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# south african Jewish Report

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■ Volume 25 – Number 04 ■ 5 February 2021 ■ 23 Shevat 5781

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## Kramer quits COVID advisory over “flouting protocols”

**NICOLA MILTZ  
AND TALI FEINBERG**

One of the community's top COVID-19 advisors this week lashed out at the community for flouting rules and putting lives at risk. Professor Efraim Kramer said he could no longer contribute to the safety of the community during the pandemic in light of this brazen behaviour.

“In a nutshell, I’m fed up,” Kramer told the *SA Jewish Report*. He said while the first surge “brought out the best in the community”, the second wave “brought out the worst in us”. His frustration has been mounting for some weeks in light of the number of deaths in the community. Last week, two members of his family passed away from COVID-19.

“I don’t care if I upset people. My aim is just to save lives. I don’t want to implicate anybody. The final straw came this week when President Cyril Ramaphosa allowed faith gatherings to take place, and people went to shul the next day. Where was the consultation? No meetings were held on how best to re-open shuls.”

Kramer is the head of the Division of Emergency Medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and Professor of Sports Medicine at Pretoria University. He has specialised in emergency medicine for 30 years, and was FIFA’s tournament medical officer at the Soccer World Cup in 2018. Along with other experts, he has advised the office of the chief rabbi on matters related to COVID-19 and shuls.

“I have written at least eight different protocols for things like weddings, Barmitzvahs, *yom tov* [gatherings], and shuls and it seems that everyone is doing what they like,” he said. “Come December, in the middle of a raging pandemic, people got in their cars or on flights and headed straight for hotspots. They flew home knowing they were infected. The results have been devastating, people have died. We’ve done this to ourselves. We’re doing it to our own.”

He said the communal leadership was “paralysed”. In a strongly worded message he sent to Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein and members of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues, he wrote, “Please note, with regret, that I have withdrawn from all community COVID-19 commitments and communications due to the total disregard

and ignoring of the various safety protocols developed for the shuls and the community by many. I will no longer consult on any COVID-19 issue because it generally amounts to nothing as most people are still intent on doing their own thing anyway, in spite of advice to the contrary. But then, who am I to give advice anyway.”

Kramer said he had received countless complaints from members of the community afraid to attend large *simchas* which had been taking place “as if things are normal”. On Wednesday, he received another complaint from a community member who lamented that while a caterer was following protocols, guests were dancing, hugging, and behaving as if it was a pre-COVID-19 wedding.

“I drive past a shul every day and see countless cars outside. There have been *minyanim* taking place. The shuls have relaxed their protocols. I went into a bakery last week, and things were haywire. People were on top of each other using the same tongs and there was no safe distancing. It was a disgrace. As a doctor, I can’t fight this anymore. I’m going back to hospitals where at least the patients appreciate what I’m doing.

“While many people are being very careful, there are those who don’t care about the next guy. They think they are ‘holier than thou’ and Hashem will listen to their prayers. When you add up all the incidences, you get a picture of a community that doesn’t care for one another anymore. And where is the leadership when this is happening? How come nothing was said when shuls continued to open when it was against the law to do so and unsafe?”

Barry Schoub, emeritus professor in virology at Wits and the former director of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, said, “This is very disappointing news. Professor Kramer has been an absolutely invaluable member of our community medical advisory team and has devoted an incredible amount of his time and energy in drawing up protocols, inspecting shuls, and looking after the safety of functions. He is an international authority on mass gatherings and has world-class credentials which have been so valuable in managing the COVID-19 epidemic. I’m sad at the decision he has taken, but I do understand the intense frustration he is feeling at the attitudes he has come across in a small minority of our community and the

disregarding of protocols to safeguard our community by a small minority of shuls and *minyanim*.”

Leading pulmonologist Dr Carron Zinman said she understood Kramer’s frustration. “We’re all frustrated by people’s complete disregard for safety protocols as it’s so simple to follow the rules. We’re absolutely exhausted, and are tired of watching people struggle for each and every breath knowing that they should have worn a mask/should have kept a safe distance/should have avoided the gathering, and could have avoided getting COVID-19. You realise that you can give the same advice till you’re blue in the face, and people will choose to do what they want. We don’t act as judge, and never compromise our standard of care, going all out to fight for our patients’ lives.”

Said Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein, “I was disappointed and surprised to receive Professor Kramer’s resignation on the eve of the president’s announcement allowing for the reopening of shuls, which have been closed for more than a month. I have asked to meet with Professor Kramer to understand his specific concerns because the reports I have received since the reopening of our shuls in August 2020 indicate that the overwhelming majority of shuls have been outstanding and totally dedicated to the implementation of the health and safety protocols drafted by our full medical team.

“As a community, we will continue to be guided by Professor Barry Schoub and Dr Richard Friedland, who remain on our medical team, as we go forward to ensure the highest standards of safety for our

community. On behalf of our community, I want to thank Professor Kramer for his months of tireless volunteer work to train and prepare our shuls to function safely in this pandemic.”

Wendy Kahn, the executive director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, said, “We have no knowledge about Professor Kramer’s resignation or the reasons for it. We commend him for his amazing contribution to our community.”

Rabbi Yossi Chaikin, the chairperson of the South African Rabbinical Association, said he was “shocked, surprised, and upset” when he received Kramer’s message. “We

are so grateful for his service, and he is so respected. He sat with every rabbi and advised us. And even though he was very strict, we listened to him!

“I know that all shuls have followed his protocols with proper distancing, screening, hand sanitising, and masks – this is being enforced. I also know there have been private *minyanim* not under our jurisdiction where I believe there were minimal to nil protocols. On behalf of the rabbonim and shuls, I say that we are doing the best we can. It’s sad that people have acted this way leading to this decision, but we will continue to be vigilant.”



An eery silence as Israel's Ben Gurion Airport remains closed for another week. See page 3.

## Closer ties between Zim and Israel rattles ANC

**TALI FEINBERG**

Zimbabwe and Israel have had full diplomatic relations since 1993, but further overtures by our northern neighbour to the Jewish state could cause conflict with South Africa, particularly certain factions in the African National Congress (ANC).

According to an article by Carien du Plessis published on *News24* on Wednesday, 3 February, “Zimbabwe has been seeking closer ties with Israel in the hope of securing more investment and doing away with sanctions. This move has caused unease within the ANC, which has a pro-Palestinian stance, although it’s unlikely the party will act on it.

“The ruling party [in Zimbabwe], ZANU-PF, has historically positioned itself as pro-Palestinian, but Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa’s latest move closer to Israel represents

a change in policy direction,” Du Plessis writes.

She reports that although the head of the ANC committee on international relations, Lindiwe Zulu, said that, “We cannot interfere with the sovereign decisions of the governing party of any other government”, there have been divisions within ZANU-PF and within the ANC about the Israel matter.

“A pro-Palestine lobby within the ANC wants South Africa’s governing party to take a more hardline approach to its Zimbabwean counterpart, while the pragmatists prefer not to push this issue for diplomatic reasons,” Du Plessis says.

Darren Bergman, the shadow minister for international relations and cooperation and a member of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Parliamentary Forum Human Rights Committee, didn’t mince his words about South Africa’s response.

**Continued on page 2**

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18:15	19:42	Bloemfontein
18:15	19:55	Port Elizabeth
18:15	19:43	East London

## Closer ties between Zim and Israel rattles ANC

>>>Continued from page 1

“The people of Zimbabwe are suffering. The internal affairs of Zimbabwe couldn’t get South Africa to act, the situation in Zimbabwe couldn’t get South Africa to act, but the

relationship with Israel gets South Africa to act,” he said.

“This is a sinister situation that must make the SADC and African Union [AU] question what exactly South Africa’s situation is with regard to the Middle East,” Bergman said.

“It’s one thing to have an opinion and a position, but it’s another to keep a hard-pressed, almost spiteful stance at all times that can actually harm and injure the people and the continent. To this I would say that South Africa should show diplomatic constraint, and hold back.”

One of Mnangagwa’s recent moves to improve relations with Israel is the appointment last year of Israeli national Ronny Levi Musan as honorary consul of Zimbabwe to Israel.

The Afro-Middle East Centre reported in October 2020 that, “Musan has set plans into motion for Mnangagwa’s official visit to Israel. His activities in Zimbabwe include collaboration with Pentecostal churches to push for Christian support for Israel. Zimbabwe’s honorary consul is also pushing for Israeli businesses to invest in Zimbabwe’s agricultural sector, and he recently announced the intention to open an Israeli academy of agriculture in Zimbabwe. On the diplomatic front, Israel hopes that Mnangagwa will follow the example of his Malawian counterpart, Lazarus Chakwera, who announced plans to open an embassy in Jerusalem.”

Musan told the *SA Jewish Report* he had worked in Africa for the past 20 years to strengthen links between churches and the Holy Land. “About five years ago, I was invited to visit Zimbabwe which lasted about two weeks. I tried to do everything possible to connect Zimbabwe to Israel on a practical level. After the first visit, I visited Zimbabwe several more times, and met a number of ministers and church leaders, and just fell in love with the place.

“From there, it continued through my activities with the Israeli foreign ministry and the foreign ministry in Zimbabwe to promote diplomatic relations between the countries.” He was eventually appointed to this role.

“My main responsibility is to do everything possible in every field to bring knowledge and support from Israel to Zimbabwe, and vice versa. The main issue is technology in the field of agriculture, education, and innovation. These are the cornerstones that will return the crown to Zimbabwe as the ‘grain basket of Africa.’”

Local political analyst Daniel Silke says that Zimbabwe’s overtures to Israel “could well be an attempt by Zimbabwe to follow the Sudan example, in which currying favour with the United States via the channel of restoring relations with Israel allows the country to receive assistance and perhaps even escape some of the worst sanctions. But, of course, [former US] President Donald Trump is no longer in the White House. Whether this will have any traction with Joe Biden, who I think will be a lot more critical of the Zimbabwean regime, remains to be seen.”

In terms of the impact it could have on South African-Israel relations, Silke says, “Many other African countries are forging their own path in terms of relations with Israel. For President [Cyril] Ramaphosa, it’s a difficult balancing act given the demands from within his own party. But I don’t think South Africa has any leg to stand on in terms of interference with any country which wishes to forge some sort of close relationship with the Jewish state. As head of the AU, Ramaphosa is again in a tough position because of the changing dynamics across Africa, but I don’t think it’s an issue that will really get much attention.”

Rowan Polovin, the chairperson of the South African Zionist Federation, says, “We see this as a positive development, particularly for Southern Africa, which is part of the momentum that is being created by the Abraham Accords.

“Northern Africa has been very much part of the momentum. In the southern region, Malawi, which is diplomatically and geographically close to South Africa, has signalled its intention to open an embassy in Israel. If all this has an impact on South Africa’s neighbours, then South Africa will see the benefits. It’s very hard to ignore the importance of building ties with Israel, which has so many solutions for African issues, particularly water, electricity, agriculture, and security. Notwithstanding the noise that the ANC might make, ultimately it’s positive.”

### Torah Thought

**Rabbi Rodney Richard,  
Emmarentia Shul**



## Be the solution

While the highlight of this week’s parsha is undoubtedly the revelation of Hashem at Mount Sinai, the preceding narrative shouldn’t be ignored.

Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, observes how the masses would wait in line to have matters adjudicated by Moshe (and don’t we know how Jews love to queue!) Yitro criticizes Moshe, “What you are doing isn’t right! You will surely wear yourself out and these people as well. The task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone!”

But here’s the crux! His words don’t end there. He continues, “Therefore, develop various levels of judges to assist you.”

Yitro doesn’t just criticize. He offers a solution.

It’s a unique person who identifies a problem and thereafter, immediately seeks the solution.

In communal life – so my colleagues tell me – there will always be those

who will verbalise the problem (often exaggerating it as well). Let’s be honest, it doesn’t take tremendous insight, sophistication, or aptitude to see problems. Problems exist, and they are often there for everyone to see. But how many of those people will just as eagerly and readily offer up solutions? Very few.

Of course, this isn’t only at communal level. We live in a world where people enjoy pointing out all that’s wrong in others. In Parliament, the seats of the opposition are always the more comfortable ones.

Yes, Yitro criticizes, but he offers a solution. He ensures that the negative is immediately followed by the positive.

Perhaps this is the reason our parsha, which records the historic and transformative event of Hashem’s revelation to His people on Mount Sinai, doesn’t bear a name more suited to this event such as *Matan Torah* (the giving of the Torah) or *Aseret Hadibrot* (the ten utterances), but rather the


name Yitro.

Yitro merits this reward for the important and timeless lesson he teaches. Anyone can criticize and point out faults, but that doesn’t resolve the problem. If one sees the problem, one should try equally hard to see the solution.

In a world that tends to be problem-oriented, let’s strive to be solution-oriented. Perhaps we can go one step further, to be solution-committed. Not only should we devise the solution, we should strive to be part of its active implementation.

Though I have focused on the qualities of Yitro, let’s not forget the lesson taught by our great teacher, Moshe Rabbeinu. If we receive positive criticism, let’s be humble enough to implement it, and gracious enough to say, “Thank you”.

Wishing you and yours a wonderful and safe Shabbos!



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# Ben Gurion Airport closure leaves many stranded

JORDAN MOSHE

At 07:00 on Wednesday morning, 96-year-old Shulamit Klein passed away alone in hospital in Akko, Israel, with no visitors allowed and her care worker in quarantine. Klein’s daughter, Dalia Shalev, was desperate to get to Israel to at least sit shiva for her, but with Ben Gurion Airport closed, she has no hope of getting there.

“We cannot honour her the way she should be honoured,” says Shirley Cohen, Klein’s granddaughter. “The lack of closure makes the loss of a family matriarch devastating and heart breaking.

“If it weren’t for the current situation, my mother could have seen my grandmother at least one more time. In her last days, she was all alone with no one to comfort her.”

Countless individuals in South Africa, Israel, and several other countries have been left stuck or stranded as a result of the closure of the Tel Aviv airport which began at midnight on 25 January. Although initially scheduled to last for a week, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu extended the closure until 7 February in a bid to prevent people infected with new coronavirus variants from entering the country. All inbound and outbound passenger flights are barred for Israelis and foreigners alike.

The move has been criticised for effectively trapping Israeli citizens abroad and at home. “Mothers went abroad to visit aging or ill parents and are stuck there,” wrote former Knesset member Dov Lipman. “There are new olim who were granted some vacation time who are now at risk of losing their jobs because they haven’t returned; there are people who have run out of their medication abroad and cannot access more.”

There are also those who are desperate to leave Israel for pressing reasons, Lipman said, including new immigrants who have parents dying abroad but cannot travel to see them. “Some missed being with their parents when they died due to the draconian rule not allowing anyone to leave the country,” he wrote. “I am all for rules to fight the spread of COVID-19 mutations, but a country filled with new immigrants who have relatives and businesses

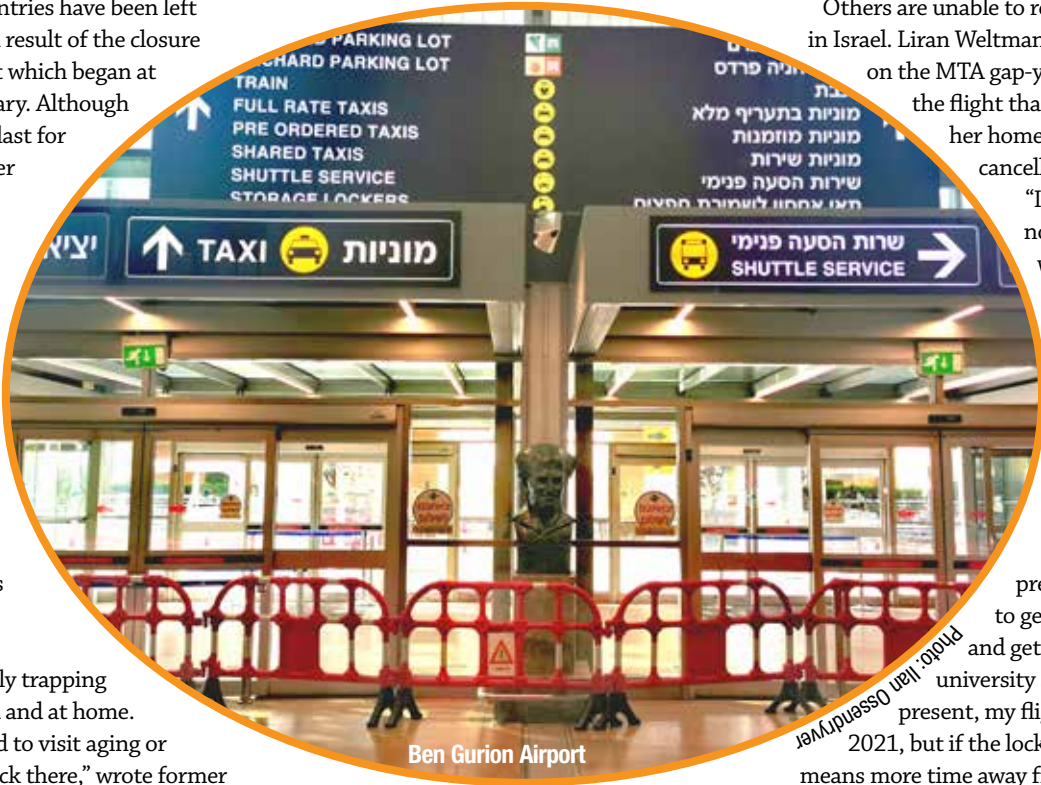
abroad cannot impose these kinds of rules without a clear and simple method to allow for exceptions and emergencies.

“A country should never close its doors to its own citizens.”

Like Shalev, several South Africans have been frustrated by the impact the closure has had on their need to get into or out of Israel. Among them is 68-year-old Gideon Lapidus, who is desperate to get to Israel to be with his 96-year-old mother after his father passed away in September.

“My mom desperately needs me at this crucial time, but I’m stuck here in South Africa,” he told the *SA Jewish Report*. “I couldn’t get to Israel when my dad passed away. I’m the only child my mom has left, and we don’t know when we’ll get to see one another again.”

Lockdowns have frustrated every effort Lapidus has made to book flights, and the



Ben Gurion Airport

closure of Ben Gurion is yet another obstacle to his arrangements.

“My dad is gone, and my mom has no one,” he says. “I’m not going on holiday, I’m going to help an elderly woman who is alone. This closure is absolutely ridiculous. I really think they need to give special permission to people who need to go. This Gestapo lockdown is unacceptable, and I’m sure I’m not the only one who feels this way.”

Having prepared to go on aliyah, Gwenda Glass’s plans were delayed when she suffered a stroke in October. Her daughter, who recently made aliyah, is supposed to come to South Africa to escort her mother to Israel, but neither



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of them are able to travel anywhere because of the airport closure.

“In the meantime, I’m stuck in a home and no one is allowed in or out,” says Glass. “I have no choice but to play it by ear and take the first opportunity that comes. I’ve packed up everything and should have gone already, but I’m still here four months later. It’s a big mess.”

Others are unable to return home after being in Israel. Liran Weltman spent 2020 in Israel on the MTA gap-year programme, but the flight that was supposed to bring her home this week has been cancelled.

“It’s a scary thought not being in control of when I can get home and see my family,” she says. “This past year has been full of uncertainty, and now there’s the uncertainty about whether or not I can get home.

“I have university preparation to do, I need to get my driver’s license and get settled in before university starts in March. At present, my flight is on 9 February 2021, but if the lockdown is extended, that means more time away from my family and home country, and Bnei Akiva needs to support us for a longer amount of time.”

Israel Centre Director Liat Amar Arran says all aliyah flights with El Al have been temporarily postponed and will be scheduled only when Ben Gurion’s reopening is confirmed.

“The last flight was on 25 January, and we had a crazy time making sure the 28 olim could get into Israel,” she says. “They left Johannesburg in the afternoon, arrived in Ethiopia, and took off for Israel at 23:55 that night. They were in the air in time, and were allowed in.

“It was too stressful to plan, so we’re hoping the next flight will be at the end of February. Now is not the time to make aliyah if you’re the sort of person who needs things confirmed in

advance. Things change all the time.”

Telfed Chief Executive Dorron Kline says the only way travellers can enter Israel right now is via Frankfurt, an option that some desperate people are choosing.

“It’s a very big international airport that remains active, and people are using it to get into Israel,” he says. “It involves a complex procedure, applying for permission on special grounds. The situation isn’t expected to last very long, but because of the possibility that the closure could be extended, people are trying to apply for permission.

“I couldn’t get to Israel when my dad passed away. I’m the only child my mom has left, and we don’t know when we’ll get to see one another again.”

“What qualifies as essential travel? What reason is really good enough to get into Israel? It’s such a difficult question.”

For this reason, Israel needs to be open to discussing and evaluating each case according to its merits, says Kim Milner Kur. Kur is the founder of the “Community Circle Home SA” Facebook group which assists South Africans stranded abroad. She has been contacted by a few people affected by Israel’s airport closure.

“You have to know people’s backstories,” she says. “What seems essential to one person isn’t essential to another, but when you dig deeper and engage, you find out how essential it really is. All countries need to be open to discussing these reasons.

“We need to understand Israel’s approach while it’s vaccinating people, but we also need to find ways to come together and help. There’s power in a group, and people need to be heard. We need to help each other to find solutions.”



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# Silent heroes touching lives during time of sorrow

NICOLA MILTZ

There has been a focus on frontline healthcare workers and emergency medical personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic, but what about the community’s loyal and over stretched “death-care” workers?

These are the unsung heroes of Johannesburg’s Chevrah Kadisha burial services, the last responders on the frontline whose day begins when someone in the community dies. Sadly, they have been very busy.

They are known as *mesuskim* (attendants), and no matter what time of day – and often in the middle of the night – they are the ones to answer the phone when you have to make that dreaded call. From a smallholding in Krugersdorp, a rundown flat in Hillbrow, to a mansion in the suburbs, these men are often the first to arrive and offer a kind word.

Since the start of the pandemic, these silent heroes of Westpark Cemetery have touched the lives of countless people. They have had to adapt to a whole new world of figuring out how to comfort mourning families from a distance wearing full personal-protective equipment while adhering to the health department’s vastly changed protocols.

This week, the Chev’s six full-time *mesuskim* were presented with new suits donated by the community in a show of appreciation for their efforts. They reminisced about the “fearful and terrifying” early days of the pandemic.

“It was scary when we attended the first few COVID-19 calls,” said Keith Tabakin who has been at Westpark for nine years. “We had to adapt and face our fears.”

The six full-time *mesuskim* work around the clock in shifts making sure that there is always someone on duty, said funeral director David Weber, who has been with the Chevrah Kadisha for 13 years.

The Johannesburg Chevrah Kadisha is



unique, he said. “In other places, there are separate companies that deal with coffins, burial plots, or funeral arrangements. Overseas, the Chev takes care of the dead, over here we look after the dead and the living.”

All it takes is one phone call for the team of dedicated burial specialists to spring into action. Weber and Funeral Directors Philip Kalmonowitz and Darren Sevitz, together with the six *mesuskim* and many volunteers take care of everything from collecting the deceased, doing *tahara*, which spiritually prepares bodies for burial, attending funeral arrangements, navigating the paperwork, and carrying out the burial. The *mesuskim* attend every funeral, and on many occasions form part of the *minyán* when there aren’t enough men present.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the work has been seemingly endless. Regretfully there have been too many calls.

According to Chevrah Kadisha Chief Executive Saul Tomson, the number of funerals rose 82% in January compared to the average number of funerals over the past five years. The number of funerals in December rose 37% compared to the past five Decembers.

“Even though burial is only a small part [less than 5%] of the Chev’s activities, it’s

at the core of who we are and where we come from,” he said.

There are on average 40 funerals a month in “normal” times, said Weber. “In July, there were 110 funerals during the first pandemic surge.” There were days when the men attended to nine or 10 funerals.

The head of the ladies *tahara*, Shirley Resnick, is like a mother figure to the *mesuskim*. She recalls when it was so busy, she had to ensure that they were adequately fed because many worked long stretches without eating.

“There were many nights when we arranged mattresses and blankets so they could sleep in the newly built *tahara* room at Sandringham Gardens,” she said, to ensure that if they were worked late, they could be back at work early the next day.

“Some of them were traumatised in the beginning by having to visit COVID-19 wards or homes where they felt at high risk of exposure. There were times some considered pulling out but instead, they pulled together. They are a close-knit group who help each other.”



Back row: Menachem Kruger and Rodney Margot  
Front row: Colin Barnett and Braam Shevel

So how do they cope?

“We focus on the job,” said Tabakin who is grateful to be able to help people, especially those he knows, during a stressful period in their lives.

“There is life after the cemetery,” said Neil Nathan. “At work, we concentrate on what we’re required to do with compassion and care, but when we leave, we try to switch off and concentrate on our family life.”

Although it has been stressful and difficult at times, Eddie Taitz said he found the work rewarding.

“Before I came to work at the Chev, I was petrified to be even in the driveway of Westpark, but now I’m used to it. It has become a way of life,” he said.

Braam Shevel, who contracted COVID-19

last year, has been at the Chev for 15 years. The husband and father of two said the work can sometimes take its toll, but his spirits are lifted because his work enables him to “touch people’s lives”.

“People remember any act of kindness – a simple gesture or a certain look – for years to come. This brings me a sense of fulfilment and reminds me of the importance of the work we do,” he said.

The longest serving member of the *mesuskim*, Rodney Margot, takes pride in having adapted to the new rules laid down by the health department and the extra work brought by the pandemic. The husband and father of two grown children said the hours were long but no funerals were delayed and everyone was buried

speedily and according to Jewish law.

Colin Barnett said he felt honoured to perform the *mitzvah* of caring for the deceased. “It’s good to know that in our small way we can offer people comfort when they need it most,” he said.

Doing a kindness for the departed is called a “kindness of truth” said Chev Group Rabbi Jonathan Fox because “one cannot expect anything in return”.

“It’s done with pure intentions and that’s what makes it so holy. They are helping those who literally cannot help themselves, and this is the highest form of kindness.”

Said Tomson, “We are blessed to have such a committed and caring group doing this vital work, especially at a time like this. I salute every one of them.”

## Pandemic rips hole in students’ gap year

JORDAN MOSHE

Whether spent in Israel or elsewhere, a gap year is considered a rite of passage by most Jewish youngsters just out of matric. Yeshiva, seminary, kibbutz, backpacking and touring offer formative experiences and memories that last a lifetime, coupled with a sense of freedom and independence.

But with the virus still rampant, is there still something to look forward to, or does the pandemic mean a year of disappointment?

“COVID-19 will affect a large part of my gap year,” says Dean Chaitowitz, a Yeshiva College graduate who is to go on Bnei Akiva’s MTA (Midreshet Tora v’Avodah) programme. “There has been much uncertainty with regards to the programme, making it difficult to prepare for the year ahead.”

Chaitowitz will be spending the year in Jerusalem at Yeshivat Eretz Hatzvi. Beyond learning, the MTA programme typically includes a considerable amount of touring across Israel, as well as leadership seminars and a summer trip to Poland.

Says Chaitowitz, “All these activities may not happen if the COVID-19 situation in Israel doesn’t improve, having a major impact on the year.

“I was excited to see friends and family and build friendships with individuals from all over the world, but due to the strict system that the programme has in place to keep our group in a

‘capsule’, this will be difficult.”

Fellow Yeshiva College graduate, Dani Sack, is also hoping to go on the MTA programme and attend Midreshet Harova in the Old City.

“They have told us that we must prepare to leave at any time between 3 and 10 February, but nothing is confirmed and we’re still waiting to book tickets,” she says.

“COVID-19 has affected so many aspects of my gap year. Having no idea when we’re leaving has been a cause of anxiety, plus knowing that leaving means entering into a 10-day quarantine only amplifies that.”

Sack says students at the *midrasha* will be assigned to capsules, meaning that she can socialise only with her fellow South Africans and Australians in the MTA group.

“We won’t get to see much of the American, British, or Israeli students, which is usually a large part of the programme,” she says.

King David Linksfield graduate Brad Gottschalk is also waiting for a definitive departure date for Habonim’s Israel gap year programme, Shnat. The programme involves travelling and living across Israel while engaging in activities like kibbutz stays and more.

“The departure date is very up in the air at the moment based on the Israeli lockdown and its stance on international travel,” he says.

“Cases in Israel remain quite high, and with [Benjamin] Netanyahu’s image at stake, he’s making decisions which are beneficial to his public image, which means keeping cases as low

Continued on page 5>>

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# Just how successful is Israel’s vaccine push?

PAULA SLIER

Israel is reporting promising initial results from its COVID-19 vaccine rollout, the fastest in the world. The first official findings released by the health ministry show that only 0.04% of people caught the virus a week after their second dose, and a mere 0.002% needed hospital treatment.

Clalit, the country’s largest health service organisation, has also released its preliminary data. It compared 200 000 people aged 60 and over who’ve been vaccinated with 200 000 similar unvaccinated older adults. It found that the rate of those who tested positive dropped 33% among the vaccinated 14 days after they received it. No decline was seen in the unvaccinated.

Maccabi, another healthcare organisation, saw an even larger drop. Infections decreased 60% among 430 000 people 13 to 21 days after they received the vaccine. The data also suggested the vaccine was 92% effective, close to the 95% efficacy claimed by Pfizer.

Israeli researchers are conducting more in-depth analysis, and point out that real-world effectiveness of vaccines is often lower than the efficacy seen in clinical trials due to a number of factors.

But experts warn that this data has yet to be published in a peer-reviewed journal so it should be viewed with some caution.

There are also various factors that could be influencing the results. The current lockdown and behaviour such as travelling and gathering less,

wearing masks, and greater physical distancing might be decreasing infections. The first people to receive the vaccine were mostly from vulnerable populations, so they are more likely to

As for the South African strain, there are currently 80 detected cases in Israel, and there is concern that the vaccine isn’t as effective against this variant. A number of Israelis who previously had COVID-19 have been re-

overwrite lockdown concerns. Last Sunday, 31 January, thousands of ultra-Orthodox mourners, many without masks, crowded together to attend two funerals of famous rabbis who died from coronavirus.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been criticised for not cracking down harshly enough on the community for political reasons – he needs their votes in the upcoming 23 March election.

Residents of Tel Aviv spoke to the *SA Jewish Report*, complaining that the actions of the ultra-Orthodox were forcing the whole country to go repeatedly into lockdown, and it wasn’t fair. It’s no surprise thus that the latest word from the

government is that the current – third – nationwide lockdown may not be Israel’s last.

Many Israelis want cities and towns to once again be divided into red, orange, yellow, and green zones and scales of restrictions to be put in place accordingly. This would mean those who obey the restrictions wouldn’t have to pay the price of those who don’t.

In recent days, there’s also growing concern in some quarters in Israel that because the mass vaccination campaign is running in parallel with an active coronavirus outbreak, it could lead to an “evolutionary pressure” on the virus in which it would ultimately become immune to vaccination. Doctors are suggesting that in future, people will need to take an annual anti-COVID-19 jab, much in the same way the annual flu injection is taken.

But for now, the race to inoculate everyone is on. Among the first to be injected were people aged 60 or older. More than two-thirds of this age group have already received the required two doses. Up to 200 000 people are being injected each day, and the vaccine is now available to anyone over the age of 35. High-school students aged 16 to 18 are also included in the hope that they will be able to sit for exams. It seems Netanyahu is on track to fulfil his promise of inoculating five million of the country’s nine million citizens by the end of March.

To date, just more than one in three Israelis has been inoculated – about 1.7 million of them twice. Because this is a far higher fraction than anywhere else in the world, it makes the country a test case for the international vaccine push.



An Israeli woman being vaccinated

Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

take precautions which could also skew the data.

In spite of the encouraging news, the death toll from COVID-19 continues to climb. Of the 4 816 fatalities at the time of writing, 30% occurred in January when the vaccination rollout was already in full swing. The government blames this on the more transmissible British variant of the virus, especially among children. According to Clalit, when the vaccination campaign started in late December, the new variant caused 30% to 40% of infections, whereas now that figure has doubled.

infected with the South African strain, with the most recent case identified two days ago.

Compounding the situation is the flagrant disregard by the ultra-Orthodox community, that comprises just less than 13% of the population, for lockdown rules. Since the start of the pandemic, one in five ultra-Orthodox has tested positive.

Many in the community doubt the safety of the vaccine or believe the country’s citizens are being used as guinea pigs to test its efficacy. Prominent rabbis have also said that communal prayer and study needs to

## Pandemic rips hole in students’ gap year

>>>Continued from page 4

as possible and successfully thrusting the vaccination drive forward. “Last year’s Shnatties arrived to a COVID-19 free Israel, but were almost immediately caught up in lockdowns, masks, and social distancing. This meant that their year had to be restructured to be as safe and logistically sound as possible, and our year is going to look much like theirs because we are still in a similar situation.”

Those who embarked on or planned a gap year in 2020 didn’t have it easy either. Sarah Saacks, who went on MTA last year, enjoyed six weeks of normality at Midreshet Harova before things took a turn.

“The changes to my year started out slowly, and then all at once,” she says. “Our Purim party with international and Hebrew students was cancelled. This seemed inconvenient at the time, but we were fine with the sacrifice. Next came tracking all our public transport, but it wasn’t such a worry.

“A few days later, Israel went into a full lockdown, our *midrasha* had to ask us to leave, and our gap year was put on hold. We were devastated, but we couldn’t fully comprehend what was happening.”

While most of her friends returned home, Saacks opted to remain with family in Israel, determined to make the most of her gap year. She was later able to resume the programme, albeit under strict pandemic protocols and at the expense of much of the typical MTA experience.

“I’ve spent almost the entire year since the pandemic broke out trying to understand what happened and making peace with missing out on what I expected to experience,” she says. “Sure, I may have been ‘cheated’ in some way for not having the experiences I signed up for, but I gained so much this year that in hindsight, I couldn’t have imagined the year going any other way.”

For Gabriel Katz, the pandemic meant scuppering his gap year plans altogether, having planned to travel to Japan to watch the Olympics and train in the Tokyo and Okinawa dojo.

“I was supposed to leave at the beginning of June,” says Katz. “However, then Prime Minster Shinzo Abe declared

a state of emergency in April, cancelling all flights and postponing the Olympics. All my plans were immediately halted, and any other ideas such as travelling to central Europe were also on a steep downward slope.”

Katz was initially extremely upset, having saved for the gap year since the age of 10. This feeling was soon replaced with a sense of relief, however, as media coverage of the first wave started trickling in with images of packed hospitals, empty streets, and stranded foreign nationals in major airports.

“I started to focus on what was possible here as I knew that South Africa was going to be placed in a similar position,” he says. “I ramped up my music lessons, which would soon become virtual, as well as looking at new hobbies such as sewing.” Katz also assisted the Chevrah Kadisha, and later landed an online job during the course of the year.

“I do feel that I lost the year I was hoping for, but it’s not all a waste,” he says. “I’ve developed many new skills and become more introspective.

“This has been quite transformative for me, as I have realised that with all the chaos swirling around there is never any certainty in life and we ought to recognise the significance of the present.”

While they may not have the year they’d like, Chaitowitz, Sack, and Gottschalk are all determined to make the most of their overseas experiences and agree that Israel is one of the safest places to be.

Says Sack, “I want to grow in my independence, my Judaism, and my relationships. COVID-19 put a lot of that on pause during 2020, so please G-d, 2021 allows it to play out fully again.”

“Gap years are about taking challenges as they come,” says Gottschalk. “No year is ever perfect or exactly to plan, that’s where we are given the opportunity to grow.

“Life always throws something into the mix which ruins plans. It’s how we react to these unexpected blips which define whether or not we have a meaningful year.”



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Should you not hear from the school by 25th February 2021 please accept that your application has not been successful.



## Recognising our invisible heroes

Our newspaper last week was described by some as “depressing”, and they had good reason to do so. While we paid tribute to our paramedic heroes, there was much illness and death in the newspaper.

We thought long and hard about giving you a newspaper that was so sad when we were all feeling a little down in the dumps thanks to the second phase of this horrific killer virus and the extended lockdown. Should we have scoured our community for more positivity and happy stories? Well, we did, but didn’t find much at all.

The truth is, we painted an accurate picture in the newspaper of what was relevant in the week. We did our best to capture what was in the ether and what people were experiencing. Unfortunately, it wasn’t uplifting or happy!

However, it was a week in which we recognised the heroes in our midst. Those heroes are visible. So many of us have met them and paid tribute to them personally. In fact, I wonder how many have added their monthly contribution to Hatzolah and the Community Security Organisation in the last while because of personal experience with these superheroes. I understand why. They are brave, talented, attentive, and go way beyond the call of duty.

However, they aren’t alone. There are many more heroes in our midst, but we don’t always see them. And if we do, sometimes we look right through them when they are standing right next to us.

These heroes don’t wear dashing uniforms and don’t perform life-saving miracles. They do the work that most of us wouldn’t do even if you paid us lots of money. This could be a description of many different heroes in our community and hopefully down the line, we will salute all of them.

However, in this case, I’m referring to those unsung heroes from the Chevrah Kadisha who deal with dead bodies, funerals, burials, and all that unpleasant but vital work to do with death.

They are the people who, with absolute integrity and kindness, fetch our loved ones after they are gone. They take them away and prepare their bodies for burial. They then put them in coffins and prepare the graves. Then they help with the funeral, doing the work that most people prefer not to see. They ensure that our funerals and burials run smoothly and efficiently.

Perhaps you recognise them, even know their names, but do you ever think about what they do for us?

Throughout the pandemic, these heroes have been worked off their feet. In some weeks, they have had to work around the clock. With fewer people at funerals, I guess their work is even harder because they have less help on the ground.

They are the silent helpers who make the saddest and most grief-stricken times of our lives so much easier.

This week, we meet some of these men and find out a little about what they do, how they do it, and why. We pay tribute to them on page 4.

This week, as our first batch of vaccinations arrive in South Africa, we asked the most prominent expert in the field, Professor Barry Schoub, what this means for us (on this page). We also look at what vaccinations have achieved in Israel, a country that has vaccinated the highest percentage of people in the world.

We ponder the fact that while vaccines may help us medically, we still have to deal with the psychological impact of this pandemic.

I don’t think most of us are aware how much grief and sadness and in many cases sheer loneliness we’ve had to deal with. There has been much anger, frustration, and so many other emotions that weren’t necessarily as profound before COVID-19 as they are now.

These emotions fluctuate, and may not have an impact on everyone, but most of us have to deal with them in some way or another.

In some cases, they have made us more insular, quick to anger, supercritical, and constantly looking for an individual or group to blame for how we feel.

This is the reality! It’s because of the time we are living in and the insecurity of not knowing what’s going to happen next. We have to live without knowing what to expect tomorrow, next week, or in six months’ time.

We don’t know whether our children, most of whom went back to school physically this week, will still be there next week or next month. Or will they have to deal with another iteration of online learning? Are we to expect a third wave of COVID-19? And if so, what will its impact be on us? Will we be able to go to the beach this December?

Will we continue to work from home? Will we be able to have some semblance of family Pesach seders this year, or will we be alone again?

This is a difficult time, and even though it’s never easy to deal with people blaming you or finding fault, it would be incredible if we could all dig deep and find tolerance and understanding in ourselves.

We should also apply that tolerance and understanding to ourselves. If you are having a horrible day, week, or extended period, you don’t have to be hard on yourself. It’s okay. This too shall pass.

Let’s all find something special to look forward to. Something that will make us smile, laugh, and find enjoyment.

I wish you all a beautiful Shabbos, one that can now legally include going to shul, having a glass of wine, and being out until 23:00. You see, we do have something to be positive about.

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

## Coronavirus vaccines have arrived – will this rescue us?

OPINION

PROFESSOR BARRY SCHOUB



After a great deal of public clamour, media noise, and anxious expectations, the first batch of COVID-19 vaccines have finally arrived. What can we expect?

Undoubtedly, we have in vaccines one of the most powerful weapons to combat disease. It has been said that, other than the provision of clean water, vaccines have done more for public health than any other intervention.

One only needs to look at the eradication of smallpox, the near eradication of polio, and the drastic reduction of many infectious diseases – which almost all of our young doctors of today have never seen, such as polio and diphtheria and even measles – to marvel at the power of vaccines.

Unfortunately, but realistically, we cannot have the same expectation for COVID-19 vaccines. Viruses like measles and polio behave themselves and maintain their respective vaccine targets. Not so the COVID-19 coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. Here, we have a far wilier opponent.

Truth be told, we didn’t expect this virus to be as changeable as it is. (The genome, the total genetic structure of this virus, is a long piece of RNA, unlike the fragments of the influenza virus, and also unlike the mutable reverse transcription mechanism of the HIV virus.)

It did indeed surprise us, for it didn’t take long

for its many mutations to appear. Surprise turned to anxiety when it became apparent that some of these mutations were positioned in critical parts of its structure, that very part of the virus which is targeted by the immune defensive response following infection or vaccination.

Fortunately, our immune system and our immune responses to infection are more complex than merely making antibodies, and vaccines may still work in spite of worrying signals coming from the laboratory. However, what it does tell us is that we cannot presume that what you find with many other vaccines will similarly apply to controlling COVID-19.

Nevertheless, there are two factors in our favour in dealing with the challenges of this virus. First, there is our science of vaccinology. The development of vaccines and understanding of how they work is now advanced and sophisticated. So much so that the necessary adjustments to the vaccine needed to meet the changing of the virus’ targets can be done quite effortlessly and relatively quickly.

Second, and fortunately for us, as contagious as the virus is especially in certain superspreading settings, its infectivity is considerably less than (say) measles, and the herd immunity threshold is correspondingly lower.

So, what does all this mean with regard to planning how vaccines will be used to control the epidemic? The rollout will basically be structured into two parts. The aim of the first part, consisting of two phases, is to protect those most at risk of being infected. The highest priority of these will be healthcare workers, who will be the first phase. The most vulnerable of society will be in phase

two – the elderly, those with underlying illnesses (comorbidities), key personnel for the running of the country, and people living in crowded or congregate environments.

Attention can then be turned to part two, to reach as many of the rest of the adult population in order to achieve herd immunity. Children aren’t currently approved to receive the vaccine.

What do we hope the vaccine will achieve? We cannot expect it to do what the polio vaccine did for polio or the measles vaccine for measles. What we do want to see, however, is a future which avoids the healthcare system, hospitals, and healthcare workers, from being swamped, as we experienced during the first and second waves.

We will want to return to our pre-COVID-19 lives, without the restrictions, without the masks, and having functions and celebrations as before.

This will certainly not happen as soon as the vaccination kicks off. It didn’t happen in the United Kingdom, the first country to commence population immunisation. In fact, two months after commencing its rollout, the United Kingdom is in the midst of a second wave considerably more severe than the first wave, and necessitating the strictest of lockdowns.

Until herd immunity is reached, we will still need to continue strict adherence to non-pharmaceutical interventions while the vaccines do their work. That target will take many months and beyond the year to reach.

The COVID-19 pandemic will go away and vaccines will certainly play a major role together with human behaviour. The virus won’t disappear. The only virus that has ever been eradicated is smallpox.

What we are hoping for in the post-COVID-19 era is a virus which will no longer be totally new to the human population. In history, it has been those viruses introduced into totally naïve and therefore totally susceptible populations, causing so-called virgin-soil epidemics, which have devastated populations. (Measles and smallpox introduced by European invaders in the 16th century to the native populations of the Americas resulted in catastrophic epidemics, wiping out major portions of indigenous populations.) When COVID-19 is no longer new and the virus no longer meets a totally susceptible human population, immunity from vaccines and past infections will produce barriers to stop the spread of the virus.

In the future, there may well be spikes of COVID-19 respiratory infections, hopefully much more trivial, which we will come to tolerate. This will be much like we do for their coronavirus cousins, which are responsible for our annual winter colds, along with many other viruses.

Perhaps some lessons of hygiene practices may continue to be part of our everyday lives. We may well even adopt some of the cultural practices so common in the Far East, like wearing masks in public places when we have a cold, or hand-hygiene practices.

We will come out of this miserable pandemic, but the more conscientious we are about maintaining our non-pharmaceutical interventions to assist the work of vaccines, the sooner that day will come.

• *Professor Barry Schoub is the Chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 vaccines. He is emeritus professor in virology at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the former director of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.*





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The school reserves the right not to make an appointment.

Only shortlisted candidates will be interviewed.

## Aliyah under lockdown – the good, the bad, and the ugly

TALI FEINBERG

Making aliyah in normal circumstances is challenging, but under lockdown, it has become even more so. Yet, there are some surprising benefits to doing it during a pandemic, as long as you know exactly what to expect.

Liat Amar Arran, the director of Israel Centre South Africa, says, “In the past four flights of *olim*, a day or two days before the flight, something has changed. So, people deciding to make aliyah under these circumstances are under a lot of stress. There's a lot of chaos and uncertainty until the last minute. We are trying to support people, but we are also telling them that those who can't deal with high levels of stress shouldn't make aliyah at this time.”

“Under lockdown, it's much harder to integrate, build relationships, meet people, and invite new *olim* for coffee or Shabbat dinner. In terms of jobs, it's tough. The unemployment rate in Israel is high, and people are losing jobs, so it's much harder for *olim*.”

“Our staff is working hard behind the scenes. Before COVID-19, the system was running smoothly. Now, every *oleh* needs so many levels of confirmation and documentation. In addition, Israelis are scared of the South African variant [of the virus], and restrictions on South Africans are high.”

Philip Stodel and his wife, Michele, from Cape Town arrived in Israel on the aliyah flight of 25 to 26 January 2021, possibly the last before Israel's total closure of its airport.

“Our decision to make aliyah was made in May 2019, but the pandemic delayed our plans,” Stodel says. “We agreed on transfer in mid-January, but that decision and so many others was made based on a series of unknowns. The aliyah department couldn't tell us if and when the next flights would be. We just had to be ready to respond, to take the next flight offered.”

The final journey was also full of unknowns. “It was only late on Sunday night [24 January] that we got the final confirmation that the flight could go ahead. Can you imagine the stress, emotion, and inconvenience had we been grounded?”

They managed because they were staying with family so they could mobilise quickly, are retired, and have no children at school. “However, due to the pending changes about the handling of

retirement annuities from March this year, it was important for me to have emigrated and become an Israeli citizen prior to 1 March. Had this not happened, the financial impact could have been huge,” Stodel says.

“There were positive aspects too. Lockdown gave us the space to de-clutter our house. We're now in mandatory government quarantine for 10 days, and being confined to a hotel room is giving me the perfect opportunity to catch up on admin without the distractions had we entered society immediately.”

Michelle Michelow, who made aliyah with her husband and two children on 30 November, says the toughest part of making the move during the pandemic is that her sons, 13 and 15, haven't been able to go to school and get into a routine. “They've only had two days of normal school, so it's been hard.”

Other than that, she and her family have had a very positive experience. “We've been talking about making aliyah for years. Lockdown was an accelerator for us. I had been looking for a ‘sign’, and that was it. There was a lot of anxiety about having no flight date, and a lot of paperwork that had to be filled in specifically because of

the pandemic. Some paperwork could be filled in only a few hours before we flew, which was stressful.

“But since we've been here, everything has been fine. In fact, all I can say is ‘thank G-d for quarantine’. Even if there was no pandemic, I think every new *oleh* should have two weeks where they can't move. It gives you time to process everything. You have time to ‘touch base’, make appointments, assess the job market, and unpack. We had to make appointments for everything, so there were no long queues or *balagan* [chaos].”

They found jobs easily and are both working from home. “You can find a job quickly if you don't expect

it to be the exact same thing you had in South Africa. For example, there's a huge demand for English speakers in telemarketing. Another positive for us has been the simplicity of life here. It feels more manageable. You walk to the shops – I even send the kids to

the shops at night – and there's

no *schlepping*.”

They haven't felt lonely. “We knew a lot of South Africans living here, and there is a big sense of community.” Finally, they are thrilled to have already both received their first COVID-19 vaccination shots. “When I was thinking about making aliyah, someone said ‘don't think about it, just do it’ and it's the same advice I would give.”

In contrast, Marco Albeldas, in his 30s, has battled under the pandemic. “I made aliyah in January 2020. It's been a nightmare,” he says. “The pandemic closed all small businesses down. I haven't been able to find work apart from teaching surfing. My biggest issue is that everything is set up in a way that benefits Israelis. It's like Israelis are worried that we will take jobs from them.”

Dorron Kline, the chief executive of Telfed, says that since the first lockdown in 2020, more than 400 South Africans have made aliyah, including 65 this year.

Regarding aliyah and *klita* (absorption), under

lockdown, there are a number of challenges. “The government offices are closed, and their staff work from home. Therefore, everything takes a lot longer to organise. Not everyone finds it easy to stay in a hotel room for 10 days. You may struggle to make appointments. Some *olim* have lost their jobs.”

Telfed tries to assist as

much as it can. “We provide pre-aliyah counselling, especially in *klita*, aliyah benefits, employment, and housing. We connect prospective *olim* with regional volunteers, giving information about different areas in Israel. Our social worker provides essential information for families with members who have special needs. Students require information on Telfed scholarships. Once *olim* arrive, we bring welcome packages and advise how to proceed with life after quarantine.”

He says there have been positive aspects to making aliyah under the pandemic. “South African *olim* all arrive together on group flights. It makes contact with them much more manageable, and they support each other.”

For anyone thinking about aliyah during the pandemic, he says, “One needs to come with more patience and more funds. The earlier one makes contact with Telfed, the better.”

Says Amar Arran, “Aliyah is a personal decision. The pandemic is forcing us all to question what's important. For those thinking of aliyah, it may have pushed them to ask, ‘Why not now?’”



Philip and Michele Stodel on the plane before takeoff to Israel

**“We’ve been talking about making aliyah for years. Lockdown was an accelerator for us.”**





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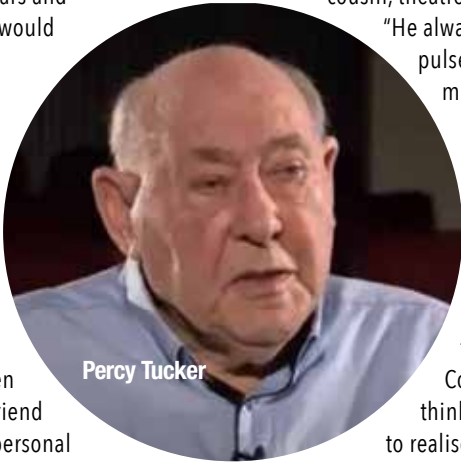


# Final curtain call for ‘Mr Computicket’

TALI FEINBERG

The boy from Benoni who grew up to rub shoulders with the stars and invent a system that would revolutionise the theatre industry has passed away at the age of 92. Percival “Percy” Tucker died in Cape Town after a number of health complications including COVID-19, shortly after the death of his life partner, Graham Dickason.

“I think he died of a broken heart,” says his devastated friend of five decades and former personal assistant, Gail Jaffit Leibman. “It’s terribly sad that after a life surrounded by so many people, he died alone in hospital.”



Percy Tucker

Tucker was born in Benoni, where his family had settled from Lithuania. When he was seven years old, the Tucker family saw British singer Gracie Fields at a Benoni performance of her South African tour. For him, it was love at first sight, and he was smitten with the theatre. When he was 10, he was alone at home when someone knocked on the door offering complimentary tickets to a play if the family was willing to lend them the furniture for it. Clearly Tucker agreed, because his parents returned home to find men loading their lounge furniture onto a truck. Their furniture was returned after the play finished its run.

“His favourite tag line was that he was BC [born in Benoni] before Charlize [Charlize Theron],” wrote arts and lifestyle writer Robyn Cohen on her website *The Cape Robyn*. “He and my late mom attended the same school in Benoni. In 2017, Percy took us on a trip there. Heritage was very important

to him.”

“When I was bitten by the entertainment bug, he became my mentor and inspiration,” says his cousin, theatre producer Hazel Feldman.

“He always had his finger on the pulse. He had an incredible memory until his last day, and knew every detail about every performance or show in South Africa, going back decades. He would travel extensively and when in London or New York, would see 15 shows in five days. What he did with Computicket was incredible. I think I was too young at the time to realise the extent of what he did by inventing such a system.”

“It began as Show Service in 1954,” remembers Jaffit Leibman. “He flew to London, bought the system, and established contracts with every theatre and movie house.” When Computicket opened for business on 16 August 1971 in South Africa, it was the world’s first fully operative computerised, centralised ticket-booking system. “We had contracts in every shopping mall. They would pay us to have booths. And it would be mandatory for all staff to see every show and movie screening so that they would be able to make recommendations,” she says.

“He revolutionised theatre in South Africa. He made it accessible. It was huge for us,” says producer Pieter Toerien, another lifelong friend. “He would joke that he was ‘just a ticket seller’, but he was so much more.”

The two met when Toerien was just 19 and brought his first show to Johannesburg. “I went to Percy for advice on ticketing, and we hit it off right away. He was always there – the ultimate friend.

There wasn’t much for visiting actors to do in Johannesburg, and he would happily entertain stars at his flat in Killarney every week. Once, I brought out famous French singer and movie star Maurice Chevalier. He was 82, and insisted on having a walk around Zoo Lake every day. I would take him, but one day, I got flu. Percy immediately offered to do it, and for three days, he would drive across town to take him for his walk.”

Tucker was “very generous”, Jaffit Leibman says. “We had a tea lady in the office. One day, we got a call that she wouldn’t be coming in. When I asked why, the person said she was having a baby. We had no idea she was pregnant! Well, Percy bought her a house and educated her child right through to university. He is now a high-powered periodontist in London. Percy did that a lot, but he always kept *schtum* about his *tzedakah*.”

Musical director Bryan Schimmel recalls, “My history with the formidable force of nature that



Percy Tucker with Elton John

Dorianne “Dr D” Weil interviewed Tucker on her show *Coffee & Connect*, and found him to be “the carrier of so much history. You could really sit at his feet and listen. But not many people knew him or what he did.” Long term friend Brian Van Rheede recalls how Tucker met stars like Percy Baneshik, Jim Stodel, Luciano Pavarotti, Shirley MacLaine, Elton John, Liza Minnelli, Roger Moore, Johnny Mathis, Anthony Perkins, Marlene Dietrich, Basil Rubin, and Goldie Hawn.

Opera singer Aviva Pelham says, “He knew what went into productions. He wasn’t there only for the good times, but also the decades in which the arts have been embattled in South Africa. This was especially true for the ballet company, which I’m sure wouldn’t exist without Percy. Not only would he regularly help it to continue, he also ensured the standard remained high. And he never looked for the limelight. He had huge integrity.”

Besides theatre, “He was mad about sport,” says Toerien. “He was a tennis fanatic, and loved golf. He would often wake up at night to watch sport live in different time zones. And if Federer lost, it



Percy Tucker with Luciano Pavarotti

is Percy Tucker goes back to 1983 when I was a student wanting to get into the entertainment industry. I worked part time as a Computicket sales operator during the holidays. He was a bottomless mine of information, and his passion for selling tickets to the arts was infectious. Eleven years later, when *A Handful of Keys* became an overnight theatrical sensation, Ian von Memerty and I were selected to be the entertainment for Percy’s retirement from Computicket in 1994 and I was thrilled to be asked to play piano and entertain at his 80th birthday. Our industry has lost a visionary, a groundbreaker, a mentor, and a friend.”

was a very bad day! He was also quite religious and embodied so many Jewish values. He would go to shul every week, and it was meaningful that at his funeral, his rabbi knew him so well. He won’t be replaced. There will only ever be one Percy Tucker. And if you have a friend even half as good as him, consider yourself a very lucky person.”

“In pandemic days, we book our tickets to watch livestreamed events and video on demand on the digital stage. There are ticket re-selling platforms, featuring complex transactions between multiple sellers and buyers,” wrote Cohen. “Let’s remember the groundwork and foundation put down by Percy Tucker, Mr Ticket, the ticket seller from Benoni.”

## Achiever donations reward charities

JORDAN MOSHE

Absa and the *SA Jewish Report* made donations to Hatzolah, the Chevrah Kadisha, and Afrika Tikkun last week in recognition of the selfless work they do within and without our community.

Each year at the Absa Jewish Achiever Awards ceremony, Absa, the event’s title sponsor, gives each nominee a gift in honour of their achievements.

This year, nominees were informed that Absa would make a donation in their name to these organisations. Each organisation received a R10 000 donation sponsored by Absa and the Jewish Achiever Awards.

“We wanted to do something constructive and good with the money,” Howard Sackstein, the chairperson of the *SA Jewish Report*, said in a virtual handover on Friday.

“Rather than give everyone a *tzatzkeh* that sits on a shelf and needs dusting, we’ve made a difference to many people’s lives. For that we thank Absa.”

Absa regional manager Cliff Mayinga said he was proud of what Absa had been able to achieve in its relationship with the *SA Jewish Report*. “Thank you for doing what you do,” he told recipients. “Your work is often thankless, and you are making a difference to the communities in which we all live. This is a small token of our appreciation, together with *SA Jewish Report*, to say thank you and keep up the great work.”

Marc Lubner, the chief executive of Afrika Tikkun, said, “The money we receive is put to invaluable use. We can now go back to our organisations and share the news

with our staff that their work has made such a difference. We’re so grateful that an organisation like Absa takes time to associate itself with the work being done on the ground.

“One of the greatest challenges we face is to continue to motivate our teams each day. When we get that recognition, we feel it, and the fact that our organisation is recognised for its work and endorsed by Absa makes a world of difference.”

Lance Abramson, the chairperson of Hatzolah, said that aid organisations are under increased pressure due to the pandemic, making the donation a considerable relief.

“We’ve been on the frontline, needing protective equipment and plenty of other things,” he said. “We’ve launched a wellness programme that also comes with costs like nursing staff, oxygen machines, and more. These things cost money, and we’re deeply appreciative of the funds we’ve received.”

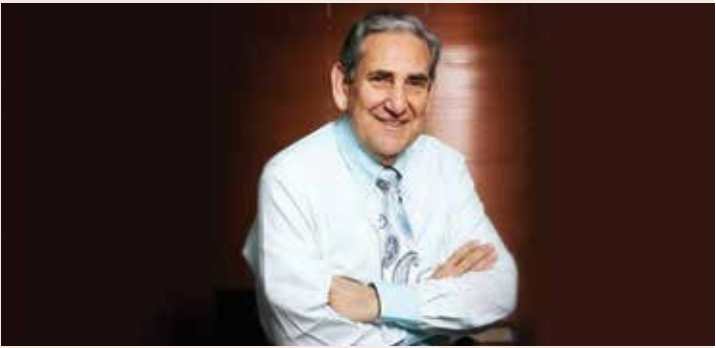
Saul Tomson, the chief executive of the Chevrah Kadisha, said that the donation recognised the efforts of the more than 500 nurses and carers operating at the group’s old-age care facilities, often a thankless task.

“It’s not a sexy cause in South Africa,” he said. “This is the first time I’ve seen care for the elderly being part of the discussion from a charity point of view.

“I hope that with this funding we can make a difference in our staff’s lives and recognise their contributions. We are very blessed and grateful to be part of the initiative.”

# TITANERIC SAMSON

Tribute to a PHILANTHROPIST



Eric Samson, founder of the MacSteel Group, was a generous and long-standing donor of Afrika Tikkun. Over the years, through his business as well as the Eric and Sheila Samson Foundation, Eric supported our mission to empower young people and uplift vulnerable communities. Eric was one of those phenomenal individuals whose professional triumphs were surpassed only by his open heart and passion for people.

The Samsons and Lubners have long shared a deep love and mutual respect. This was expressed through the contributions Eric made to Afrika Tikkun and the reciprocal joy he received knowing that his funding made such a substantial impact.

We will continue to repay Eric’s kindness by honouring and living his legacy. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Samson Family now and always.



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# How to stay sane in a pandemic

JORDAN MOSHE

When anti-apartheid activist Maxine Hart was arrested by the feared security police in 1984, she was forced into solitary confinement for 156 days. Detained again the following year, she is no stranger to the oppression of isolation which has for many become a grim reality of COVID-19.

“We are all living with limited personal freedoms and in various states of solitary confinement,” Hart said. “When we went into lockdown, I experienced PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. I felt the terror of being in solitary again, and I recognised what this would do to people.”

For many of us, the dimensions of loneliness to which the pandemic has given rise are huge and frightening. How does one combat the emotional, mental, and psychological effects of being separated from those we love? Can we overcome the darkness caused by the lack of certainty in lives under a pandemic?

“We all have personal meaning that enables us to keep going,” said Hart, who

was sharing her experience on a webinar hosted this week by the *SA Jewish Report*. “Maybe the meaning for us right now is that in our time of adversity, we need to get through the suffering.”

Daily structure, exercise, and a belief in her ability to determine her own response all proved essential in dealing with her isolation, said Hart.

“We have a choice,” she said. “We can look out the window and see the sky or look down to see the mud. We all have an ability to choose our attitude, and we don’t have to set a general rule that we’ll always be happy.”

This approach is a vital tool under the circumstances. At a time when uncertainty abounds, it’s little wonder that people across the world are effectively in a mindset of mourning, said clinical psychologist Dr Dorianne Weil.

“The situation has actually been worse under the second wave,” she said. “We’re

seeing all of the stages of grief that come with loss – loss of money and jobs, loss of certainty, and predictability, even loss of self. No one knows what the future holds.

“I spoke to a doctor on the frontlines who also worked on the ground at 9/11. He said that as devastating as that

Bushkin agreed that uncertainty has wrought huge problems.

“The brain likes to predict what’s coming next, and we all created a pseudo date when it would be over,” he told the webinar. “People held their breath as December came, and then couldn’t see the end in spite of all the suffering.

“People can really adapt to suffering when they

know there is an end point. You can push yourself, but when it’s endless, the brain goes into a state of hopelessness.”

While the broader situation is beyond our control, Bushkin stressed that we need to find parts of our lives that we can control if we’re to give this time meaning.

“Not every moment is happy, but we have to dance

to the music and make the most of it,” he said. “The human mind has an incredible ability to develop an attitude to any situation.

“Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl watched families being led into gas chambers and some of them went dancing. He wrote that this proved that all can be taken from a person except for the freedom to choose their own attitude. You control the meaning you give to any situation.”

This can even mean actively choosing to be upset and sad, said Weil.

“There’s a danger about saying, ‘be positive’,” she said. “If you do it all the time, it makes you deny what you’re going through. It’s important to own what you feel. If you don’t, it will own you.

“If you recognise what you are going through and find ways to address it like self-compassion, routine, or exercise, you can feel a sense of control inside while you cannot control the outside.

“There’s a danger in people thinking, ‘I must just get on with it’. You get on with it by facing it,” she said.

Don’t make a condition for when you will be better, stressed Bushkin.

“Twelve months have shown us that what’s happening isn’t under our control. Don’t rely on a conditional attitude – that you’ll be better when things turn around. You’ll be disappointed. Look down, and focus on what you can change right now. It will be ok, but it happens one step at a time.”

Now is the time to develop coping mechanisms, experts say. Clinical psychologist Dr David Abrahamson said that mental health is going to be one of the biggest pandemic challenges we’ll face in 2021.

“While a vaccine may offer some light at the end of the tunnel, we don’t have a vaccine for our mental health like we do for our physical health,” he told the *SA Jewish Report*.

“Uncertain times mean navigating changes in your life that you can’t control. They may mean doing things differently, even reaching out for help. That’s part of being resilient, and it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

There’s no right way to get through a difficult time, stressed Abrahamson.

“Some people get super productive. Others, not so much. Let go of the pressure of other people’s expectations. Find some things you want to do, things that take your mind off your worries in uncertain times. That might mean enjoying a movie at home, ordering takeout, letting the kids eat cereal for dinner – whatever you need to do,” said Abrahamson.

“Accept that some days you have only so much to give others. People differ in their ability to tolerate uncertainty, and it’s so important for each of us to be aware of our own individual threshold.”

Whatever your approach, don’t neglect the basics which are hugely important in keeping us anchored, he said. These include getting enough sleep, eating healthily, and exercising regularly.

“Remind yourself that this period of uncertainty will end,” Abrahamson said. “One way or another, at some point, this period will be over. We don’t know when that will be, but we do know it will happen.”



A screenshot from the *SA Jewish Report* webinar

day was, it had nothing on what this [present situation] is. At 9/11, I could treat people and not get sick. I could treat people without worrying about my family. As devastating as it was, it had none of the huge degree of uncertainty that’s so prevalent today.”

Fellow clinical psychologist Dr Hanan

## Unknown African Holocaust ‘must be unearthed’

JORDAN MOSHE

Auschwitz, Treblinka, and other European concentration camps are familiar to most of us, but few of us know about those that operated during World War II in Africa.

These were, in fact, run along scarily similar lines, but the stories of those imprisoned there are hardly known.

This historical insight was shared at last week’s online Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre.

Survivors’ testimonies, a moving poetry recital, and various addresses marked the 76th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz camp by Soviet forces on 27 January 1945.

Keynote speaker Aomar Boum, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles, said that European Jews, non-Jews, Muslims, and Christians were interned in African camps.

“North Africa, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya came under three regimes of colonialism from France, Spain, and Italy. As the war went on, these three had colonial presences in the region and created camps of their own.”

According to Boum, a network of penal, detention, and labour camps was established across the region in the 1940s to serve the needs of a railroad project that had been launched in the previous century.

In 1941, Nazi-allied Vichy authorities transferred hundreds of refugees to the Saharan camps, many of them foreign Jews and other “undesirables” who had sought shelter in the region. Others had survived the Spanish Civil War, ending up as displaced persons in Africa only to be taken captive and held in the camps.

“The camps were linked to the colonial project of the 19th century, when France wanted to establish networks of railroads to connect the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa,” Boum said. “In the early 1940s, the colonial Vichy administration set up networks of forced labour camps in Algeria and Morocco to build the railroad system, and they relied on refugees who had come from Europe.”

The Nazi regime also supported the project, seeing an opportunity to exploit the natural resources of the region, which were mined by detainees.

Although not strictly death camps, the Saharan camps were notorious for their harsh conditions, Boum said.

“There was nothing around for miles, nowhere to go, and nowhere to flee,” he said. “In the middle of the desert, there was no need for walls or wire. Nature was used to subdue internees and make sure they followed orders.

“Even after the Americans landed in North Africa, some of the camps remained open until 1944. American Jews put a lot of pressure on the American government to close the camps, but it wanted to keep them as

they were until it defeated the Nazis.

“As a result, internees spent time in the camps even after the Americans landed in the region.”

Unlike the camps of mainland Europe, not much information has survived about what happened in these camps, Boum said, and most records were actually kept by inmates themselves. Drawings, journals, and poems are some of the few remaining pieces of evidence of what transpired, making preservation of this history especially pressing.

“This is a story we don’t know a lot about but which needs to be written,” said Boum. “As survivors are dying, we have to find ways not only to collect their stories but also to preserve the spaces [in which they were held].

“Some camp buildings have survived, as have some of the railway lines. We need to ensure that these sites become memorials as well.”

Martin Schafer, the German ambassador to South Africa, said he had

tried so many times to understand burning questions about the Holocaust. “How did we Germans, a people proud of their cultural heritage and humanity, become murderers? What did it feel like to be a perpetrator or, more importantly, a victim?”

Schafer said he had failed to answer these questions, but the current pandemic might offer a glimmer of insight.

“I have never been

persecuted or oppressed, so I cannot try to understand what it meant,” he said. “But the fear of being struck down at random and dying, is that not something we can feel in this pandemic?”

“It’s not comparable to the experience of those who suffered during the Holocaust, but perhaps I can feel something of the fear that your children, parents, or friends are here one day and gone the next, never to come back.

“Maybe, for this one time in my life, I get a little glimpse of the fear and anxiety that gripped Jews and others after 1933 in Germany.”

Alternative facts, extremism, fascism, and antisemitism are on the rise, Schafer said, suggesting that mankind has learned nothing from the past.

“Parts of the world in the weeks we have gone through resemble my home town of Berlin in 1929, when the brown masses were on the streets, when politics descended into the abyss and no one knew what was to come.”

As a representative of Germany, Schafer vowed to commemorate those who perished in the Holocaust and ensure that history didn’t repeat itself.

“We will not let it happen that fascism, racism, and hatred invade our hearts and minds,” he said. “We are willing to fight.

“The German nation will be ever conscious of our guilt and responsibility, and we will do everything we can so that the horror the Shoah is never repeated.”



A German-Jewish prisoner at forced-labour in the Im Fout camp in Morocco



# Saving lives all in a day’s work for Unit 669

JORDAN MOSHE

When Baltimore resident Isaac Pretter took his family paragliding off the coast of Herzliya in Israel, he never imagined it could end in a tragedy. The reason it didn’t was because of the swift action of the Israeli Defense Force’s (IDF’s) elite Unit 669.

“We watched our other daughter, Rina, land safely, and waited to see Leah and her instructor land just after them,” Pretter said, recalling the frightening event of 2019. “When they didn’t, I asked my instructor where they were. He pointed at a ledge in the distance, and said, ‘They crashed’.”

Pretter was horrified to see his daughter dangling from a ledge, suspended 100m over the Mediterranean. Trapped in a harness, Leah was unable to free herself or her instructor, who had been knocked unconscious.

“There were jagged rocks everywhere,” Pretter told a gala online event honouring Unit 669, Israel’s specialised combat search and rescue division. “We got closer, and I could hear my daughter screaming. The strings of her parachute were caught on a ledge, and though we could reach it, the guide said that if we pulled it, it might rip, and she’d fall. It was terrifying.”

Someone contacted Unit 669, and a helicopter was dispatched in record time.

“That wait was the longest one of my life, but when I heard the helicopter blades and saw a solider rappelling down to me, I felt safe immediately,” recalled Leah at the online event that was broadcast live this week from Israel by the American Friends of Unit 669. “He was risking his life to save mine. I’ll never forget how that felt.”

Leah was successfully transported to hospital and discharged with a few injuries 24 hours

later. She is just one of the 12 000 individuals whose lives were saved by Unit 669 in its 47 years of operation.

Founded in 1974 in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, Unit 669 was initially established to save Israeli pilots behind enemy lines. Today, it’s responsible for the rescue and evacuation of all IDF personnel, from ground forces to naval commandoes.

The unit also serves Israel’s civilian population in its moment of need, whether it be mass casualty accidents, terror attacks, car accidents, or even stranded injured hikers. Additionally, Unit 669 participates regularly in missions beyond the borders of Israel, civilian and military, Israeli and foreign.

The unit is divided into three major divisions: combat, medical, and logistics. Combat fighters are trained in high-angle rope techniques, water, and scuba diving skills, medical training, and aerial rescue methods. The medical division is made up of Israel’s top doctors and paramedics, who have a history of combat training and can administer care in the most difficult circumstances. The logistics division supports the unit’s operational capabilities.

IDF veteran Ziv Shilon was also saved by the heroic actions of the unit. A former officer of the Givati Brigade, he was severely wounded on the Gaza Strip in 2012 when an explosion ripped off his left hand.

“It was the last day of my service,” Shilon recounted during the livestream. “Our mission was to confirm that there were no terrorists at

the Gaza border.

“At 06:00, near the end of the mission, I was preparing to open the border gate to allow my team back into Israel. Because of the threat level, I ordered my soldiers to wait behind and cover me and I crawled to the gate. I arrived,



Unit 669 helicopter MEDEVAC display during IAF cadet graduation ceremony

opened the lock, and pushed the gate open.”

A sudden explosion rent the air as Shilon stepped back from the gate: he had tripped a wire attached to the fence rigged to an explosive charge. Shilon felt excruciating pain, as though he was on fire, and opened his eyes to see that his left hand was missing.

“There was blood everywhere,” he recalled. “My left hand was gone. My right hand wouldn’t move, and I could see why: it was almost disconnected from my arm, hanging by a few shreds of flesh.

“I had to conquer my shock, or I knew I would bleed out and die. My main concern was being kidnapped, and I had no hands to defend myself. With the last of my strength, I picked up what was left of my hand, stood up and ran with

all my gear still on to my team.”

After a stunned medic bandaged Shilon’s arms, the unit hastily left the scene, and headed to the landing ground nearby where a Unit 669 helicopter waited for them.

“During the flight, a Unit 669 medic worked to stabilise me. I looked her in eye and asked her if I would live. She answered, ‘Don’t worry, we will save you.’ What she said came true, and the medical treatment I received did save my life.”

Shilon was given 56 units (30 litres) of blood, underwent eight surgeries over two weeks, and realised that his life had changed forever.

“I was angry, disappointed, and scared. I couldn’t eat by myself anymore,” he said. “I had lost one hand, and couldn’t use the other. I had lost hope. I realised I had to give myself a reason to live.”

In spite of his pain and loss, Shilon resolved to return to the army, and five months later, was again in uniform.

Although he still had to undergo months of rehabilitation and a further nine surgeries, he took up studies at IDC (Interdisciplinary Centre) Herzliya, married, and even competed in five marathons and the Iron Man triathlon in Berlin, swimming and riding a bike without the use of his hands.

“I learned how to live life again, and developed a special academic programme for soldiers like me to give them the opportunity to earn a new life after their trauma. I’ve developed creative solutions for writing and driving, and I’m the only person I know who, in spite of not having hands, can flip burgers without getting burned.

“I’m living evidence of Unit 669’s role in saving lives. It saved me.”



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# Building a circle of support in the travel maze

TALI FEINBERG

While South Africa's borders remain open during the current stage of the pandemic, other countries are essentially "closing our borders for us" by making it very hard for South Africans to travel, or for people to visit South Africa.

"So you may get 'out the door and down the passage', but then you'll find a gate that only a few people can get through. The rest of the world has been spooked by the South African variant [of COVID-19], and they are shutting their doors to South Africans."

This is the assessment of Kim Kur, a Johannesburg interior architect who founded and manages the Facebook group "Community Circle Home SA". It's a non-political platform for South Africans to help other South Africans who are stranded away from home because of the COVID-19 crisis.

The group was started on 8 November, and now has 6 300 members from 96 countries. It's growing by about 50 members a day.

Kur was a volunteer for "Home Away from Home", a similar platform that closed when South Africa's borders reopened. However, she felt there was still a need for such a community, and began her new page as a service to others on the very same day.

"I realised people still have ties to South Africa, they want to be allowed to enter their home country, and they will go to great lengths to do that. People also want to help each other, even if they left South Africa decades ago. We have members who will drop everything to help someone they've never met, to share the information

they know that this person needs.

"I've also seen a lot of 'paying it forward' – once someone is helped, they offer to help someone else, even if it's by offering skills. The other day, two South Africans helped a woman get food to her son, and they were all strangers.

"With travel regulations, you are feeling around in the dark. Everyone is panicking but eventually someone finds the light switch, and it gets a little brighter. But then, without warning, the regulations change, and it all starts again. People are desperate to get to jobs, funerals, or to see family members before they die," she says.

"People are battling psychologically with the sense of being locked out of their country. Before, it was mostly about being able to afford a repatriation flight, and there were a couple of hoops to jump through. Now, countries aren't allowing South Africans to fly in. People get locked out or even deported. Money gets lost or wasted. We've had members who become suicidal, and we have psychologists in different time zones on hand to help them. It's very real."

At the moment, many of the questions on the group are about quarantine in the United Kingdom. Every day, people ask what airlines are flying. There are many queries about flights that have been suspended or postponed, and what visas are allowed.

As a busy professional with a full-time job, a husband, and two young children, it's astounding that Kur has so much time and energy to devote to this cause, but for her, it's worth it.

"Being instrumental in making sure someone gets to see their mother before she dies, or to reunite with their sibling, or get back to South Africa if there's been an accident, you can't put a price on that," she says.



She's never worked in the travel industry or in community management before, but she has just "jumped right in". She runs the page on her own, and relies heavily on travel agents, officials, pathologists, and virologists, a network around the world, and group members themselves to help desperate travellers in the ever-changing maze that is air travel under COVID-19.

"When people panic, I often tell them to take a strategic pause while we feel around, speak to government officials overseas, and help them. Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty. But we won't break any laws or help anyone break any laws.

"Also, with [the department of] home affairs being closed, it's causing massive issues. We had a couple from England who needed to get here as her father was dying. She managed to see him and she had to give permission to turn off the machines. Then, while winding up his estate, her handbag was stolen, including all their certified documents to travel back to the United Kingdom. Within two days, we had organised both her British and his South African emergency documents, and got a travel agent to move their flight. The stress of travel went away, and she could focus on her father's estate and her grief."

Many travel agents whose livelihoods have been decimated give advice on the group, but Kur encourages them to charge for their services if the query gets taken further.

Kur also wanted to make her group a "safe space". "There are many 'Saffa' groups online, but there is a lot

of misinformation, speculation, and nastiness. It seems like people on many of these groups are looking for ways to trip each other up. That's the antithesis of what I want on this group. We allow only information that has been verified.

"We don't allow anything to be shared that is speculative – even if it's a newspaper article. We allow it only if it includes actual government regulations. We ask people to wait for information, work out what it means, understand it, and then deal with it as a community.

"There have been many success stories and hardly anyone we couldn't help. We had a woman in Yemen who needed to come back to South Africa to escape her abusive husband, and we got her and two of her children to safety in South Africa. But then she went back as she missed the kids that were still there. There's only so much you can do. But when she needs our help, we will help her again."

While many people experience a great deal of relief when they finally make it to where they need to go, "we also see a lot of sadness because when people leave, they don't know when they'll be able to return". Kur is also witnessing many leaving or returning because of job losses. She recently dealt with a man who needed to get to South Africa because his brother committed suicide. "It's frightening what's going on behind the scenes," she says.

Still, she remains positive and motivated. "Even after travel restrictions ease, this group won't end. There's never going to be a South African that doesn't need help, and that's what we're there for."

## No rain on Yeshiva's parade

Rain didn't dampen the palpable energy of Yeshiva College students as they arrived, excited and a bit nervous, back on campus on 1 February. Students and staff are proving, yet again, how resilient they are. 2021 – here we come!



## Bearing fruit

King David Pre-Primary Linksfield students Ari Pantelias, Aria Demby, and Rachel Becker admire the figs growing on the school's fig tree that was planted last year in celebration of Tu Bishvat.

## King David teachers win World ORT award

King David educators Heidi Morgan and Mandy Gruzd were recently announced as winners of the World ORT Beatrice Wand-Polak Educators award. This was for their dedication to their profession, and inspiring and encouraging students above and beyond expectation in the lockdown period.

The competition was established by former ORT Latin America Director Bernard Wand-Polak in memory of his wife, Beatrice. It's open to ORT schools internationally and to schools affiliated to the World ORT network.

This year, 12 teachers from across the globe, including South Africa, Italy, Spain, France, Israel, Mexico, Argentina, Uruguay, Ukraine, and Russia were selected from hundreds of nominees as winners of the award, and acknowledged for their excellence



Heidi Morgan



Mandy Gruzd

in teaching and efforts toward "educating for life".

Heidi Morgan is the director of educational technologies at King David High School Linksfield, and Mandy Gruzd deputy head of teaching and learning and HOD History at King David High School Victory Park.

"Heidi and Mandy are worthy winners of this prestigious award," said Rabbi Ricky Seeff, the general director of the South African Jewish Board of Education. "Their contribution to education in our schools has been tremendous. Their commitment to excellence, to adapting to new teaching methodologies and encouraging change and growth in their colleagues, has brought great credit to the King David schools. Our students and teachers are lucky to have them in our midst."

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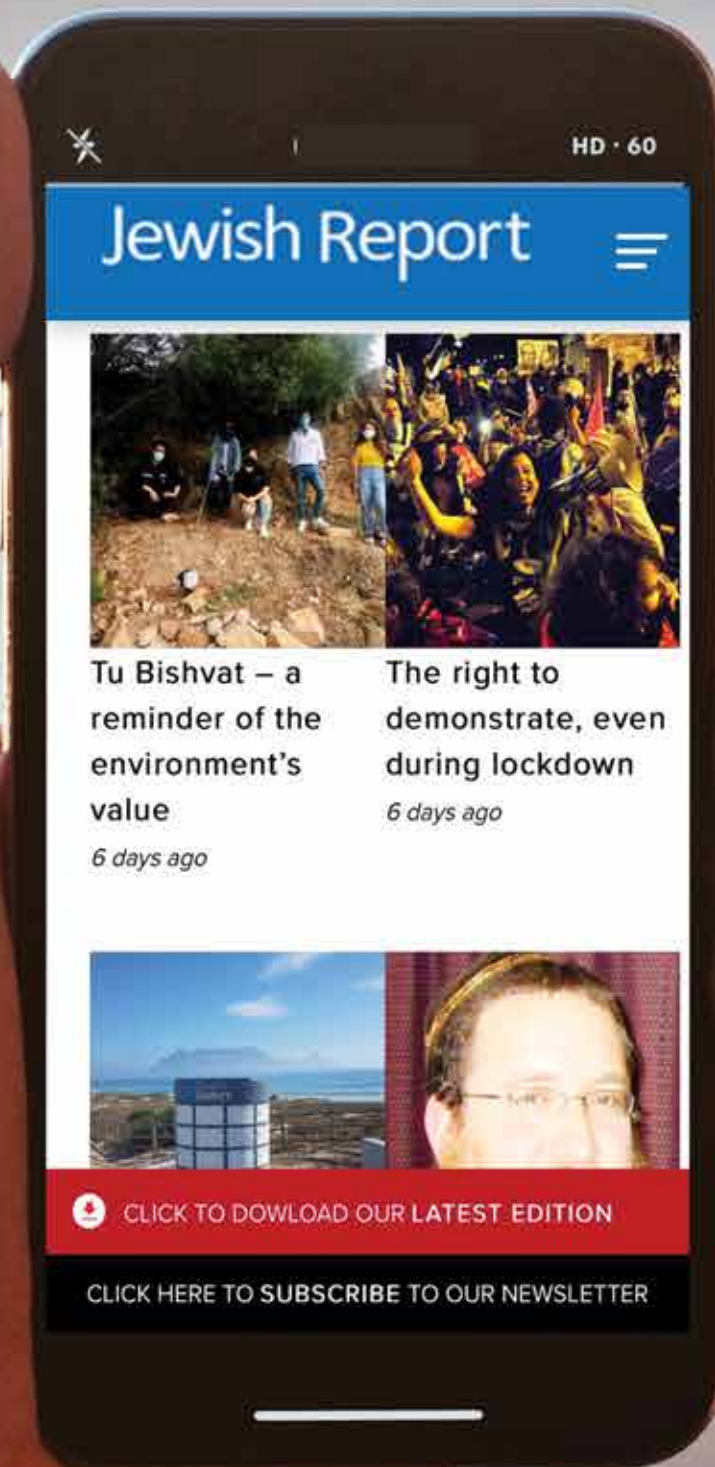


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