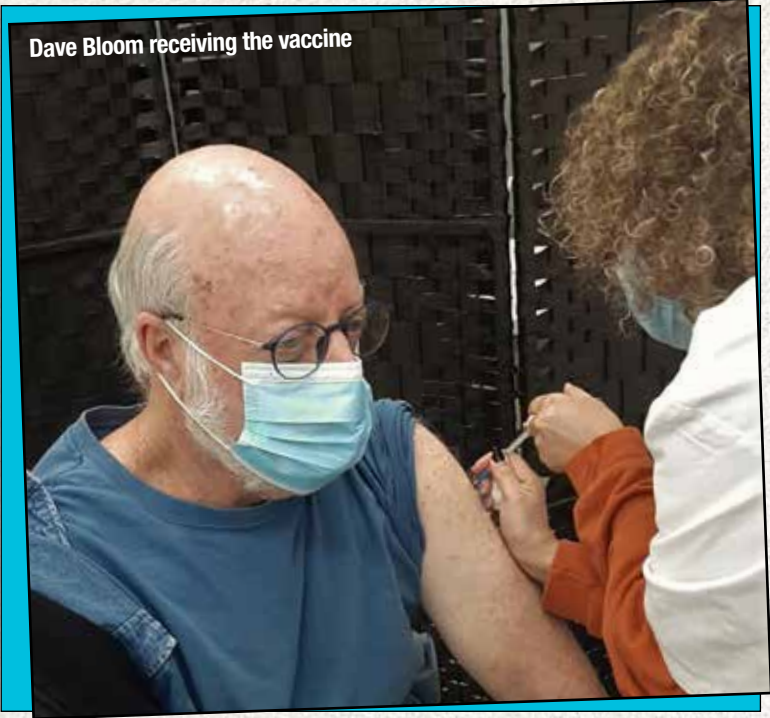
I live life on the move, guiding in 2019 in Israel, Morocco, Poland, Germany, France, and

South Africa, sleeping away from home about 150 nights of the year, and guiding and teaching and thereby meeting about 400 new people. But 2020 became a year in which, from March until the end of December, I slept at home every night and the only new people I met were on the other end of a Zoom meeting.

I found out a few things in 2020. The positives were how good it was being at home and how after 37 years of marriage, we still were/are able to enjoy each other’s company. I was also reminded just how lucky I am to be living on a kibbutz (Tzora) with all five of my grandchildren (aged one to six). When my grandchildren are old enough, I will tell them that there was once a year, 2020, when they literally saved my life.

All this began to change again three weeks ago. I’m lucky to be living in the only country in the world where there is quality medical services and the outstanding ability to deliver these services logistically. That coupled with great digital infrastructure and huge amounts of data plus the foresight of our leadership, has created our now phenomenal reality, namely that we are leading the field by a very wide

Continued on page 11>>



Dave Bloom receiving the vaccine

from my shoulders, and life felt a whole lot more positive. That was on the micro level, but on the macro level, the reality of course, looking at the steep rise in infections and serious cases of COVID-19 around the country, was very different.

As I write these words and two days before my second, “top-up” vaccination, the country is in its third lockdown. On the one hand, more than two million people have received their first dose of the vaccine but



# Guinea pig with a life jacket

PERSONAL STORY

SOPLY KAPLINSKI



A year ago, we were holidaying in South Africa, visiting family and friends, and my late parents’ graves in the Pinelands Jewish Cemetery. We were also recapturing memories and enjoying the Cape Town beaches. At the time, there was barely a mention of a mysterious disease in the *Cape Times* and just a few fleeting internet references to it. We did notice a proliferation of face masks at the airport when we left Johannesburg, although I thought nothing of it at the time. Who was to know...

Perhaps I’m a random sample of one, but as someone in his 70s, the thought of death is often close at hand, especially with the passing of close friends and contemporaries. This was so much more so this past free-floating, anxiety-filled year when a vicious, merciless, take-no-prisoners enemy has been on the loose worldwide. It has almost gone unchallenged, and leaves in its wake untold deaths, misery, and destruction. People’s livelihoods have been destroyed, and this has led to increasing poverty on an unimaginable scale.

As a former Capetonian, these past few weeks have been especially heart breaking, and my heart goes out to those families – many who I know well – who have suffered unbearable losses.

On a personal level, our three daughters and sons-in-laws’ businesses have been decimated, while my wife and I have barely seen our children and grandchildren this past year, and



Solly Kaplinski getting vaccinated

not hugged them at all. The year 2020 resulted in us changing our lifestyle dramatically. For the past 20 years, I have become used to visiting the far corners of the world as a fundraiser. So, it has been a major adjustment to be home bound and pivot to Zoom for work, not being able to engage investors and donor prospects face to face. We have been good citizens when it comes to wearing masks and social distancing, but we have been joined at the hip by fear, a constant presence. We have managed on our daily walks around the neighbourhood to have quality downtime, with three lockdowns and a myriad of restrictions that included initially not walking

more than 100m from our home. However, we have been virtual prisoners in our apartment, feeling at times isolated, and yearning for the company of our family, friends – and my colleagues at the water cooler. Taking all this into account, and especially with the dramatic spike in daily infections, when the news came through

that the vaccine was available, we saw it as a no brainer. We needed to arrange an immediate appointment with our Kupat Cholim (medical aid society) in Jerusalem for the vaccine. My wife, a former nurse, was more sceptical than I was about venturing into the unknown and the possible risks of being a guinea pig, but I saw it as a life jacket, a saviour, a genuine light at the end of a murky and devious tunnel. So too did almost two million others over the past few weeks as we literally scrambled to be first in line. We marvelled at the military style operation and efficiency of the nurses and doctors who were calm, sympathetic, and understanding. They were unfazed by all the people – who were surprisingly calm and patient – sitting a metre apart in the cavernous Israel Convention Center. They certainly inspired confidence in us in being among the first to take the plunge with their incredible competence and effective manner in

dishing out the jabs. We aren’t naïve and our spectacles aren’t rose-tinted. We know that even when we get our green passport indicating that we have had the vaccine, we aren’t yet off the hook from the virus. We still have to proceed with caution and vigilance, needing to continue wearing our masks and respecting personal space. However, we’ll do this with less fear and anxiety. One thing I do know with certainty: we will definitely re-engage with our vaccinated friends. Besides being with our immediate family, this is what we crave the most. There is hope on the horizon.

What we have learnt from this year from hell is that we are more resilient than we sometimes think we are. We recognise that calling on all our reserves of self-discipline and foregoing immediate pleasures – as difficult as this may be – seems to be paying off. Perhaps the most important thing we have learnt is that when the chips are down, we value and appreciate what’s truly important in our lives. That’s our family, our friends who have been there for us, and the quality of our personal relationships. Finally, for us in Israel, we have nothing but admiration for our health system, for our first responders and fellow citizens. Our vaccination nation has been a wow factor, a source of great pride and inspiration. Israel at its best!

• Solly Kaplinski is the former principal of Herzlia School in Cape Town. He emigrated to Canada in 1993, made aliyah in 2000, and now lives in Jerusalem.



Corinne Ossendryver being vaccinated

Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

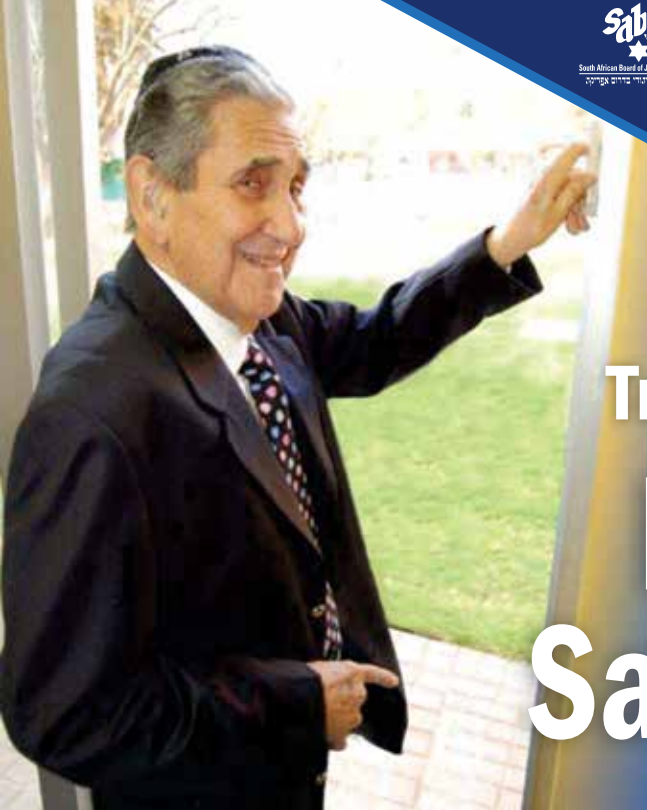
## Second jab – the first step towards the sunrise




>>Continued from page 10

margin internationally in the vaccination of our population against COVID-19. Three weeks ago, being over 60, my wife and I travelled 10 minutes to a local branch of our HMO (Health Maintenance Organisation) and in a totally prosaic moment, got our first vaccination. No, there were no trumpets blaring, no fanfare, and no crowds cheering. In fact, it was the most ordinary extraordinary experience I have ever had. A little pain in my arm was the only reminder five minutes afterwards that I had taken the first step towards reclaiming my life, the life that was, the pre-coronavirus world. Reclaiming freedom of movement, freedom of association. Reclaiming a world of intimacy where people ... hug ... kiss ... hold each other’s hands. And I’m not talking about lovers. I’m talking about parents, children, grandparents, friends, acquaintances. Have any of you watched old movies and had the weird feeling I have when people touch each other, wanting to shout out, “Be careful, you need to socially distance! Where is your mask?” It’s nothing less than that. Today, we had our second vaccination. Once again, no pain, no side effects. Was I at all afraid of having the vaccinations? I’m terrified that I might be stuck in a world where people don’t get vaccinated. Where intimacy is a thing of the past. Where

exploring the world is something we read about in books or see on Netflix. This is the dystopia which terrifies me. I am what I do. I miss my teaching, my travel, and my guiding terribly. The vaccinations are the only way out of this terrible cage we find ourselves in. I wasn’t afraid, not even for one moment, that having the vaccine might be a mistake. I now once again look at my future and I see myself guiding in Fes, Berlin, Cape Town (and Joburg), in Krakow, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, and Toledo. I see a sunrise in Merzouga, Morocco, on the edge of the Sahara. I see myself on the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. I see myself sharing Shabbat services in Saloniki; in the Old Town in Warsaw; and at the Kotel in Jerusalem. I hear discussions about meaning, about our place in history, about the future of the Jewish people. That is what I see just a few hours after my second vaccination. Take care.

• Julian Resnick grew up in Somerset West and made aliyah with Habonim Dror to Israel in 1976. He lives on Kibbutz Tzora with his little tribe of wife, two of his three children, and his five grandchildren. He guides and teaches in Israel and around the world, wherever there is a Jewish story.





# A Tribute to Eric Samson

The South African Board of Jewish Education, King David Schools and the King David Schools' Foundation mourn the passing of Eric Samson, a true friend, mensch, philanthropist and community man whose generosity knew no bounds.

His kindness spread far and wide uplifting, developing, building and changing so many lives, communities and organisations within the Jewish and greater South African context.

He has left his mark on King David Schools, which together with the KDSF were privileged to have benefitted from his support and generosity over many decades.

May his legacy be an eternal blessing and comfort to his wife, children and grandchildren.

Baruch Dayan Emet.



# Eric Samson talks to Howard Sackstein about his life

Following the death of iconic businessman and philanthropist Eric Samson this week, we are reprinting this interview done in 2013.

ANT KATZ

I had the privilege to be a fly on the wall when Eric and Sheila Samson spent an hour telling Howard Sackstein about their roller-coaster ride from starting with nothing to becoming bigger than De Beers in July. Why a privilege? Because Eric Samson is renowned for keeping out of the public arena and has refused even to speak to the *Sunday Times*, the *Financial Mail*, and *Business Day* in recent stories they have written about him.

So secretive has Samson kept his private life, most among South African Jewry know of him only through three things: his massive philanthropic activities; his close friendship with Madiba and Graça Machel; and the enormous wealth he generated (although not being a listed business, the numbers are anyone's guess).

But let me not get ahead of myself, read this amazing account of an amazing conversation, with some added research from what little information exists to give flavour.

Where it all began...

Eric Samson showed signs he would make a great businessman while still at school. After a cake sale at Parkview Junior, the principal announced that Samson had raised the largest amount of money ever from selling biscuits and sweets, a whopping £19, 9s and 6d. That was 65 years ago.

Samson's business career goes back to his late teens when he joined his father, David, in business back in 1958. His father was in the agency business, Samson says, mainly selling wire products. "I got my degrees from my dad," he says of the financial training he received. But he and his father didn't always see eye to eye.

When young Samson wanted to start holding stock and merchandising the

products five years later, he says his dad was against it. "I wanted to be the master of my own destiny. We were agents for fencing wire and a little bit of steel product, and I started merchandising in 1962."

Samson was now on his own in business, and that desire to be master of his own destiny has never abated. To this day, he wants control of the businesses he's involved in.

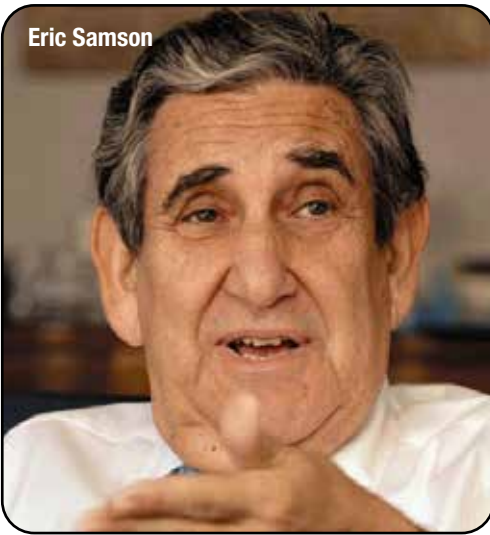
One of the young agent's major principles at the time was wire producer S Machanick of Cape Town. But the Machanick family sold their products only in the Cape. Samson and his father represented them in what were then the other three provinces in South Africa

**Taking charge...**  
"After a few years of shortages of allocations [of steel] from the mills," Samson says, business wasn't going too well for the Machanicks. "They approached me in 1965, and I entered into a joint venture with the Machanick family." While fencing material remained the main business of Mechanic Fencing, in 1969 Eric led an expansion into the steel side of the business.

In 1974, Samson bought out the Machanick family's interest, and he now owned 100% of a business called Machanick Steel & Fencing. "I decided to make the name Macsteel," he says, laughing, I knew I couldn't go wrong in a business with a Scottish name and a Jewish owner."

Samson had learned by now that he needed to "think big and to work out a game plan – how one could grow in the market". Over the years, he grew the steel business to the extent that wire products now represent only 5% of Macsteel's business.

Samson had developed the innovative model of steel service centres where people could order any amount of any



Eric Samson

steel product, cut to any size. They started popping up all around the country, and it wasn't long before Macsteel was moving a sizable percentage of the steel sold in South Africa.

"The local business always carried on and grew," says Samson, but his entrepreneurial spirit wasn't going to be satiated in the South African marketplace. In the late 1970s, Macsteel started exporting to African states and by 1980, he had started to export to markets in the Far East and South America.

**Shooting for the stars...**  
By now, the growth bug had bitten Samson hard. Whatever he touched turned to steel. He was on a roll. "In 1982, I took over Leo Raphaeli & Sons who were then the biggest commodity exporting company in South Africa." Samson was mainly interested in their steel business, he says, but with it becoming tough for South African firms to trade internationally, the Raphaelis were happy to sell it all.

Now in his mid-forties, Samson wasn't planning to stop for anything. Having ensured that he had a sound

management team behind him, Eric largely trusted them to absorb each new business he acquired and assimilate it into the rapidly growing and globalising Macsteel group. He had bigger fish to fry.

The following year, in 1983, Samson decided it was time to take his successful service-centre model further afield. Not shy of anyone, he decided to start in the United States, where he worked with the giant Associated Metals & Minerals.

In 1985, "Associated Metals got into trouble and I did a joint venture with them," says Samson nonchalantly. "They were global and that gave me the breakthrough of being able to distribute worldwide."

**A builder, but not a gambler...**  
Today, Macsteel has offices in 36 countries and on every continent in the world. When Sackstein asked Samson if this rapid expansion into globalising his business hadn't been a gamble, his retort was that "it wasn't a gamble, it was a well-calculated risk!"

Besides, he said, "I've always had the strong home base that allowed me to expand overseas."

Along the way, Samson, who is and has always been passionate about Israel, established a service-centre business there. Cleverly called Iskor, it was originally a joint venture with Iscor and Israel's largest industrial and steel company Koor Metals. After a while, says Samson, "Iskor's managing director came to me and said he was having trouble with trade unions in Israel. He offered me the opportunity to take over its interest as, he said, 'only a Jew could handle another Jew'."

Eric and Koor were left with 50% each, but he later bought 1% from Koor, "as I always like to have management control." Samson was shipping steel from anywhere to everywhere, and it didn't

take him too long to see the opportunity that created. Macsteel International, a joint venture between global steel giant ArcelorMittal and Macsteel, ("We have controlling interest," says Samson) added a large shipping business to the Macsteel empire.

The African steel service-centre operation, known as MSCSA, is a subsidiary of Macsteel Holdings, which has never listed. The company as a whole had a turnover of about \$9 billion (R135.2 billion) in 2011, according to the *Financial Mail* – bigger than De Beers – and is the largest privately held company in South Africa. MSCSA alone employs more than 5 000 people according to the *Financial Mail*.

Asked if he had ever been involved in manufacturing steel, Samson told Sackstein that Macsteel has never even considered manufacturing. "We never had a mill, we cut and sell steel. We have stuck to what we know best."

And now, aged nearly 75 and with none of his children interested in the business, Samson has started to sell up. He promised his family he would retire at 55, says his devoted wife, Sheila. But she has become resigned to the fact that he will probably never retire – she's happy that he's just cutting back.

Samson began the process of scaling back two years ago when he when he sold his US operation, Macsteel Service Centres USA, to Germany's Klöckner and Company for \$660 million (R9.9 billion).

"Your timing was good," remarked Sackstein.

"I've always been known to sell high and buy low," responded Samson laughing.

Now the South African service-centre business is up for sale.

Samson says that he has been "very fortunate" in not having had to take any hard knocks in his charmed career. "The closest I came was some disappointments, at times, in the earlier days with Iscor before I came right with getting export distribution rights."

He says has also found it "tough when going into overseas ventures". Business is about people, he says, and "when you take over companies you like to take over the management". But applying that principle meant not always having the best people in the job.

**Eric Samson the philanthropist...**  
Samson says his deep pocketed involvement with the South African Jewish community harks back to "my good friend Mendel", the late Mendel Kaplan. "He was already deeply involved, and I always gave accordingly," says Eric. In 1974, "Mendel came to me and he said we have to set an example."

Samson says that in those days, he used to give about R20 000 a year. Kaplan reminded him that he, Samson, was now earning more and that the community need was greater. "I gave Mendel R100 000, and afterwards he said he was only going to ask me for R50 000," says Samson laughing.

From that day on, he was hooked on philanthropy.

He recalls Cape community fundraising supremo Fritz Frank. They called him the Boston Strangler, says Samson as an aside. "Fritz had 30 people in a room and he said, 'Eric is at last giving what he should.'" Samson says he stood up, and said, "Mr Chairman, I have always given, and now that I am more successful, I am giving more!"

"Giving to Israel has always been close to my heart," he says. He recalls his grandmother showing him pictures of their family in Europe. "Only two of them survived," and that's why he feels Israel is so important.

"Thank goodness I have been blessed and have been able to give," Samson says. I have been charitable, he confirms, pointing out that "the more you give, the more you get".

• The full version of this story was published in the 'Absa Jewish Achievers Magazine' in 2013.

## A man who gave beyond measure

TRIBUTE

ALAN FISCHER



According to Maimonides, the highest level of charity is to give anonymously. If there was ever a man who epitomised this, it was Eric Samson, who gave beyond measure.

Born in Cape Town in 1938, South African and global steel magnate Samson had a substantial impact on countless causes and communities throughout the world as well as profoundly changing the lives of numerous individuals.

Samson's legendary philanthropic work had an impact on virtually every Jewish communal organisation in South Africa. His arc of giving encompassed all – from kindergartens to old aged homes, from Jewish community centres to the Chevrah Kadisha, no aspect of Jewish communal life was left untouched. Samson embodied the loftiest values of humility, compassion, sincerity, wisdom, fairness, and gemilut chasadim (kindness), and distinguished himself as a visionary leader through his charitable endeavours and his dedicated efforts on behalf of the Jewish people and Israel.

His business credentials speak for themselves. This modest and unassuming 82-year-old single-handedly transformed a small steel trading family enterprise that he established in 1962 into a global powerhouse. Today, Macsteel is the largest distributor of steel in Africa, and operates in 39 countries across the world.

Samson's passion for philanthropy was most evident when it came to education and children. He was a benefactor to and received a number of honorary doctorates from South African and Israeli universities.

He was a major donor to the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund as well as the Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital. He shared a great friendship with former President Nelson



Eric and Sheila Samson

Mandela as well as with President Cyril Ramaphosa. His support for Ma Afrika Tikkun as well as the "adopt-a-school" programme had an impact on thousands of underprivileged children on a daily basis, transforming lives of poverty into opportunity. His Macsteel

Maestros mentoring programme for disadvantaged sports men and women produced numerous national winners as well as an Olympic gold medallist.

In Israel, Samson, together with his wife, Sheila, and family, supported many major initiatives, some that that have changed the face of Israel. These include:

The prestigious Eric and Sheila Samson Prime Minister's Prize for Innovation in Alternative Fuels for Transportation, which was initiated in 2013, together with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This annual award, in the sum of \$1 million (R15 million), has become the most prominent award for alternative-energy innovation.

The renovation of Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, a monumental project which is the cornerstone of the nationwide heritage project.

The Samson Assuta Ashdod University Hospital, the first public hospital to serve the people of Ashdod and the surrounding area.

The Eric and Sheila Samson Surgical Hospital at Barzilai Medical Center, which has a direct impact on the medical treatment provided to hundreds of thousands of citizens in the south of Israel.

In addition, he supported many organisations in Israel including the Beit Protea Retirement Home, the Jerusalem Botanical Gardens, the Sheila Samson Centre of Enlightenment, playgrounds, tennis centres, and the Samson Stadium in Jerusalem, to name but a few. He was instrumental in the creation of the Beit Issie Shapiro Organisation, which caters for the needs of the disabled.

In the United States, Eric funded many projects with the Cleveland Clinic, including a partnership with Case Western Reserve University for advanced medical education, a cardiac wing, and a global centre for leadership in medicine.

His tireless commitment to humanitarianism brought him numerous awards throughout the world including from UJA, IUA, UCF, Magen David Adom, Bnei Brith, and Keren Hayesod.

Samson's global philanthropy has always been encouraged by Sheila, who has been at his side for the past five decades.

Above all, Samson was a dedicated family man. His three children, Jeffrey, Dorothy, Frankie and their families all share the same commitment to philanthropy, the Jewish people and Israel, and undoubtedly will continue to perpetuate his legacy.

Perhaps the best way to encapsulate Samson's essence can be found in the famous quote attributed to Winston Churchill: "We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give".

May the precious memory of Eric Samson always be a blessing for all and may he rest in peace.

• Alan Fischer is Eric Samson's biographer and a close friend of the family.



# My journey to the past

OPINION

GRANT GOCHIN



My grandparents suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. I grew up witnessing their internal, silent agony. They were victimised by antisemitism, and suffered. As the clouds gathered, they left Europe for South Africa.

My maternal grandmother was rescued from Lithuania, orphaned by murderous pogroms. She was adopted by South African Jews.

Her final words to me in South Africa were, “I wish I knew what my real name was, who my birth parents were, and where I was from.”

My paternal grandmother was driven insane, never escaping her demons of persecution.

My paternal grandfather was deported, starved, beaten, and forced to become a child soldier. His crime? Born Jewish.

Lithuanian government officials deliberately refused to allow his family to return to Lithuania, preventing his family's rescue, exterminating one more Jewish family. Incredibly, my grandfather survived.

Independently, they migrated to South Africa, later learning that all of their remaining family members were slaughtered in the Holocaust. Generations of my family were destroyed.

My grandmothers never spoke of their lives, I just knew that they were sad and always hungry. It had an impact on every thought and action, questioning every belief.

Grandfather spent his life surrounded by ghosts, sifting through photographs and letters – his memories.

Every day of my childhood, I witnessed my grandparents wrapped in an unspeakable darkness of loss. They relived their persecution, every word and action in their lives interpreted through a veil of victimisation. The ghosts of the murderers and the murdered were constant, mysterious companions.

After their deaths, how could I continue on my way, shirking my inherited responsibility to remember, not reconciling the past horrors with my modern self?

I clung to their memories with very little actual knowledge of their suffering. I became determined to somehow find and cure the disease of misery they suffered.

When Lithuania was liberated from the Soviets in 1990, I was one of the very first people to visit the country.

I walked the streets my grandparents had

walked.

I visited the lakes they drank from.

I breathed the air they devoured. I felt warm shrouds of lives.

I have visited Lithuania repeatedly. I sought out Jewish cemeteries. I longed to say Kaddish, as my grandfather had asked of me. I couldn't find the burial grounds. Most Jewish cemeteries had been plundered, excavated, overgrown, and ruined.

I restored dozens of Jewish cemeteries in Lithuania. With vivid memories of my grandfather, I recited Kaddish. The restoration of cemeteries is a key weapon in the fight against Holocaust denial. Allowing the complete ruin and abandonment of Jewish cemeteries obliterated the last signs of Jewish life. Lithuanians were no longer forced to remember.

My heartfelt work has since been converted by enterprising Lithuanians into tourist sites to lure Jewish visitors. Jewish memory is now a revenue stream for the Lithuanian state.

I applied for restoration of my own Lithuanian citizenship. I realised that I desperately needed a connection to my heritage.

Dishonesty by the Lithuanian government made me research harder, and led to a terrible discovery. The tactics previously used to prevent the rescue of my grandfather's family from certain death were the same tactics still being used by modern Lithuanian bureaucrats to rebuff me.

Five times, I sued the Lithuanian government to expose its sanctioned antisemitism. I wrote the book, *Malice*,



family from Lithuania survived the Holocaust.

I remember my grandfather looking at photographs of his family and friends, silently imploring that one would reach out.

I searched for the killing fields where my relatives had been murdered.

I took candles and stones, and recited Kaddish. I placed photographs of his friends, neighbours, and cousins, and if possible, I recited their name and remembered that they were once loved.

Increasingly, I asked, “Who committed the murders?” An answer was, “In this region, it was Jonas Noreika.” I researched Noreika, only to find out that he is hailed as a Lithuanian national hero. I appealed to the Lithuanian government for clarification. I uncovered a widespread yet secret agenda to portray the murderers of Jews as national heroes, denying their crimes.

For a decade, I have worked to expose this Holocaust denial by the Lithuanian government. The case will finally reach the European Court of Human Rights.

In response to my queries, the Lithuanian government has – and continues to – gone to extraordinary lengths to silence me and prevent the exposure of truth.

Lithuania had the highest Holocaust murder rate in Europe.

I have met hundreds of Lithuanians. Most have no idea of their actual history. As happens worldwide, they believe a massive number of Lithuanians risked their lives to rescue Jews. So many told me that their relatives were “righteous gentiles”. In fact, only 0.04% of Lithuanians were rescuers – 917 people out of a population of 2.5 million. Yet, almost every Lithuanian I have ever encountered has informed me of the enormous debt of

gratitude that we Jews owe them for their humanity.

Much of current Lithuania is built on the blood of her murdered Jews.

Much of its economy is built on plunder stolen from Jews.

Much of the current business focus of the state is to foment Jewish tourism and investment.

My grandparents died with their pain intact. My grandfather's last words to me were of his murdered relatives. He calls to me in my dreams to continue searching. I now realise that I absorbed my grandparents' pain.

I view my own relationships within the legacy of hate, fear, and victimisation. The pain cannot end until the whole truth is acknowledged.

Still today, Lithuania openly honours the perpetrators of my people's grief as national heroes.

Lithuania is proud of its independence. My grandfather fought in the war to achieve its freedom. In my citizenship applications, his participation, identity, and consequent suffering were all denied. They slandered his service to Lithuania.

Lithuania speaks lovingly of its “lost” Jews. No-one is lost. Murdered remains are within Lithuanian soil. Their blood has

fertilised the land, and, perhaps most egregious, there are national monuments to the murderers.

We hear Lithuania speak passionately of peace and reconciliation. These ideals aren't achievable in an environment of deception. It thinks we Jews are ignorant of our history, and ignorant of its continuing antisemitism. We aren't.

On this Holocaust Remembrance Day, let's continue to expose the lies and true sentiments of the Lithuanian government. It must give children accurate information.

I didn't know that my initial curiosity would become such an obsessive quest.

Let it take down monuments to the murderers, and publicly acknowledge what they did.

Let it finally allow my grandparents and all murdered Lithuanian Jews to be at peace.

Until then, it cannot reach out to Jews. Not before.

• *South African-born Grant Gochin is actively involved in Jewish affairs, focusing on historical justice. He has spent the past 20 years documenting and restoring signs of Jewish life in Lithuania. In March 2019, he took the Lithuanian government to court to get it to recognise its active role in the Holocaust.*



*Murder and Manipulation.* Since then, Lithuania seems to have realised that reinstating citizenship to Jewish descendants offers them no risk. The results are positive, a source of business revenue, and tourism. Lithuania has since turned citizenship restoration for Jews into a revenue stream.

Not one member of my grandfather's

## Wedding leads to a number of COVID-19 cases

>>>Continued from page 1

infection and loss to the pandemic is a loss to our community and South Africa. Our principal aim is the preservation of life, and we will do what we can to forward that aim.”

Stuart Diamond, the executive director of the Cape SAJBD, echoed these sentiments. “By following the rules, you’re not only protecting yourself, you’re protecting our community. And by doing that, you’re saving lives and ensuring our communal resources aren’t stretched financially and in terms of manpower.”


“We are a five star, tourism-graded venue, set on four acres of grounds with only a small venue on the grounds,” say the venue owners. “There is ample space outside. We allocated six tables inside in a room certified for 150 people. Although they are 12-seater tables, we allowed only six people to be seated at each. The room has frameless, sliding stacking doors on two sides of the venue and four large opening doors on the smallest side. All doors were open. Families sat together at these tables in their own bubbles.

“All serving staff wore gloves, masks, and some wore

additional face shields. There was ample sanitiser at several points. The bar has a Perspex shield across it. The wedding ceremony was in the open air, at least 200m from the venue, and the chairs were placed at the correct social distance. We have heard that someone who was at the wedding tested positive the following day. This person must have been contagious at the wedding and could have spread it, but was in no way caused by the venue.”

One of the owners says she was against the wedding going ahead, and has since closed her venues for the next two months. She emphasised that they had no control over the food, and everyone left by 19:30 because of the curfew. “We have won many tourism awards many years in a row, so we are rigorous about the implementation of safety protocols,” she says.

• *The SA Jewish Report reached out to both families who hosted the wedding, but they chose not to comment. The newspaper chose not to use the names of the parties involved in order for them not to be targeted.*



KING DAVID PRIMARY SCHOOL SANDTON

tel +27 11 253 7440 Fax +27 11 803 7246 E-mail [spinfo@sabje.co.za](mailto:spinfo@sabje.co.za) Steering Ave Woodmead Ext 4 Sandton PO Box 1013 Sunninghill 2157 South Africa

The South African Board of Jewish Education invites dynamic and motivated applicants for the position of

Head of Jewish Life

King David Sandton

Effective from 1st April 2021 (neg.)

King David, Sandton is a co-educational ISASA-affiliated Primary School, situated in Sandton, Johannesburg catering for children from Grade R to Grade 7. The school strives to encourage children to be kind, committed and independent thinkers with a genuine love and connection to their Jewish roots. The opportunity exists for an Educator to be appointed as Head of Jewish Life reporting directly to the Head of School.

**Specific qualities, knowledge and skills of the successful candidate will include:**


- A relevant educational qualification and experience within a school/ community environment as the role includes teaching both Jewish Studies and Life-skills.
- A progressive educational philosophy aligned with current international curriculum trends and best practice.
- Strong leadership qualities with a passion for maximising the potential of each child. Previous leadership experience is a prerequisite.
- Well-developed interpersonal skills with the ability to successfully engage with all stakeholders.
- Working together with the SABJE's Jewish Education Leadership (including Primary School, High School, and Informal departments).
- Excellent communication skills coupled with effective administrative and organisational skills.
- Sound computer literacy capabilities.
- Initiating Jewish programmes to engage the parent body.
- A firm belief and observance of Yiddishkeit and being a positive role-model.
- Co-ordinating, creating, and engaging with Jewish Life activities on campus, including allstakeholders.
- Registration with SACE and a current Police Clearance Certificate which are mandatory.

Please submit a letter of motivation with a full Curriculum Vitae and contact details of three references to Mrs C. McCormick P.A to Head of School [mccormickc@sabje.co.za](mailto:mccormickc@sabje.co.za)

**Closing date for applications: 3 February 2021**

King David Primary School, Sandton is not an ordinary school and is thus looking for an extraordinary leader.

An application will not in itself entitle the applicant to an interview and only shortlisted candidates will be interviewed. The SABJE reserves the right not to make an appointment.



South African Board of Jewish Education

ועד החינוך הישראלי

ישראל



# Shabbat Around The World beams out from Jozi

More than 75 devices around the globe logged in to Beit Luria’s World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) Shabbat Around the World programme on Friday, 15 January.

Whether it was breakfast time in California, tea time in Europe, or time to break challah in Johannesburg, participants logged in to take part in Beit Luria’s Kabbalat Shabbat service.

Among those participating were Rabbi Sergio Bergman, the president of the WUPJ; chairperson Carole Sterling; and Rabbi Nathan Alfred, the head of international relations. Singers Tulla Eckhart and Brian Joffe



Beit Luria’s Shabbat Around the World webinar

performed songs from a global array of artists, along with Toto’s *Africa* to add a little local flair to the service. After kiddish was said and bread was broken, Rabbi

Bergman thanked Beit Luria for hosting the WUPJ. The shul looks forward to more collaborations with its global friends in the future.

# UJW Sewing School graduates model creations

The outfits modelled by graduates of the Union of Jewish Women’s (UJW’s) Sewing School were all the more spectacular for the fact that some of their creators had never seen a sewing machine prior to the four-month course.

They were modelled at the school’s graduation ceremony at Oxford Shul on 15 December to much excitement and applause.

UJW executive member and Sewing School Manager Ariane Heneck expressed her gratitude to Chido Tsodzo, the school’s

superb teacher, and the event ended with a much appreciated lunch for graduates and their invited guests.

The self-empowerment Sewing School for unemployed men and women was started by the UJW 10 years ago. It now has a small production team of ex-students, and some of its graduates have been employed in factories, while others are selling their own creations.



The UJW Sewing School graduation class of 2020



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## Letters

### DEFIANT MINYAN DANGEROUS AND SHAMEFUL

The advent of COVID-19 has resulted in every one of us having to make sacrifices to keep ourselves, our family, and our community safe. So, it’s with disdain that we read comments in the *SA Jewish Report* by a group within our community who have flouted the laws of the country, disregarded globally accepted medical advice, as well as the directive of the chief rabbi’s office by hosting shul services throughout COVID-19. They have put their agenda above the real safety of those around them, saying, “Our members are resolutely determined to daven in a minyan.”

We all feel the pain of not being able to attend shul at this time. The chief rabbi and Rabbi Yossi Chaikin have articulated how difficult this has been, but they have recognised what countless religious authorities have voiced throughout the pandemic, namely that sacrifice is called for in terms of the ultimate objective of saving life – *pikuach nefesh*. The outright arrogance and selfishness of this group has no place in a Jewish community that cares about one another. At a time when infection and death in our community and our country are escalating, it’s horrifying that people would flagrantly ignore measures designed to protect life.

The same edition of the *SA Jewish*

*Report* contained articles from young people, all of whom have contracted the virus, and who described the agonising horror of what they experienced. Meanwhile, this group chooses to think only of itself. It has always been a religious principle to obey the laws of the country, which this group is disregarding. A true *chilul Hashem* (desecration of the name of G-d). What an affront to the courageous frontline medical personnel, including many in our community, who put their lives at risk trying to save COVID-19 patients!

The anonymous representative says, “There is no medical reason ... to suspend minyanim. That decision was motivated by fear and ignorance rather than prudence.” It remains a mystery which reputable medical experts or epidemiologists this group is consulting. Perhaps it could share its findings. It has been widely documented by medical experts globally that religious houses of worship certainly pose specific dangers, and on numerous occasions have been super-spreader events.

At a time when unity is so desperately required, they are electing to separate themselves from the community. – **Shaun Zagnoev, national chairperson, South African Jewish Board of Deputies**

### ILLEGAL SHUL’S RATIONALISATION FOR STAYING OPEN A WHOLE LOT OF FECAL MATTER

Last week’s *SA Jewish Report* (15 January 2021) reports on a selfish Glenhazel shul that has operated illegally and hazardingly right through the

lockdown since March 2020!

In an article by Jordan Moshe, the sages of the illegal, righteous minyan of Glenhazel tell us, “It never occurred to Rabbi Akiva Eiger that minyanim should be shut down,” according to a representative of the minyan, who asked to remain anonymous (for good reason).

Genius!

Rabbi Akiva Eiger lived in 18th century Posen, Germany, and made rulings for that time and place. Viruses were discovered only 100 years later!

Actually, Rabbi Akiva Eiger, was dealing with cholera, a totally different disease to COVID-19. By the way, cholera is caused by a bacterium not a virus.

COVID-19 is caused by a virus, something that behaves very differently.

The sage of Glenhazel doesn’t know the

difference between bacteria and viruses and their modes of transmission, epidemiology, morbidity, and mortality.

COVID-19 is spread through the air, hence the use of masks, social distancing, and shutting down gatherings.

Eiger’s cholera is usually transmitted through the fecal-oral route of contaminated food or water caused by poor sanitation.

By the way, cholera is also spread through the raw, unpasteurised milk that these flat earthers want us to drink in the name of kashrut.

COVID-19 is a respiratory virus, the cholera bacterium, *vibrio cholerae*, infects the small intestine.

Tell that to the anonymous halachic decisor/ epidemiologist from Glenhazel!

How many people will these stupid, pretentious pseudo-scholars kill?

They arrogantly follow the authority of neither the majority of rabbis, nor the majority of doctors and scientists.

– **Jonathan Fishman, Johannesburg**

### ISAACSON NOT JUST AN ACTIVIST, BUT AN AWESOME TORAH SCHOLAR AND TEACHER

Thank you for the obituary you published about Rabbi Ben Isaacson, who was my rabbi and teacher in the days when he ran the Emet Women’s Learning Centre in Highlands North. He referred to me as his *talmida muvheket* (his most faithful/loyal student), a term of endearment I will always treasure.

Though I spent countless hours in Isaacson’s shul, *beit midrash*, and home when he ran the Emet Centre, some of the anecdotes you recounted were previously unknown to me. I can’t imagine the bravery that was required to view the bodies of protesters gunned down by apartheid police in the Sharpeville Massacre. The image of Thabo Mbeki eating chopped liver at the rabbi’s home is wonderful. I didn’t know that the apartheid police had seized the rabbi’s holy books, seeing them as the source of his belief in the equality, dignity, and value of all people. What greater tribute could there be to Isaacson’s Torah?

I have one criticism of your obituary.

Since you chose to mention aspects of Isaacson’s life that he was ashamed of, it would have been fitting to mention that being a true *ba’al teshuva* (penitent) was a fundamental pillar of his identity. A true *ba’al teshuva*, he often used to say, isn’t someone who is born into a family of Jews who know close to nothing about Jewish law and scripture and then learns about and starts to practice Jewish law. Such a person is known as a *tinok shenishba*. A true *ba’al teshuva*, on the other hand, is someone steeped in knowledge of Jewish law, who breaks it in full knowledge that he’s doing so, and later, out of deep regret and a yearning to come closer to his creator, makes a conscious decision to return to embrace Jewish law in its entirety. This Isaacson most certainly did, with the last decades of his life steeped in learning, teaching, and writing by hand commentary after commentary on the prophets.

I hope that publishing some of his writings will form part of the tribute that the *SA Jewish Report* pays to this great maverick. – **Carin Lichtenstein, Johannesburg**

**Disclaimer:** The letters page is intended to provide an opportunity for a range of views on any given topic to be expressed. Opinions articulated in the letters are those of the writers and do not reflect the views of the *SA Jewish Report*. The editor is not obliged to use every letter and will not publish vitriolic statements or any letters with inappropriate content. Letters will be edited and – if need be – shortened. **Guidelines:** Letters are limited to 400 words. Provide your full name, place of residence, and daytime phone number. Letters should be emailed to [editorial@sajewishreport.co.za](mailto:editorial@sajewishreport.co.za)







# Give schools a break

We need to give schools a break. They are forced to find a perfect balance between trying to educate our children, keep them and the teachers safe, adhere to the sometimes confusing and always changing regulations, all while staying afloat financially.

They have unenviable and impossible decisions to make. And they do this in the full knowledge that no matter what they decide, someone’s mom or dad or grandmother is likely to be outraged.



Ahead of the schools’ decision, the department of education was to meet to establish the approach for the country. The private schools were waiting for the outcome of this meeting before deciding what they would do. They had consulted their medical teams and their own principals and boards, but needed the ruling before informing parents.

This is the context in which I received a letter from our school informing us about the plan for the week. My daughter had been checking in with me in 15-minute intervals to see if we had heard from the school. She got wind of the fact that an email had dropped, and came running in to the room to ask me if school was starting or not.

While she stood there in eager anticipation, I read the email. Then I reread it and skimmed it one more time. I looked at her expectant face, and felt the failure that I knew I would be when I uttered the words, “Honestly, I have no idea.”

“But you are reading the email!” she shrieked as only a 16-year-old on the brink of maybe Grade 11 could do. “Yes,”



Grade 1 orientation at Yeshiva College

## INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman

I replied. “And I genuinely have no idea. Maybe ask mom.”

It should have taken just one reading of the school’s communique to realise that I wasn’t equipped to understand it without a master’s in engineering. It needed a methodical approach, maybe even some coloured pens if I was to get a grip on what it had decided. I thought initially that a quick Excel spreadsheet would assist me in figuring out which grades were going to school for orientation only, when they would be on campus, and when they wouldn’t be. It should then have been easy to see which years would go back full time and what the reasons were, as well as the dates of travel that would preclude children from doing so.

I whipped it together in no time at all, only to give up when I realised that I needed to introduce a new tab for hotspots, weddings, and illegal minyanim.

The communication shared by some of the private Jewish schools last week was a perfect representation of how challenging the task is. It illustrated above all else how hard they are trying in full knowledge that very few would be happy.

What’s remarkable is the expectation we seem to have of our schools. The truth is, no one knows what the next day will bring in terms of COVID-19. Also, there’s not a country or government in the world that has got this right. Add to that the fact that parents will lie to the school about their own behaviour, and you see how astounding it is just how high the bar has been set.

As parents, we need to take it down a notch. We need to take a moment to appreciate just how much the schools care, how hard they are trying, and applaud the unbelievable effort they put in to educate and care for our children. Even if we don’t always understand their emails.



## A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

### Eric Samson a giant of SA Jewry

South African Jewry has long been regarded as a model diaspora community. We are famed for our excellent communal infrastructure, high level of identity and involvement, and we have a deserved reputation for punching above our weight on the international Jewish stage.

All of this, of course, was made possible only by the deeply committed men and women who, over the years, have devoted so much time, effort, and resources to their community. These have included many remarkably generous benefactors, who in addition to what they contributed to the wider society, have consistently dug deep to ensure the continued well-being of their fellow Jews and viability of their communal institutions, whether religious, educational, Zionist, welfare-related, or cultural.

In the pantheon of Jewish philanthropists, few have matched and none have exceeded the record of Eric and Sheila Samson. Innumerable organisations and individuals benefited from his support throughout his life. This was true not just for our own community, but for the people of South Africa as a whole and for Israel. Earlier this week, we were heartbroken to learn that Eric had passed away. As our press statement put it, he was a visionary leader and nation builder, one whose multifaceted legacy would benefit our country long into the future.

One of the primary beneficiaries of Eric’s unsurpassed generosity was the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD). He was unstinting in his support for the Board, recognising the vital importance of its work to protect the civil liberties of South African Jewry and represent its vital interests, locally and abroad.



## ABOVE BOARD

Shaun Zagnoev



The SAJBD pays fulsome tribute to a South African giant, the magnitude of whose achievements was surpassed only by the greatness of his heart.

In everything that he did, Eric was supported and assisted by his dear wife, Sheila. May she and the family be comforted amongst the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem, and may Eric’s memory be a blessing and an inspiration for all those who follow in his footsteps.

### Rabbi Desmond Maizels, zt”l

The sudden passing in Cape Town last week of Rabbi Desmond Maizels is another loss that will be deeply felt not just by his congregants and Union of Orthodox Synagogues (UOS) and Cape Beth Din colleagues, but by the whole of South African Jewry.

A true doyen of our community, Rabbi Maizels was someone whose dedication and expertise in the field of halacha went hand in hand with his whole-hearted love for his fellow Jews. Whether in his work on the Beth Din, as a congregational rabbi, or as an esteemed community leader, he epitomised *ahavat Yisrael* (love for fellow Jews) in all that he did. Rabbi Maizels was renowned in particular for his work in the field of kashrut in Cape Town, and the extraordinary lengths to which he went to create a system that would encourage and facilitate its practice. We extend our sincerest condolences to the family and his colleagues in the UOS, Beth Din, and the Rabbinical Association.

• 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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