



South African Jewish Report

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Mogoeng ruling a moment of reckoning

TALI FEINBERG

When news broke on 4 March 2021 that the Judicial Conduct Committee (JCC) had directed Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng to apologise unconditionally for statements he made about Israel, it felt for many like a moment of truth, whether they were supporters or detractors of the chief justice.

Mogoeng was taken to task for comments he made during a webinar in June 2020, and later at a prayer meeting when he doubled down and refused to apologise for what he had said.

Africa4Palestine, the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions South Africa (BDS SA) coalition and the Women's Cultural Group laid complaints against him, saying he had flouted rules regarding judicial ethics. The matter was adjudicated by Judge Phineas Mojapelo.

Amongst other points, the chief justice said in the webinar that, "We are denying ourselves the opportunity of being a game changer in the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The forgiveness that was displayed by President Mandela is an asset that we must use around the world."

Mogoeng expressed support for Israel and the Palestinians, and said, "I'm under an obligation as a Christian to love Israel, to pray for the peace of Jerusalem." He stressed that he was bound by the policy of the South African government, and didn't reject it.

But in his judgement, Mojapelo said that Mogoeng had gone too far. "Whether we like it or not, the chief justice isn't like any other citizen of South Africa. He is the head of the

judiciary and is subject to the restraints of that office, including the ethical rules which govern the conduct of each and every single judge. He is subject to those restraints of his office in his official and private capacity," he wrote.

"Members of the judiciary have a duty individually and collectively to publicly accept their own peer-review process and to strengthen its credibility. Instead, he showed his disregard for the process by flaunting the fact that he would never apologise for his conduct, even [in Mogoeng's words] 'if 50 million people marched for ten years'."

Mojapelo provided the exact words of an apology and retraction that the chief justice must make by 14 March 2021. At the time of going to print, Mogoeng has remained

silent.

A senior member of the legal profession in South Africa, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Mojapelo is a respected judge who wouldn't make a biased ruling. The ruling, he said, was more about Mogoeng "straying into territory he shouldn't" rather than what he said about Israel. However, he noted that another judge had strongly condemned Israel in the past and was never reprimanded, and "he should have been".

But writing for *Business Day*, Milton Shain, emeritus professor of history at the University of Cape Town, noted among other points, "What seems to be drowned out is the vehemence with which his [the chief justice] words were greeted at the outset, as

opposed to the relative silence around his comments on the COVID-19 vaccine, not to mention the unusual alacrity with which the JCC has acted on the matter. Should we be surprised? The chief justice deviated from the national script.

"While antagonism towards Israel cannot axiomatically be equated with antisemitism, it's apparent that the discourse of anti-Zionism often goes beyond the bounds of normal political rhetoric and frequently betrays vulgar Jew-hatred. Israel alone is signalled out for obloquy, while the human-rights abuses of many other states are ignored. Mogoeng made this clear. In so doing, he crossed a red line."

Meanwhile, Sara Gon, the head of strategic engagement at the Institute of

Race Relations, said, "What Mogoeng said about Israel wasn't particularly inflammatory, even though it seemingly contradicted government policy. He has said far worse in the past, and no complaints have been made.

"The moniker of Israel as an 'apartheid' state applied by the ANC [African National Congress] is at risk with Mogoeng's utterances. This causes a problem because it questions the ANC's position, yet the ANC supposedly holds that it's available to act as an 'honest' broker in reaching peace. The ANC should have ignored it instead of bringing it up in parliament. Its failure to take action on previous misconduct means it's an anti-Israel knee-jerk reaction."

Gon doesn't think the ruling breaches Mogoeng's religious rights, and said his right to free speech is limited to the code of conduct. "Judges are required to be careful about their public statements. I suspect if he'd worded it more judicially, he could have got away with it. But he's operating in a milieu where his words will be watched.

"It is, however, a question of seriousness and, other than offending certain groups, it hasn't been a crisis anywhere near the crisis that has beset the judicial system by the failure of the JCC to get to grips with the matters against Judge [John] Hlope over more than a decade. The contrast is disgraceful."

Rowan Polovin, the national chairperson of the South African Zionist Federation, said the organisation was concerned by the ruling for three reasons. "First, the original comments of the chief justice were legitimate, fair, and impartial. They gave full credence to both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His comments were in

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One year into lockdown



Photo: Alon Cohen

Selwyn Segal residents lighting the Shabbos candles.

See story on page 5

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Student barred from gap year speaks out

TALI FEINBERG

Demi Putziger, a King David Victory Park (KDVP) matriculant in 2020, was looking forward to her gap-year programme this year and was devastated when, at the last minute, she was told she wasn't welcome because her mother isn't Jewish.

This was in spite of paying a hefty deposit three months earlier and an intense campaign by programme organisers for her to join it.

Not only was Putziger, 18, left disheartened and infuriated, but her two closest friends have decided not to attend the programme in light of what happened to her.

Putziger asked that we not name the programme and its organisers because she doesn't want them to be victimised. Rather, she just wants to highlight the way she was treated and to create awareness.

"It was a huge shock. Who would have seen this coming?" she says. "I wish they had told me from the start. I'm most upset that they led me on, and that I haven't been able to apply to universities or mentally prepare myself for this sudden change."

She says that since finding out about it, she hasn't been able to bring herself to light Shabbos candles, or say Friday night *brochas*. "I'm nauseated and

disappointed to see the community and those in authority turn their back on me like this," she says.

Her father, a regular donor to the community, is furious at the way his daughter has been treated, and has decided to withdraw financial contributions to the community.

Before committing to the programme, Putziger planned to study abroad, and would have left in February 2021 had she not made the commitment to go on the gap year. Now, she has to wait until August 2021 to go, and is at home, unemployed and struggling to find a job to occupy her time before

she leaves. She applied to work at a local community organisation, but was told it wouldn't accept her because she is leaving South Africa in six months' time.

The gap-year programme's organisers have since paid back her deposit. "It's not about the money, it's about moral consensus. They should have been more specific about their religious requirements before the deposit was paid. When you pay for something, you expect something in return, especially if it's in the thousands and a decision for a whole year."

Going back to the beginning of her Jewish journey, she says she attended a non-Jewish private school for most of her school career as it had a good reputation and was nearby. But then she was selected to go to the Maccabi Games in 2017, and "it changed my life".

After much thought, "I told my parents I wanted to move to KDVP," Putziger says. "We met [KDVP headmaster] Mr [Andrew] Baker, and he was so welcoming. It was the best decision I could have made. It couldn't have been a more warm and accepting environment."

From that moment, she was welcomed by peers, teachers, and on any programme she wanted to attend. "In Grade 10 [2018], I went on Hadracha and Bnei Akiva camp, and in Grade 11 [2019] I went on the March of the Living and Habonim Dror camp. I wanted to try everything, and every programme had no problem with allowing me to join."

"In January 2020, I went overseas with my parents to look at different universities, and decided that this was where I wanted to go after I matriculated. But then, the programme organiser came to school and promoted the gap year," she said.

"He said they would be more than happy to have me join the programme. My friend and I made the decision to go, and he urged us to pay our deposit as soon as possible. I did so in October 2020. One of my other friends said she would join us, and the three of us made a pact that we would be each other's support systems. Then in December 2020, the organiser phoned

me out of nowhere to say they couldn't let me join the programme because my mother isn't Jewish."

The incident raises the question of how pupils in the Jewish school system whose mothers aren't Jewish can be excluded from programmes at the whim of organisers and authorities.

"I'm speaking out because King David has taught me to have a voice. I need to speak up and tell the truth. If this is the way people are treated in our tiny community, then people will leave, and the community will diminish," says Putziger.

One of her friends, who asked to remain anonymous, says she chose not to go on the programme after what happened to Putziger, and hasn't been paid back her deposit. "We planned the whole of last year what we were going to do when we were in Israel together. It was our little 'light' after all the uncertain times," she says. "It was just so exciting, and then suddenly the excitement was ripped away. I was upset and felt disgusted with the programme. I don't want to be associated with the people who turned her away."

In response to questions from the *SA Jewish Report*, one of the gap-year programme's organisers said, "We are deeply regretful about the hurt and disappointment for Demi and her family. The pain that arose out of these circumstances is something for which we apologise unreservedly."

"The ordering in which Demi's application was conducted was unusual, and seems possibly at the root

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Demi Putziger

Torah Thought

Passing the final exam

Transparency and accountability are the buzzwords for 21st century corporate governance. No doubt all upright, honourable people welcome every effort to stop corruption and dishonesty in whatever sphere of society – corporate, government, or personal. But is this really a new phenomenon?

This week, at the very end of the Book of Exodus, we will be reading that way back in the days of Moses, a transparent and detailed accounting audit was conducted over the donations made by the Israelites towards the building of the sanctuary and its sacred vessels.

The contributions of gold, silver, and copper were all weighed out and tallied so that no one could cast any aspersions on the integrity of Moshe and his team.

Ethics of the Fathers reminds us to consider that one day, we will all face ultimate accountability. Each of us will stand before the heavenly tribunal to give a *din v'cheshbon*, a "full justification and an accounting" for the way we lived our lives.

It's fascinating to note that somehow, the Talmud (Shabbos, 31a) was able to get wind of the actual questions we will be asked by that supernal tribunal. Do you know what the very first question is going to be? Surprise! It's not, 'Did you

believe in G-d, fast on Yom Kippur, or join a Pesach seder'. Believe it or not, the first question in this final exam of exams is, "Did you deal faithfully in business?" Not how religious you were, but whether you conducted your business affairs with integrity. Were you honest and fair?"

The second question, however, does go to the heart of our Jewishness. "Did you set aside fixed time for Torah study?" Familiarising oneself with Torah and becoming a knowledgeable Jew is the key that opens the doors to everything else in Jewish life.

Is it not an anomaly that many of our most brilliant legal minds – attorneys, advocates, and judges – may have never opened a single page of the Talmud, Judaism's classic encyclopaedia of law? Or that some of our finest doctors may be completely unfamiliar with the medical writings of Maimonides, the great 12th century physician and scholar? Or that our brightest business magnates remain Jewishly ignorant, even illiterate?

When it comes to crossing a red light, ignorance of the law is no excuse. No traffic cop will buy the story that the driver didn't know it was illegal. In our day and age, with so many new opportunities for Torah study available, Jewish ignorance just doesn't wash. If the Talmud was once a closed book, today it's available in English, and there are teachers to go with it too. Opportunities for Jewish studies abound in every community. And on Zoom, from the comfort of your own lounge! You can even find yourself a virtual rabbi!

Let's hope that when they pull us over to ask us a few questions, we'll all be able to answer in the affirmative.

Rabbi Yossy Goldman, Sydenham Shul



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'Vaccine apartheid' – the latest anti-Israel libel

JORDAN MOSHE

Mike Shingange, the first deputy president of the National Education Health and Allied Workers' Union (NEHAWU), lambasted Israel for "war crimes and violation of international law" in relation to vaccines in an opinion piece on *Eyewitness News* (EWN) last Thursday, 4 March.

"Apartheid Israel has never cared for the lives of Palestinians, and the outbreak of coronavirus has further highlighted the sheer disregard for the lives of the Palestinian people," he wrote. "The outbreak of the virus has exacerbated the problems faced by the people of Gaza."

Israel continues to be demonised the world over as it forges ahead with its vaccination rollout. Accusations of "vaccine apartheid", refusal to assist Palestinians, and other falsities abound, all the while ignoring the true extent to which the Jewish state is, in fact, offering help to the Palestinian Authority (PA).

Shingange accuses "apartheid Israel" of blockading vaccines destined for healthcare workers in the Gaza Strip, saying it is "one of the biggest atrocities that hasn't received the attention it deserves, and it continues unabated due to the deafening silence of the international community".

He further asserts that Israel hasn't offered any of its own vaccines to a struggling Palestinian healthcare infrastructure which "has been demolished by countless Israel military attacks".

He goes on to write, "As an occupying power, apartheid Israel has vehemently refused to share its stock with Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip."

"The Israeli government has failed to ensure that the occupied territories have adequate medical supplies, including a comprehensive plan for infection control and prevention."

Shingange's accusation about the "blockade" of vaccines comes weeks after the issue was resolved. In February, Palestinian officials accused Israel of preventing the first shipment of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine (co-developed by Israel's Hadassah Hospital together with Russia's health authorities) from entering the Gaza Strip. Israeli legislators reportedly feared that the vaccines would land in the hands of Hamas, but ultimately approved the transfer within two days. A vaccination drive has since been launched in the Gaza region.

Shingange's allegations about Israel's refusal to assist the Palestinians have no basis in fact, says Sara Gon, policy fellow at the Institute of Race Relations.

"If Israel were an individual, this letter would be defamatory," she told the *SA Jewish Report*. "I would challenge him to cite all his sources."

"Shingange clearly knows nothing about the fact that the Palestinians are administratively autonomous. He knows nothing about Oslo, and is repeating falsehoods that have already been debunked."

Rowan Polovin, the national chairperson of the South African Zionist Federation, agrees. "NEHAWU's malicious comment on this issue should be rejected with the contempt that it deserves," he says. "The spread of medical-related blood libels against the Jewish people has a dangerous history, and we strongly reject

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this malevolent libel against the Jewish state."

Vaccine-inspired accusations against Israel are sadly further expression of anti-Israel and antisemitic rhetoric within the context of the pandemic, says Gon.

"COVID-19 has produced a range of libels that have one common element: the Jews, the

ruling party only. Israel, on the other hand, has reportedly vaccinated more Arab Muslim men, women, and children as a percent of its total population than any other Arab country in the Middle East region.

While Israel is under no obligation to do so, it has made a concerted effort to assist Gaza with



Palestinians wait to be tested for the coronavirus at a health centre in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip

Zionists, and/or the state of Israel are to blame for the pandemic or stand to gain from it," she says.

According to Gon, in the first week of January, Sky News, CNN, and the BBC News channel all misrepresented the story about Israel and COVID-19 vaccinations and Israel's alleged obligation and failure to vaccinate Palestinians. This contradicts the Oslo Accords, which affirms the legal administration of the PA over the Gaza Strip and Palestinian areas of the West Bank, including healthcare services and vaccinations.

Says Gon, "Israeli media monitors, lawyers, journalists and others have pointed out that Israel has no such obligation because Palestinian Arabs aren't Israeli citizens."

Says Polovin, "Under the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians are accountable for the vaccination of the population under their control. Palestinian officials have themselves repeatedly confirmed this point. The PA has been able to procure vaccines from a variety of sources including the COVAX [COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access] facility in the same way South Africa does."

Israeli ambassador to South Africa, Lior Keinan, stressed that the Oslo Accords granted the PA full autonomy and responsibility.

"Israel cannot decide what the PA can buy or from where," he says. "Imagine if we dictated to the PA on its health system, telling it which vaccines to take."

"We cannot win either way. If Israel does nothing, it's blamed. If it does anything, it's also blamed."

"Israel will ensure that whatever medical supplies need to enter Gaza, will enter. The fact that it may not arrive relates not to Israel but to those who control Gaza. When corrupt terrorists like Hamas are in control, do you really believe supplies will go to where they are needed most?"

Indeed, reports have emerged that the Palestinian leadership has siphoned off some of the vaccines that have arrived in Gaza to date, distributing them amongst the ranks of the

its vaccination programme in spite of repeated refusals and illogical decisions.

"In 2020, the PA refused planeloads and millions of dollars of healthcare assistance from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to fight COVID-19 because the UAE planes landed at Israel's Ben Gurion Airport," says Gon. "The PA tried to obtain an entire vaccine inventory free of charge, but international organisations and state powers were unwilling to comply. So, Israel supplied PA government officials with an initial batch."

About 20% of necessary vaccines are expected to be donated to the PA, she says.

"Holding out for free vaccines accounted for months-long delays in PA acquisition," Gon says. "Had the PA asked Israel for assistance, it would be farther along in vaccinating its public."

Polovin agrees. "Not only has Israel provided the Palestinians with thousands of doses out of its own stockpile, it has worked to facilitate a supply of the vaccine to the PA from other sources, including [so far] 10 000 doses from Russia, and 37 000 doses from the World Health Organization."

A plan is also in place for Israel to inoculate about 100 000 Palestinian workers from the country's own supply, and Jerusalem is part of an effort to help procure about four million more doses from the government in Moscow. Still, the Palestinians continue to reject much of the assistance.

"The media have simply ignored these facts, and continue to promulgate the vaccine libel against Israel," says Gon. "In a grotesque inversion of roles, the Palestinians have now belatedly jumped on the Israel-demonisation bandwagon that the Western media have provided for them."

Therefore, Shingange is simply perpetuating a false narrative, says Keinan.

"Why should we address open lies that have nothing to do with reality?" he says. "Instead of writing these claims, perhaps Shingange should ask whether a worker's union like his could be allowed to exist in Gaza under Hamas. It is the reason why vaccines aren't reaching people."

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Chaos and catastrophe – COVID-19's 'annus horribilis'

NICOLA MILTZ

Exactly a year ago, COVID-19 entered our living rooms as news broke of the first case of the dreaded disease striking a member of our community.

Johannesburg businessman Gary Sweidan's private WhatsApp video started doing the rounds. The post informed his friends about testing positive for the virus following his return from a trip to New York.

Along with alarm and dismay, the virus hit the community barely a week or so after the first few cases were detected in KwaZulu-Natal by locals who had travelled to Italy.

Sweidan, 44, soon became the community's poster boy for calm in the face of the COVID-19 curse after his post went viral followed by panic, stigma, and terror.

He and communal organisations went into overdrive to foster unity, allay fears, and equip people with what little knowledge was available.

"Last year was chaos," Sweidan told the *SA Jewish Report* this week. It still baffles him that his wife never contracted the virus even though she sat next to him on the long-haul flight when he first started to feel symptoms.

"There is so much about this illness that is still unknown. I guess you can say I was lucky in that I didn't land up in hospital, but I felt horrible make no mistake, and it took me months to get over the fatigue," he said.

Marking the anniversary, doctors worldwide have taken to reflecting on an incomprehensible year that caught them totally off guard.

"We did suspect that a pandemic such as COVID-19 would ultimately be unleashed on an unprepared human population," said Professor Barry Schoub, emeritus professor in virology at the University of the Witwatersrand and former director of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.

"Many of us in the virology community believed it was a matter of time before a widespread pandemic

of an animal-sourced virus would cross the species barrier and spread rapidly into a vulnerable human population. But we didn't foresee how it would actually turn out."

Also the chairperson of the South African Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, Schoub said that in retrospect, experts should have been more alert and responsive to certain cues.

"The combination of humans intruding into animal ecosystems, the caging, transporting, and consumption of exotic animal species, together with the globalisation of human movement, have all ensured that an event such as a global pandemic of COVID-19 would be inevitable," he said.

However, he agreed that no one could have anticipated and have prepared for the explosive pandemic of a respiratory-spread virus which COVID-19 turned out to be.

Specialist physician pulmonologist Dr Carron Zinman of Netcare Linksfield Hospital said the effects of the disease had been "unprecedented and overwhelming from the scale, the severity, the clinical spectrum of this disease, to the effect of this virus on the human body".

It had behaved in a way that was "completely dissimilar" to the usual seasonal coronavirus influenza infections doctors were used to.

There is the early viral-response phase, which generates symptoms that people are used to by now. If you have mild COVID-19 illness, it means that your immune system has controlled the disease, Zinman said.

"However, a percentage of people go on to a more severe form of COVID-19 with direct involvement of the lungs and every other organ in the body," she said.

"The lay public have learnt a new vocabulary from this disease which includes the words 'cytokine storm', a term we dread as it heralds the onset of the severest form of COVID-19. Another unanticipated element is the hypercoagulable state associated with this infection, causing clotting in small and large blood vessels."

The pandemic rapidly became a scientific challenge of the utmost urgency, and the global scientific community all become students of this new disease, said Schoub.

"The challenge was met head-on and with incredibly rapid progress and success. Within 10 months of isolating the virus, a protective human vaccine had been developed and rolled out into the human population."

Doctors and healthcare workers across the spectrum understand the disease better now than they did a year ago.

Said Zinman, "We know how it's transmitted and know what behaviour is considered safe in terms of preventing infection. We know what the 'danger signs' are, and have learnt which medication is effective and which has proven to be of no benefit. We understand immunity better than we did before."

Sadly, said Schoub, the cost to society of the past year of COVID-19 has been high, as medical science struggled to cope with the new emergency.

"Faced with a menacing and dark threat, societies are wont to respond in three ways," said Schoub. "First, by taking refuge in conspiracy theories, much of them authored from science fiction. Second, by vainly searching for a miracle drug, often by trying to repurpose medications designed and used for other purposes such as Chloroquine in the first wave and Ivermectin in the second wave. Third, by pushing the blame game, sometimes fuelled by an ever-eager, sensation-driven media."

While so much has been learnt, doctors agree that there is no "magic cure".

"There is no pill or injection or anything else that will make it go away," said Zinman.

But the management of patients has advanced significantly. While there is no anti-COVID-19 drug, there is oxygen therapy, steroids, and anticoagulants. And of course, there are vaccines to lessen the severity, although there is the growing threat of "immune-



escape variants", said Schoub.

"We also know what doesn't work," said Zinman, citing antiretrovirals, antibiotics [unless there is a bacterial superinfection], Chloroquine, and convalescent plasma. Ivermectin remains unproven, with preliminary controlled studies showing lack of efficacy.

Zinman said doctors had come to terms with the disease's "unpredictability", and the devastating effects on multiple systems in the body.

"We're better off because we're comfortable with COVID-19 as a disease. The medication prescribed is very familiar now, and can be written by rote. The bloods we use to monitor our patients with have become standard practice. We recognise the extreme anxiety present in our patients and manage it, trying to make the whole experience more bearable. We've surrendered to a completely different way of practicing medicine without compromising standards," she said.

"We've learnt a lot, but there is still a lot to learn."

The second year of COVID-19 will again see cycles of waves, said Schoub, especially as winter approaches.

Its control will still depend only on human behaviour as the vaccine rollout progresses towards achieving community immunity. He hopes the pandemic will be brought under control in 2022.

"Medical science has learnt a lot over the past year, and we can only hope that the knowledge gained will make the biomedical fraternity better prepared and equipped for the next animal-sourced pandemic."



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Mogoeng ruling a moment of reckoning

>>Continued from page 1

line with South African foreign policy, and he took care to note that he is bound by South African government policy on the issue.

"Second, the effect of this ruling is to make balanced – let alone pro-Israel – positions politically controversial in this country. If the chief justice had expressed an anti-Israel position, he would have been applauded by those who instead seek to damage him. This falls in stark contrast to judges who have taken political positions or expressed an opinion on controversial matters but have never been questioned or sanctioned.

"Third, this leads to a form of 'cancel culture' in our country. If one is not blatantly anti-Israel, then one's comments aren't accepted in the political discourse. It leads to a chilling effect, where pro-Israel or even balanced opinions are silenced. The JCC in this matter may have handed the government a blank cheque to silence those with whom it disagrees through this ruling."

Others saw the fight as just beginning, and boldly expressed their support. "The chief justice must never and will never apologise for praying for the peace of Jerusalem," said South African Friends of Israel (SAFI) spokesperson and radio personality Bafana Modise. "If you expect an apology, forget about it. We serve the G-d of Israel. Israel is the homeland of Christianity. We will not be silenced by you. Chief Justice must not ever and will never, ever, apologise for praying for Israel. We will never apologise for praying for the G-d of Israel."

SAFI and other Christian organisations have created a petition calling for "President Cyril Ramaphosa to

publicly support [Mogoeng] and his right to speak out and express his Christian views to bless Israel and pray for the peace of Jerusalem." At the time of writing, 114 600 people had signed it. One supporter wrote, "I'm signing because we still live in a country with free speech. Why can those opposing Israel speak out, but Christians that support Israel must be muted?"

African Christian Democratic Party leader Kenneth Meshoe, who founded the non-profit organisation Defend Embrace Invest (In) Support Israel (DEISI), said in response to the ruling, "The JCC's finding ... is very disturbing and unsettling. DEISI views this finding as a threat to the religious freedom of all South Africans, particularly members of the Judeo-Christian faith."

Vivienne Myburgh, the national director of the South African Branch of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, said, "We fully support the right of [Mogoeng] to express his Christian convictions and support for peace in the holy land, and we denounce those who are mischievously misinterpreting his message towards their hateful agenda.

"His message has been one of love for all people caught up in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He should be applauded for his impartial and unprejudiced stance. This kind of calumny actually exacerbates divisions and increases religious and social tensions at home and in Israel. Any attempt to abrogate [his] constitutional freedom should cause all peace and freedom-loving South Africans to be most wary and alarmed."

A year into lockdown, Chev residents show fighting spirit

TALI FEINBERG

Can you imagine 365 days without leaving your place of residence during a pandemic that plagues such facilities, and surviving not only with your health intact, but your sanity as well? This is the reality for 1 000 residents in the Chevrah Kadisha (the Chev) of Johannesburg's seven care facilities. Their lives were irrevocably changed when the residences went into a sudden lockdown on Friday, 13 March, 2020.

"It was so sudden. The day before, I had been out for coffee, and then the next day, we were in lockdown," recalls 84-year-old Clara Taub, a resident at Our Parents Home (OPH). "Not seeing family or being able to hug your grandchildren is like a feeling of homesickness ... it's hard to explain," she says.

Taub contracted COVID-19 in July 2020. She was hospitalised and survived. "It was really horrid. I was scared. I can't remember much, but the care I got was incredible. I've never felt alone while being at OPH. Lockdown isn't easy, but you've got to have faith, and know that every journey comes to an end. It's how you manage the journey that's important."

Besides this experience, she has thrived under the new circumstances. As a former speech and drama teacher, she continues to work. She coaches over Zoom, and has written books which she sells online.

She delights in playing Trivial Pursuit over the phone with a friend, has started a newspaper with the same friend, and writes limericks and poetry for the Chev's poetry competition – which she won! She also shops online and watches Netflix, but most of the time she's so busy "that the days just fly by!"

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* on 5 March 2021, one year since the first COVID-19 case was identified in South Africa, Chief Executive Saul Tomson recalled how fast things changed at the Chev. "We were one of the first organisations to go into lockdown in the community and the country. It

was such a shock for everyone.

"Residents were planning to see their families on the weekend, and then we decided to lock down. There were people coming from overseas to visit their parents, so it really had the potential to become a major issue. The president was yet to address the nation, but given what was going on in care homes across the world, we felt we had no choice."

It took strength and courage to make such a decision, but Tomson said the fact that he had been in London two weeks prior as the pandemic began to rage wildly across Europe helped to guide his thinking.

"My mindset was different because I happened to be there. I could see how serious it was. In South Africa, it was still such a foreign concept. People said I was crazy, overreacting, and overly

conservative. But I had already been messaging from London telling the organisation to stock up on supplies – everything we thought we might need."

Tomson wants to pay tribute to the 1 000 residents' "sense of courage and conviction". "They are desperate to hug and hold their families. They have had to adjust to a new way of living while knowing that they are the most vulnerable population. Residential care homes are 'ground zero' for this virus."

To honour the residents for their resilience during such a tough year, the Chev has launched a campaign for 1 000 community members to donate R18, which will buy a cupcake and a rose for each resident – a symbol of the fact that the community is thinking of them. There will also be a very special Friday night dinner this Shabbat at each facility, catered by a community caterer who has also battled over the past year.

"Each dinner has been sponsored by the children of one of the residents at that facility. For the caterers, it will be their first 1 000-person event they are catering in a year. And the residents will be spoilt and celebrated."

Looking at recent statistics, Tomson notes that in Spain, 59% of COVID-19 deaths were from residents of long-term care facilities. In Belgium, it was 57%; in Sweden, 47%; in the United States, 38%; and in the United Kingdom, 27%. Yet at this stage of the pandemic, the mortality rate at the Chev's care facilities is tiny in comparison. In the second wave, there were just a handful of infections across all homes. "It's nothing short of a miracle. We thank Hashem every day," he said.

"COVID-19 has devastated aged homes, and we've seen it

locally in organisations that don't have the protocols, discipline, or finances. Without this community, there's no way we could have mounted this defence. For example, we've conducted nearly 3 000 COVID-19 tests in the past year. That runs into several million rand."

Possibly unique to the organisation is the fact that it saw the challenges of COVID-19 not only as a clinical issue, but a psychosocial one too. "Yes, this virus can be devastating to one's health, but we also have to look at the alienation and depression that it has caused. Our community social workers have witnessed a huge increase in mental-health issues in the Jewish community, and from the start, we saw this as a dual challenge – to protect residents' physical health as well as to protect them emotionally and spiritually.

"That's why our social services and life-enrichment teams worked so hard to make them feel seen, heard and loved. Even at the height of our intense lockdown, when they were confined to their rooms, they would get two to three visits a day, comfort packs, phone calls, a gift for Shabbos, or flowers. And, living in a facility means that they always have each other."

Tomson said that ironically, the Chev possibly had less deaths in the past 12 months than in a "normal" year, and it was "one of our healthiest years. Our four doctors have prescribed significantly less antibiotics compared to a usual year! This is obviously due to infection control, segregation, no visitors, and wearing masks."

So, what's changed, and what has stayed the same? "Today, we are less anxious. COVID-19 is less of an unknown. I remember the first six months, just waiting for 'that call'. I don't feel that way anymore because we have experience," said Tomson.

"The way we work has had to change. Everything from fundraising to staff team building, to keeping people motivated and inspired. What has also changed is that residents with family overseas have had more frequent contact thanks to technology and innovation. We have dedicated staff members facilitating video calls, connecting residents with their loved ones.


"But our commitment hasn't changed, nor has our relationship with the community. People haven't turned their backs, even in difficult times. They have dug deep, and found ways to show their support. So I say a massive 'thank you' to our residents for their courage and conviction, to the community for its unfaltering dedication, and to our staff for being the heroes they are.

"They say a society is judged by how it treats its elderly and for us, every life is treasured. It's a feather in our cap as a community."




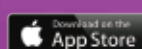
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Stamp out cancel culture

When our judiciary orders a person to apologise for something they said, which was 100% their opinion and uttered in a personal capacity, what kind of message does that put out?

When any person gives an opinion which is unpopular and they are lambasted and ostracised for it, what are we doing?

When we stop printing and selling books written by an age-old children's literature giant like Dr Seuss because of how he portrayed racial stereotypes, what's going on?

And are these experiences even comparable?

In terms of Chief Justice Mogoeng Mogoeng being ordered to apologise for his statements about Israel, I can only imagine what this giant of a man is going through right now. To put a man of this stature through an experience like this, which is humiliating at best, seems absurd.

I do understand that there are certain categories of professions or careers in which an individual's views have an impact on their public image. In this instance, it might not be fitting for a judge to publicise his or her contentious views because people may believe it could impact on their judgement. However, one really can expect someone of this stature to be able to separate their own views and beliefs from their professional judgement.

But, much more than that, if Mogoeng is going to be censured or censored for his statements, then this needs to be done across the board. When a judge made anti-Israel statements, why wasn't he hauled over the coals? Or is it simply because Mogoeng's views aren't popular with a certain powerful segment of our population? And so, they believe he needs to be brought down a peg or two...

In Mogoeng's case, he was supportive of Israel and Palestinians, and suggested that the South African government get involved in the peace process in the Middle East. How terribly controversial!

Then he went out on a limb, once again defending his right to make such statements when people (read: anti-Israel activists) lambasted him for "supporting" what they call "apartheid Israel".

So, they took him to the Judicial Conduct Committee. There, another respected judge decided that Mogoeng had gone too far, and demanded he apologise.

It will be interesting to see what our esteemed judge does. I would be surprised, based on previous events, if he does apologise.

And if he does, what does that say about freedom of speech? This is something fundamental to the rights we hold in this country. Unless it is hate speech or provokes violence, we are legally allowed to voice our opinion. In fact, diversity of opinion is supposedly encouraged.

However, it seems to me that certain subjects or viewpoints are red-ringed as being unacceptable by specific "activists", and they stop at nothing to eradicate these views from the public arena. That is, whether you are a judge, journalist, celebrity, or just a person with strong views.

Therein lies the problem.

Ever heard of the term 'cancel culture'? I hadn't until recently. It's defined by Forbes.com as "unaccountable groups successfully applying pressure to punish someone for perceived wrong opinions". It's a form of ostracism, either in social media, in person, or in professional circles. Victims of cancel culture are supposedly "cancelled" or shut down, and the consequences can be devastating to one's reputation and life.

Could we say that Mogoeng is a victim of cancel culture?

Others who speak out in support of the Jewish State in our country have felt the wrath of those activists who don't seem to let up until the person who made the statement withdraws it.

We have seen this with many celebrities. Remember Shashi Naidoo, and the reaction when she called Gaza a "sh*thole", and ran down Hamas for supposedly pursuing an "ambition to annihilate Israel". As I understood, she was threatened and denigrated until she apologised and literally joined Boycott, Divestment Sanctions South Africa. Then all was good for her, or so it seems.

There have been others. It's tough to withstand that intense and persistent pressure. How many people do you know who support Israel and would make their views known on social media?

It's not easy to have perspectives or views that aren't popular, and it takes so much more than courage today to stand up and be counted for such views.

The problem is, such people are being censored and their right to free speech is being curtailed. Are people going too far in shutting down views they don't like?

I find racism, sexism, antisemitism, and homophobia totally unacceptable on every level. I also find bullying abhorrent. I guess you may say that's all so easy to say.

This weekend, I was having a fascinating conversation about pronouns, and how I'm lost with all the new pronouns regarding gender. I was speaking to someone who knows a lot about this and has wise and sound opinions. Inadvertently, I referred to myself as "normal" in trying to explain that I was heterosexual and accepted my G-d-given gender as opposed to falling in the LGBT group.

As it came out of my mouth, I realised how offensive this could be. Because if I was "normal", what did that make other people? I quickly corrected myself. How easy it was to make an honest mistake that could have caused so much animosity and pain in some circles.

I was embarrassed, but it was an error. It made me wonder if it possible that we have all become too sensitive or too judgemental?

Or has cancel culture taken hold and stopped us from being able to relax and have a view or make silly mistakes of terminology?

Coming back to Dr Seuss, I know there are many who can give me numerous reasons why his "racial stereotyping" shouldn't be available to young children. I can't help but think that's sad. My children learnt a lot from Dr Seuss, and I don't believe any of his "racial stereotypes" had an impact on them. On this I am open to persuasion.

However, I do think we need to take a long, hard look at cancel culture, and give people the space to verbalise their views as long as they aren't harmful to others.

Shabbat Shalom!

Peta Krost Maunder
Editor



To be, or not to Bibi – act four

OPINION

ZVIKA (BIKO) ARRAN



Taxi drivers in Israel are the best political barometer. A friend shared on Twitter a chat he had on a ride a week ago, when the driver preached to him during the drive, saying "Only Bibi can lead us in this coronavirus crisis!" "And how's Bibi doing that?" my passenger friend asked. "Very bad. Very bad handling..." the taxi driver answered frankly.

Don't be too overwhelmed with the vaccination operation in Israel. The situation in the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic is pretty bad: three waves; a high death rate of 6 000 Israelis; endless lockdowns; no school; neurotic last-minute decision making; and a low-level of co-operation and compliance with regulations among specific leaders and sectors (mainly Haredim).



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

Our "start-up" nation might be good at improvising and invention, but not with long, disciplined processes. (South Africa should be commended for keeping the economy and schools more or less open most of the time, and for maintaining some trust with the citizens through limitations and public participation.)

Even though Israel is in a social, economic, and medical emergency, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is still Israel's apparently unbeatable leader.

Although some of the problems can be attributed to his political manoeuvring and survival tactics, Bibi is still considered on a par with David Ben Gurion and other Zionist forefathers. But in order to remain an icon, Netanyahu must somehow put a halt to his criminal procedures and any chance of going to jail.

Meanwhile, Israel moves forward to its fourth general election in two years, something clearly unprecedented in the country. And once again, it's all around Netanyahu.

The crucial new potential gamechangers this time around are new political parties that emanated from Bibi's own right wing, and which are clearly standing against him. The main new anti-Bibi power is Gideon Sa'ar and his "New Hope" party. These are pure Likud and right-wing candidates committed to moving Bibi aside. Then there is also Naftali Bennett's Yamina party.

It doesn't mean that these parties won't eventually join Bibi in some coalition like Gantz and Blue & White did, but their general sentiment is critical towards the longest-ever-seated prime minister in Israel.

The only loyal partners left for Likud are the publicly unpopular Haredi parties and the extreme right party – backed by racist Meir Kahane's Kach supporters.

Netanyahu, the marketing master, is once again framing his failure as a great success. In the Trump-era when no one was really interested in details and truth, Bibi could make Israelis buy the fact that they were the first to rid their country of this disease. However, they have done no such thing, and certainly won't be the first to do so.

Even though people in Israel agree that the country is poorly managed, the prime minister's effective propaganda machine insists he's not responsible for the mess they are in and that he is the only one who can rescue Israel from the economic nightmare.

This strategy works for the taxi driver and for about 25% of Israelis who still support Bibi and his Likud party. They might even represent sufficient support to create a new government in the Israeli coalition-based system.

The prime minister might also get unprecedented low ratings and minimal support, but whatever happens, the public is sick and tired of so many elections.

It's also apathetic about the fact that Netanyahu's criminal corruption trial will start on evidence immediately after the

elections, putting the prime minister on the bench three times a week.

Together with the deep disappointment over the political system during COVID-19 and the uncertainty about polling turnout under corona conditions, the status quo probably won't dramatically change the political map or the outcome

of the last three elections.

The current elections are all about small numbers. Four parties from the anti-Bibi block are in danger of not reaching the threshold.

Even the veteran Meretz left-wing party is in jeopardy, according to some polls. A few thousand ballots here or there, and the whole pro-Bibi block will be solid and secured.

Therefore, contrary to most of the surveys now, there's still a real chance that Bibi will get through the elections with a majority of 61 Knesset-member supporters. It's enough for a government and to legislate something to prevent the trial from going on – the so-called "French Law".

It won't be a landslide or a knockout but winning by points due to a lack of "killer instinct" and too much ego among his opponents, who didn't co-operate enough.

The common scenario now of a majority against Bibi doesn't mean an alternative government is going to be formed. With no clear rival and power as big as Likud, there's no other option besides Bibi.

Nevertheless, this time, unlike in previous elections, "battle foxes" are playing poker with Bibi. Not lieutenant general and political novice Benny Gantz, who was easily manipulated by Netanyahu. This time, experienced politicians Avigdor Lieberman, Sa'ar, Lapid, and Bennett won't let an option to remove Bibi from office sneak away.

If they have a block, they will find a formula, depending on the final results. Maybe some kind of a short-term deal. A coalition with rotation as prime ministers, or electing Netanyahu as the next president of Israel (who is protected from legal procedures).

Or maybe even a temporary emergency government led by the outgoing President Ruvi Rivlin. Everything is possible only to have Bibi out of Balfour Street for one hour, and make his house of cards collapse.

• Zvika (Biko) Arran is an Israeli publicist, social entrepreneur, lawyer, advisor to philanthropists, and the host of a podcast. He currently lives in Johannesburg with his wife and four sons.

Israeli parties pitch to 'Anglo' voters

STEVEN GRUZZ

Like a partially-digested falafel ball, elections are repeating on the Israeli public, which, on 23 March, heads to the polls for the fourth time in two years.

Unsurprisingly, fatigue and frustration have set in. The votes continue to be referenda on Benjamin Netanyahu, the incumbent but criminally indicted prime minister.

There is little change in the political landscape that promises a radically different election result.

Nevertheless, it's important to know what Israel's parties are for and against.

On 7 March, World Mizrahi and the South African Zionist Federation hosted an online forum with the leadership of eight of Israel's many political parties. Some were asked how they would appeal to English-speakers, affectionately known as "Anglos".

First up, host Gil Hoffman, chief political correspondent of *The Jerusalem Post*, introduced Naftali Bennett, the leader of Yamina (Rightwards). It's the latest incarnation of splits and mergers of right-wing parties, and has three of the Knesset's 120 seats.

"We must replace Netanyahu with respect," Bennett said. Like many speakers, he highlighted the expectation of better public services from Anglos. He said he had a "Singapore" economic plan, to slash taxes, reduce bureaucracy, and attract massive foreign investment.

The once-mighty left-leaning Labour Party that formed all Israeli governments from 1948 to 1977, has been reduced to a paltry two Knesset seats. New party head Merav Michaeli said only Labour promised a future for Jewish and non-Jewish Israelis, and Jews from non-Orthodox backgrounds that clash with the rabbinate.

After failing to unseat Netanyahu in Likud, Gideon Sa'ar formed the Tikvah Chadashah (New Hope) Party, not yet represented in the Knesset. Preaching unity while aiming at disgruntled Likudniks, he claimed his party would end the loop of political, social, and economic instability of the past two years. Netanyahu had "done some good things, but he is now preferring his personal interests to the good of the country", Sa'ar said. His promises include changing the electoral system to increase accountability, the devolution of powers to local level, educational reforms, and approving a new budget.

Likud (36 seats) was represented by Gila Gamliel, the minister of environmental protection. She trumpeted Netanyahu's achievements, saying that COVID-19 had stressed the need for experienced leadership and quick action. Netanyahu had made Israel lead the world in administering vaccinations, and the economy would bounce back rapidly from the pandemic. The relationship with the United States remained strong under the Biden administration, and the Abraham Accords with Arab states were already bearing fruit. Gamliel urged voters to support the centre-right.

Next up, the leader of Kachol Lavan (Blue and White), defence minister and alternate Prime Minister Benny Gantz gave veiled criticism of Netanyahu. He said the government wasn't "about politicians surviving, but being public servants to help real people". His alliance has haemorrhaged seats, being left with just 12 members of the Knesset. Gantz said the party had paid a price for going into government with Likud to fight COVID-19, "but we had to do what's right. I'm proud to serve every citizen with honesty and integrity, and Blue and White stands for these values".

Yitzchak Pindrus from United Torah Judaism, (Yahadut HaTora), (seven seats) claimed religion was more important in Israel than it was 70 years ago, and that giving up land for peace was less of an issue today. He said UTJ stood for a stronger economy, the rights of citizens, cutting bureaucracy, and preserving Jewish values. In the short term, he is focusing on easing travel to and from Israel under lockdown conditions. Centrist Yesh Atid (There is a Future) was represented by party leader Yair Lapid. It has 16 Knesset seats. He characterised Israel's situation as "crazy", with 90 000 small businesses closed and reportedly one million Israelis unemployed. Lapid decried having 36 ministers, and the support Netanyahu was receiving from them.

Finally, Bezalel Smotrich, the head of Hatzionut HaDatit, the Religious Zionist Party (two seats), said voting was a matter of identity and that his party held disproportionate power to influence portfolios such as education. Anglos left their countries by choice to make aliyah, he said, and had the interests of the Jewish people at heart.

Conspicuous by its absence was any talk about the Palestinians. There is an anxious wait to see what the election delivers, or whether there might need to be a fifth election thereafter.



New SAZF Cape director guided by tradition

TALI FEINBERG

In an exciting move for the Cape Town Jewish community, Chaya Singer was recently appointed executive director of the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) Cape Council. Young but experienced in communal, Jewish, and Zionist affairs, she could have taken her skills anywhere, but has chosen to stay and make an impact in this new role.

"I'm proudly South African, and want to contribute to the well-being of our community and our country in the tradition of generations of Jews who have helped to build what's best about us.

"I'm hopeful for our country and our continent, and I believe that Israel has much to offer. My *zaida*, Rabbi Bernhard, used to say, 'Go home or stay home.' It's sad to see our community disperse, but this platform also allows me to assist those who see their short or long-term future in Israel."

Her vision for the organisation is "to establish the SAZF as a broad tent within the parameters of Zionist ideology, with a focus on communal and broader education. We want to bring South Africa everything Israel has to offer, a leader in innovation, technology, and international development.

"We want to bring value as an umbrella organisation that deals with a wide spectrum of the community, from youth movements to people looking to make aliyah, as well as addressing hard issues around politics and advocacy."

Singer grew up in Johannesburg, with annual holidays to visit her grandparents in Cape Town. She went to Torah Academy, followed by a seminary in Israel, where she got a diploma in Jewish Diaspora Education. She did *shlichut* in various Jewish communities including in Sweden, Denmark, Russia, China, and the United States.

It was during her Bachelor of Music majoring in classical voice and art history at the University of the Witwatersrand that she joined the South African Union of Jewish Students and was elected national chairperson. She was then elected chairperson of the World Union of Jewish Students, the only South African to have served in this position since the organisation's founding in 1924. She held ex-officio positions on the executive boards of the World Zionist Organisation,



Chaya Singer with President Cyril Ramaphosa

the Jewish National Fund, Jewish Agency for Israel, and the World Jewish Congress. She also graduated from the Interdisciplinary Centre (IDC) in Herzliya with a master's degree in government, specialising in diplomacy and conflict studies.

Returning to South Africa, she served for the past five years as the first parliamentary liaison for the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and built relationships across the political spectrum, facilitating Jewish communal input on relevant legislation. She has numerous awards to her name, and has attended leadership programmes across the globe. She is a visiting research fellow at the Asia Policy Program at the Aba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy at the IDC.

While she grew up in Johannesburg, she's familiar with the Cape community. "I'm particularly appreciative of the communal infrastructure of the United Jewish Campaign umbrella in Cape Town, which provides fundamental support and oversight for all organisations," she says.

Looking at the challenges ahead, she says, "We foresee that 2021 will be a year of polarised threats and opportunities. On the one hand, the coronavirus pandemic in South Africa is far from under control. For the time being, this means that there can be no physical gatherings of significant numbers of people. The SAZF will need to continue to manage its primary activities through digital means so that we maintain the connection of our community to Israel.

"In sharp contrast, there is a renewed sense of optimism within the worldwide Zionist movement following the four seismic normalisation agreements signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. All of these agreements were signed between August and December 2020, representing nothing short of a sea change in Arab-Israeli relationships. The year 2021 therefore presents a golden opportunity to seize this momentum.

"We will achieve this by strengthening the community's identification with Israel and its Jewish identity through meaningful cultural events. We will seek to find the best international speakers to address not only the Jewish community but also non-Jewish communities in South Africa."

She has already made a number of changes. "We are creating four new departments in the SAZF to focus on specific elements of our mandate," Singer says. "This includes a business forum to encourage trade relationships and investment between South Africa and Israel, a legal forum to build institutional legal knowledge for the SAZF and to create opportunities for law students and practising lawyers in our community, and a sports forum to encourage sports as a bridge building tool between Israel and South Africa."

Regarding the future of Zionism in South Africa, she says, "We are increasingly seeing warming relations with Israel, also in Africa. Hopefully, South Africa will similarly align itself more pragmatically in the future. With regards to Jewish and other Zionist communities, we are grateful to live in a country with a Constitution which protects freedom of religion and association."

Singer is excited to work with the newly elected SAZF Cape Council chairperson, Cape Town-based businesswoman Karen Marsden Sank, along with other highly respected businessmen, industry experts, and communal leaders. There are also three new co-optees on the SAZF Cape Council: Lauren Fine, a practising attorney, renowned motivational speaker, and all-round tech guru; tech entrepreneur Dale Imerman; and Jordan Seligmann, former SAUJS co-chairperson and the co-founder of the non-profit youth organisation Progress SA, which aims to promote liberalism and democracy in the country.

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- The CEO will also be responsible for managing the national distribution of the SA Jewish Report print publication.

Sharaka shakes up Middle East peace talks

STEVEN GRUZD

“Who would have thought this webinar would be possible a year ago?” asked Amit Deri, the co-founder and director of Sharaka (“partnership” in Arabic). This organisation sprang from the Abraham Accords signed between Israel, the United States, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in August 2020 to deepen peace by promoting people-to-people interactions.

Deri was kicking off a Zoom conversation on Monday, 8 March, about growing peace in the Middle East and South Africa’s lessons for reconciliation. The event was co-hosted by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and Sharaka.

He noted how relations between Israel and the two Arab countries had blossomed in just six months. “It felt like meeting old friends after a long time,” he said of visiting the UAE. “The world belongs to the youth. We are willing to dream, to see the future.” Sharaka organised an Israeli youth delegation to the UAE before there were visa arrangements between the two countries.

“At the first meeting, people were so spontaneous. We took copies of their passports, and ten days later, our new friends were in Israel, in my house in the Golan!”

Sharaka holds webinars almost every week to promote unity, heritage, and language, and hopes to have more in-person interaction once lockdowns are lifted.

From Bahrain, journalist and activist Amjad Taha, resplendent in his

traditional white thobe or dishdasha, said, “Bombs and guns belong to yesterday. There should be peace through negotiations, where both sides give something at the table. The Middle East isn’t the same. The peace treaties between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan are more like ceasefires. We want a real peace. Sudan and Morocco have joined the Abraham Accords, and there will be others. They will join the peace train in their own time.”

Taha said young people had welcomed the accords, and gave the example of Israeli and Bahraini weightlifters that have been in touch. “We want to connect around culture, sport, technology, art, languages.” He has been subjected to abuse on social media for his stance, but has started engaging with his critics. He was also astounded by the diversity of Israeli society when he visited the country in January.

Asked how the Abraham Accords

affected the Palestinian question, Taha said, “Every single religion looks for the prospect of peace. The Middle East has come to understand that we will no longer be hostages of anyone’s cause. We are used to Arab countries being threatened and deceived. Support has waned for terrorism. People want to see peace with Israel, and we oppose Iran. We’re no longer capable of war. And the more countries that join the Abraham Accords, the more Palestinians will come to the table.

“We did our best for the past 30 years, but Palestinians rejected peace overtures again and again and again,” Deri said. “We are now turning to the broader Middle East – Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco – *inshallah* that will bring us closer to peace with the Palestinians. We can do it from the outside in.” He flatly rejects those who refuse to normalise ties with Israel until the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

South African activist Jamie Mighti said, “The Palestinians have been scoring own goals for years. The ANC [African National Congress] and EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters] have a strong position of supporting the Palestinians, and haven’t been welcoming of the Abraham Accords, the peace with Sudan. The question is whether this a viable response – not if they want to be part of the process.”

Mighti asserted that South Africa’s watershed elections in 1994 were a product of years of dialogue. “You have to speak to the other side to chart a way forward,” he said. In both South Africa and the Abraham Accords, “former enemies were willing to meet and normalise, and build long-term peace”.

Overcoming apartheid and changing mindsets takes hard work, Mighti pointed out. The negotiations of the 1990s and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were incomplete, and South Africa needs more nation-building. “We need to build communities across territories and interests.”

Gabi Farber, a white ANC member of the student representative council at the University of the Witwatersrand, said that 27 years on, South Africa still had racism and inequality. “There’s still pain in society. We can’t move forward unless we discuss it. I made a conscious decision to leave my ‘Jewish bubble’, my comfort zone, and change the narrative.”

Lorena Khateeb, an Israeli Druze, said that since the peace agreements, she had been talking to the UAE and Bahrain “on a daily basis” through Sharaka. She also spoke about how Arab women were emerging from the shadows, becoming doctors, lawyers, and artists. She was able to visit the UAE as a woman on her own.

“The only solution is peace,” she said. “It’s our responsibility to action it. People are tired of conflict.”



Host of the dialogue, Muhamad-Nur Nordien



Jamie Mighti



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Physios fighting a war on COVID-19 frontline

TALI FEINBERG

We know about the doctors and nurses battling the pandemic, but there are also teams of other healthcare professionals who put their lives on the line to support COVID-19 patients in hospital wards.

Physiotherapists (physios) are one such group, and their work puts them at particular risk of contracting the virus from their patients.

"I told my wife I was going to war," recalls Darryn Edinburg, a 43-year-old father of three and hospital physiotherapist at Linksfeld Park Clinic in Johannesburg.

"You just have to get stuck in. You can't be scared, even though five physios in our team contracted the virus in the first wave, and one got quite ill. You go in, and the patients are coughing, and you're moving them, getting them to walk and do breathing exercises, and they're essentially coughing at you."

Edinburg says at the start of the pandemic, the belief was that physios wouldn't be needed to treat COVID-19-positive patients because the respiratory issues were

seen as a dry cough. However, it soon became clear that pneumonia and the devastation that the virus wreaks on the body meant physiotherapy would be essential. "Suddenly, everyone realised that patients and doctors needed all the help they could get," he says.

"It was a huge shock to see the

30 and 40-year-olds with no comorbidities struggling, and there was no explanation, especially in the second wave. It felt like a battle zone."

Thirty-year-old Dalya Abromowitz was one such patient, spending eight days in a Cape Town hospital at the height of

the second wave. Fit, healthy, and a non-smoker, she still ended up with COVID-19, pneumonia, and physiotherapy

was key to her recovery.

"The physios were very important because almost everyone in the ward had

COVID-19 pneumonia, and essentially that means mucus stuck in your lungs. It's been very effective to try and loosen that, to try to cough it out," she says. "At least once a day, physios would come in their hazmat suits – because patients cough a lot during the physio sessions – and they would do a few exercises. The first one would be to vibrate my ribs. I would lie on each side and the physio would apply vibrations with their hands. After a few gentle vibrations, I would cough massively.

"They would also get you to do four or five different breathing exercises, like deep belly breaths. It completely exhausts you. I remember after sessions, I would sleep for two or three hours, just because it's really exhausting, especially when your oxygen levels are quite low. It can feel like you've run a marathon. A lot of the sessions are only 15 to 20 minutes because patients usually can't tolerate much more than that," she says.

"They would come Monday to Sunday, sometimes very early or late. They were very busy. They definitely put themselves at risk. That's why they would wear such protective gear, even more so than nurses or doctors," she says. Exercises included breathing through a straw to make bubbles in a bottle with water, or trying to keep a ball elevated by breathing out, into an apparatus. "Physio definitely helped me to recover,"

Abromowitz says. "It helped to increase my oxygen levels, and helped with the pneumonia."

Edinburg says he wears hospital scrubs, an apron, a surgical gown, an N95 mask, double gloves, a visor, and plastic sleeves when treating patients. "It wasn't too bad in June and July because it was winter, but in December, it was vicious in the heat, and there was no air-conditioning because of the risk it poses for spreading the virus."

He says a lot of patients have died. "Two were aged 42 and 46. One just got worse slowly. The other was meant to be discharged on a Sunday. On the Saturday, he had a relapse, was put on a ventilator, and he passed away two weeks ago. In the second wave, the age dropped by 20 years. Those who made it were the ones we thought weren't going to make it, and those who died were the ones we thought were going to survive."

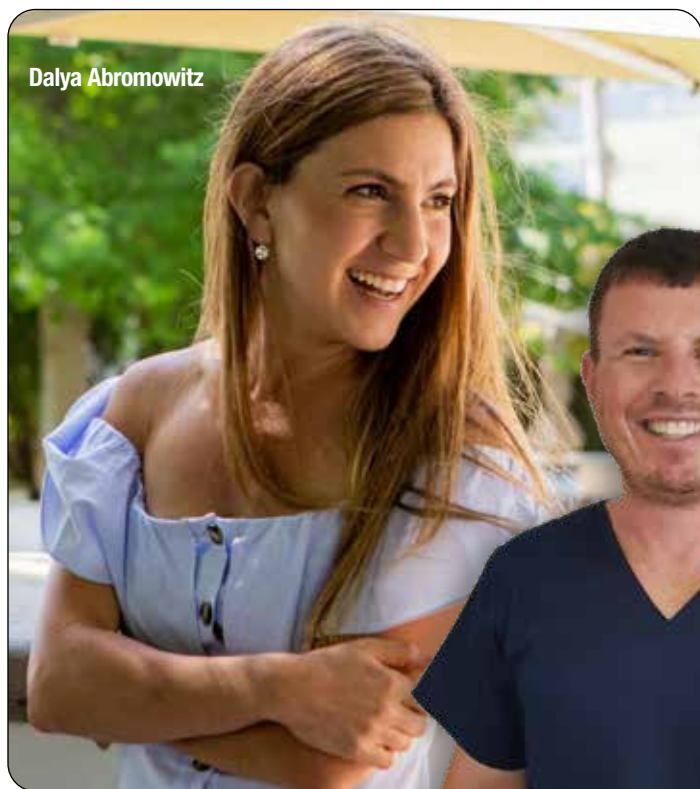
Edinburg says physios have also become a support system for COVID-19 patients, often helping them to cope with anxiety. "You've got to educate and reassure, and teach them what they can do to feel better. For example, one thing we teach is positioning. Instead of lying on their back, we teach them to lie on their side or stomach, which allows for better breathing, functioning of the lungs, and oxygenation. We have also become the 'eyes and ears' of the doctors because they are so busy, they may have missed things."

He says that the physio's job doesn't end when the patient is discharged. "The reality is that patients are still compromised. They may not even be medically better, but others are worse and need their hospital bed. We teach them not to overdo it at home, build strength over time, and have patience. But it's hard – these guys used to be fit, running marathons, and now they can't even walk to the bathroom without running out of breath. There is also the stigma of having home oxygen."

"We are so lucky to have Hatzolah, which checks on these patients every day. I have patients who aren't Jewish, and they're essentially on their own," he says. He visits Jewish and non-Jewish patients at home, but tries to give non-Jewish patients extra support because they don't have anything like Hatzolah.

Edinburg emphasises that the numbers may have dropped, but "COVID-19 is still around us. The hospital isn't quiet. We need to carry on being vigilant."

For him, the "best" part of the pandemic has been seeing "a few patients who we didn't think were going to survive, at home and almost back to normal. We've been involved in the whole process, from intensive-care to home to rehabilitation". Seeing doctors unite and support each other has also been fulfilling. The worst part has been "40-year-old patients, who you speak to, and then the next day, they're not there – they passed away. It's scary. It feels like it could be you."



Dalya Abromowitz

Darryn Edinburg

effects of the virus on the patients. I don't think doctors ever pictured such a scenario, never mind physios. It was completely surreal. We were seeing

Look no further than Durban for origins of activist antisemitism

JORDAN MOSHE

The infamous World Conference Against Racism held in Durban in 2001 set the standard for much of the anti-Israel and antisemitic rhetoric of today. Numerous so-called "human-rights protectors" continue to fall back on the same language and lies in their criticism of the Jewish state, and the need to hold them accountable is more pressing than ever.

So say Gerald Steinberg and Shaun Sacks, whose work at non-government organisation (NGO) Monitor aims to address this problem.

They unpacked the latest trends in antisemitism last Thursday, 4 March, at an event hosted by the antisemitism and legal subcommittee of the Cape South African Jewish Board of Deputies, tracing many developments back to the events in Durban 20 years ago.

"Durban is really the opening point," says Steinberg, the president of Monitor. "It was in this context that the final declaration [against Israel] was adopted."

"There is a tendency to attribute BDS [the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement] to the Palestinians, and to describe Omar Barghouti as the founder. That's bad history. BDS really began at Durban through the NGO forum, and its final declaration focused on Israel. In the declaration, the term apartheid was used many times."

The declaration was adopted by 5 000 delegates and 1 500 organisations (among them Amnesty International) and called on the international community to isolate Israel as had been done to South Africa.

Says Steinberg, "They took the package of the anti-apartheid movement and dropped it onto the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Off course, it was entirely against Israel."

"The prosecutor of the International Criminal Court [ICC] announced last week the decision to investigate Israeli and Palestinian actions," he says. "I don't think anyone

really takes them [the Palestinian actions] seriously – the Palestinians certainly don't.

"It subjects Israel to further demonisation, something which, like BDS, began at Durban."

In spite of the inroads it has made into advocacy, BDS has had almost no economic impact, Steinberg says.

"It's a failure economically. It has had almost no impact on the Israeli economy. A few companies were affected but essentially, the economy wasn't. What succeeded, however, was combining BDS with 'lawfare'.

"The framework was so solidly crystalised, it succeeded in labelling Israel in general as a country of war criminals, occupiers, and colonialists," Steinberg says. "Its allegations are uniquely focused on Israel. That's the real damage of the Durban strategy."

"It took 20 years, but they have succeeded in labelling Israel, especially among so-called progressives and liberals."

For this reason, the events at Durban were the trigger for the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism.

"There's a direct link between Durban and the definition," Steinberg says. "They took what they saw happening at Durban. Contemporary examples of antisemitism include denying the

Jewish people their right to self-determination, applying double standards, using symbols associated with classic antisemitism, and drawing comparisons between contemporary Israeli policy and that of the Nazis.

"These grew out of Durban, and are what we have to deal with when looking at BDS."

NGOs are leading the ICC process. "They are the ones who give 'evidence' to the ICC, who present volumes of allegations and false claims in order to promote the

agenda," says Steinberg. "They have massive budgets that go into their campaigns every year, have special access to the United Nations, and are motivated by a combination of post-colonial ideology and anti-Western sentiment."

"There's always a strong element of antisemitism."

Many of the NGOs also became consultants, Steinberg says, driving the spirit of Durban 2001.

"They use the halo effect," he says. "If they say Israel commits war crimes, it's put into the media as a headline story. Journalists simply cut and paste what these NGOs report, it goes into the media with no independent investigation of accuracy, and is then quoted by diplomats."

The organisations are believed because of their status as human-rights groups, he says.

"Because they fought apartheid 30 years ago, they have an image of morality, but they have long since left that framework."

"Robert Bernstein, the founder of Human Rights Watch, denounced his own organisation in 2009 for abandoning its moral compass and turning Israel into a pariah. Ambassadors even freely quote NGOs in spite of many of them having links to terror."

Sacks, a senior researcher at NGO Monitor, illustrated some cases the organisation has dealt with. NGO Monitor maintains a database of about 200 human rights and humanitarian groups, promoting accountability from those claiming to advance human rights.

"Palestinian organisation Al-Haq became active following the proposal-of-action plan against Israel," Sacks says. "It proposed sanctions via the UN, along with international legal activities. It's a major driving force at the ICC."

"This same organisation acknowledged that it sees the ICC simply as a tool for more Palestinian independence. A video it put out in 2018 called the creation of Israel in 1948 illegal, and needing to be addressed by the ICC."

Another is the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR).

"At the conference, it objected to any language that didn't recognise the 'racist' nature of Zionism," Sacks



Continued on page 12>>

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Celebrating the 'man from Africa' who rescued Jewish orphans

DAVID E. KAPLAN

While we are gripped in the vice of an international pandemic, one can only imagine what about 300 000 Jewish orphans must have experienced 100 years ago in the wake of the Russian Revolution in Eastern Europe. The diseases they faced weren't coronavirus, but typhoid and smallpox and worst of all, the seemingly incurable malady of antisemitism.

Pogroms were rife in 1921. It was hunting season, and the prey was Jews, with the most vulnerable being Jewish orphans. Jews smuggled letters of their plight out of this region that was experiencing a cataclysmic clash between the Red and White armies. One such letter reached Isaac Ochberg, a Jewish Ukrainian-born businessman in Cape Town. It inspired him to take on the cause of saving as

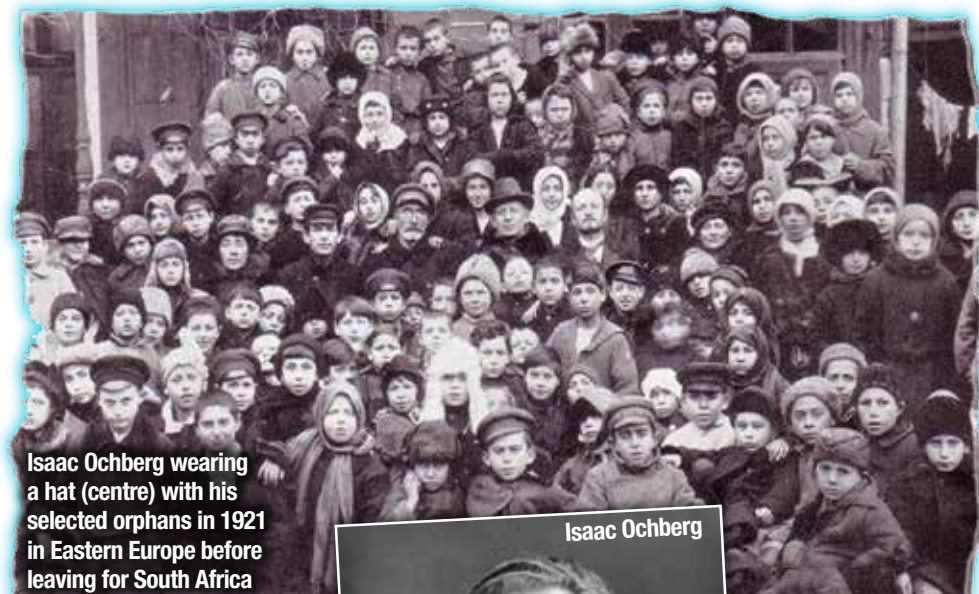
many Jewish orphans as possible, bringing them to safety in South Africa.

On 14 March 1921, at his own expense, Ochberg left for London on his dangerous mission to rescue Jewish children. Almost miraculously, he returned with close to 200 Jewish children.

This year, to mark the centenary of this heroic rescue, the *SA Jewish Report* will host a webinar on 14 March, organised by the Isaac Ochberg Heritage Committee (Israel) in partnership with the Megiddo Regional Council.

To understand the hell the Ochberg orphans came from, one has only to learn of how orphan Harry Stillerman at the Oranje Orphanage in Cape Town lost half his arm.

A band of Cossacks on horseback had come galloping into his shtetl, shot his parents in front of him, and when one of them was about to slash Harry with his sabre, the young boy raised his arm to protect himself. With one



Isaac Ochberg wearing a hat (centre) with his selected orphans in 1921 in Eastern Europe before leaving for South Africa



Isaac Ochberg

strike, he severed Harry's arm off at the elbow and left him to bleed to death in the mud. But five-year-old Harry didn't die because the "man from Africa" found him and brought him to South Africa.

Transforming fiction into fact, Ochberg, like a benevolent Pied Piper of Hamelin, crisscrossed by truck, train, and horse-drawn cart, a region beset by civil war and pogroms, plucking up orphans in cities, towns, and shtetls. Had they not been rescued, the odds were that they would have perished.

Those who survived the horrors of the 1920s would have perished in the World War II devastation of the 1940s. Ochberg recognised that there was always going to be a hunting season for Jews, and so he worked tirelessly to save children and for a future Jewish state.

Ochberg represented the South African Jewish community at the 16th World Zionist Conference in Zurich, Switzerland, in 1929, when the Jewish Agency was established as a government-in-waiting for a state-in-making.

Another of the orphans saved by Ochberg was the late Fanny Frier, who would later become chair of the Cape Jewish Orphanage. She recalled waiting for Ochberg to arrive as an orphan in Brest-Litovsk. "We were told a man from Africa was coming to save us. He was going to take some of us away with him and give us a new home on the other side of the world," she said. Fanny said they were scared, but when Ochberg appeared, "with his reddish hair and cheery smile, we all took a great liking to him and called him 'daddy'. He would spend hours talking to us, making jokes, and cheering us up."

For Fanny and many of the other orphans, Ochberg would be known as "Daddy Ochberg" because as she would say, "he was the only daddy we would know".

Reporting on his progress during the rescue, Ochberg wrote to an awaiting Jewish community in South Africa, "I have been through almost every village in the Polish Ukraine and Galicia, and am now well acquainted with the places where there is extreme suffering. I have succeeded in collecting the necessary number of children, and I can safely say that the generosity displayed by South African Jewry in making this mission possible means nothing less than saving their lives. They would surely have died of starvation, disease, or been lost to our nation for other reasons."

Today, there are thousands of Jews who are alive because of "Daddy Ochberg", descendants of the Ochberg orphans from South Africa, Australia, the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and Israel. They will reunite on 14 March at the webinar to celebrate this great man. The last reunion was in 2011, when the Isaac

Ochberg Memorial Park was inaugurated in Megiddo, Israel.

In the webinar, a panel discussion will be followed by a recorded ceremony from Ochberg Park. There will be messages from Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, Jewish Agency Chairperson Isaac Herzog, and others.

Ochberg was, after all, not only a saviour of children but a Zionist visionary who left large bequests in the 1930s that went to Jewish institutions of learning in Palestine as well as the purchase of huge tracts of land that established Kibbutzim Dalia and Gal'ed in the Megiddo district.

These kibbutzim would later absorb survivors of the Holocaust in the immediate aftermath of World War II and so, from saving children in 1921, Ochberg would leave a legacy of salvation into the future that would help Jews in need again nearly three decades later. It's little wonder that the message of Isaac Ochberg resonates down the century. It's from the Talmud: "He who has saved one life is as though he has saved the entire world."

In 2016, when I addressed Limmud South Africa and all the Jewish schools in Johannesburg about Ochberg, I started with King David Linkfield, posing the question:

"Has anyone here ever heard of Isaac Ochberg?"

A hand went up shyly.

"How come?" I asked.

"He saved my great grandfather, Solly Jossel."

It dawned on the packed auditorium of students that this was no dry history lesson but something personal, meaningful, and instructive. Their friend wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for one man – Isaac Ochberg.

• David E. Kaplan is a founding member and the present chairperson of the Isaac Ochberg Heritage Committee (Israel) and a former chairperson of Telfed. A journalist, Kaplan is the editor of the 'Hilton Israel Magazine', 'Inbal Jerusalem Magazine', and the founder and editor of the online multimedia platform, *Lay Of The Land*.

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Shai has been involved in EMS since 1991. He started as a volunteer in Teaneck, NJ, ultimately culminating in managing the 9-1-1 Communication Center in Newark, NJ prior to moving to Israel in 2007. He has been an active medic with United Hatzalah since his arrival in Israel and has consulted previously with the organization with international implementation projects. He most recently worked for a medical equipment and technology importer in Israel prior to joining the United Rescue/United Hatzalah team as the Director of International Operations and has been promoted to Vice President of Development-Israel.

Look no further than Durban for origins of activist antisemitism

>>Continued from page 10

says. "It wanted that to be the focus of Durban. When the conference commissioner said some of the calls by NGOs had gone too far, PCHR circulated a petition calling on her to resign."

Certain Israeli organisations were also involved in Durban, and continue to use language in the same way, Sacks says. B'Tselem, for instance, makes a point of not calling for boycotts but for "international consequences and pressure".

"Soon after Durban, it threw around the apartheid label, and recently released a report about Israel being a regime of Jewish supremacy."

In 2014, Amnesty International recruited an organisation to investigate the events which transpired in Gaza 2014, relying on the PCHR to provide information.

"It put together an online tool of all attacks committed by Israelis," Sacks says. "It was a massive platform where you could see every place Israel was accused of killing

Palestinians.

"In every instance we looked at, all we did was a simple cross reference, and found that murdered 'civilians' were also martyrs and members of armed groups. Amnesty acknowledged none of this."

Beyond BDS, NGOs active in South Africa include the Media Review Network, which in 2005, shared material on its website suggesting that 9/11 was a conspiracy theory, and blaming the Mossad. It also promoted the idea that the Holocaust was possibly a myth.

"Today, we are accused of spreading COVID-19 or allowing Palestinians to be infected," Sacks says. "A Jewish anti-Israel activist wrote online that six million Jewish Israelis under COVID-19 lockdown were getting a taste of what the Palestinians experience."

"The then head of Human Rights Watch's Middle East programme commented, saying it was just missing a 'teaspoon of blood'. These are human-rights activists, and they have no problem using this type of language."

Shattered mom thanks community for picking up the pieces

NICOLA MILTZ

Ruth Beinart has a choice phrase that describes the devastating year she has faced since her only child and partner died tragically last year within weeks of each other. It's not exactly one she bandies about, and it's certainly not printable. Safe to say she has been to hell and back a few times.

Her beloved son, Dylan, 18, was a sickly child. He received a liver transplant when he was 14, and had recently undergone an operation to remove his colon. But the witty and determined King David Victory Park teenager was safely on the mend, and had so much to look forward to.

Sadly, out of the blue, he contracted measles, and succumbed to the disease a few days later. This happened in March last year at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Nine weeks later, Ruth's loving partner, Glen Heyns, 55, an energetic and healthy man, died unexpectedly from what is assumed was a heart attack in the middle of the night. She was left bereft and in turmoil.

With her small Clamber Club business in tatters because of the effects of lockdown and the double whammy of not benefiting from her partner's income, things were bleak.

Were it not for the support of the community, family, and friends, she says she doesn't know how she would have pulled through.

"What can I say, I'm living the dream," she responds with her usual dark sense of humour, something her late son inherited from her.

"There are no words to describe what I've been through. It's surreal."

"I've been grieving for the two people closest to me at the same time, two very different kinds of grief. It's like I first lost my left arm and then I lost my right arm. I may have two legs and can



walk, but I don't know how to do stuff anymore without my arms," she told the SA Jewish Report this week.

Although she's a positive person, she says, "I cry every day. It just depends on the time of day."

Her Rabbi, Pini Pink, of Chabad of Greenstone, is attempting to spread some light and honour her son's memory. Marking the teenager's first *yahrzeit* last week, he launched an initiative to raise funds to purchase a Sefer Torah in Dylan's memory, calling it the Dylan Beinart Memorial Torah.

The Sefer Torah will cost in excess of R500 000, but the rabbi is optimistic they will reach their target to acquire the best quality Torah that will be "an everlasting way" to remember this "special child whose life was cut short too soon".

"Last week, the shul put out a message alerting its members when Dylan's father wanted to say kaddish for his late son marking a year since his passing. We were worried about

getting a *minyán* because of COVID-19, but were amazed to see so many people arrive to show their love and support. The parking lot was full," Pink says.

According to Ruth, her son had a close bond with the rabbi, and would be quite vocal during his sermons. He even took to wearing the rabbi's hat from time to time.

"Dylan was a special and fond member of our community," says the rabbi. "He was loved by everybody. He added so much character to the shul, and from the moment he walked into a room, he would change the dynamics for good.

"His tragic passing has taken its toll on our community. We were looking for ways to honour his memory and together with the family, we spoke about various ideas," Pink says.

They wanted a "forever tribute", not something that would lose momentum over time.

"Our shul needs a Sefer Torah and in this way, Dylan will be remembered every time it's used on Shabbos and festivals. It will be a beautiful tribute and bring comfort to his soul," Pink says.

Ruth says she is touched by this idea, and hopes the Torah will travel so that it can be used for a number of *simchas*.

"It's a lovely idea, and I'm grateful for it. When we eventually get it, we will personalise the cover with something that will remind us of Dylan's quirky, fun nature," Ruth says.

She says she has managed to pick up some of the financial pieces with the re-opening of schools, and has offered private Clamber Club sessions for moms who enjoy the respite, especially when their little ones aren't at school or are online.

She's happy that business is picking up again, and grateful to the community for all the support.

Student barred from gap year speaks out

>>Continued from page 2

of the problems that ensued. It's an area which we will ensure is much more tightly managed.

"Our first formal interaction with Demi regarding the gap-year programme was in mid-October 2020, when she paid an initial registration fee. She was then invited to an interview. She received a WhatsApp on 13 October 2020 confirming her acceptance, and the next step was to fill out certain forms.

"Demi's case has shown us that the wording of this message may be problematic in not fully explaining that the ensuing application form would be the final determining factor. However, it's something which we believed was implicit. Nevertheless, the message's wording will be changed in the future.

"The application form for our gap year does ask outright for information about the Jewish background of parents and family. These criteria are completely transparent, and have been consistent throughout our existence.

"Demi elected to send in the form with full information on 8 December 2020, which is late into the process. We can respond only to information of which we are aware, and once the form was submitted, we responded within 24 hours. We see the potential problem in our administrative processes. We will be proactive in rectifying this. It remains a great pity that events transpired as they did for Demi. We have tried to resolve the matter as sensitively as possible."

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A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

Peaceful debate on Israel a nice change

One of the few rays of light in a very bleak year was how in 2020, no fewer than four countries – the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco – decided to normalise relations with Israel, a country they had been reflexively hostile towards ever since its establishment.

These breakthroughs were widely acclaimed as heralding a new era of peace, reconciliation, and co-operation, not just for Israel and its neighbours but for the region as a whole. Since then, there has been a flurry of activity between the various countries, from the diplomatic sphere to trade, tourism, and cultural exchanges.

The significance of the agreements – aptly named the Abraham Accords – was the subject of a webinar titled, “A new Arab-Israeli Peace and 27 Years of South Africa’s Reconciliation: Lessons Learnt” held on Monday, 8 March. The event (<https://youtu.be/RKuWy85rcdl>) was co-organised by the South African Jewish Board of Deputies and Sharaka, a nongovernmental organisation recently established with the aim of bringing together Israeli Arabs, Jews, Bahrainis, and Emiratis. Participants included a diverse range of social activists and pundits from Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, and South Africa.

One of the points that surfaced frequently was that peace and reconciliation cannot be left solely to politicians; ordinary people on the ground also have a duty and the ability to make a difference. Outside of the public eye, there are indeed a range of organisations in Israel that are quietly working to build bridges of friendship and understanding between Jews and Palestinians, as well as between Israel’s many diverse ethnic and religious communities. As Gabi Farber, former chairperson of the South African Union of Jewish

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

ABOVE BOARD

Shaun Zagnoev



Students at the University of the Witwatersrand and a current member of the student representative council pointed out, true unity between people doesn’t mean that they must all be the same, but is achieved through respecting and, indeed, valuing the differences between them. One need not agree with the other person’s narrative, but one should always be open to hearing and understanding where they are coming from.

Amjad Taha, an investigative journalist and a strategic advisor in Bahrain and the UAE, further stressed that in planning for the future, people couldn’t become prisoners of the past, nor could the future of the Middle East be held hostage to anyone else’s cause. For too long, the unresolved Israel-Palestine issue had prevented various Arab states from making peace and establishing relations with Israel, he said, even though this would be beneficial not just to themselves but the region in general. Today, however, there was a growing groundswell of support for peaceful coexistence and a corresponding decline in support for the actions of Palestinian militants.

It was heartening to hear the issues relating to Israel and its relationship with its neighbours being debated in such a positive, mutually respectful spirit. As we know, such exchanges are all too often characterised by crude invective and finger pointing. One came away from it feeling that for all the obstacles that lie ahead, a shared commitment to the values of peace, empathy, and mutual respect can indeed usher in a hopeful new era for all inhabitants of the region.

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

Girls find the power within

Thirteen girls had their Batmitzvah ceremony at the Great Park Shul in Houghton Estate on Sunday, 7 March. The theme of their milestone transition into womanhood was “The leader in me”.

It was the culmination of months of learning and growth, with each girl discovering her inner strength and the power of her soul.

Sessions that began as weekly Zoom meetings due to COVID-19, progressed into in-person sessions as school reopened. Special programmes included participation at the Drive-Thru Chanukah event at Great Park, Challah plaiting, Purim *mishloach manot* deliveries to senior members of the Great



The Great Park Shul Batmitzvah girls

Park community, and a mikvah tour with a presentation for mothers and daughters.

The shul wished its Bnotmitzvah much success as they continue to lead by example and have a positive impact on the world around them.

Creativity in ‘My Family’ project



Elisheva Kahn

Yeshiva College pupils Elisheva Kahn and Ariella Kretzmer won in the “My Family Story Project” run by the Beit Hatfusot Museum in Tel Aviv. The Grade 7 girls researched their roots and used their creative skills to design original projects that capture the essence of their family history. Well done to the winners. We are so proud to have them representing Yeshiva College.

Shabbat break

King David High School Victory Park pupils Dina Kay and Dannica De Aguiar light candles on Kabbalat Shabbat during break on Friday, 5 March.



Dina Kay and Dannica De Aguiar

A year from that first COVID-19-alert cappuccino

A year ago, on 5 March, it was announced that the first case of COVID-19 had been diagnosed in South Africa. I remember so vividly that I was walking to Seattle to get a short double shot cappuccino (low fat) when I looked down, and saw the alert on my phone. I had been anxiously waiting for this announcement. So much so, that the news, in a strange way, came as a relief to me. I knew that when I looked up, I would see a different world.

A world altered.

On 5 March a year ago, South Africa began its COVID-19 journey. During this time, we were forced to educate ourselves, face our own mortality and the mortality of those around us. We had to shift how we work, how we exercise, how we socialise, and how we communicate. We had to be strong for others, and others had to be strong for us. We had to embrace our own vulnerability and celebrate the vulnerability of our co-workers, friends, and family.

We had to come to terms with the fact that the medical experts didn’t know everything, and would be learning as they went along. We had to accept that no government would get this absolutely right, and there were people who would take advantage of the crises for political or financial gain.

And we would see remarkable acts performed by the normal people. Nurses and doctors and physios and first responders and support staff became superheroes. And those involved in charity became the lifeblood for so many.

This Sunday marks the anniversary of a weekly COVID-19 podcast in which we try to address as many of the questions and concerns



INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman

that people have. This Sunday, in fact, marks the 50th edition, and also should notch up our 200 000th viewer.

We began our journey in studio in Rosebank before lockdown. We moved into our homes, recorded from hospitals, and even on the beach before closure in December. We journeyed through hydroxychloroquine, Ivermectin, and bleach, and debated if the tuberculosis vaccine would perhaps protect us. We watched in horror as Italy buried its dead, and Americans ripped each other apart. We followed the vaccines and the variants that would continue to reshape our experience.

When we began this project, we could have no idea where it would take us and who we would reach. I had no data to base the proposal on, and no experience to draw on. I simply asked well-meaning people to choose to have faith in an idea and sponsor it. Because after all, we might not have chosen to live through a pandemic. But we could choose how we would deal with it.

On 5 March a year ago, the first COVID-19 case was announced in South Africa. We have no way of knowing when the last case will be diagnosed, and if we will even be paying attention when that happens. Perhaps by then we will all have been vaccinated. And when I walk to Seattle to get a short double shot cappuccino (low fat), I won’t even notice that there was an alert on my phone.

Letters

DRUG TRAFFICKING ARTICLE HAS NO INTEREST FOR SA COMMUNITY

I find the article, “SA chiropractor in Melbourne jail pleads guilty to drug trafficking”, *SA Jewish Report*, 26 February 2021, in extremely bad taste. It smacks of sensationalism.

It happened more than two years ago, and in Australia. What possible benefit or interest could the article have for the Jewish population in South Africa?

The only outcome of this article is to worsen the anguish of the family here and in Australia.

I find it disgusting that you would even think about printing it! Jews face enough criticism, and this just adds fuel to the

debate.

I used to hold the *SA Jewish Report* in high regard, but not anymore.

– Les Davis, Johannesburg

We covered the story because we are a newspaper that deals with things related to and of interest to the Jewish community. This was undoubtedly such a story. We certainly did not sensationalise it and kept very much to the fact that this South African-born and educated man pleaded guilty to the crime of drug trafficking. Should we have been suppressing this or ignoring this? I think not.

– Editor

FURORE OVER CHIEF JUSTICE THE HEIGHT OF HYPOCRISY

Much criticism has been aimed at the judiciary these past months, stemming predominantly from some high-ranking African National Congress (ANC) officials who obviously see the rule of law in South Africa’s democracy as at odds with their views and political agendas.

But these same folk will hypocritically voice support for the judiciary when it suits their narrative, and here, the ruling of the Judicial Conduct Commission (JCC) to force an apology from the chief justice for personal remarks that he made, which in anyone’s views were totally inoffensive and in fact supported peace, seems offensive in certain quarters.

The JCC, indeed, needs to reflect on its own actions regarding Judge John Hlope, who is the judge president of the Western Cape High Court. Isn’t hypocrisy designed to favour the hypocrite?

The chief justice has ruffled some feathers through his honesty, and the call for an apology is a vindictive way at getting to the judge. But isn’t it strange that, given the way in which the ANC has mismanaged every aspect of the country from corruption, to botched COVID-19 vaccines, crime and

everything it touches, it creates issues to deflect from its failures?

The ANC government and its foreign policy is completely out of step with its African brothers, their BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) partners, and many in the Arab world, where they have cemented strong ties with Israel to the undeniable benefit of their people and countries generally. It’s only South Africa, which is bending to an archaic agenda out of place in this modern progressive world. So, countries like Rwanda and others are far outstripping South Africa in many fields.

But the ANC blindly forges ahead with an ideology fashioned on the likes of Cuba and Venezuela.

Here, we have a tiny group of activists who have such a disproportionate influence on ANC policy that it must sound alarm bells for the direction that the country is heading. It seems that minority is blind to the real problems facing this country, more so during this pandemic that has caused such devastation. These bigots care less about the starving millions and jobless hoards than missing the bus, shame on them!

– Allan Wolman, Israel

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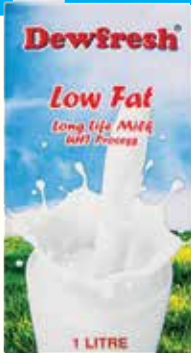
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