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## Arsonists destroy family's Mpumalanga bush hotel

NICOLA MILTZ

When a group of marauding arsonists torched and destroyed a luxurious Mpumalanga game lodge recently, it not only devastated one Johannesburg family but affected the lives and livelihoods of many in neighbouring villages.

The Seligman family of Johannesburg won't be spending Passover at their beloved Bongani Mountain Lodge in Mpumalanga this year like they often do, after a gang of thugs set fire to the hotel they share and partly own, razing it almost to the ground.

The beautiful, and tranquil lodge, situated in the 8 000ha Mthethomusha Game Reserve that borders the Kruger National Park, is a burnt-out shell. The hotel is now out of business. Loyal hotel employees risk losing their jobs and countless local community businesses have been affected, from fresh produce suppliers to locally-sourced building contractors to laundry and security vendors.

Members of a local gang went on a rampage on Sunday, 31 January, destroying the 40-room hotel. The lodge was one of the late Nelson Mandela's favourite retreats. He even had a special suite named after him following one of his visits.

Manty Seligman, one of five partners of the lodge, told the *SA Jewish Report* he was at home that Sunday afternoon when he received a telephone call from his lodge manager, Johan Meintjies, telling

him that the lodge was under attack.

Hundreds of kilometres away from the scene, a frantic Seligman instructed his staff to vacate the premises for their own safety while he attempted to call for help.

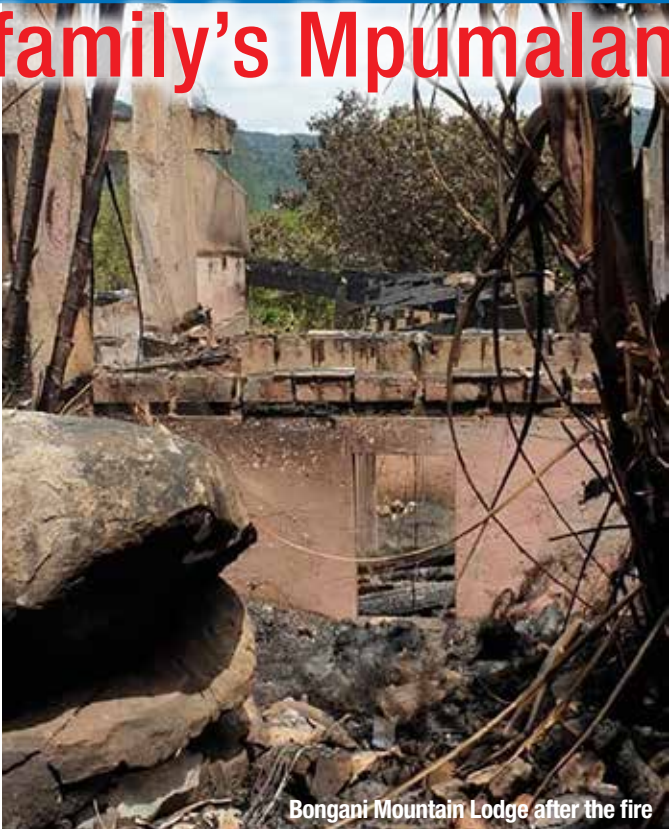
"Fortunately, a group of guests had departed earlier in the day. I then called everyone including the police, the riot squad, and local community members," he said.

Sadly, reinforcements didn't arrive in time to assist the police, and the gang was able to "do what it liked".

The details are sketchy, but it's rumoured that the incident was sparked by the shooting of a suspected poacher whose body was found in nearby Mpakeni Village.

Members of the community angrily pointed fingers at the local Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency anti-poaching unit, which resulted in an alleged act of retaliation. The gang first attacked the barracks just outside the lodge which housed the Mpumalanga security rangers. The following day, they returned around noon making their way to the lodge.

Police spokesman Brigadier Leonard Hlathi told the *SA Jewish Report* this week that three suspects aged between 28 and 37 had



Bongani Mountain Lodge after the fire

appeared before the Kanyamazane Magistrates Court in Mbombela on Tuesday on charges of arson, possession of stolen goods, and other crimes.

He said that before the attack, a group in a white SUV barricaded the road leading to the lodge using rubble including stones and branches of trees, so it was difficult to get there.

"While police were clearing the road, people among the group proceeded to the lodge where they are reported to have broken several doors and helped themselves to liquor as well as other items belonging to the lodge. They also damaged some property, torching some of the rooms and other infrastructure

friends at the lodge. I feel sad and disappointed.

"It's a sorrowful indictment of our society. Sadly, this incident will have a long-term impact on the local community. The jobs of 80 employees, all bread winners, are now in jeopardy."

He said he hoped this "needless tragedy" would result in the government moving to protect national assets effectively and to help uplift communities who are integral to the growth and sustainability of these assets. "Communities need to benefit from our heritage. We need to ensure that this type of criminality doesn't happen again elsewhere." If that were to happen, at least

something positive would come out of this.

He said the lodge has a rich cultural history, with 250 recorded San rock art paintings.

The surrounding local community has expanded in recent years, as has unemployment and poverty. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked further economic havoc in the area.

In recent months, Seligman said there had been a "huge upswing" in poaching. He had on several occasions warned local authorities of the Mpumalanga Tourism and Parks Agency about concerns about safety and security. Last Sunday, a week after the incident, police discovered nine carcasses of four different animal species on the reserve, believed to be the work of poachers, according to police.

The family and other shareholders were involved in numerous outreach projects aimed at the upliftment of surrounding communities.

Seligman said these included education drives, and sponsorship of the local annual sports tournament, an initiative by 702 Talk Radio host John Perlman called Dreamfields. During the lockdown, the lodge's staff distributed food parcels and continued to distribute sanitary pads.

"It's heartbreaking. A lot of people have been displaced and have lost everything. No one is a winner here," said Brenda Seligman.

The family spent many Shabbos meals at the lodge as well as special occasions like Manty's 50th birthday party.

Police investigations continue.

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## Netanyahu pleads not guilty and walks out

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 8 February pleaded not guilty in his ongoing corruption trial, then left the courtroom while the hearing was still taking place.

Later on Monday, he dismissed the charges, as he has in the past, as “fabricated”.

Netanyahu is on trial for fraud, bribery, and breach of trust – the first time a sitting prime minister has stood trial in Israeli history. The investigations of allegedly illicit payments and favours stretch back years. His trial began in May, but successive delays due to COVID-19 have drawn out the process.

Ahead of Monday’s hearing, Netanyahu urged his supporters not to protest outside the courtroom. Hundreds of protestors who oppose the prime minister did show up. The hearing came about six weeks ahead of Israel’s election, the fourth national vote in the span of two years.

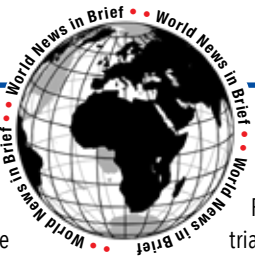
## British teen youngest-ever convicted of terrorism

A London court has convicted of terrorism a 16-year-old boy who researched producing weapons for what he described in online chats were for hanging gays and gassing Jews.

The Central Criminal Court of England and Wales sentenced the teenager from Cornwall, a municipality located about 250 miles (402km) southwest of London, to 24 months at a youth rehabilitation programme. He is the kingdom’s youngest-ever person to be convicted of terrorism.

He pleaded guilty last week to 10 counts of possessing terrorist material and two counts of disseminating terror documents, *Cornwall Live* reported. His crimes began when he was 13.

The teen wasn’t named as he is a minor.



## Impeachment trial no longer delayed by Shabbat

Former United States President Donald Trump’s second impeachment trial won’t be delayed by Shabbat now that his Orthodox Jewish lawyer has withdrawn his request for the delay.

Last week, David Schoen asked for and received permission to delay the proceedings should they extend into Friday evening and Saturday, as they are expected to do. But on Monday, he withdrew the request, saying he had worked out a solution with the former president’s legal team: Schoen’s role would be completed by the time Shabbat begins.

Trump’s Senate trial, which started on 9 February, is for the role he played in inciting the deadly 6 January mob assault on the US Capitol by protestors heeding his call to stop Congress’ validation of his election loss to Joe Biden.

## Rabbis defend congresswoman over reference to Hitler



Illinois  
Republican  
representative,  
Mary Miller

A freshman congresswoman who said, “Hitler was right on one thing” during a speech just before the Capitol insurrection, last week met right-wing rabbinical group The Coalition for Jewish Values which defended her from calls to resign.

Speaking to a pro-Trump crowd on 5 January, the day before the deadly insurrection at the Capitol, Representative Mary Miller, an Illinois Republican said, “Hitler was right on one thing: he said, ‘Whoever has the youth has the future.’”

Facing criticism from Democrats, some Republicans, and Jewish groups, including some calls to resign, Miller later apologised for “using a reference to one of the most evil dictators in history”. The Coalition for Jewish Values issued a press release two days after the speech expressing its support for her but saying that there were better ways to express concerns about the “indoctrination of our youth”.

• All briefs supplied by JTA

### Torah Thought

## The difference between “no” and “not yet”

Overnight sensations are often just that. They don’t necessarily last. Slow and steady, step by step, the gradual approach usually has longevity and more enduring success.

In this week’s reading, the Almighty tells the Jewish people that they won’t inherit the land of Canaan immediately. It will be to their benefit that the conquest of the Promised Land be gradual and deliberate. To settle the land successfully would take time, and they were cautioned to be patient. The process would unfold at a slow but steady pace so that there should be a smooth transition.

Every Jew has a share in the Promised Land, not only geographically but spiritually. There’s a piece of Jerusalem inside each of us. We all have the capacity for sanctity and spirituality. But sometimes we may be discouraged from beginning the journey to our own personal Promised Land. The

road seems too far, the trip too long and arduous. Here, G-d is giving us wise words of encouragement. Don’t expect overnight miracles. Don’t say, “I have a whole country to conquer, how will I do it?” Rather say, “Where should I start today?”

If you were just starting your first business venture, and I asked you if you were a millionaire, would you say “no”, “not yet”, or “I’m working on it?” It should be the same in our Jewish journeys.

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) was a German-Jewish philosopher who as a young man considered opting out of Judaism completely. But his intellectual bent compelled him to at least do a proper examination of Judaism first. So he went to shul and, as it happened, experienced a spiritual transformation. He went on to become a serious student of Judaism.

It seems that when Rosenzweig was once asked, “Do you put on tefillin?”, his answer was, “Not yet”. Not “no”, but “not yet”. There is a

critical difference

between the two.

“No” implies that

I’m not doing it

now nor do I have any plans to do it

anytime soon. “Not yet” means that

while presently I may not be there,

I’m open to suggestion. Hopefully,

the time will soon come when I will

be ready to make tefillin part of my

daily observance.

The “not yet” approach is a good

one. No one does it all. We should all

want to aspire to greater things. If we

don’t practice a particular good deed

at the moment, there’s no reason

why we can’t begin to do it in the

near future. Don’t be discouraged by

the length of the journey. Take the

first step and keep moving. It may

be slow, but if there’s steady growth,

you’ll get there.

So, if someone asks, “Do you put

on tefillin?”, “Do you keep kosher?”

or “Do you observe Shabbos?” and

you don’t, please don’t say, “No”.

Say, “Not yet”.

Rabbi Yossy Goldman,  
Sydenham Shul



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# Doctors pull back the curtain on COVID

TALI FEINBERG

Watching a quarter of their patients die from COVID-19. Being yelled at by a family unable to come to terms with their father's demise. Spending hours talking to families and rabbis when a patient refused ventilation. Seeing the first critically ill young patient typing a goodbye message to his wife, afraid to close his eyes in case he stopped breathing. Witnessing a 17-year-old flinging herself on her father's body, begging him to keep fighting (when family were allowed into wards).

These are just some of the traumatic experiences that Drs Carron Zinman and Anton Meyberg describe as they try to capture why being on the frontlines of the COVID-19 war has been so devastating to the mental health of doctors and other frontline workers.

They are both pulmonologists at the Linksfield Clinic in Johannesburg, working together during the pandemic. "The most poignant time was when I watched Anton say the *vidui* prayer for our patients who we knew weren't going to survive," says Zinman.

Going back to the beginning, she recalls how they "understood coronaviruses, but SARS-CoV-2 changed the rules. While we were grappling with the complexities of this new disease, we had to contend with a deluge of patients", many of whom were seriously ill.

"I remember the terror when the first AIDS patient was admitted. I looked after the nursing sister who picked up Ebola, dressing in a spacesuit to assess her. In those times, I felt calm and in control. But COVID-19 was overwhelming and exhausting, and caused a high level of anxiety and stress," she says.

She remembers getting used to PPE (personal protective equipment), which is uncomfortable, restrictive, and depersonalising.

"We felt like we were fighting a war whose rules of engagement we didn't understand. I remember the shock at the sheer number of death certificates we had to sign. I recall when Anton admitted a friend – it's impossible to stay dispassionate in that situation."

She was deeply affected by the rollercoaster of emotions when patients were well enough to be discharged, yet died suddenly, or the guilt of children who had inadvertently given their parent/s COVID-19.

"More often than not, only one of a couple would go home. The ward rounds felt interminable, often being interrupted by calls for resuscitation and admission. It's an unpredictable disease and as such, we couldn't always prepare the families for what was to come. We felt like we were being pulled in multiple directions while being physically tired, sleep deprived, and emotionally drained," says Zinman.

"Then the second wave hit. We had become

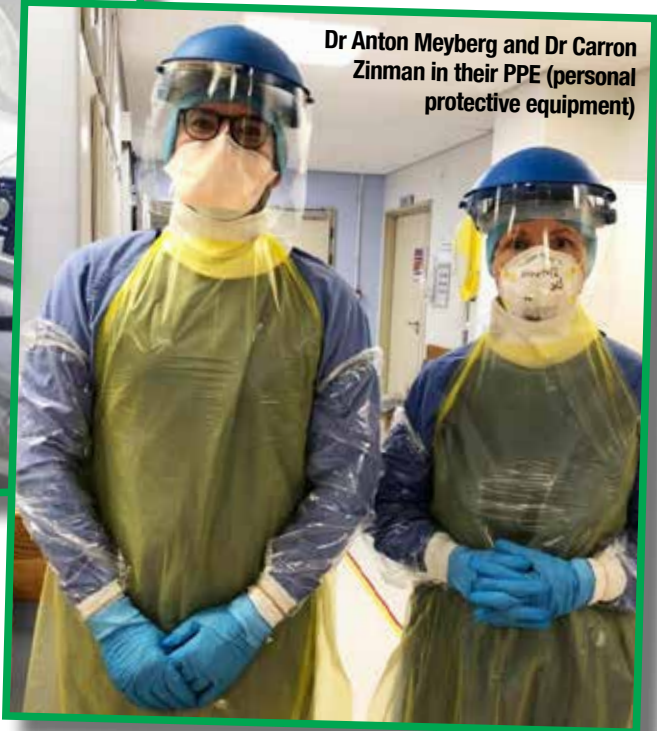
complacent, believing we understood this disease, but COVID-19 decided otherwise. The new variant affected younger patients, led to a fuller intensive-care unit and a higher percentage of patients on ventilators. This time, patients tried to get us to promise that they would survive to see their children grow up, and we witnessed last phone calls to wives in which they professed their love and asked them to look after their babies. A lot of time is spent agonising over our decisions, trying to find something more we could do. The emotional trauma inflicted by COVID-19 is unique."

A local general practitioner (GP), who spoke on condition of anonymity, says, "Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have experienced anxiety, although over time, what specifically triggers it has changed.

"In the beginning, I felt overwhelmed by not knowing enough. We saw the hospitals in Italy, and it was frightening. The thought of possibly having to work in a hospital setting after a number of years as an office-



Dr Carron Zinman using an 'ambu bag' to breathe for a COVID patient



Dr Anton Meyberg and Dr Carron Zinman in their PPE (personal protective equipment)

based practitioner was overwhelming. The 'silver lining' was the realisation that I wasn't alone in feeling majorly under-prepared.

"The fear of becoming ill, of bringing the illness home to my family, coupled with the enormous pressure of trying to be available to see patients while having kids at home remote-learning was exhausting," she continues. "By the time the second wave came, I felt more knowledgeable, but when it came, it was much harder.

"The number of patients who contracted the virus was high. The practice couldn't keep up with the appointments, tests, and patients who needed to be managed at home. The constant feeling of not being on top of things and also of 'neglecting' non-COVID-19 patients took a toll.

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"There was the stress of trying to find hospital beds for patients. Everyone was under immense pressure, which was palpable. Trying to support families, keep them updated on their relatives, as well as dispel myths and give reliable advice all felt like a lot to manage.

"And then there were the deaths. So many deaths. It really took a toll on me. I had physical symptoms of anxiety such as a tight chest, abdominal cramps, insomnia, and headaches. I absorb a lot. Usually I try to make time to decompress, but during the peak, it was really impossible. The thought of a third wave gives me massive anxiety. I'm choosing not to think about it."

Clinical psychologist Dr Hanan Bushkin says that among the medical professionals he has treated, "the rate of burnout, post-traumatic-stress

has only trained for war but is now experiencing real war, and it's a whole different ball game. They are seeing traumas that the public don't see, and this can lead to huge frustration at the ignorance, arrogance, and lack of prevention they see on the street."

Bushkin says GPs often treat generations of families and get to know them well. Now, he says, "they have a front-row seat to families being broken and the incredible losses of many people that they had a personal relationship with". In addition, before the pandemic, people who died were usually elderly, or slowly declined after a cancer diagnosis. Now, patients of all ages are getting sick and dying within weeks. "It's incredibly traumatic," he says.

"PTSD doesn't get you when you're in it," says Bushkin. "It's afterwards when the trauma hits, when someone tells themselves, 'I cannot believe that's the world I've just come from.'" He hopes that when the pandemic is over there will be some kind of platform or forum that allows healthcare workers to "de-brief" what they've witnessed.

Clinical psychologist Dr Dorianne Weil, who has consulted healthcare workers since the beginning of the pandemic, says, "Doctors are looked to for answers. But if they don't have all the answers, it creates a dissonance that's incredibly stressful. They may feel like an 'imposter', like they are 'living a lie'. Everyone sees them as heroes, but they don't feel that way."

"There is also the pervasive fear of contracting the virus and passing it onto their families. They become 'torn' as they know it's their calling. Sometimes they don't want to rely on their families as a support system as there is a feeling that 'unless you're in my shoes, you don't know what it's like,'" she says.

Doctors have also had to take on the role of being their patients' families, when family members haven't been allowed to comfort dying loved ones. "They are stepping into a role that they aren't usually called to do. It's unprecedented, and it's really getting to them."

So what can we do to support our frontline workers?

"There needs to be a group effort to do what these professionals are recommending," says Bushkin. "I cannot think of a greater insult than for them to come out of a ward and witness people disobeying the rules. It's incredibly disheartening, and doctors are devastated. It's the least we can do."

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# Toxic conspiracy theory paints Ramaphosa as a ‘Jew’

TALI FEINBERG

What do you get when you combine antisemitism, conspiracy theories, and COVID-19 denial? While white supremacists and QAnon supporters feel like they are far off, this toxic combination came much closer to home last week when a woman calling herself “Chabad de la Fontaine” started spouting such ideas to journalists at an anti-lockdown protest in Cape Town.

“[South African President Cyril Ramaphosa] became a Jew,” she told news photographer Esa Alexander in a video he took at Fish Hoek beach on 6 February 2020. Although the initial word “Ramaphosa” is cut out of the clip, Alexander confirmed to the *SA Jewish Report* that this was what she said. She isn’t wearing a mask in the video.

“And he is acting like the anti-Christ, so I don’t respect him,

because people who take their knowledge of G-d and mis-interpret it and distort it the way he did need to be kicked out of the country,” she continued in a rant that became even more hysterical. “I don’t want him in South Africa anymore. He’s not a South African. He can go to America and live with all those people that are the Zionists and the cabal that are trying to manage our planet. No, Mr Ramaphosa, immigrate [sic], go and live in America, we don’t want you.” The video was posted on Twitter, and went viral, with almost 90 000 views.

She’s not the first person to spout such a theory. Local antisemite and white supremacist Jan Lamprecht also calls Ramaphosa “the Black Jew”.

Jevon Greenblatt, the director of operations at the Community Security Organisation in Gauteng said, “The first time we heard this theory about Ramaphosa was from



## Vaccine rollout delayed but not derailed

NICOLA MILTZ

The COVID-19 vaccine rollout is on track to start as soon as next week say community medical experts in spite of the curve ball wrought by the immediate suspension of the newly acquired and much anticipated Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.

South Africa’s COVID-19 vaccination rollout will now take place with vaccine doses from Johnson & Johnson.

There was a sense of despondency in the community this week when the government stopped the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine rollout, seemingly bringing hope to a grinding halt. This after researchers found it offered minimal protection against mild to moderate COVID-19 disease caused by the country’s dominant coronavirus variant.

On 7 February, Health Minister Dr Zweli Mkhize publicly announced (shortly after addressing the Jewish community in a webinar with Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein) that South Africa would temporarily halt its Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine rollout plan. It would instead conduct an implementation study that would assess how different vaccines (Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson, and possibly Oxford/AstraZeneca) compare in protecting against severe COVID-19 disease.

Community experts say there is a lot to be hopeful about as scientists, in spite of the latest setback, devise a plan to vaccinate the population in the shortest time possible.

“The main aim is to prevent severe illness and hospitalisation,” said Professor Barry Schoub, the chairperson of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 vaccines and emeritus professor in virology at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits).

“The trial data doesn’t yet tell researchers how well the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine protects against severe disease, hospitalisation, and death. So, guided by scientific evidence, the Oxford/AstraZeneca rollout is being

suspended not cancelled until we have more scientific data. In the meantime, we are getting other vaccines – in the next couple of weeks – to start the rollout,” he said.

The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine “may still well prevent severe infection. We still have to find this out,” Schoub said.

“The good news is that we have scientific depth and expertise in this country that picked up this particular variant to begin with. Then we were able to conduct clinical trials to demonstrate that this particular vaccine didn’t work so well. Imagine if we had ordered vaccines for the entire adult population.”

He assured the *SA Jewish Report* that “the vaccine rollout is on track”.

“It will be starting very soon,” Schoub said. Several studies are in progress to investigate the use of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine in combination with the Johnson & Johnson jab.

The clinical-trial data that came to light at the weekend showed that the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine wasn’t as effective in fighting the 501Y.V2 variant. Dr Mkhize said on Wednesday, 10 February, that the government’s process of procuring vaccines preceded the discovery of the new strain of the virus.

While the halting of the rollout may have thrown scientists an unwanted COVID-19 curve ball, experts this week said it was now a matter of re-assessing the national vaccine strategy and reconfiguring ways to best to deal with a virus intent on wreaking havoc.

As the Wits Professor Shabir Madhi, the trial’s principal investigator, put it to *Daily Maverick* “The findings suggest that as a global community, we need to recalibrate our thinking around the pandemic and expectations of COVID-19 vaccines.”

Meanwhile, experts have stressed that there are no safety issues with the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, the questions are all linked to its efficacy against the 501Y.V2 variant.

“It’s important to reassure people that the SARS-CoV-2 vaccines are safe,” said

Professor Lucille Blumberg, the deputy director at the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.

“We need to prioritise health workers and those in the general population who are at risk for severe illness from the variant.”

She said the Johnson & Johnson vaccine “has been shown to be beneficial”.

“The focus in the first phase of the vaccine rollout needs to be on reducing severe illness and death from COVID-19. The target group needs to be the at-risk group: those over 60 years of age, and those with co-morbidities. Studies to date support the use of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine for this purpose even in infections caused by the variant of the virus circulating in South Africa. There needs to be further evaluation in this regard for the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine.”

The government has allowed for an implementation study of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

Professor Glenda Gray, the principal investigator for the Johnson & Johnson trial and the president of the South African Medical Research Council, said this vaccine, administered as a single shot, doesn’t protect against “the sniffles” but has a “high efficacy against severe disease and death”, also in regard to the new variant.

Apart from the 1.5 million doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine already in South Africa, Dr Mkhize said the government had secured nine million doses from Johnson & Johnson. It has secured 12 million vaccine doses from the COVAX initiative, and 20 million from Pfizer.

There are 35 other vaccines in late-stage human trials.

“The way forward,” said Professor Schoub, “is to make good, scientific-based evidence decisions”.

It’s also crucial to continue to implement health protocols including washing hands, wearing masks, and social distancing.s

Lamprecht. He would justify it by sharing photos of Ramaphosa talking to the chief rabbi, or of the president talking on the *bimah* of a shul. It proves that you can sell anything you want to if you have a willing audience.

“It’s not just about spreading propaganda, but having an audience that’s receptive to it. There are so many conspiracy theories out there that you can espouse anything that suits your own agenda.”

Greenblatt says the “Ramaphosa is a Jew” lie is attractive because it ties into age-old antisemitic tropes of Jews controlling the world. “When society is under pressure, this idea is often the first port of call. We see Jews being blamed for the virus or being implicated in benefiting from the virus. It’s a strong element of the extreme right-wing to blame others rather than look at themselves. And it suits them to say that the Jews are controlling the government or South Africa, and here is ‘proof’, ‘Ramaphosa is a Jew.’”

In November 2020, the Randburg Magistrate’s Court issued an interim protection order against Lamprecht following an application by Professor Karen Milner, the Gauteng chairperson of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), after Lamprecht posted her personal details along with disparaging comments about her on his website, resulting in her receiving hate mail.

Over many years, Lamprecht has used his website to promote Nazi propaganda and disseminate extreme antisemitic and racist content. His published comments include, “Given what a race of two-faced, backstabbing fiends they are, I ... have made the argument that there is no such thing as a good Jew”; “They need to meet a new kind of white man, the kind they’ve not met since the time of Hitler”; and “filthy little race of rats and pathological liars ... They dominate EVERYTHING ... and turn all the powerful against us ... Hitler was too nice to them.”

He is prolific on social media, managing multiple websites. His homemade videos spread inflammatory, racist, and antisemitic material. He lauds lone-wolf white supremacists including Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue mass shooter Robert Bowers, and Charleston Church mass killer Dylann Roof.

Lamprecht has continued to post inflammatory material and incite violence even after he was served with the protection notice. He is expected to appear in court on 16 March for his final order, and the interim order will be in place until then.

It’s clear that the woman calling herself Chabad de la Fontaine is elderly, and while some social media users laugh at her statements, others say that she is bigoted, a white supremacist, antisemitic, racist, and a danger to society. This became clearer in another clip posted by Alexander from a different lockdown protest at Muizenberg beach on 31 January.

“I’m a very highly skilled medical doctor as well as a virologist, immunologist, and quantum physicist, working with parasites

that they call viruses,” she stated, also not wearing a mask.

“They’re not viruses, they’re parasites, and you don’t need to wear a mask because none of it can be transferred, even with kissing or in a sexual act. What we need to understand is that you’ve got to build up your immune system, like mine, I’m 77 years of age, and I’ve got a strong immune system.” A quick look at her LinkedIn profile and other investigations online make it clear that she isn’t a medical professional.

Asked if she’s on the radar of the SAJBD and if the organisation will take her on over her antisemitic conspiracy theories, Cape SAJBD Executive Director Stuart Diamond, said, “In 2019, we launched our ‘report hate’ tool to capture concerns about antisemitism, anti-Jewish rhetoric, conspiracy theories, hate speech, discrimination, and the like from the Cape community. To date, this tool has provided us with various cases that we consider in our antisemitism and legal subcommittee to determine appropriate action.

“The videos of Chabad de la Fontaine reached us via this tool over the weekend. It’s our first interaction with her content. We are following the same process to determine appropriate action, if any. Further findings on the reported content will be communicated in due course.

“Giving conspiracy theories any airtime is a dangerous activity,” Diamond said. “People are vulnerable to misinformation, especially as South Africa faces a pandemic and its associated complications, economic turmoil, and social challenges. We urge our community to refer to global and local health authorities on all matters related to COVID-19. We also urge our community to continue to use the report hate tool if they become aware of any possible hate incidents.”

Antisemitism expert and emeritus professor of history at the University of Cape Town, Professor Milton Shain, said, “She’s clearly living in a world in which ‘Zionists’ [the collective Jew] are ‘controlling’ and ‘manipulating’ global affairs. This is a classic trope. Her use of the ‘anti-Christ’ also suggests a penchant for conspiracies. This idea goes back to the medieval world. Such tropes are always available, but in times of crisis they seem to have greater traction.”

Darren Bergman, the shadow minister for international relations and cooperation, said he hadn’t heard fellow politicians say that Ramaphosa was Jewish. However, it is a theory circulated amongst some right-wing extremists.

“It’s sad to see such vile hatred. Unfortunately, as the government’s failures increase and citizens’ desperation increases, so will the risk of scapegoating, and that bottle could spin between race, religion, and parties. The sensitivity for Jewry is that we have seen this rodeo far too often, and for us, it has had fatal consequences historically.”

• *To report antisemitism in the Cape, visit at [www.capesajbd.org/focus-areas/antisemitism/report-hate/](http://www.capesajbd.org/focus-areas/antisemitism/report-hate/)*



# What does the ICC investigation mean for Israel?

PAULA SLIER

The recent decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to allow an investigation into possible war crimes committed by Israel isn't a surprise. But that doesn't lessen its significance.

Last Friday, 5 February, the court's pre-trial chamber ruled 2-1 that it had jurisdiction to open a criminal investigation into the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict (Operation Protective Edge), Israeli settlement policy, and the Israeli response to protests at the Gaza border. There remains the possibility that other incidents could also be probed in future.

For many Israelis, this is yet further proof of the double standards under which they believe the court operates. The ICC has honed in on Jerusalem while ignoring human rights abusers in Iran, Syria, and China.

Palestinians have welcomed the move. Although the ICC will examine actions by both Israelis and Palestinians, including Hamas, the probe was launched at the request of the Palestinian Authority (PA), and is expected to focus overwhelmingly on Israeli actions.

The ICC doesn't try countries, but rather individuals. This means that war crimes suits could be levelled against Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Defence

had been a member of the Israeli war cabinet that sanctioned the assault on Gaza, in which more than a thousand Palestinians were killed. In the end, Livni cancelled a trip to the United Kingdom (UK) and the threat of arrest kept her out of the country until authorities in 2011 granted automatic immunity to all Israeli officials visiting the UK.

But should Israeli (and/or Hamas) officials ultimately be convicted of war crimes by the ICC and senior officials named in such a verdict, they could be subject to international arrest warrants upon travel abroad.

However, for now at least, Jerusalem says it doesn't anticipate any immediate threats to senior Israeli political or military figures. But that could change.

The court's announcement also has implications at a state level. A negative ruling on Israeli actions in Gaza would ultimately raise questions about Jerusalem's right to self-defence, and make it difficult for the Israeli army to operate against threats on the country's southern border.

If the court also rules against settlements and Jewish building in east Jerusalem, this would undercut the country's legal claims to historical and religious rights. Any Israeli activity in the West Bank would amount to a war crime.

Jerusalem has long argued that the ICC

over Netanyahu's corruption trial).

Responding to the ICC statement, Mandelblit said, "The principled legal position of the state of Israel, which is not a party to the ICC, is that the court lacks jurisdiction in relation to Israel and that any Palestinian actions with respect to the court are legally invalid."

He noted that only sovereign states could delegate criminal jurisdiction to the court, claiming that the PA didn't meet the criteria. He also argued that Israel had "valid legal claims" over the territory in question, and that the sides had agreed in the past "to resolve their dispute over the future status of this territory in the framework of negotiations".

The ICC is meant to serve as a court of last resort when countries' own judicial systems are unable or unwilling to investigate and prosecute war crimes. Until now, all attempts to prosecute Israel in the ICC have failed, not least because its courts are seen as independent and able to investigate any allegations of crimes in the territories on their own.

Israel's military also has its own internal systems to probe alleged wrongdoing by its troops and in spite of criticism that the system is insufficient, experts say it has a good chance of fending off ICC investigations into its wartime practices.

But when it comes to settlement activity, which Israel considers to be legal, Jerusalem hasn't held criminal investigations. Some experts say the country could have a difficult time contesting international law that forbids the transfer of a civilian population into occupied territory.

In practical terms, ICC Chief Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda hasn't yet decided to launch her investigation into possible Israeli war crimes. She has only requested, and now received, authority from the court to do so. Her term as prosecutor is set to expire in June, and some Israeli officials are hopeful that her as of yet unelected successor could take a different path.

Still, meetings will be held in coming days to discuss strategy moving forward, including the possibility of a shift away from the current path of refusing to co-operate with the ICC.

Israel's judicial establishment has been preparing for possible scenarios of ICC action for the past decade, and now fears that the country could be headed down a path that will lead to eventual ICC rulings against its politicians and military officials.



The International Criminal Court

Minister Moshe Ya'alon, who held that post during the 2014 Gaza War.

Avigdor Lieberman, who was defence minister when the Great March began, could also be targeted, as could Defence Minister Benny Gantz and his predecessor, Naftali Bennett. This is in addition to individual Israeli soldiers and commanders.

Already in 2009, an arrest warrant was issued for Tzipi Livni on the grounds that she

has no jurisdiction, and that Palestine isn't a sovereign state. Although it was given the option to submit its position on the matter to the ICC, it declined. As such, Israel cannot appeal this ruling even if it wanted to.

Already back in 2016, Netanyahu appointed Avichai Mandelblit as attorney general because he believed he was the best person to defend Israel against future actions from the ICC. (Ironically today, the two are at loggerheads

## Biden administration draws Palestinians close, Israel closer

RON KAMPEAS – JTA

Statements and appearances by United States (US) officials suggest the Biden administration's emerging Middle East strategy, namely reassuring Israel while resuming ties with the Palestinians ruptured by President Joe Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump.

On Tuesday, 26 January, the acting ambassador to the United Nations (UN) outlined plans to reverse the Trump administration's policies concerning the Palestinians.

"The Biden administration will restore credible US engagement with Palestinians as well as Israelis," Richard Mills said at a meeting of the UN Security Council, the first such appearance since Biden's 20 January inauguration.

Mills, a career diplomat, is acting as UN envoy until the Senate confirms Biden's nominee.

"This will involve renewing US relations with the Palestinian leadership and Palestinian people, relations which have atrophied over the past four years," Mills said. "President Biden has been clear in his intent to restore US assistance programmes that support economic development and humanitarian aid for the Palestinian people, and to take steps to reopen diplomatic missions that were closed by the last US administration."

Reassurance came on Wednesday, when Biden's nominee for UN ambassador told senators that she would maintain some of the pro-Israel policies advanced by Trump.

Linda Thomas-Greenfield said at her confirmation hearing that America would

robustly push back against anti-Israel bias at the UN.

"I look forward to standing with Israel, standing against the unfair targeting of Israel, the relentless resolutions that are proposed against Israel unfairly," she said.

Her remarks recalled one of the final acts of the Obama administration, when it allowed a Security Council resolution condemning Israel's settlement policies. The Senate roundly condemned President Barack Obama's failure to veto the resolution. Trump's UN ambassadors went on to use US influence to nix pro-Palestinian moves at the body.


Biden has indicated that he wants to repair ties between Israel and Democrats strained by tensions between the administrations of Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Obama. Notably, some of the most pointed pro-Israel questions at Thomas-Greenfield's hearing came from Democrats who are close to Biden like Chris Coons of Delaware, Robert Menendez of New Jersey, and Ben Cardin of Maryland.

There remain more differences between the Biden and Netanyahu administrations than there were under Trump, but Biden is striving to tamp down Israeli anxieties about his revival of some Obama-era policies when he served as vice-president. For instance, Biden wants to return to the Iran nuclear deal, which Netanyahu reviles, but says he will do so in consultation with Israel. Obama cut out Israel until the last phase of the negotiations.

Biden campaigned on restoring ties with the Palestinians, but it won't be easy to reverse Trump's policies, which included shutting down diplomatic relations and severing assistance to the Palestinian Authority. Biden must deal with a law



Continued on page 7>>

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## Glass half full

At the beginning of the week, the news broke that the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine that we had been waiting for, and which arrived last week, wasn’t going to be very helpful against the mutation most dominant in South Africa.

After all the excitement of the first lot of vaccines having arrived, we felt let down. Consequently, it led to moaning and finger pointing.

For so many of us, this seems to be a knee-jerk reaction. It’s easy. We look for the worst-case scenario, and blame someone so we can resume our position of doing nothing, complaining, and being miserable. It doesn’t help any of us though.

And, as is blatantly clear from the story on page 4 and Dr Israel’s OpEd on this page, those of us who had this reaction missed the point.

Yes, a great deal of money was spent on the vaccine and there was much anticipation of the rollout. But shouldn’t we be relieved that there is enough honesty to stop the vaccine from being distributed and people from being vaccinated for no purpose? The fact that our scientists did the research in time, making it clear that the vaccine was less than we expected, should surely be applauded. We should be proud that we have such scientists, and that there are experts now trying to figure out if this particular vaccine can still be altered or not.

What’s more, if it hadn’t been for South African medical experts, we wouldn’t know about this particular mutation of COVID-19. It was our guys who discovered it, which led to a great deal more knowledge about this coronavirus.

I must say, looking at the same scenario in this way is so much more helpful and inspiring.

The facts are the same. The government procured vaccines, the first of which arrived last week. They weren’t exactly what we needed, and we found out only once we already had them. However, there are a great deal more vaccines – different and more appropriate ones – still on the way.

From that point, it’s how you look at the situation. Yes, it’s possible there was an error or an oversight. That does happen.

However, we caught it in time. We also have many more suitable vaccines on the way. We may still be able to salvage the situation, but we will lose a few weeks in the process. Add to that the fact that we have learnt how proud we can be of our medical scientists.

You know, one of the directors on the board of the *SA Jewish Report*, Benjy Porter, pointed out this week how fortunate we are to have so many incredible people in top positions in our country.

He was specifically talking about the calibre of people who are willing to make time – their own personal time – to be a part of our webinars. He mentioned two in particular, Eskom Chief Executive Andre de Ruyter (see page 7) and Professor Tshilidzi Marwala, vice-chancellor at the University of Johannesburg (UJ).

De Ruyter gave up his Saturday night to be put through his paces in answering questions on our power predicament. He was still doing it at 22:00 with a courteous smile, and graciously answered questions to the best of his ability.

Marwala was so impressive last Thursday in addressing how we futureproof ourselves to ensure that we aren’t victims of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

As deputy chairperson of the Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution and in his position at UJ, Marwala has his hands full, but he selflessly made time for us.

Obviously, like these two men, there are exceptional people who give their all for this amazing country in which we live. This is something that should inspire us.

The reality is that we have outstanding people in this country – not everyone, but a majority. The same goes for our particular community.

Most people want the same things and aspire to do good. Yes, we know there are bad people among us, and a fair number of them are in senior political positions. However, they are still in the minority, and there are far more of us who are good and do amazing things in our lives.

On last week’s front page, we wrote about Professor Efraim Kramer stepping down from the work he was doing. To my amazement, so many chose to badmouth him for his choice rather than to recognise the work that he has done for the community. He put in months of work to help make sure that our shuls were safe. He wrote protocols on safe weddings and much more. He did this only because he cared so deeply for our community’s well-being.

He was angry, and he had his reasons. Instead of thanking him for all the work he put in for us and trying to understand why he was angry, some lambasted him for challenging members of the community who are ignoring the safeguards. I do appreciate that they were a small minority, but it wasn’t helpful, respectful, and didn’t show integrity.

This week, we take you behind the scenes to see the reality faced by frontline doctors dealing with COVID-19 patients (page 3). They, too, get frustrated when people ignore the protocols because they see the results of this. Let’s recognise why, instead of lambasting them.

Right now, we are seeing a little lightness as the second wave abates. If we follow protocols and take precautions, we can hold off a third wave or reduce it significantly. It’s up to us.

We can choose to see only the bad in our country and wallow in it, or we can recognise the good that people do, and celebrate that.

I choose the latter.

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



## Time to substitute evidence for emotion about vaccine delays

OPINION

DR DANIEL ISRAEL



This week, a balloon of hope that thousands of healthcare workers would be well on their way to long-awaited immunity against COVID-19 was deflated as the government announced it wouldn’t dispense the one million doses of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine as planned. The vaccine’s efficacy against the 501Y.V2 South Africa variant was unveiled at just 22%.

As this development was announced, my Facebook feed became increasingly flooded with frustrated community members calling out the “inept” government for buying one million vaccines that now need to be thrown away. “Typical South Africa!”, “Trust our country to get it wrong!” These were the comments attracting the most attention.

My mind went to a mere six weeks ago, when I followed a webinar in which Professor Barry Schoub, the chairperson of the COVID-19 Ministerial Advisory Committee on coronavirus vaccines, said that the government would be taking its time to evaluate the most appropriate choice of vaccines and rollout approach in view of the complexities of the population and variants here. This would be in contrast to countries like Israel that had already dived into a mass rollout. Interestingly at the time, I also came across similar “typical inept South Africa!” comments.

Aside from the apparent cynicism that has grown in our society – perhaps from inconsistency in public policy in so many facets of public life, COVID-19 being no exception – I believe a real understanding of levels of evidence of medical research is needed here. Sound medical decisions are informed by evidence. Evidence is graded into seven levels: randomised control trials occupying levels 1 and 2, control trials without randomisation level 3, case controls level 4, large reviews level 5, single studies level 6, and expert opinions level 7. So, without getting too technical, when you visit your doctor and (s)he tells you (s)he strongly believes in a new supplement, it may be a level 7 at most.

The risky and expensive process of rolling out millions of vaccines across South Africa ought to be informed by the highest level of evidence – randomised control trials (RCTs). An RCT involves recruiting thousands of volunteers and randomising them to two groups: one that receives the vaccine and one that doesn’t. However, the volunteers ought not to know who is in which group lest their preconceived beliefs and subsequent behaviour play a role in the outcome of their results.

In the context of a COVID-19 vaccine, to test whether an Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine would work on our population, thousands of people needed to be recruited and randomly assigned to either a placebo or a real intervention group, and then followed for months to see whether there would be a difference in incidence of COVID-19 infections between the groups. South African mainstream medical scientists have, thankfully, always been focused on these principles with a deep commitment to recommending interventions that do no harm and work scientifically. COVID-19 has been no exception to this. So, the above process was followed.

The Wits Vaccines and Infectious Diseases Analytics (VIDA) Research Unit has run the Oxford COVID-19 vaccine trial in South Africa for months, and has raced ahead to produce results as quickly as possible. It so happens that because of the immune pressure on the SARS-CoV-2 virus to survive amongst a relatively already exposed population, the virus mutated in November 2020.

It was only due to the rigorous efforts of units like VIDA that South Africa identified the variant so quickly and soon began to evaluate whether the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine would work here. It also soon

became apparent that 95% of all cases in the second surge of the pandemic were, indeed, this new variant.

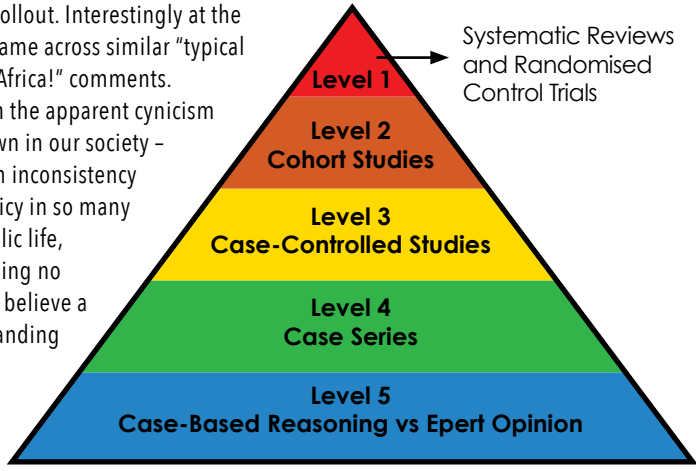
Stuck between a rock and a hard place of procuring stock while still awaiting results, the government secured its first shipment and cautiously forged ahead. Telling results have now followed, just before implementation.

We are all deeply disappointed by the failure in the efficacy of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine against our local strain of COVID-19. But we should be equally encouraged by our scientists’ and the country’s commitment to balancing swift action against evidence-based results, which unfortunately takes time to unravel.

With this mindset, let’s take a moment to reflect on what we now know about COVID-19 in February 2021 that we didn’t know six or eight months ago through this evidence-based lens:

1. The 501Y.V2 variant of SARS-CoV-2, causing COVID-19, was detected in the Eastern Cape in November 2020. It accounts for 95% of infections in South Africa today. It’s more transmissible than its predecessor, the original SARS-CoV-2 virus. (High-level evidence.)
  2. The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine showed 70% efficacy against the original strain. A high standard trial showed only 22% effectiveness against the variant. This was for mild and moderate illness only though. (Level 1 – RCT on young, healthy people). (High-level evidence.)
  3. The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine’s efficacy against severe disease in South Africa is still unknown and being determined. (High-level evidence.)
  4. The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which is a single-dose vaccine, showed a 82% efficacy against the original strain. This dropped against the variant to 57%, but the number remains high against preventing serious disease, hospitalisation, and death, even against the variant – 83%. This is very important. (High-level evidence.)
  5. Pfizer, Moderna, and Sputnik vaccines may achieve similar results against the variant. No trials have been released on them yet.
  6. All these vaccines are safe. The question remains which are effective in the South African context. (High-level evidence.)
  7. The second wave in South Africa is almost over. The R value is 0.43 at the moment. This means we are in a recovery phase. This is the lowest the R value has been since the pandemic began. (Middle-level evidence.)
  8. A third wave is probable – soon. As early as April – June. This is probably inevitable. (Low-level evidence – expert opinion.)
  9. The extent of the third wave is determinable by preventative, non-pharmacological behaviour. (High-level evidence.) Masks and social distancing are definitely here to stay for the next year at least. (Expert opinion – low-level evidence.)
  10. COVID-19 can be contracted twice – particularly with different variants being present. (High-level evidence.)
  11. COVID-19 is likely to last for the rest of our lives and become endemic. However, with the correct vaccination, its clinical effects can be attenuated and it will hopefully tend towards a more common cold. (Low-level evidence. Expert opinion.)
- Let’s take a feather out of our South African scientists’ hat, salute our government for its transparency and its approach to following the science, and put up with the unexpected hurdles along the way.

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





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# There’s light at end of Eskom tunnel

JORDAN MOSHE

Eskom is making progress, though it may not be visible yet, Andre de Ruyter, Eskom’s group chief executive, told a *SA Jewish Report* webinar last Saturday night.

He said a great deal of work was being done behind the scenes to address 10 years of state capture, deliberate neglect, and ill-discipline, but all hands were on deck to turn the power utility around. “Eskom has 12 key risks, and by March 2020, five of them had manifested,” he told the online audience. “We’re addressing issues we inherited and are trying to rebuild from the low base to which we’ve been worn down.”

In 2001, the utility was named power company of the year at the Financial Times Global Energy Awards in New York. Much has changed since then.

“State capture, corruption, self-enrichment, and neglect crept in. Good practice was deliberately neglected to create opportunity for looting,” De Ruyter said. “A lot of procurement was done on a free-text basis, typing any description in to push through an order.

“I caught an incident where someone was buying a mop with a wooden handle for R238 000. Fortunately, we could stop it, but systems have degenerated such that that was possible.”

However, he said in recent months, much had been done to root out corruption. The company reclaimed R1.1 billion in the time before he joined. Since he has come onboard, a further R177 million has been reclaimed, with further claims in the pipeline. Eskom has also launched action against the “dirty dozen” – former Eskom executives and others (including the Guptas) – aimed at recovering R3.8 billion.

“I know most of the money is safely hidden offshore and it’s unlikely we will recover it all,” De Ruyter said. “But you have to demonstrate that there are consequences. The wheels of our criminal justice system grind very slowly, but we must keep going after people with civil actions.”

Lower-level corruption is also being exposed, with lifestyle audits being ordered on suspected employees.

De Ruyter described the situation at the Kusile and Medupi power stations, saying that their problems could be traced back more than 27 years.

“The problem originated in 1993 when an energy white paper was published,” he said. “Eskom warned government that we were about to enter a shortage of capacity.

“That duly happened, and Mbeki

was graceful enough to admit that the government was wrong and should have begun building capacity earlier.”

The construction of the two stations was also pursued in an uncoordinated fashion.

“At one time, we were building before designs were complete,” said De Ruyter. “The project management was inappropriate,

in full backup capacity, they install grid-linked systems. If the sun doesn’t shine and batteries run down, they want the luxury of tapping into Eskom’s system and accessing our electricity.

“They relieve the burden on the grid, but for Eskom to remain available as a proxy battery for when your battery runs down and not get

on a global basis against reasonably efficient costs of generating electricity and compensate us for that.”

Beyond renewable sources of energy, De Ruyter said South Africans need to adopt an integrated approach moving forward.

“When people hear ‘load shedding’, they just think Eskom, but they should think where the policy is coming from in terms of the department of mineral resources and energy and the role of the National Energy Regulator of South Africa [NERSA],” he said. “We concluded an auction process to add short-term emergency power procurement to the grid, but NERSA decided not to allow it. We need to address the alignment issue, and address it quickly.”

Load shedding will remain an issue as long as maintenance is delayed, De Ruyter said.

“We’re maintaining two large power stations, and while we do it, it will increase the risk of shedding. The alternative is that the whole system crashes. We have taken an aggressive stance on maintenance, and the first step should be complete by April.

“The second round of units will then be taken offline and by September, we should have a substantial reduction in load shedding. Ultimately, it’s vital that we address capacity shortage.

“Load shedding risks remain as long as we don’t address capacity shortage,” De Ruyter said. “We’re willing to do what’s necessary to enable new capacity to come on the grid. Eskom was resistant to new capacity in the past, with projects failing as Eskom refused to sign. The country needs the extra capacity, and we’ll do what’s necessary to make it happen.”



and as a consequence, there were major challenges in design that slipped through.

“We have identified the defects and implemented fixes at five of six units at Medupi. It has taken us 72 days of outages per unit at Medupi to correct them at a cost of R300 million per unit.

“Eskom takes no pleasure in load shedding. This isn’t an easy fix,” De Ruyter said. “We are living with the consequences of the decisions taken more than 15 years ago, really poor management, and no maintenance over decades.”

A private investment opportunity aimed at increasing generation capacity will result in Eskom being restructured into three separate divisions – generation, transmission, and distribution. By the end of 2021, the transmission arm is expected to be set up as an independent buyer of electricity.

Eskom will also have to overcome its crippling debt, said De Ruyter.

“Eskom spends R32 billion in net finance cost, an enormous burden that is the legacy of mega projects that we undertook with no equity support,” he said. “We have consistently had below-cost-reflective tariff increases, so the debt mountain has become bigger.”

The newly adjusted tariffs have aroused the ire of those who want to go off grid and generate their own electricity, but De Ruyter stressed the necessity of the changes.

“The adjusted tariff reflects capacity and energy charge,” he said. “People install solar panels, but because it’s expensive to invest

compensated for the fixed cost we incur is incorrect. If you want to go off grid, we’re not stopping you, but we want to be compensated for allowing the backup facility option.”

De Ruyter stressed that the money Eskom receives from the treasury is used to pay interest not debt, which isn’t sustainable.

“We aren’t asking to be subsidised for our own inefficiencies,” he said. “Where our costs are high and headcount excessive, we accept that as our management challenges and will fix it. What we are saying is benchmark us



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## Biden administration draws Palestinians close, Israel closer

>>>Continued from page 5

passed by Congress that denies funding for the Palestinians as long as the Palestinian Authority pays families of Palestinians who killed Israeli and American civilians. Another law makes it hard for a president to allow the Palestinians to reopen an office in Washington unless the Palestinian Authority agrees not to seek charges against Israel in the International Criminal Court.

Trump also shut down a dedicated consulate for Palestinians in Jerusalem. Reopening that office could face resistance from the Israeli government and the municipality.

At the same time, Biden officials are seeking to reassure Israel that they will sustain some of the tone and substance of changes carried out under Trump.

In one of his first statements Jake Sullivan, Biden’s national security adviser, described his first conversation with his Israeli counterpart, Meir Ben Shabbat. They “discussed opportunities to enhance the partnership over the coming months, including by building on the success of Israel’s normalisation

arrangements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco,” Sullivan said.

Thomas-Greenfield said she would build on the normalisation agreements – called the Abraham Accords – to encourage those countries to change their approach at the UN and take an active role in countering anti-Israel actions there.

“If they’re going to recognise Israel in the Abraham Accords, they need to recognise Israel at the UN,” she said.

Thomas-Greenfield also denounced the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement targeting Israel.

“The actions and the approach that BDS has taken toward Israel is unacceptable,” she said. “It verges on antisemitism, and it’s important that it not be allowed to have a voice at the UN.”

The Obama administration also opposed BDS, but unlike the Trump administration, didn’t make it a front-and-centre issue, nor did it compare the movement to antisemitism.



# From Durban to Rikers Island: Jewish entrepreneur’s fall from grace

TALI FEINBERG

Eran Eyal seemed destined for success: a head for business, a love of technology, insatiable ambition, a charming personality, and extreme intelligence. But all this may be what led to his downfall. When he realised that his start-up dream wasn’t going to succeed, he simply reached for more.

Fooling investors and everyone else in his life, he stole and lied shamelessly until the bubble burst and he was arrested in New York City. He spent three weeks at the notorious Rikers Island prison surrounded by rapists and murderers before being released on bail of \$250 000 (R3.7m).

How did he get to this point? A new book, *At Any Cost: The South African fraudster who took the tech world for more than \$40 million* by Stephen Timm tells the full story of how a nice Jewish boy who was born in Israel and grew up in Durban, came to be investigated, arrested, charged, and eventually deported. South African business leader Michael Jordaan describes the book as “an age-old narrative about ego and flying too close to the sun as well as a modern version of greed in the tech world”.

When Eyal was released from Rikers Island, it was one of the few times he responded to communication from Timm, who was covering the story at the time. “Literally been through hell. Rikers Island is no picnic. Been sleeping next to murderers and rapists,” he wrote over Facebook Messenger, adding that he was in a cell with 50 other people during those three weeks.

Timm has covered Eyal’s story from the very beginning when he was still the darling of the tech start-up sector in South Africa. Eyal’s first company, Springleap, began as a crowdsourcing platform for t-shirt designs, and then pivoted into a conduit for clients to access thousands of creative professionals.

investors threw money at him without asking what he was doing with it. The result was that he lived his dream: a trendy New York apartment, spending \$500 000 (R7.4m) of investor funds on rent, shopping, entertainment, and a dating service. “He was so set on having this lifestyle that he even fooled his landlord about how much investors were paying him,” says Timm.

New York authorities responded to complaints, and began to investigate him, eventually pouncing in August 2018, when he was charged with stealing \$600 000 (R8.8m). “I started writing about it as part of my job [editor at *Ventureburn*, a South African online publication that covers the start-up sector], but then I really got into the story. It epitomises a big problem in the tech start-up sector globally – the ‘fake it till you make it’ syndrome. Eran’s story represented the dark side of this industry,” says Timm.

“And he was such a nice guy, that I had to keep going to understand where these allegations were coming from. The more involved I got, the more I could see that it was plain and simple lying, that he twisted everything. And he had been doing it for years. So it really is a detective-type story. It reads like a movie.”

From his interactions with Eyal and from what he heard from others, “He’s a really charming person. Very well spoken, intelligent, a gentle soul. No one saw it coming, because he would take you in. Like others who have committed fraud, he convinced all these people to part with their money. Investors say he has the gift of the gab.

“Those who knew him at school – he went to Carmel College – said he always had a way with people. Sometimes I would reach out to acquaintances who would initially respond but then wouldn’t come back to me, maybe because they themselves didn’t believe he could get convicted of fraud.”

Timm says Eyal was born in Israel and came to Durban with his family when he was very young. He is one of three siblings, and “I think a key thing that motivated him is that he has a successful brother, Avi Eyal, who has done really well in the tech and start-up sector. That could be the reason that he wanted success at any cost and to be like his brother, who he looked up to.”

Timm thinks that because Eyal worked so hard and made so many sacrifices, he felt that success was owed to him. “And he also began to believe his own lies. Because he worked so hard and hardly ever slept, he was always on edge. He was close to breaking. He saw the things he did as ‘white lies’ that were excusable because he was suffering so much to build a massive, successful company.

“A lot of this goes on in the tech sector because it allows people to hide behind things. You don’t have a proper product, it’s still being developed, so you can lead people along. And your worth is based on how much money you can raise. So it’s about who is able to pitch the best, and he was highly talented at that.”

Eyal was eventually convicted in December 2019 in a New York court of defrauding investors of millions of dollars

through three investment schemes. He pleaded guilty to all charges. He wasn’t jailed, but as part of his plea agreement, he has to refund \$600 000 (R8.8m) to four Springleap investors he defrauded. He also had to step down as chief executive of Shopin, and was banned from raising capital or serving in any position of authority in any New York business for three years. Investigators were able to find only \$450 000 (R6.6m) of the \$42.5m (R628m)

Eyal raised in an initial coin offering for the Shopin start-up, and he was ordered to return that amount to investors.

In his sentencing on 26 February 2020, Eyal was told that he would have 48 hours to leave the United States. He was deported to Israel in May of that year. There are already reports that he has travelled to the United Kingdom to see his girlfriend. Many believe he got off lightly. Timm isn’t sure what his next steps will be, but fears he could fall

into his old ways, especially in the ‘start-up nation’ that is Israel.

Timm was there when Eyal was sentenced and deported. “They brought him in with his legs and hands shackled. He was wearing a white yarmulke and holding a small Torah. He’s never been a practicing Jew, so I’m not sure if it was to receive benefits in custody, or maybe he was trying to change his life. But you could see he was a man in turmoil. I felt sorry for him.”



Eran Eyal

## Communities come together to keep the faith during COVID

TALI FEINBERG

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that no matter who they pray to, religious communities have a lot in common and are dealing with similar difficulties.

Recognising the power of coming together to share experiences, impart wisdom, and optimise solutions, the Cape South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) hosted a webinar titled, “Coping with COVID: thoughts of the interfaith community” on Thursday, 4 February, during the United Nations Interfaith Harmony Week. The Cape SAJBD has been commemorating the event annually since 2012.

The event opened with Cape SAJBD Chairperson Izvi Brivik lighting a candle in memory of those lost to the pandemic, and cantor Ivor Joffe singing the *haskarah* in an empty shul as faith leaders took a moment to pray for healing across the globe.

Dominee Riaan de Villiers of the NG Groote Kerk said that at the beginning of lockdown, community leaders focused on caring for their most vulnerable. This included everything from helping people to stay positive and connected, to assisting a community member with how to use an ATM as he usually went into the bank.



A screenshot from the webinar

“I would think about how our church is one of the oldest buildings in the city, and how it has witnessed many crises, including pandemics,” said De Villiers. “While the building has always been a place of stability and connection, under lockdown, we had to find other ways for people to connect.”

They scheduled online readings and music, shared news over social media, and encouraged people to pray for healthcare workers and leaders. He said many congregants appreciated the time to reconnect with family under lockdown. “Life is so busy and stressful, it was something of a Sabbath.”

De Villiers expressed concern about the spread of conspiracy theories that are often religion-based. “This is bad theology as it could be life threatening. We have a responsibility as preachers to share a message of hope, kindness, and love.” He said the pandemic forced religions to “think anew about concepts in the Bible”, and had “exposed clear fault lines in society that we as faith-based organisations need to seek justice for”.

Sheikh Ismail Keraan of the Al Azhar Masjid Educational Institute, one of the oldest mosques in District Six, echoed the responsibility of religious leaders to reject conspiracy theories. “We need to have critical thinking, especially these days. We need to stop irrational conspiracy theories. When people are impatient and lonely, they ‘act out’, and this leads to frustration. But if we all agree that this infection is life threatening, then our response in handling it must be real.”

From the beginning of the first hard lockdown until today, his congregation has fed more than 400 people in Woodstock and Salt River. It has also offered financial aid to those needing assistance with paying salaries and funeral costs, and its members have worked in an orphanage for abused children.

“We have had to communicate in creative ways. This ‘new normal’ goes against our inherent social nature as human beings. So we need to re-imagine and reshape the perspective of our life,” he said.

Keraan said it was a “wake-up call” to show that “we are all human beings on the Almighty’s earth. It has made us acutely aware of the

fine line between life and death, sickness and health. If we don’t care for each other and co-operate, we’ll be going in the opposite direction towards aggression and injustice.” He thanked the Cape SAJBD for hosting the event, and said he looked forward to more interaction with the Jewish community.

Mlingane Poswayo, the director of the South African Baha’i Office of Public Affairs, also thanked the Cape SAJBD for creating a forum to share and explore ideas to deal with the crisis. He said many of his congregants were isolated due to lack of data and living in rural areas without reception. While they were able to provide data for some, reaching isolated community members was more difficult.

His community is focusing on working with children to ensure that they keep up with their education and teaching them real-life lessons of serving others through, for example, making masks for communities and helping to raise awareness about safety protocols.

“We hosted monthly virtual discussions with academics, media, and the government, and these were the highlight of my year. I learned so much from my fellow South Africans. It showed that we can have a socially cohesive society.”

Rabbi Sam Thurgood of Beit Midrash Morasha in Cape Town pointed out that “faith leaders feel losses more keenly [during the pandemic] as they are conducting the funerals, comforting the mourners, and facilitating the mourning process”, all in very challenging circumstances. In addition, they are helping congregants to navigate huge losses from financial to emotional, and the full range of emotions that come with such an uncertain time. He said the virus had changed places

of worship from spiritual sanctuaries to places where contagion could spread, which had been particularly challenging for all faiths.

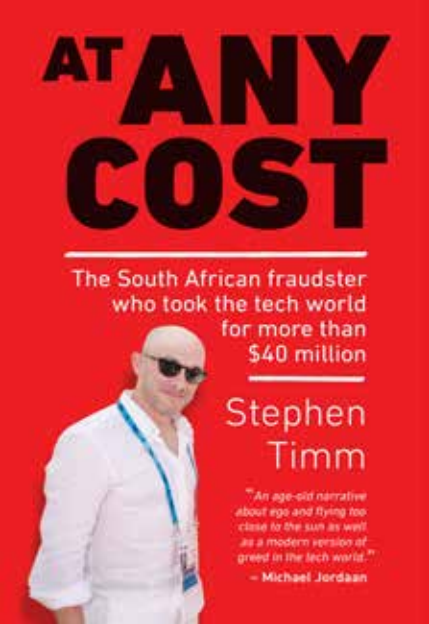
“Teaching our communities to turn their homes into centres of prayer, study, and kindness has been a positive result of the pandemic, but on the other hand, some congregants say they now prefer praying at home,” he said. “This is a continuing challenge, but it’s been important to empower congregants. It’s the call of the hour.” He shared how a mother spoke about how much joy it brought to hear her son praying with his friends over Zoom, something she never got to hear when they prayed at school. “The sound filled their home. It became a house of prayer.”

Creating a sense of community and helping people to feel “safe and sane” is important, Thurgood said. “Zoom is great for delivery of a message, but it’s challenging for socialising.” He combatted this by telling children’s stories with puppets when schools were closed, and encouraging community members to imagine being in their shul garden, swapping stories and news of the week. Congregants also gave talks on their areas of expertise. Once lockdown eased, they started having “hybrid celebrations”.

“Having events online is a little sterile, so we sent packs around with fruits, treats, and drinks to enjoy during an online event so that we were all eating together like we used to,” Thurgood said.

He examined the question many are asking at the moment: “Where is G-d in all this suffering?” Looking at the parsha from a few weeks ago, when G-d told Moshe to “come to Pharaoh” to ask him to release the Jewish people – not “go to” Pharaoh – Thurgood explained that “G-d is where we act in a godly manner. When we act as G-d acts, we bring the presence of G-d into the world.

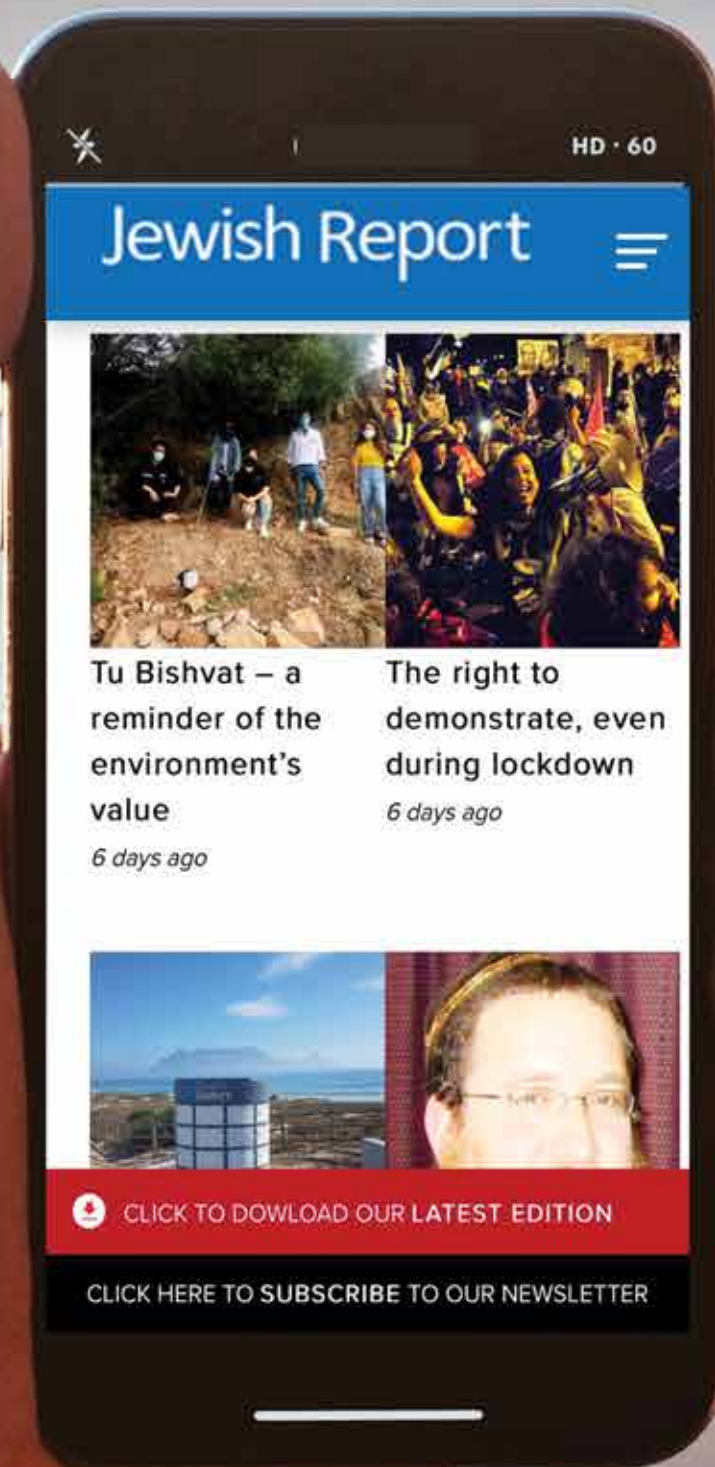
“While there are many things that G-d does that we cannot do, there are many that we can do, like acting with kindness, care, and compassion. So when people are struggling on so many levels, there is something everyone can do to reach out to one another. G-d is present in the world through us. A challenge to G-d is a challenge to us.”





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# Gone but not forgotten, unearthing Joburg’s shuls

JORDAN MOSHE

There were 43 breathtaking synagogues in Johannesburg at the turn of the 20th century and, tragically, not one of them is still standing.

They were, indeed, architectural masterpieces, which could rival their counterparts in Europe. They loomed above the streets of a city still in its infancy, with their towering domes and detailed facades catching the eye of any passer-by.

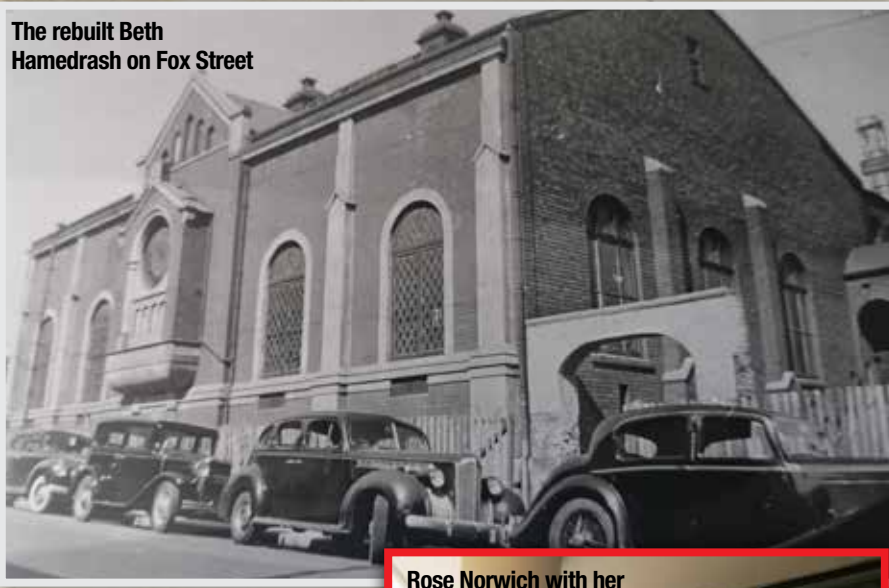
While they no longer exist, their stories remain a lasting testament to the Jews who first made Johannesburg their home.

“The stories of these synagogues are absolutely incredible,” says Rose Norwich. “They formed part of Johannesburg in the early days when it was established in 1886. Most people today don’t fully appreciate what we actually had here.”

Norwich, who recently celebrated her 100th birthday, is an authority on the early shuls which were established in Johannesburg and on the reef. An architect by profession, she undertook a study of these shuls more than 40 years ago after visiting the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York with her late husband.

“The man in charge showed me a folio of the destroyed synagogues

The rebuilt Beth Hamedrash on Fox Street



of Poland,” she recounted. “I reflected that they had been through a war there, but that in South Africa, our shuls had fallen apart out of sheer neglect.”

Norwich returned home determined to record and account for Johannesburg’s earliest shuls. However, she found that the shuls weren’t the only things that had faded out of existence.

“There was simply no information available. No one seemed to have taken any notice of the shuls or made records of them. No one had preserved them or accounted for them. There was nothing.”

Encouraged by her husband and close friend, Stephen Cohen, Norwich decided to address

Rose Norwich with her research



the issue by preparing a master’s dissertation on the subject, returning to university at the age of 66. Beginning in 1886 (when Jews first settled in the Witwatersrand), she charted the stories of the first shuls built in Johannesburg, concluding her study in the 1930s.

Norwich received a list of the city’s shuls from the Federation of Synagogues, but it was woefully incomplete. After obtaining the few photographs housed at the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), she set off on an exhaustive search.

“I trawled through every archive imaginable,” she says. “From the library of the SAJBD, I moved on to the government archives, museums, university collections, and many more. I was given access to all council plans as well as I wanted to find out everything I could about these shuls and what they had looked like.

“I went to a woman called Nola Green at the city council and begged her to help me. She said that plans had been moved from the Town Hall to Hillbrow, adding that someone had found people tearing up the plans. Some had been saved and

taken to the Africana Museum [now Museum Africa], so she said I should go there.

“I found four of five beautiful plans there. I had to search everywhere, but there they were.”

Norwich devoted four years to the dissertation, accounting for 43 of Johannesburg’s first shuls. Their stories captivated her.

“The President Street Synagogue was the very first,” she says. “It ran between 1889 and 1926. They had used other premises before, including the Rand Club, for services on high holy days. Later they got some land from the government, but they sold it because they didn’t like it.”

Because no plan of the shul existed, Norwich had to recreate it using a few photographs of the building she’d found during her search.

“The shul was copied from a famous German synagogue, and it was fascinating to see how they had replicated it. It didn’t last very long because there was an

argument. They had a rabbi, Mark Harris, that people didn’t like, so the congregation split, and a new congregation was formed.”

Following the split, a magnificent shul was constructed on the Wanderers Park, named the Park Synagogue. The shul was opened by none other than President Paul Kruger in 1892, but lasted only until 1914.

The Park Synagogue in Wanderers Park



Says Norwich, “Kruger actually gave them the ground, and they established a shul, a school, and a minister’s house on the site. I hunted for photos of the site and ended up at RAU [Rand Afrikaans University]. I found a photo there

that showed the area and noticed the distinctive dome of the shul in the image.

“That picture was worth its weight in gold. Some people wouldn’t give tuppence for it, but it was proof that the shul had once stood there.”

The shul was located near what was called the Telephone Tower. When a railway company announced its intention to construct headquarters in the area, it bought out the shul, converting part of the building into its offices. The money from the sale went towards building what would become the Doornfontein Shul.

“I knew about the sale only because of an article I found at the military museum,” says Norwich. “It became a very personal thing, that search. I hunted high and low.”

Norwich also discovered a shul which had stood at the end of Fox Street in the centre of town, known as the Beth Hamedrash.

“An Orthodox group bought a little house in 1893,” she says. “It was a tiny space. There are stories of how people had to come in small groups, people with prams coming in, and then the next lot because space was so limited.”

“I struggled to identify the plans because it looked like an ordinary house, but eventually realised that an odd feature in it was in fact the women’s gallery. That was how I knew it was a shul.”

The shul was demolished and larger premises built in 1912, only to be demolished later. The property was sold, and no photographs of the original building survive.

There were also shuls that were planned but never built. Such was the case with the End Street Synagogue in Doornfontein.

Says Norwich, “They were in the process of building and had laid the foundation in 1906, but they never



built it. They didn’t have the money, and later donated it to a Catholic nun, Kate O’Brien.”

“There’s only one picture that exists of that space. The foundation stone that sits on display at Great Park Synagogue actually comes from there.”

By the time Norwich began her research in 1988, only nine of the 43 shuls she studied still stood. None of them exist today.

“It’s a loss we have to accept,” she concludes. “Jews moved away from these areas, they built new synagogues and established new communities. It’s a great shame that they are no more, but it was inevitable.

“People always migrate, so be careful where you build a shul, because people won’t always stay there.”

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The President Street Synagogue in inner city Johannesburg







# Holocaust victims and the art of survival

JORDAN MOSHE

Art assumed a central role in helping many Holocaust survivors come to terms with their ordeal and share their harrowing experiences with the world. In their drawings, paintings, and sculptures, we don't only have a testament to what happened, but also a warning for future generations.

"Many Holocaust survivors used the language of art to express their trauma and embrace life and hope," said Liz Elsby, an artist and educator at Yad Vashem. "Many of them rebuilt their lives and captured what they had experienced."

Elsby explored the art created by those who survived the Holocaust this past Monday, 8 February, in an exclusive webinar hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre.

"The [post-war] period of Holocaust artwork tends to be looked at a little less compared to the art created during the Holocaust," she said. "After the war, people asked what it meant to be a survivor."

"Students like to ask survivors what they did first after being liberated. They perceive it like a TV programme, believing there's an end to the ordeal. In reality, it was a long and arduous road, and we see this in the artwork of survivors."

Images created by artists such as Zinovii Tolkathev, a Soviet artist who accompanied the Red Army forces that liberated the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, captured some of the euphoria of salvation.

"He captures people waving and smiling, celebrating the moment," said Elsby. "That's the way that many people think of liberation. That the gates opened, survivors greeted their liberators, and they went on to start a new life."

This wasn't always the case, as survivor Antek Zukerman wrote.

"The grief was never as great as on that joyous day," quoted Elsby. "I wanted to weep, not from joy but sorrow. Suddenly, we were faced with the desolation of reckoning. What? Who? We had lived all the time with a sense of mission, but now? ... It wasn't easy to be the last

of the Mohicans."

Said Elsby, "For many, the moment brought questions: what was it all for? Why did we suffer? The first instinct for many was a fleeting moment of joy. Some were overwhelmed with despair; others were in utter disbelief. They were liberated, but not free."

This was reflected in many art pieces at the time, illustrating that survivors had to grasp that while they had been suffering, life was going on outside. Images show people walking freely in the streets, disconnected from the suffering of so many others.

For some survivors, art expressed the euphoria of re-joining the world. Buchenwald survivor Jakob Zim, for instance, chose not to capture the horror of his experience, but the European landscape he could now be a part of once again.



Waiting for the Train by Marc Klionsky

Others, however, responded differently.

"David Friedmann writes about a sudden urge of artists to show what happened," said Elsby. "It wasn't enough to express joy, but that they could bear witness at last after having been unable to while in the camps. They wanted to draw what they went through."

Often raw and unnerving, these paintings frequently show suffering victims, menacing oppressors, and a clear distinction between humanity and the inhuman. Penetrating expressions accuse perpetrators, artists often inserting their own sense of injustice into the image and asking how the atrocity could have been humanly

possible.

"It was all very fresh," said Elsby. "These people had just lost their families and had yet to rebuild their lives. Many of them used this as an impetus to draw what they went through. They're saying, 'This is the horror of where I was. This is what the world didn't see and didn't prevent.'"

The next notable movement in artwork dealt with yearning, loss, and longing, reflecting a nostalgia to return to places alive in memory only. As Elsby explained, many works showed the Jewish life of Warsaw and Vilna, the shuls, Jewish institutions, and communities that were no more.

"They expressed a sense of mourning, a need to remember," she said. "They knew that these places were being replaced with something new, would be forgotten, and wanted to create an epitaph in their art. How do you really get over the loss?"

Guilt was also a central motif in much of the artwork that follows the war. Themes of identity play a central role, with artists trying to understand who they are now without their families and to live with the guilt of being alive. Abstract images, figures aged by horror, and images of wandering Jews are common.

This changed in the 1950s, however, when many survivors attempted to get on with their lives.

"Their bodies are healing, and they begin to trust in humanity again," said Elsby. "They are trying to avoid dealing with what they have gone through, and don't want their new families to know about the past. Again, they struggle with their identity, and we find them sometimes transported back to their experiences."

"The trauma won't go away, and as much as you try to rebuild your life, everyday things can trigger you and take you back."

Memory also changed, Elsby said.

"After a period of wanting to testify, memories begin



David Friedmann's 'Mass Grave' charcoal drawing

to soften and become misty by the eighties. Images of Majdanek by Israel Kantor show something less menacing, with green fields, no people, no horror. Memory has softened."

In the 1960s and 1970s, religion also featured frequently, with Christian iconography often included as an indictment against those who professed love and concern in the name of Christ but did nothing to help suffering Jews.

"Some survivors take years to express themselves, painting in the 1990s only," said Elsby. "As we move further away from the Holocaust, there is more of a tendency to look at it as less of a historical event with dates and to focus instead on names and places. We see a desire to bring back humanity."

These works of art are inspiring, she said.

"With so much pain, anguish, and memory, they could somehow still create and wanted to join the world of the living," she said.

"As Tamara Deuel Sternberg wrote, 'I feel that by my art I am helping to transfer my experiences and feelings to others to help prevent this from ever happening again. Every individual who survived that other world has a duty to leave documentation, art, music, and personal stories behind that future generations will never forget.'"

## Cheers to 100-year-old who sees glass half full

JULIE LEIBOWITZ

Herman Rothenberg, who turns 100 on 15 February, escaped the Holocaust in Germany in 1934 when his parents sent him out the country on his own as a part of the Kindertransport rescue effort.

He was just 13 when he left his parents in Frankfurt and headed to the United States (US).

Rothenberg's parents sent him out of the country following several ugly incidents in the country. On one occasion, he witnessed a demonstration at the Bahnhofspatz outside Frankfurt, with people yelling "Sig Heil". He wasn't meant to be there, and got into trouble with his parents for going.

After a long sea voyage, Rothenberg got to Ellis Island in New York and says, "the g-ds smiled on him" when distant family in Cincinnati fostered him.

His journey didn't end



Herman Rothenberg

there. After a few years at Walnut Hills High School in 1939, he left for South Africa to join his parents, who had relocated there.

He intended to return to the US, but at the age of 18, was conscripted into the army, where he served in Italy and Egypt and was discharged at the end of the war, with shell shock, in 1945.

Rothenberg has always been a radio enthusiast, becoming an electronics engineer and starting numerous technology-related companies.

There were numerous "firsts" in his career, including being the first company to bring microwave ovens to the country (for use in hospitals), and the first to do underfloor heating in South Africa.

He was also the first public passenger of the Gautrain in 2010, when it opened just before the FIFA World Cup.

"He wanted to be the first on the train. He was 89," his daughter, Joan, remembers. "My son, Larry, picked him up at 04:00, and they went to wait at Sandton Station. It was a freezing morning, and they were the very first passengers. He made international news."

Rothenberg attended a few World Cup soccer matches at the age of 90. He bought his last car, a Honda, at the age of 98. Joan was horrified, she says, because she wanted him to stop driving.

His adventurous nature included piloting his own light aircraft, which he often flew to Bloemfontein. He once flew Joan back from Durban because she couldn't face taking the train back.

Rothenberg met his wife, Doris Speyer, playing table tennis at Temple Israel. They have been married for 73 years.

They both loved playing tennis, and Rothenberg has always loved music and books – though he reads only nonfiction. Being a Holocaust refugee, he has had a lifelong obsession with Holocaust literature. Last year, he donated his huge Holocaust library to the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, including some titles not seen in South Africa before.

Rothenberg says he has "reason to be satisfied" with his life so far. Joan says: "He supplied all our needs, and is the most outstanding role model for my two sons."

Retirement hasn't slowed him down much. "He has an iPad and an iPhone, and he Skypes us twice a day and uses WhatsApp and Zoom," Joan says. "You can't tell him anything – he already knows it all."

"He's very disciplined," she says. "He never stops halfway, but he's also someone who always sees the glass half full."

## Still crazy for each other after 65 years

JULIE LEIBOWITZ

There is a saying that a successful marriage means falling in love many times, always with the same person, and this couldn't be truer for Esther and Ronnie Jankelowitz.



Esther and Ronnie Jankelowitz

The couple, who still work together in their agribusiness, Benfarm, in Benoni, celebrated their 65th wedding anniversary on Wednesday, 3 February.

The company, which has also stood the test of time, was started by Ronnie's father and is more than 100 years old.

Born only a few months apart, Ronnie and Esther met at school at the age of 15, and have been together ever since, marrying at the tender age of 22.

It really was a case of love at first sight. "My sister, Judy, brought home a lovely young girl. I nearly fell

over," Ronnie says of Esther. "I was very attracted to him," Esther says of Ronnie.

From those early days riding their bikes to school together to raising three children and still running a successful business together today in their eighties, the couple would definitely describe their experience as a "true love story".

In their time together, Ronnie completed 17 Comrades Marathons and climbed Kilimanjaro once. Esther was an accomplished marksman and member of the Benoni Pistol Club. She won a number of awards for combat and target shooting, a skill she passed down to all her children.

"You've got to work on happiness," Ronnie says. "It's not healthy to divorce. Accept that every five years or so, there will be change. Not all your years together will be good, but you have to work together, play together, and forget."

"Give each other space, but never go on holiday apart," Esther counsels. "Celebrate every year with your children."

"When I turned 80, I told Esther, 'I'm an old man, whatever I do, forgive me,'" Ronnie says.

This is the first year that the couple have had to celebrate their anniversary in masks, but they are grateful to be able to go to work every day in spite of COVID-19.

"This is the first year in 65 years that I couldn't kiss Esther happy anniversary," Ronnie says. "We rubbed elbows instead."



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# Fears over fertile rumours about vaccines

SHIRA HANAU – JTA

For much of the past year, the young mothers of Lakewood, New Jersey, have experienced the pandemic as much as a nuisance as a matter of life and death. That’s not to say the community hasn’t experienced its share of outbreaks; it has. Or that families haven’t lost loved ones; they have. But to hear the young mothers of the large Orthodox community tell it, the crisis part of the pandemic had passed. And to watch the Instagram videos of the frequent indoor weddings held in the town, where few if any guests wear masks, the dark days of last March were nearly forgotten. That has changed in recent weeks, as news of the death of a 37-year-old woman understood to be previously healthy swept through WhatsApp groups at the same time that misinformation took hold about the new coronavirus vaccines potentially threaten fertility. In a community where childbearing and mothering are marks of status among women, the two developments brought the pandemic’s seriousness home for many of the town’s young mothers. Now, as physicians there and

across the Orthodox world mount a campaign to convince women to get vaccinated when they’re eligible and be more careful if they’re not, some mothers in Lakewood are reconsidering their families’ approach to COVID-19 safety. Lakewood, with a haredi Orthodox community that makes up more than half the town’s population of more than 100 000, is by far New Jersey’s most fertile town. In 2015, it recorded 45 live births per 1 000 residents – a rate more than four times the state average and among the highest in the world. So when rumours started circulating about the effect of the soon-to-arrive COVID-19 vaccines on fertility, locals were alarmed. The rumours began right around the time New Jersey began offering vaccines, and they took root on Instagram and WhatsApp. In one WhatsApp group organised by Orthodox Jews to discuss COVID-19, a woman said she had been thinking of moving to Israel, but was reconsidering after the mayor of the Israeli city of Lod said he would require parents to be vaccinated before their children could come to school. In another group, women

compared Israel’s recommendation that pregnant women get the vaccine to Nazi doctors’ torture of Jews. “Disgusting! They are really making experimentation on Jews!” one woman wrote. Several shared information about a drug cocktail created by a Hasidic doctor, Vladimir Zelenko, that Donald Trump touted but was later found to be ineffective and even harmful in some cases. Someone else shared a video of Zelenko in which he said that young healthy people don’t need to get the vaccine. He suggested taking zinc to inhibit “viral replication” and said “in my medical opinion, no one needs the vaccine”. In early January, Michal Weinstein, an Orthodox Instagram influencer who lives on Long Island and has more than 21 000 followers, posted an Instagram livestream of Dr Lawrence Palevsky, a paediatrician and well-known anti-vaxxer who spoke at a 2019 symposium of anti-vaccine activists that was attended by hundreds of haredi Orthodox Jews in Monsey, New York. In the video, Palevsky suggested that the vaccines were a profit move by drug companies and that they could contribute to



Photo: Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images

infertility. Tova Herskovitz, a 30-year-old mother of four living in Tom’s River, New Jersey, a large Orthodox community neighbouring Lakewood, said many of her friends were confused about the vaccine. “It’s scary to know that there are women who are saying whatever they want about this vaccine,” she said, noting that Instagram influencers popular in the Orthodox community have spread misinformation. “A lot of my friends follow these people.” Dr Mark Kirschenbaum, a

paediatrician with a practice in Borough Park and Williamsburg, both Hasidic communities where weddings and other social events resumed their pre-pandemic pace months ago, said he thinks about 20% of his patient families are “vaccine sceptical”. Most vaccinate their children for other diseases because of school requirements, but the COVID-19 vaccines are optional if you can get one at all. To combat this, Orthodox healthcare professionals are turning their attention to building confidence in the new vaccines. The Jewish Orthodox Women’s Medical Association, an organisation for Orthodox women doctors and medical students, has been debunking misinformation in a fact sheet and podcast that it produces. And a group of Orthodox Jewish nurses are hosting a weekly call to discuss the vaccines to take place on hotlines that are accessible to women who don’t use the internet for religious reasons. Orthodox doctors said they’ve been getting dozens of phone calls about the safety of vaccines over the past two months, many with questions about whether the vaccines are safe for young women or women who are already pregnant. “If somebody asks me, I absolutely recommend that they take it,” said Rabbi Dr Aaron Glatt, the chief of infectious diseases and hospital epidemiologist at Mount Sinai South Nassau on Long Island. “You’re dealing with a real risk of dying or having serious complications from COVID-19 versus a theoretical risk when there’s no real theoretical reason why it should be dangerous. “There is zero evidence to suggest there’s any risk with infertility.” Some cite changing guidance from health authorities as a cause of confusion. The new coronavirus vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna haven’t been tested on pregnant women, leading the World Health Organization (WHO) originally to advise that only pregnant women who were at high risk for complications from COVID-19 get vaccinated. But over time, consensus has emerged that pregnancy itself represents a risk factor, and the WHO has changed its advice, though it still doesn’t advise the vaccine for all pregnant women and recommends that women speak to their doctors. New Jersey includes pregnancy in a list of conditions entitling people to early vaccines. New York just added it as well.

## Race against time to preserve Jewish languages

OPINION

SARAH BUNIN BENOR – JTA



I can’t stop thinking about Flory Jagoda, Joseph Sassoon, and Kitty Sassoon – three American Jews in their 90s who died last week. As an Ashkenazi Jew, I don’t share their family backgrounds. But their deaths hit home for me as they were among the last native speakers of endangered Jewish languages, languages I’m helping to document before it’s too late. Flory Jagoda devoted much of her life to preserving one of those languages. She grew up in Bosnia speaking Ladino, also known as Judeo-Spanish, which her ancestors had maintained since their expulsion from Spain in 1492. She survived the Holocaust in part through her musical skills, playing accordion and singing in Serbo-Croatian. For decades, she wrote and performed Ladino songs, maintaining the Sephardic folk traditions of her *Nona* (grandmother), innovating them, and bringing them to a wider audience.

Jagoda’s work to promote Sephardic language and culture just a week before she died. While Jagoda is among the last generation of native Ladino speakers, young people have continued her language-preservation work, as we see in Devin Naar’s archive of Ladino letters, books, and other historical treasures; Bryan Kirschen’s Ladino research and classes; and Sarah Aroeste’s contemporary Ladino music and children’s books. Due to these efforts, American Jews tend to know about the language. When I ask audiences which Jewish languages they have heard of, they generally mention Hebrew, Yiddish, and Ladino. People are less familiar with other Jewish languages, including Judeo-Shirazi (from Iran), Judeo-Malayalam (from India), and Jewish Neo-Aramaic (from the Kurdish region) – all critically endangered. The many endangered dialects of Judeo-Arabic have been documented to varying

in Myanmar, and Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in India, Joseph and Kitty spoke multiple languages, but their parents spoke Judeo-Arabic when they didn’t want the children to understand. As many American-born children of immigrants know, this means they picked up snippets of the language. As adults, living most recently in Los Angeles, Joseph and Kitty spoke Hindi and English together and didn’t have much opportunity to use Judeo-Arabic, but their granddaughters remember them using some words and phrases. Kitty used pet names for grandchildren, like *abdalnuana* for boys and *abdalki* for girls (both literally meaning “penance” like the Hebrew *kapara*) and frequently said *mashallah* (what G-d has willed) when expressing pride and joy. Joseph called his mother *Umm Shalom* (mother of Shalom, her first son), in line with Judeo-Arabic convention, and hurled joking insults at grandchildren, such as *harami* (thief) and *mamzerim* (bastards) – a Hebrew word used in several Jewish languages).

The Sassoons are characteristic of speakers of endangered languages. Unlike Jagoda, they didn’t devote their lives to cultural preservation. And they had varying degrees of knowledge of the language. Joseph grew up speaking more Judeo-Arabic than Kitty. While language documenters would prefer fluent speakers, even semi-speakers can provide important information, particularly when the language is severely endangered. Every day, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, more speakers of endangered languages die. If we don’t interview them now, we will lose our opportunity forever. Fortunately, several organisations have been doing this important work, including the Endangered Language Alliance, the Jewish Language Project, and Wikitongues in the United States, and the Mother Tongue Project in Israel. This isn’t just a Jewish issue. Of the 7 000 languages of the world, about half are now endangered. Organisations like these are our last hope of recording them before the last speakers are gone. We can all get involved by donating funds, volunteering, or connecting the projects with speakers of endangered languages.

May the memories of Flory Jagoda and Joseph and Kitty Sassoon be a blessing – and a wakeup call. We must act now to preserve their languages and cultures while we still can. • Sarah Bunin Benor is a professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies and Linguistics at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles. She directs the Jewish Language Project and edits the *Journal of Jewish Languages*.



Jagoda’s music introduced me to Ladino and ignited my interest in Jewish languages. In my fifth-grade class at Jewish day school, my classmates and I learned her catchy tune, *Ocho Kandelikas* (Eight Little Candles) along with Hebrew and English Chanukah songs. As a teenager, I heard Jagoda perform at a Jewish Folk Life Festival, of which she was a founder, and purchased a cassette of hers, *La Nona Kanta* (The Grandmother Sings). I still listen to those songs and now share them – especially my favourite, *Laz Tiyas* (The Aunties) – with my students when I teach Jewish languages. My students read an article about

extents, from Egypt to Morocco, from Syria to Yemen. And some young people are keeping the music alive, such as Neta Elkayam, A-WA, and Asher Shasho Levy for Moroccan, Yemenite, and Syrian traditions. Even so, most American Jews have never heard of Judeo-Arabic. Whenever a speaker dies, we lose an opportunity to learn and teach more about the nuances of this rich language and culture. Joseph and Kitty Sassoon died of COVID-19 within 12 hours of each other, months after their 76th anniversary. Both were children of Baghdadi parents who spoke Judeo-Arabic natively. Growing up in Yangon (formerly Rangoon)



# Captain Kaela sails the Mediterranean

TALI FEINBERG

It’s not often that you find a nice Jewish girl from Cape Town captaining a super yacht in the Mediterranean, but for 28-year-old Kaela Bermeister, it’s all in a day’s work.

As she prepares to set sail on a spontaneous trip to Mexico, she told the *SA Jewish Report* how hard work, a cool head, and a sense of adventure led her to this unusual and exciting career.

“I went to Herzlia for most of my school career. I found out about yachting as a career one evening at the end of matric. The company was advertising yachting courses and gap-year experiences working on super yachts, earning Euros tax free, and an expense-free lifestyle travelling the Mediterranean,” she says. “I kept it in mind as I studied a BCom in Financial Management through Unisa [the University of South Africa], while working as a waitress at Café Caprice in Camps Bay, which was lots of fun and a good way to boost myself into the hospitality industry.”

She saved up and paid for the basic courses one needs to work on a yacht, covering skills like survival, fire-fighting, and security awareness out at sea.

“My first job was on a 40 metre yacht based in Ibiza. The captain took me under his wing, and taught me everything I know, and then took me with him to work on a 50 metre yacht. I worked with him for five years, and was the only girl on deck. He invested in

all my courses because I gave so much time to them. I accumulated a ‘yacht master off shore’ qualification which allows you to drive a boat up to 26 metres.”

The yacht she is now skippering is a 26 metre yacht named Shockwave, built by a company in Sweden called Delta. Full of enthusiasm and knowledge, Bermeister says it’s “very unusual

looking for its size compared to your standard super yacht”.

“It’s made entirely out of carbon fibre, and it’s got three Volvo engines, which is also unusual for a boat this size. It goes very fast – up to 40 knots – which is about 80km an hour. It cruises through the water because it’s so light – it weighs only 60 tons – which is also unusual for a boat this size. They usually weigh up to 150 tons to 200 tons. It just sits on top of the water – we fly over the swell. You never feel the weather. Similar boats may rock on the waves and people feel queasy and things fly all over the place. We don’t have any of that.”

The yacht is owned by a family, and Bermeister hopes they will still be able to travel in the months ahead in spite of lockdowns around the world. “We will probably

go to Monaco for the Grand Prix, then the South of France, and maybe Italy and Sardinia. It’s much more fun to be at sea, to navigate, and come up with a travel plan than just to sit stationary.”

The pandemic has had a positive impact on her. “I’m grateful that it’s given me the opportunity to be on this yacht. At the beginning of the pandemic, I left my previous boat and got stuck in Cape Town for six months. It gave me time to think about what I want to

do, and to manifest a more ‘normal’ life, based in Mallorca with my apartment and friends, and not be on the go all the time, which I have been for the previous five years. Then I got this job. It was the perfect situation for me – exactly what I wanted.”

However, they have done a lot less travelling because of the pandemic. “I actually contracted



The Shockwave

ensuring everything is clean and shiny, even playing great music.

“Ultimately it’s about making sure the guests are having a great time from the minute they arrive to the minute they leave, with top quality service. If anything goes wrong, or the other crew member makes a mistake, it’s on me. I’m responsible for everyone on board as well as the boat.”

She doesn’t think she is the first Jewish person in this kind of role, but there are definitely fewer female captains than men. “I’m probably one of the very few Jewish women doing this, but there are a growing number of women stepping out on deck, getting qualifications, and becoming captains,” she says.

She plans to get more qualifications. “I would love to end up at naval college in the United Kingdom at the end of the year and do its course in three months, which is possible as my boss has agreed to invest in my courses going forward. I want to continue to work with this family – they are wonderful. They may build a bigger boat and if they do, they will take me with them, and I’ll be qualified to work on it.”

She loves what she does. “It’s a great way to save money and invest, and it’s been a lot of fun. It definitely beats having an office job.” And, in spite of the responsibility and workload she takes on, she says, “I can’t remember the last time I was stressed out because of my job.” As she sets sail for her next adventure, the world really is her oyster.



Kaela Bermeister

## Letters

### LOSS CAN TEACH US HOW TO LIVE

My name is Lisa. I work as a child and adult psychologist in our community.

It’s been almost eight years since my husband and child passed away. I survived the car accident, but they didn’t. My broken bones healed, but my broken heart has been the biggest challenge to live with. Last year, my beloved father passed away. Like you, I’m no stranger to loss.

I see our community reeling from loss upon loss. I see how frightened many are as the distance between death and life has closed or narrowed for so many.

I have learned as a psychologist and survivor that death is as much a part of life as breath. I have learned that pain is a natural response to death, and that in life, pain is inevitable but suffering is optional. I understand that “suffering is what our mind does to us”. (David Kessler).

David Kessler is an American grief expert. He has repeatedly been called upon to help the nation understand the psychological impact of COVID-19 and the loss on all levels it leaves in its wake. Kessler’s latest book is titled, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief*. It’s our destiny to make meaning, to learn from life. As I sit with parents and children

in loss and hold my own, this is some of what I have come to understand:

- Enjoy your children;
- Enjoy your life; and
- Teach yourselves how to take control of your mind.

As a parent, I remember how busy life can be. We take care of our children’s physical needs. We provide, feed, clothe, educate, and stimulate them, but do we make enough time to enjoy them? To join a child in play is remarkable. Here we are able to delight in the joy they bring to our world. How precious they are, and how precious it is to be alive!

The more we are present in our lives, the less we fear death.

Now, I take the time to turn inward, to be still on a regular basis and ask: what gives my life meaning? Then I prioritise it.

When you are deeply engaged in life, there isn’t too much space for fear and suffering. The pain will be there, but the living will be larger. In this way, we, too, reduce our suffering.

My prayer is simple: may we have the capacity to allow loss to teach us all how to live a more meaningful life. – Lisa Michalson, Cape Town

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## A tradition of friendship

*Shaun Zagnoev*



In last week's column, I wrote about the global #WeRemember campaign that had been run for International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Now, under his banner of the Clive Mashishi

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

# Oxford/AstraZeneca not demisting COVID

I believe spectacle wearers should stand at the front of the line when it comes to receiving the vaccine. Not that we could find the line if we are being compliant and are wearing a mask and spectacles at the same time. I haven't had a visually clear moment since March 2020, and will never really know the number of people I have either failed to greet, greeted in error, or handed my driver's licence to. The suffering of those of us who are visionally impaired is unquestionably the greatest and should qualify us

The failure of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is hugely disappointing. What should have been the start of the immunisation programme ended before it even began. It's discouraging for all of us. But more so for those of us who now have to live for an additional few months wondering what it is that we're not seeing.

Howard Feldman



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*This column is paid for by WIZO SA*

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