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Chief rabbi calls JSC questioning 'racist and antisemitic'

TALI FEINBERG

Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein this week was appalled at the "conduct of the commissioners of the Judicial Service Commission [JSC] in their questioning of two Jewish judges [over the past weeks]". He described it as "racist and antisemitic in effect, if not in intention".

Judge David Unterhalter was grilled about his short association with the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) and his views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in his interview with the JSC. He was being interviewed for a position on the Constitutional Court. Similar queries were directed at judicial candidate Advocate Lawrence Lever who is standing for a position in the Northern Cape, including if he observed Shabbat.

"The Jewish candidates were the only ones subjected to questions relating to religious identity and practice," said the chief rabbi. "The direct implication of their questions was that a Jewish judge who is a Zionist or observes Shabbat would be disqualified from holding high judicial office."

"This violates the letter and spirit of our Constitution. It's morally and legally repugnant for officers of the JSC to discriminate against any candidate on the basis of their religious identity. They should all be ashamed of themselves," the chief rabbi said.

He called on JSC commissioners including the minister of justice to retract and apologise for their comments. "And I also call on President Cyril Ramaphosa to return the list to the JSC as the Constitution allows him to do on the grounds that aspects of the hearing exhibited discriminatory questions which cast a shadow on their entire process. Racist conduct can never be condoned," Goldstein said.

The SAJBD also described the JSC's questioning of both men as "discriminatory and anti-constitutional".

"Advocate Lawrence Lever and Judge David Unterhalter were subjected to questions pertaining to their Jewish identity while no other candidates were subjected to offensive religious scrutiny," said SAJBD National Director Wendy Kahn. "Advocate Lever was asked about his level of religious observance, specifically

whether he observes Shabbat. It was made clear that this observance would be problematic for his appointment.

"It should also be noted that no other candidate was questioned on their religious practices, except those of the Jewish faith. Christian candidates weren't asked about working on Christmas, nor were Muslim candidates asked about working on Friday afternoons or Eid," said Kahn. "It's also extremely disturbing that questions posed to both Advocate Lever and Judge Unterhalter focused extensively on their possible association with the Board. Nearly all Jews in South Africa have some association with [it]. One wonders why a body mandated with protecting constitutionally sound principles of religious freedom and fighting hate would be so objectionable to members of the JSC panel," she asked rhetorically.

"Equally concerning were questions posed to the two Jewish candidates regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," said Kahn. "Both were questioned on their stance on the two-state solution. It's difficult to understand how a conflict of this nature has intruded into this forum. No Muslim candidates were questioned

on the issue.

"From the questions Jewish candidates were asked at the JSC interviews this month, one would question whether those bent on pursuing an antisemitic agenda are beginning to influence key decision-making bodies unduly. We call on all South Africans to stand up and protect these constitutional values, and reject all forms of discrimination."

Rabbi Greg Alexander, the co-chairperson at the South African Centre for Religious Equality and Diversity (SACRED), didn't hold back on his opinion of the interviews. "There is little doubt that there was flagrant discrimination at the recent JSC hearings. This is specifically concerning the two Jewish candidates being interviewed."

"Had such religious or cultural questions been asked of others of another faith, it would undoubtedly have sounded an alarm and disgusted those observing," said SACRED co-chairperson Rabbi Julia Margolis. "However, we now face a doubly-disgusting situation in that such questions arose in the first place, and secondly, that only one religion, faith, or culture appears to have been

deliberately targeted.

"This suggests that the very foundation of South Africa's democracy is under threat, and one cannot help recalling the late Nelson Mandela's voice: 'I have fought against white domination, and I will fight against black domination.' The determination of the late, great statesman to fight for absolute equality and against discrimination of any kind should be brought front and centre at this time. Those who raise such blatantly discriminating questions should be publicly shamed for doing so."

"There does appear to be some prejudice in the questioning from the JSC," said Mark Oppenheimer, an advocate at the Johannesburg Bar. To question a Jewish advocate about their observation of the Sabbath "is a weird thing to ask, given that there have been many Jews on the courts over the years, and you wouldn't ask a Christian whether they could do their job given that they might go to church on Sunday, or a Muslim who needs to go to prayers on a Friday. So there is either antisemitism or anti-Zionism, or a great deal of ignorance. With Judge Unterhalter, it's unclear if this was an excuse to try and block him, or whether it was the reason he wasn't nominated further."

Writing in *Business Live*, Tony Leon, the former leader of the opposition, said, "In the dismissal of Unterhalter's claims for judicial advancement, his membership of the 'suspect class' of his race was fused with his religious affiliation. Thus, the JSC interviewers gave little airtime to Unterhalter's credentials, which include being the first South African ever appointed to the appellate body of the World Trade Organisation, where he served as chairperson for two years."

"Courtesy of a bile-ridden tissue of vitriol against him authored by the Qatar-funded Boycott, Divest and Sanction outfit, Unterhalter landed up spending much of his time offering his views on Zionism (not in the remit of the court) and his one-time membership of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies," continued Leon. "According to BDS, the century-old Board, whose leadership



Fight for freedom – and survival

Nicholas Wolpe is giving his all to
 keep Liliesleaf afloat

Photo: Ian Ossendryver

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'My Octopus Teacher' extends tentacles from Cape to Oscars

TALI FEINBERG

Pippa Ehrlich travelled from the depths of Cape Town's icy oceans to the heights of the film industry when she won the Academy Award for Best Documentary this week.

Ehrlich, whose father is Jewish, grew up in Johannesburg and lives in Cape Town. She and co-director James Reed were awarded the Oscar for their film, *My Octopus Teacher*, which made waves around the world when it was released by Netflix last year.

When 34-year-old Ehrlich spoke to the *SA Jewish Report* last year, she said her proudest moment of the film's release was when her 90-year-old *bobba*, Rica Ehrlich, told her how much *nachas* she was getting as people around the globe responded to the film with joy, amazement, and fascination.

"She just couldn't believe it. She said, 'Every *bobba* should have such *nachas* from their granddaughter.' It was a lovely moment for me," recalls the filmmaker. One can imagine her *bobba's nachas* at her granddaughter's Oscar win.

Says Ehrlich, "I've had incredible support from the Jewish community, from my wonderful cousin, Danielle, and from Carina Frankal, who is the executive director of the Sea Change Project. Also my friend, Brian Bergman, who is a truly wise and wonderful man. There were many times where I felt out of my depth [when making the film]. I wanted to give up, and arrived on his doorstep in tears. Every time, he talked me through it, brought me back to myself, and sent me out to face the project again. You cannot do these things without having friends like that in your life.

"ORT Jet has also been so supportive," she says. "Since I first got in touch with them more than a year ago, they've been super encouraging, helped me with all sorts of things that I needed. The South African Jewish community is an incredible community to be part of, and it's wonderful to feel that support behind you."

Ehrlich and the film's subject and producer, Craig Foster, are part of the Sea Change Project, a community of scientists, storytellers, journalists, and filmmakers

who made *My Octopus Teacher* and are dedicated to raising awareness of the beauty and ecological importance of South



Pippa Ehrlich

Photo: Thomas Neil

Africa's kelp forest, which they call "the Great African Seaforest".

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* after the Oscar win, Frankal says that it has been a heady few days. She and her team have been working 18-hour days over the past few months as interest in the film went into overdrive.

Although she is thrilled with the Academy Award, for her "nothing can beat the impact of the Netflix launch of the film on 7 September 2020. The *nachas* we received from the outpouring of interest from all over the world was unequivocally incredible, and we were completely taken by surprise. We saw people connecting the film with their own story, and it touched people from all walks of life and all ages – even children. Art and poems were created, and our website crashed because of the amount of traffic. Emails came in literally every second, for days. We weren't prepared for it. We had no idea, so it was quite overwhelming, but also wonderful."

My Octopus Teacher has won more than 20 international awards, including Best Documentary at the British Academy Film Awards (BAFTA) and Producers Guild of America Awards. President Cyril Ramaphosa personally congratulated the team for its nomination and award. It was Ehrlich's first feature-length film, and as a first-time director, she told the *SA Jewish Report* that the experience of making it was "a baptism of fire".

In the months since the film launched on Netflix, the organisation has been bolstered with more hands on deck, and it was better prepared should the film win the BAFTA and Academy Award. "The Oscar is a win for all South Africans all over the world," says Frankal.

With a long career in filmmaking and media, Frankal has known Sea Change Project founders Craig Foster and Ross Frylinck for many years. When they invited her to join them, she was excited and intrigued.

"The mandate of using media to work towards

ocean conservation was of great interest to me. I knew the calibre of their work, and saw it as an exciting opportunity." It was largely voluntary and "we didn't go into it with any funding, job security, or salaries. We just worked on projects we loved".

Frankal hopes the Oscar will lead to more protection of the precious ecosystem that is the Great African Seaforest and other ocean environments. "If people can take the groundswell of interest and create meaningful and sustainable change, then we couldn't be happier," she says.

Like many others at the Sea Change Project, she started free diving five years ago. "At first, I would watch Craig and Ross go into the cold water, and I felt it wasn't for me. But then I saw them transform in a positive way, and I thought it wasn't such a leap to try this for myself. I'm now a die-hard cold-water swimmer and free diver. It's been life-changing to have access to this underwater world on our doorstep. I feel awe and wonder at the privilege of exploring this environment." She emphasises that anyone interested in doing it should do so safely, and seek others with more experience to guide them.

Frankal believes that *My Octopus Teacher* resonated with so many people because "it's everyone's story – we can all relate to how we feel when we connect with nature. It's in our wiring. I also think Craig's vulnerability in telling the story was powerful. He wasn't being anything other than himself. The film also lifts the veil between us and nature – it reminds us that we're not separate. We're all connected, and we're part of the natural world. This was Pippa's conviction – that the film doesn't have an overt conservation message, but rather, it's about the human heart."

In accepting the award, Ehrlich said, "In many ways, this really is a tiny personal story that played out in a sea forest at the very tip of Africa, but on a more universal level, I hope that it provided a glimpse of a different type of relationship between human beings and the natural world."

Speaking to the media, she said, "In a difficult year in which many of us were stuck inside, feeling afraid and confused, a positive story that transports you to a magical world has a powerful appeal. Parts of this story are universal to almost every person on earth – love and friendship, and connection and hope. It's about nature, but it's also a very powerful, archetypal story that helps us to make sense of the world."

Torah Thought

Rabbi David Nossel



To love is easy, to respect is hard

"Twelve thousand pairs of students were under Rebbi Akiva, and they all died in one chapter for they did not act respectfully to each other. It was taught, they all died from Pesach until Shavuot. They all died a bad death." (Talmud, Yevamot 62b).

There is something that really bothers me about this piece of Talmud, namely, were these students of Rebbi Akiva "goodies" or "baddies"?

On the one hand, they seem to be real baddies. To treat each other without respect certainly sounds pretty bad. And the Talmud tells us that they all suffered a "bad death".

On the other, they seem to be real goodies. After all, the Talmud calls them Rebbi Akiva's students. It doesn't say that there were 12 000 pairs of dropouts from Rebbi Akiva! Furthermore, their demise is mourned for more than a month every year by every Jew. It could be that no other people in the history of the world are mourned to the same extent.

So which one is it?

It's both. This profound Talmudic

text teaches us the tension between two magnificent human traits: love and respect.

Rebbi Akiva taught love. It was none other than Rebbi Akiva who said, "Love your fellow as yourself." This is a great principle of the Torah. No doubt, it's the reason why his students were described as being in pairs. If the Talmud wanted to emphasise the enormity of their numbers, it should have said 24 000 individuals. But it said 12 000 pairs because it wanted to reveal their inseparability, and to emphasise the enormity of their love for each other.

Why, then, did they die? The Talmud is teaching us that they died not in spite of their love for each other, they died because of it.

The core power of love is commonality. People love each other because they share things in common. It's this commonality that brings them together and unites them. It allows them to become one.

But people in love becoming one has its problems. First, it leads to sameness,

and sameness leads to redundancy. And second, it leads to exclusivity, and exclusivity leads to rejection.

This is why the students of Rebbi Akiva died "in the same chapter", because they all lived only "in the same chapter". And it's why they were able to love each other, but weren't able to respect each other, because love is based on sameness, respect is based on difference.

The Talmud is teaching us about the goodness and importance of love, about the students of love who learnt from a rebbe of love, who taught a Torah of love. And we mourn those students to this day out of our love for them.

But the Talmud is also teaching us the dangers of love. To love is easy, to respect is hard. To love is to remove otherness, to respect is to admire it.

As great as love is, by itself, it has no future. It's when love leads to respect that it will lead to Sinai, and a better future for all.

HRW report accusing Israel of apartheid widely condemned

NICOLA MILTZ

There has been widespread local and international condemnation over a Human Rights Watch (HRW) report accusing Israel of apartheid and persecution. The United States-based HRW published a 213-page report this week accusing Israel of pursuing policies of apartheid and persecution against Palestinians and against the country’s own Arab minority that amount to crimes against humanity. The report claims the Israeli government enforces an overarching policy to “maintain the domination by Jewish Israelis over Palestinians”.

HRW said that after decades of warnings that an entrenched hold over Palestinian life could lead to apartheid, it had found that the “threshold” had been crossed.

The report titled “A threshold crossed: Israeli authorities and the crimes of apartheid and persecution” was authored by Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine country director at HRW. Shakir was deported from Israel in 2019 for his alleged support of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

“HRW’s credibility as a human-rights watchdog has been hopelessly compromised by its obsessive anti-Israel bias, so much so that its founder has distanced himself from it,” says David Saks of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies. “Its latest report is just another rehashing of this politically-driven, factually distorted vendetta against the Jewish state.”

Israel’s foreign ministry rejected the claims as “preposterous and false”, and accused HRW of harbouring an “anti-Israeli agenda”, saying the group had sought “for years to promote boycotts against Israel”.

Israeli Strategic Affairs Minister Michael Biton said the purpose of the report was “in no way related to human rights, but to an ongoing attempt by HRW to undermine the state of Israel’s right to exist as the nation state of the Jewish people”.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas welcomed the report.

The HRW said its report wasn’t aimed at comparing Israel with apartheid-era South Africa, but rather at assessing “whether specific acts and policies” constitute apartheid as defined under international law. The report said Israel met the legal definition for crimes of apartheid as set out by the Rome Statute.

This is the first time in HRW’s 43-year history that it has accused Israel of apartheid. It has called on the United Nations (UN) to verify

the claims, and apply an arms embargo against Israel until steps are taken to end such “crimes”.

The report said Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, both within and outside sovereign Israel, met the definition of the crimes of apartheid.

The report provides an example of discrimination, citing Israel’s Law of Return which grants citizenship to Jews who want to emigrate to Israel. It says Palestinian refugees and their descendants who had lived on territory now under Israeli sovereignty didn’t have that same right of return.

NGO Monitor said that for close to 20 years, HRW had backed various BDS campaigns against Israel and companies that do business in Israel. “Recently, HRW was active in [failed] BDS attacks targeting Airbnb and FIFA, as well as in lobbying intensively for the UN BDS Blacklist.”

In its extensive analysis of the HRW report, the nongovernmental organisation accuses the



Human Rights Watch’s Omar Shakir being deported from Israel at the end of 2019

HRW “of deviously erasing the context” of the Law of Return.

“The Law of Return was enacted in the shadow of the Holocaust to provide a safe haven for Jews who for centuries suffered persecution around the world. The sharp rise in physical violence and other forms of antisemitism around the world in recent years only highlights the need for Israel as a safe refuge from persecution.”

The report addressed Israeli policies against Palestinians in the West Bank, including settlement activity, the demolition of Palestinian homes, and lack of freedom of movement for Palestinians.

The report also highlights problems with the

2018 Nation State Law.

NGO Monitor condemned the apartheid accusation, saying it was part of a larger global campaign to discredit Israel and undermine its identity as a Jewish state.

Shaun Sacks of NGO Monitor told the SA Jewish Report that over the past 18 months, NGOs had intensified their campaign to highlight the term “apartheid” in discourse about Israel.

In January, Israeli organisation B’Tselem made exactly the same case, also accusing Israel

Israeli law.”

The president of NGO Monitor, Professor Gerald Steinberg, said in a statement, “The demonisation of Israel through comparisons to the heinous legacy of the South African apartheid regime has deep roots, going back to the Soviet and Arab campaigns and the infamous Durban NGO Forum. HRW’s latest contribution consists of the standard mix of shrill propaganda, false allegations, and legal fictions. Exploiting the ‘apartheid’ image for propaganda is a cynical appropriation of the suffering of the victims of the actual apartheid regime.”

Rowan Polovin, the national chairperson of the South African Zionist Federation, said the HRW was biased against Israel.

“It’s not surprising that HRW has produced yet another anti-Israel report based on distortion, misinformation, and the political agendas of the writers. Even HRW’s original founder, Robert Bernstein, has distanced himself from the organisation over its obsessive and ongoing anti-Israel focus. HRW has admitted in the report that it doesn’t base its claims on the repeatedly debunked notion that Israel is similar to apartheid South Africa. This is yet another attempt to dilute the meaning of actual apartheid practices in South Africa and the victims who suffered under it.”

Polovin said the facts on the ground “simply don’t comport with the fantasy being portrayed in the report”.

“Whilst this report is being promulgated, multiple Arab nations are signing peace treaties with Israel and scaling up their involvement with the Jewish state. Democratically elected political parties with constituents from Arab-Israeli communities are engaging in the Israeli Knesset with their counterparts, and Israel is faced with rocket attacks not just from Gaza but from Syria as well. This reality isn’t portrayed in the report, and strongly contradicts the allegations it makes.”

Said Saks, “As for the impact of this report, it depends in part on how effectively the message gets out that HRW cannot be trusted, especially on this issue.”

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Picking up the pieces after UCT fire

TALI FEINBERG

The world watched in horror on Sunday, 21 April, as a raging wildfire bore down on the University of Cape Town (UCT), hitting at its heart when the JW Jagger Library went up in flames. Now, members of the community are pitching in from all sides to save priceless archival material from fire and water damage.

For principal archivist Michal Singer, it has been a harrowing week. She's barely had a moment to breathe as efforts to rescue material got underway. She has grieved along with staff members who worked in the library for decades.

"On Wednesday night, staff gathered for a memorial ceremony. For many, it's like losing a child. It was a moment for everyone to acknowledge the loss. It was one of the saddest days of my professional life." At the same time, Singer says the university has assured them that all staff members are supported mentally and emotionally, and given time to pause, rest, and take stock of the situation.

"It was a cruel twist of fate that of all the buildings at UCT, it was this building that caught fire. There was so much material to burn, and there was nothing they could do. The fire was so hot that when water was sprayed, it just evaporated. Now, the flooding of basements filled with archival material is the biggest concern. They were filled waist-deep with water. It took two days to pump out the water. We are now trying to evacuate both basements."

Evacuation and rescue efforts require hundreds of volunteers, and Singer says that the public has responded to the call in their numbers. "We have seen former UCT staff members assist our conservation and disaster-management team. We have had students come to help, even though they were evacuated from their residences for a week. And the public has come forward. It's backbreaking work, like being in the mines. They have been lifting and carrying kilograms of materials, forming human chains to get it out as quickly as possible, and working in shifts.

"It's a mouldy environment, so we've had to rotate teams to maintain health and safety. Then there are COVID-19 safety standards." They have also had to negotiate with the dismantling team about when volunteers can go in. Most material is taken to a "triage tent" where professionals attempt to restore it.

And then there are the thousands of milk crates that retailer Pick n Pay donated "at a moment's notice". Material needed to be evacuated quickly and stored in crates where air could pass through to prevent mould.

"Adam Mendelsohn, the director of UCT's Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies, reached out to us, desperate for help in procuring crates," says outgoing Cape South African Jewish Board of Deputies director Stuart Diamond. "We first contacted Melanie Levy from The Angel Network, and she helped us get 250 crates. But it became abundantly clear that UCT needed thousands. So I sent [Pick n Pay Transformation Director and Head of Ackerman Pick n Pay Foundation] Suzanne Ackerman-Berman a voice note, and she kicked things off," says Diamond. Soon, thousands of Pick n Pay milk crates started streaming in from all over the country.

"For some, it may look like an old milk crate, but for us it was the difference between saving and not saving the archive," says Singer.



Suzanne Ackerman-Berman looking through material that has been rescued

"Suzanne completely understood the gravity of it." Singer also lauds Mendelsohn for allowing the Kaplan Centre to be a place of refuge for the material.

Says Ackerman-Berman, "I was traumatised when I saw UCT going up in flames, and didn't want to believe that this could happen to this magnificent institution. And that library – I spent many hours there. I was UCT RAG [Remember And Give, which raises money for SHAWCO (Students Health and Welfare Centre Organisation)] chairperson in 1984, and spent a lot of time on those Jameson steps [now the steps of Sarah Baartman Hall].

"When I heard that the basement had been flooded, I remembered going into that basement myself," she says. "And my mother told me when she was a student at UCT, she spent many hours reading first editions of *Punch* magazine there. I heard they needed plastic crates – not boxes – because the plastic mesh would allow the air to circulate and dry the documents. We were able to immediately find 2 000 crates, the next day 4 000 crates, and today [Monday, 26 April], we have supplied a further 6 000 crates. I think UCT has been surprised at how many crates it needs.

"When I visited the campus on Friday, I was hit on the chest, literally, with a small piece of paper. And when I looked at it, it was a burnt snippet of a book. And I just burst into tears as I realised the trauma of a library going up in flames," says Ackerman-Berman. "At the Kaplan Centre, I saw first-hand the scale of the documents being restored." She came across news clippings of students assisting women in the townships – something she remembers doing in her SHAWCO days.

"I picked up another file, and I saw items on NUSAS [the National Union of South African Students]. My father, [Pick n Pay founder, Raymond Ackerman] was president of NUSAS in the 1940s and 1950s. My family connection with UCT is pretty long. My brother, Gareth, was a RAG chairperson, I was a RAG chairperson – we were all involved in student politics. My parents were involved in UCT night schools. So, to see these documents damaged, it threw me. This is the history of what turned our country around, and how UCT fought against apartheid. We have to save the heritage of our nation."

Meanwhile, others have stepped in to assist in the restoration of historic buildings that were burnt. "We got the call last week to get on site as quickly as possible to assist in assessing the damages and digitising the affected buildings," says Darryl Epstein, engineer and managing

director at Delta Scan.

The company specialises in the digitisation and inspection of infrastructure using high-tech solutions such as drones and artificial intelligence. "We often get involved in complex assessments where conventional methods aren't suitable, speed is a priority, or access may not be safe. Working with local legal drone teams, we received special permission to fly drones over a classified emergency zone, while other aircraft were operating nearby to control the blaze," says Epstein.

"We have been operating throughout the week to get the students back on campus and to preserve as much information on these historical sites as possible. We are now building exact digital replicas of the affected structures for analysis and restoration. We transform the buildings into 3D digital replicas, which are put into virtual reality and analysed by our team of engineers and digital experts.

"It was a moving experience to work alongside the emergency response teams," says Epstein. "We were allowed into areas not yet cleared for public or media access. It's been emotional to see first-hand the destruction and loss of historical sites."

Chief rabbi calls JSC questioning 'racist and antisemitic'

>> Continued from page 1

is democratically and transparently elected, is akin to the Broederbond. Mere membership of this community body rendered Unterhalter unfit for higher judicial office in the view of BDS, a matter the JSC seemed to endorse."

The JSC recommended Lever for a vacant judge's position in the Northern Cape. It also recommended lawyer Norman Manoim for a vacancy on the Gauteng High Court bench. Both are to be referred to President Cyril Ramaphosa for appointment. Meanwhile, the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution is reportedly considering legal options regarding the recent interviews by the JSC for candidates for appointment to the Constitutional Court.

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report*, Manoim said, "It's a great honour to be able to serve. I've been in public service for a long time – on the Competition Tribunal for 20 years as a public regulator

– and I wanted to be able to continue serving."

As a human rights lawyer before 1994, Manoim said he hoped to bring "the perspective of a lawyer who has worked with and without a Constitution". He also wants to emphasise the importance of institutions in society. "We as a country must ensure our institutions work properly and independently, and we must work to protect them," he said.

He said it was important for people who had the opportunity to serve in public office, to do so. "It's easy to criticise society – and we do have many problems. But we must get our hands dirty and contribute towards solutions. As an optimist, I think we can solve our problems – we always have. So we must put ourselves in whatever role we can be useful in. This community has people with a wide range of skills and talents. We must get involved in whatever sphere we can to make a real difference."

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How COVID-19 lockdown turned eating upside down

MIRAH LANGER

Families baking cakes, icing drive-by party cupcakes, and fermenting sourdough starters was one of the more celebratory public images of the COVID-19 lockdown. However, for some, the isolation and disruption in routine helped to trigger a struggle with food, the effects of which continue to linger more than a year afterwards.

unsettled by “disordered eating” during this time. This, she says, is when one exhibits behaviours that show a preoccupation with eating, weight, exercise, body shape, and so on, but doesn’t fulfil the definitive criteria of an eating disorder. An example is when a person begins to feel overwhelming guilt or the need to overcompensate with exercise or skipping a meal after they believe they have overindulged.

Either way, the consequences can be

struggle.

Even in normal circumstances, a big trigger for eating disorders is isolation. “There can be a sense of discomfort and in those moments, people feel overwhelmed and everything feels heightened, even warped. COVID-19 really ruined the sense of well-being for some, their sense of control over their environment, and food is one thing that people can control.”

As Lurie notes, what becomes difficult is that physically, “once your weight begins to drop or rise below or above a certain point, cognitive and metabolic changes take place. Restriction and bingeing become sources of serotonin, and the addictive cycle is hard to break. Decisions about food, weight, and general eating become exceptionally difficult to make, particularly for those who are malnourished.”

Lurie and Bruk both express particular concern about the effect that lockdown has had on adolescents and children.

Among adolescents, Bruk has seen an “intensity in how quickly eating disorders manifested to a severe level. Normally, a parent would bring in a teenager who was exhibiting some concerning tendencies in their eating over some time; now the adolescent would already have quickly found themselves experiencing extreme levels of body dissatisfaction and obsession with food and/or exercise to the degree they would already be diagnosed as a disorder.”

Lurie says the number of eating disorders during lockdown concerning adolescents and children is “alarming”.

“Adolescents during the harder lockdowns were confined to remote learning, cut off from their social support, and had opportunities, like adults, for more social-media exposure.”

She mentions slogans like “avoid the quarantine 15 [pound weight gain]” as well as “people posting pictures of their stringent lockdown exercise and diet routines” as contributing to problematic eating habits.

Already, Bruk says, adolescents often have distorted perceptions of their bodies. For example, when presented with images that show a spectrum of body sizes from thinnest to largest and asked to choose the figure that most closely resembles themselves, many choose a figure that’s several sizes larger than their actual body shape. Similarly, when asked to select the figure that most closely matches their ideal size, they often select the figure that would be classified as unhealthily thin.

During COVID-19, there seemed to be peer pressure among friends to use the time away from school to overhaul themselves, often in unrealistic ways. “The general impression shared was, ‘Okay, we’re not going to be at school for the next few months, and when I come back, I’m going to go through a ‘glow-up’ – I’m going to look amazing.’”

Both Lurie and Bruk urge anyone who is concerned about their own or a family member’s eating patterns to seek help as quickly as possible.

“We know that the sooner an intervention takes place the better the prognosis, and encourage anyone battling or their families to reach out for help as soon as possible,” says Lurie.

“Many feel lost and helpless when they have a family member who is suffering from an eating disorder. There is often a long road ahead, but with the right support, recovery is possible,” Bruk says.

Sometimes these problems require a holistic approach.

“We always recommend a multidisciplinary approach in the form of a psychologist, psychiatrist, or general practitioner as well as a dietitian to monitor all aspects of these disorders and hopefully facilitate a recovery process,” says Lurie.



“My coping mechanism is eating and food, and that’s what I turned to during lockdown,” reflects Lynn (name changed), a 40-something-year-old from Johannesburg.

“The stress was on us because we had our business that had to keep running. After work, I would just come home and binge. The cycle started – I went into a mindset where I wasn’t even thinking. This period has been like a dream; a surreal situation.”

Lynn says she has never had a “calm or peaceful” relationship with food, but lockdown triggered an extreme manifestation of this.

In the beginning, she and her family were gung-ho at the idea of using the time to focus on well-being. “I remember that first week of being home, we were like, ‘Oh cool, we’re going to start exercise routines and create healthy meals.’”

“Then, I don’t know what happened. I’ve always been a secret eater. If you asked my husband, he would say that I hardly eat junk food, but during lockdown, I didn’t care. I was eating junk food in front of him. When we went to the shops, I would buy junk food with the intention that it was all for me.”

Lynn tried to counteract this by going on a strict diet for three months at the end of last year, but she slipped again. “At the moment, it’s one of the biggest struggles. I’m just so tired. It totally controls your life.”

Psychologist Liane Lurie and dietician Lila Bruk say that Lynn isn’t alone in her struggle with food during lockdown.

Lurie says it’s important to note that while there has been a rise in reported cases of eating disorders during COVID-19, the exact cause of such a condition is never completely known. “It’s unclear as to whether the pandemic itself has given rise to new cases, or whether the person presenting for treatment already had the makings of an eating disorder beforehand.”

Bruk notes that along with officially diagnosed eating disorders, others have been

devastating for the person suffering.

Although the specific roots of eating problems are established on a case-by-case basis, Bruk says there are elements of lockdown that certainly exacerbated the

Five ways back to well-being

Bruk offers some starting pointers to rebalance eating habits:

1. Keep a food diary. Write down when and what you eat, as well as what you are feeling at the time of the meal. “It’s a useful tool to get back on track, as well as create mindfulness around eating.”
2. Try to identify the feeling of hunger. We slip into eating for so many other reasons besides actually fuelling our body that we need to try and connect to its core function again. “Check in with yourself at different points in the day, especially before a meal, as to whether you actually do feel hungry and what this experience feels like for you.”
3. Take it one meal at a time. Make changing your eating habits feel manageable by not trying to overhaul everything at once. “Commit yourself to a good breakfast. Then commit to the same for the following snack or meal, and so on. Otherwise, you will simply get too stressed.”
4. Do any form of exercise that feels good to you. “Getting active helps you get you back in touch with your body and release stress.”
5. For parents who are concerned about their children’s eating habits, keep communication open. Be careful how you comment on your child’s body, even positively. Also avoid slipping into conflict situations such as begging your child to eat more or less. “This is such a delicate situation and is often linked to so many other family dynamics. Sometimes it’s best to get outside help that can help navigate the situation from a different perspective.”

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Some are more equal than others

In this country, we have a Constitution that most experts around the world believe to be one of the finest. Apparently, every genuine right that a person could think of was considered in writing it, and is somehow included. And if it wasn’t originally included, it has since been considered and brought into law.

Sounds incredible, right? However, considering the corruption in this country, could it possibly be too good to be true?

No, the Constitution is as sound as we have described, however, it’s only as good as its implementation. In the past few weeks, we have witnessed the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) interview people for positions as judges in various courts. One would imagine that, more than any other body, the JSC would be exemplary when it came to upholding the Constitution and ensuring any prejudice was not allowed.

Well, that hasn’t been our experience in watching Jewish legal beagles cross questioned by the JSC in areas that have no bearing on their positions as judges, but rather point to potential antisemitism and violation of the Constitution. Frankly, it’s extremely troubling.

I am considering here only issues pertaining specifically to the Jewish community and Jewish people who underwent JSC scrutiny, not any of the others.

When Judge David Unterhalter was interviewed two weeks back – or should I say interrogated, as that’s how it felt to me as I watched – it followed a very distressing antisemitic complaint by the South African Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Coalition. While we have discussed this complaint at length, in a rough summary of it: BDS smeared the South African Jewish Board of Deputies’ (SAJBD’s) name, and by virtue of his connection with it, Unterhalter’s as well.

This obviously got to the JSC, and during the “interview”, individual members intimated that by virtue of the fact that Unterhalter had been on the SAJBD for some months, it somehow meant he might not be “constitutional” or “support equality”. The line of questioning was ugly. It also unfairly painted the SAJBD as an organisation opposed to human rights rather than one that fights to enable South African Jews to live a prejudice-free life in South Africa.

I wondered if this was only because of the BDS complaint. And why was it even allowed by a body that should be the absolute upholder of the Constitution? I mean, we’re talking about the initial selection committee for Constitutional Court judges, no less. The line of questioning was uncomfortable and frankly, unacceptable. It’s true, everyone vying for these positions gets put through the question-firing committee, but some questions don’t fall into the appropriate category, and Unterhalter got those.

Fast forward to last Friday, and Advocate Lawrence Lever underwent his interview for a position as a judge in the Northern Cape. He has been acting as a high court judge for five years already. After answering “no” to having been on the SAJBD, he was tackled about what it meant to have an allegiance with the board, as if it (once again) was some dubious organisation. All this was pointed, as it had been with Unterhalter, to South African Jewry’s allegiance with Israel, the Jewish state. And by virtue of having any allegiance, it meant that they (or we) support human rights violations. Talk about a leap of judgement! Talk about tarring and feathering us all...

But with Lever, it didn’t end there. He was then questioned about whether he observed Shabbos. The question led to the idea that if he was *shomrei Shabbat*, it could get in the way of him doing his job as a judge properly because he might not be willing to work on a Friday night or Saturday. Astonishingly, no Christian, Muslim, or person of any other faith faced this line of questioning. Again, I come back to the fact that we’re talking about seats for judges on our judiciary, and these questions were, in my opinion, unconstitutional.

As Jews, we have the right to observe our religion, and we have the right to have a body that protects us. We also have the right to an affinity with another country. It should never be allowed that we – or anyone else – should be demeaned or not given a position because of this.

Now, I cannot say categorically that Judge Unterhalter wasn’t shortlisted for Constitutional Court judgeship because of antisemitism or because of his allegiance with the board. Although I know that some people have questioned my saying that I believe it was also due to the fact that he was white, privileged, and didn’t have that many years as a judge behind him, it certainly didn’t work in his favour.

As for Lever, well, we’ll see.

The point is that, with our incredible Constitution admired throughout the world, we should never be subjected to this, especially in the name of the JSC. If the Constitution was properly implemented, this would be stopped immediately and only questions that are fair and reasonable would be allowed. Surely those who bring up these kinds of questions should be censured?

I must say that as we consider what Freedom Day means to us this week, it’s sad to think that 27 years ago, we celebrated the rainbow nation. This amazing concept meant all South Africans were equal, and race, religion, gender, etcetera weren’t going to get in the way of our beloved country. Perhaps we need to rethink how we implement our Constitution, and what we’re all doing to recreate that rainbow nation so that we can build the country of our dreams.

I, for one, want to live in a country where we’re all equal before the law, Jewish or not.



Is the Judicial Services Commission hostile to Jews?



OPINION

ADVOCATE MARK OPPENHEIMER

The appointment of judges is a key component of the health and vitality of our democracy. The Judicial Services Commission (JSC) has recently gone through the process of nominating judges for the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court of Appeal, and high courts around the country.

The separation of powers doctrine means that the different arms of government are checks on each other. The legislature’s role is to create the laws, the judiciary’s role is to adjudicate upon the laws, and the executive’s role is to carry out the law. Traditionally, the executive also has the task of appointing judges.

Lawrence Lever was asked if his “observation of the Sabbath would interfere with his judicial duties”. Such questions weren’t put to Christian or Muslim candidates.

In America, the president decides which judges are placed on its Supreme Court, subject to a confirmation hearing held by the Senate. In South Africa we have the JSC, which is made up of 23 people from a variety of sectors, including politicians, an academic, and legal practitioners. Members interview the judicial candidates, and then recommend candidates who the president can ultimately appoint. The president may refuse to appoint people and ask for an additional set of names.

The JSC hearings have been publicly broadcast, which gives us a sense of what these potential judges would be like on the bench. It also shows the workings of the JSC and the questions that its members deem important.

There is concern that Julius Malema sits as a member of the JSC while being a frequent litigant in the courts. While I trust that judges would be able to fairly apply the law to the facts of Malema’s cases, there is concern that his role in their further elevation to higher courts may create a perception of bias in the eyes of the public. It may be appropriate for Malema to recuse himself from taking part in the nomination process of any judge that has heard his cases.

The Constitution requires judges to be appropriately qualified and to be fit and proper.

We should expect the JSC to ask candidates questions about their knowledge of the law and the cases they litigated while in practice. If they are already a judge and are being interviewed for elevation to a higher court, questions should be asked about the judgments that they have written and whether they were delivered timeously. The JSC should also ensure that judges in particular divisions have experience in private law, criminal law, and constitutional matters.

The Constitution states that “the need for the judiciary to reflect broadly the racial

and gender composition of South Africa must be considered when judicial officers are appointed”. However, the obligation is only to consider these criteria, and demographic representation is by no means mandated.

It has become common for members of the JSC to interrogate white male candidates about their sex and gender. Judge Roland Sutherland, who was being interviewed for the position of deputy judge president of the South Gauteng High Court, was asked to comment on the fact that he is a white male. He noted that, among deputy judge presidents in the country, only one of them is white. This entails that his appointment would further the objective of broadly reflecting the racial composition of the bench.

Sutherland has been nominated by the JSC, and thankfully many of the questions that he was asked related to his achievements as a judge. His judgments are written with clarity and wisdom, and his reputation as a fair and patient adjudicator is widespread at the Bar. He also restructured the court to ensure that trial dates are allocated within a few months as opposed to years.

There is a reasonable worry that the JSC has shown hostility to Jewish candidates. Lawrence Lever was asked if his “observation of the Sabbath would interfere with his judicial duties”. Such questions weren’t put to Christian or Muslim candidates.

The BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement wrote a letter to the JSC claiming that it was improper for Judge David Unterhalter to have held a position at the

South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) because it deemed the organisation to be supportive of the “apartheid state of Israel” and antithetical to the values of the Constitution.

Instead of asking Unterhalter about the vast array of expertise that he would bring to the Constitutional Court, the Black Lawyers Association and Dali Mpofu repeatedly asked about his short stint on the SAJBD.

The code of judicial conduct states that a judge cannot be part of a political party, but it explicitly allows judges to be members of charitable organisations like the SAJBD. Unterhalter made it clear that he had been asked to assist vulnerable people in the Jewish community who had been imperilled by the pandemic

The JSC declined to nominate Unterhalter in spite of his numerous appearances before the Constitutional Court in landmark cases that include the certification of the Constitution itself.

• *Mark Oppenheimer is a practising advocate and member of the Johannesburg Bar.*



The South African Constitutional Court

Freedom Day fight for Liliesleaf’s survival

NICOLA MILTZ

Nicholas Wolpe, the founder and chief executive of the Liliesleaf Trust, is a man on a sad, lonely mission.

Out of desperation, he has become the mouthpiece for the arts, heritage, and culture sector, one which in his view is dismally neglected and forgotten about.

Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, Johannesburg, described as the “nerve centre of the liberation movement”, is hanging by a thread and facing permanent closure due to a funding crisis exacerbated by the pandemic.

Once a hive of activity frequented by many Jewish struggle stalwarts and their famous brothers in arms during the height of the struggle, the secret safehouse turned internationally renowned place of memory, now stands forlorn and overgrown.

It was at Liliesleaf that a group of dedicated activists including Nelson Mandela were arrested during a police raid in 1963 for planning to overthrow the apartheid government. The raid led to the Rivonia Treason Trial.

Among the freedom fighters was Nicholas’ father, Harold Wolpe, Arthur Goldreich, Denis Goldberg, Lionel Bernstein, and James Kantor.

“The Jewish population made up a miniscule percentage of the population and here, these activists comprised 40% of those arrested,” Wolpe told the *SA Jewish Report* this week.

The once popular tourist attraction hasn’t been open since last March, and like many struggle heritage sites in the country, risks closure.

“Many of our historical sites of memory, including Robben Island, have deteriorated and are a shadow of their former selves,” said Wolpe.

Like Liliesleaf, they are “either on life support or are being forced to close their doors. Some even consider auction in the hope of securing a benefactor who will ensure their survival”, he said.

Many historical sites are dilapidated and falling apart. Wolpe emphasises the repercussions should these crucial places of memory be threatened with closure.

This week, on Freedom Day, 27 April, Liliesleaf launched a crowdfunding campaign in a last-ditch attempt to keep this vital place of history afloat.

“It’s crucial that we keep the memory of the struggle against apartheid alive,” he said.

Wolpe was a baby when police raided Liliesleaf Farm on 11 July 1963, arresting the high command of Umkhonto we Sizwe. His father, Harold, was one of them.

It led to the famous Rivonia Trial at which eight accused, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Govan Mbeki, Ahmed Kathrada, Denis Goldberg, Elias Motsoaledi, Andrew Mlangeni, and Raymond Mhlaba, were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Wolpe’s parents, Harold and AnnMarie, fled into exile shortly after Harold escaped from the Marshall Square police headquarters in Johannesburg by bribing a young warder, just before the start of the Rivonia Trial. Nicholas returned to South Africa as a young man on a mission to bring those defining moments in the history of South Africa to life. He went back to Liliesleaf Farm, and created an independent site

of memory.

In spite of many funding challenges, he has shown steadfast commitment and dedication to ensuring that “a unique and seminal epoch in our struggle for freedom isn’t lost and forgotten, but remembered and honoured”.

It hasn’t been easy for Wolpe.

“There exists an indifference to preserving the memory of our struggle. Current government



Nicholas Wolpe

policy doesn’t recognise independent heritage sites so they are denied access to much-needed government funding,” he said.

Places like Liliesleaf rely on donations, tourism, entrance fees, and school visits, all hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I fear that our liberation history will fade from our collective consciousness and will hold little meaning, particularly for our youth and future generations,” he said.

“Historical sites like Liliesleaf should be given the attention they deserve and the funding they desperately need. This way, the men and women who sacrificed their own lives so that the South Africans of today could enjoy the fruits of freedom will be honoured.”

He said Liliesleaf recognised the unique,

ethical, and principled group of leaders who rose above self-interest and aspirations.

“Service was a fundamental aspect of what they were doing. It’s what drove them as a collective. They didn’t seek affirmation, reward, or publicity. They fought for a free, equal, just society. Together they symbolised the essence of being a servant of the people,” he said.

“South Africa is grappling with corruption, self-interest, and state capture – the very antithesis of the ideals, principles, beliefs, and aspirations of struggle heroes. Places like Liliesleaf stand as a reminder to the youth of the importance of what underpinned our struggle and what can be achieved through a unified commitment defined and underpinned by self-dedication.

“Arts, culture, and heritage is the soul of our nation, and theatres and many places like Liliesleaf are our link to the past, our connection to the present, and our bridge to our future,” Wolpe said.

“Liliesleaf has a crucial and indispensable role to play in highlighting that the Freedom Charter was not merely a statement, but a statement of intent. It was a reality as highlighted by the role individuals across the colour bar played in the fight for freedom, justice, equality, and democracy. This is why we must take a stand before it’s too late.”

The crowdfunding campaign will help to meet basic operating costs such as staff salaries and utilities. It asks people to donate R27 or R60 to commemorate 27 years of democracy, the 27 years Nelson Mandela spent in prison, and the 60th anniversary, this August, since Liliesleaf was purchased. Donations can be made via the Liliesleaf website.

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Lag B’Omer, fire, and faith

OPINION

RABBI YOSSY GOLDMAN



With the old Johannesburg General Hospital, Cape Town’s Table Mountain, and the University of Cape Town having suffered devastating fire damage just last week, I would imagine that the custom of lighting bonfires on Lag B’Omer will be somewhat subdued this year.

Perhaps it’s timely to ask where this custom originates. And, in general, how is fire looked upon in Jewish thought? What, is, in fact, the spiritual symbolism of fire?

If we go back to the very beginning of time in the Genesis story, we find that the first human, Adam, discovered fire on the very first Saturday night in history. It was the first time he had experienced darkness and, somehow, he was inspired to rub two flint stones together sparking a flame which enabled him to see in the night. This is the source for our weekly blessing over fire, “*boreh meorei haeish*”, in the Havdalah prayer recited at the conclusion of Shabbat.

Fire features prominently throughout the Bible and in the Tanach. Just a few episodes that come to mind immediately are Moses’ very first revelation from G-d at the burning bush, and the clouds of glory which miraculously guided and protected the Israelites during their travels in the wilderness which included a pillar of fire. During the great revelation at Sinai where we heard the ten commandments directly from G-d, scripture records that, “The whole of Mount Sinai was smoking because the L-rd had descended upon it in fire.” Indeed, the Torah itself is described as “a fiery faith”.

Tragically, twice in our history, our enemies set fire to Jerusalem and our Holy Temples, causing destruction and the enduring exile from which we have yet to fully recover.

Arguably, the most famous wedding speech one hears under the *chupah* is the one about the Hebrew words for

“man” and “woman”, “*ish*” and “*isha*”. *Ish* (man) contains the Hebrew letter *yud* while *isha* (woman) contains the letter *hay*. Together, *yud* and *hay* spell one of the holy names of G-d. Remove those letters, and you are left with only the *alef* and the *shin* in each word, which spells *aish*, or fire.

The sobering message to bride and groom? Leaving G-d out of the marital relationship definitely spells trouble and may well bring a fiery end to the marriage, whereas the presence of Hashem in their home is a recipe for a life of happiness.

Not long after the people sinned with the golden calf, the Jewish people were remorseful but needed to do something meaningful to atone for their terrible mistake.

G-d told them to bring a half shekel of silver as their penance.

But Moses was puzzled. How could the giving of a mere coin atone for such a grievous sin as idolatry? Rashi, quoting the Midrash, writes that G-d showed Moses a “coin of fire”. The Lubavitcher Rebbe explained that the concept of the coin of fire means that while a coin alone is certainly an inadequate atonement, if it is given with fire, meaning with passion and profound feelings of contrition and regret, it can indeed bring about the desired atonement. Thus, fire becomes a powerful symbol of a passionate and inspired spiritual experience.

Of course, fire has always been a symbol of warmth, light, illumination, spirituality, and even divine revelation as it pierces the darkness of the material world. But, as we all know only too well, fire can also be a source of horrific chaos and destruction. Fire can illuminate and open our eyes to new and higher realities. It can help us to “see the light”, but it can also wreak havoc and destruction.

Nuclear energy can fire up power plants producing electricity for an entire continent, but if it gets into the wrong hands, it can blow our entire planet to smithereens.

Fire, too, can be a positive tool for building, illuminating, welding, and bringing things together; or, it can be a weapon of mass destruction, G-d forbid. It all depends on the people using it and their intentions, whether noble or evil. When controlled with intelligence and sensitivity, fire can provide energy to fuel a nation. Unchecked, it destroys and leaves utter devastation in its wake.

In the Lag B’Omer story, besides Rabbi Akiva, the other hero of the day is Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the second century sage who passed away on this day. Besides being a famed Talmudist, he is acknowledged as the author of the holy Zohar, the “Bible” of the Kabbalah and the father of Jewish mysticism.

Tradition has it that when he taught Torah it was, quite

literally, a fiery experience. And, on that fateful Lag B’Omer day, when his holy soul was leaving this world, his face was so radiant that his students couldn’t gaze at him directly. And his entire house was shining with a fiery light, symbolising the powerful, spiritual light of his holy teachings. For this, as well as other reasons, we light bonfires on Lag B’Omer, especially around his tomb in Meron, the little town in Upper Galilee in Israel.

I will end with a Jewish proverb from the saintly sages of old that tells us: “After a fire, one is blessed with wealth.” So may it be for all who have suffered trauma and loss.

• *Rabbi Yossy Goldman is the Life Rabbi Emeritus at Sydenham Shul and the president of the SA Rabbinical Association.*



Holocaust survivor makes case for recognition of Armenian genocide

MIRAH LANGER

Nearly 100 years later, Armenians continue to struggle for full recognition of the genocide inflicted upon their nation and, in a poignant twist, one of the most profound contributors to their cause was Holocaust survivor and author, Edgar Hilsenrath.

Hilsenrath, a German-Jew who survived a Ukrainian ghetto, was responsible for a seminal novel, *The Story of the Last Thought*. The work spans centuries of Armenian life in contextualising and portraying the genocide that took place between 1915 and 1916, when about 1.5 million Armenians were murdered in the Ottoman Empire.

The epic novel, for which Hilsenrath received many prizes, is “regarded as one of the most important books about this history”, said University of Leeds Professor Frank Finlay in a seminar last week, held by the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in conjunction with the Armenian Youth of South Africa.

“This book can be regarded as making a literary case for recognition of the massacres in Armenia as being a genocide.”

Its stance remains so potent, that staging it as a play in Germany in 2014, particularly the use of the word *völkermord* (genocide) on posters and on the theatre website, drew protesting crowds of Turkish nationals and a letter from the Turkish consul general.

Hilsenrath’s sensitive devotion to recognition of the Armenian genocide was intertwined with his own life experiences. Born in Leipzig in 1926 when the Nazis began to rise to power, he, along with other family members, tried to flee to Romania, but later were deported to the Mogilev-Podolsk ghetto in Ukraine.

After surviving the war, Hilsenrath made his way to what was then the British protectorate of Palestine, before later reuniting with family in France.

“This was quite a traumatic time for him. He started to work through the experience he had at the ghetto and at the same time, he was trying to write about them. He fell into a deep depression. Amongst other things, he arranged to have electroshock therapy.”

Hilsenrath wrote of these experiences, saying that at the heart of his struggle was the impossible guilt of having survived.

He worked doing hand-to-mouth day jobs while writing feverishly at night. His initial works were experimental craftings that dealt with his experiences in the Holocaust.

From 1951, he moved to New York until 1975, when he settled in Berlin.

His first novel, *Night*, was published in 1964, and caused controversy for unflinchingly detailing some of the harshest realities of the victims of the ghetto. In 1971, he published the novel *The Nazi and the Barber* about an SS member who pretends to be Jewish after the war in order to escape prosecution. Its use of “grotesque” humour to tackle the subject brought him fame and controversy.

Hilsenrath continued to write until his death in 2018. Out of his oeuvre, he regarded *The Story of the Last Thought*, published in 1989 and 20 years in the making, as his best book.

“He referred to it as his most poetic book. It was really the culmination of a lifelong study and preoccupation

with Armenia; with its history and, in particular, that of the genocide,” said Finlay.

More than simply using his writing to present a historical account of events, what the author really does is “perform an act of restoration, conjuring up and memorialising a lost world through words and stories”.

Furthermore, Hilsenrath chose a particularly unusual form for the novel, titling it in German as a *märchen* (fairytale). Yet, he combined this with a subtitle, “*Ein historischer Roman aus dem Kaukasus*” (a historical novel from the Caucasus).

Finlay said that while the two genres would conventionally “appear to be at odds with one another”, in fact, they have a powerful interplay.

Indeed, Hilsenrath conducted meticulous research into every aspect of Armenian history and culture in preparation for writing. Yet the final plotline, based on the journey of “the dying 73-year-old Thovma Khatasia, as old as the genocide and one of only two members of his

family to survive it” is a “kind of a magic carpet ride through time and space. We eavesdrop on conversations of historical personages and inhabit the past as it happened.”

Guided by a *meddah*, a genie-like magical helper, and with a refrain both in Turkish and German of “once upon a time”, the novel’s protagonist “seeks not to punish or demand retribution, but rather to uphold the

monitory potential of the Armenian genocide in order to prevent similar atrocities in future”.

By the end, it fulfils the promise of its unusual paradoxical form, proving “the didactic moral purpose of all good fairy stories: while the family story is a fiction, the reader is shown that the genocide did, indeed, take place, that it meets the United Nation’s legal definition of the term and, as such, that Armenian claims for restitution are justified”.

Finlay said the work was a remarkable achievement of literature as justice. “Hilsenrath manages to convey the acts of the perpetrators and the magnitude of the suffering in a way that blends meticulously researched history with fantasy and imagination that opens up a new way of engaging with the material. It’s a way that encourages empathy.”

Indeed this “post-Holocaust depiction of a pre-Holocaust genocide” is a contribution to the ongoing exploration of and inquiry into “how we speak about the unspeakable”, posits Finlay.

In trying to grapple with the atrocities of world history, the question for writers remains, “Do we surrender before the challenge of representing that, or do we strive to find adequate literary forms to express various things that have happened?”

Hilsenrath strove to do so. As *The Story of the Last Thought* itself self-reflectively declares within its pages: “Sometimes one has no other choice than to seek the final truth in the imagination.”



Edgar Hilsenrath

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Cape Town school urges community to connect with a phone call

TALI FEINBERG

When last did you make a phone call to a friend or family member just to chat? Not a voice note or a text, or a WhatsApp message, or a Facebook message, or a Zoom session, but an actual telephone call? Ease of technology means that most of us send messages to each other every day, but we don't really connect. That's why the Phyllis Jowell Jewish Day School (PJJDs) in Cape Town has launched a #makethecall campaign to challenge the community to make phone calls as a way to connect in a time of disconnection.

"We wanted to show our pupils that education isn't just about books, but about actions," says Rabbi Gavi Ziegler, campus rabbi at PJJDs. He explains that the idea came about as part of an educational project. "We also wanted

to do something for the community, whose morale was particularly low after the second wave [of COVID-19]. We felt that making phone calls is something anyone can do. The initiative crosses all borders and boundaries, all sectors of the community, and all demographics."

He and PJJDs educator Rebbetzin Leah Silman also wanted to focus on the teachings in *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of our Fathers). "Chapter 1:15 Shamai says to 'greet all people with a pleasant countenance' – to reach out to others with kind words and greetings," says Ziegler. "Rambam says in Chapter 4:2 – Ben Azai, 'Run after an easy *mitzvah* like a difficult one, as one *mitzvah* leads to another.' In Chapter 4:15, Rabbi Matya says, 'Be the first to greet all people.'"

"We feel that one good deed leads to another, and you never know what can come out of one phone call," says

the rabbi. "The culture of voice notes isn't as real – it's not as connecting," says Silman.

"The other day I left a voice note for a friend on his birthday, and then decided to actually call him. We had a half-an-hour chat, and I felt much better afterwards. I had strengthened our connection," says Ziegler. "We want people to see the benefit in making a call, even if just to a friend. Ultimately, one phone call can change someone's life, especially when so many people have been so isolated during the pandemic."

Ziegler says that there has been much interest in the project from Jewish schools and organisations across the country, and they hope it will grow.

The campaign will run from 3 to 7 May 2021. "This will be achieved through a Facebook 'challenge', in which we motivate schools in and around Cape Town and Johannesburg to encourage their students, parents, and communities to #makethecall this week. By taking just a few minutes to reach out and be there for someone, you can brighten their day and lift their spirits. This is how a simple phone call becomes a meaningful connection," says Ziegler.

PJJDs has contacted seniors in Cape Town asking if they would like to be contacted, and many said yes. "Our students will reach out to those in our community who have been

isolated for many months," says the rabbi. "We also want to encourage the parent body and broader community to reach out to individuals whom they would normally WhatsApp, or those they haven't been in touch with, and give them a call. We hope people will challenge each other and spread the word. We also envision different classes from different schools connecting with each other, and that phone calls become a regular thing, especially between young people and the elderly."

To motivate children to get involved, every child who makes five phone calls will be entered into a draw for a prize.

PJJDs has invited parents to learn with children to kick off the project on 3 May. "Every child from 18 months to Grade 6 will receive a beautiful *Pirkei Avot* book to launch the project," says Silman.

While Ziegler would love the project to go global, "Even if it affects one person's life positively, we've done our job. Our goals are learning and connections. We hope it catches on, but we've achieved our aim if one person feels more connected and less alone."

• *To find out more, visit Phyllis Jowell Jewish Day School on Facebook and Instagram, or share your phone call stories on social media with the hashtag #makethecall.*



Phyllis Jowell Jewish Day School campus rabbi Gavi Ziegler and principal Theodore Thomas

Time travelling autobiography gives glimpse into the past

TALI FEINBERG

He was the very first headmaster of Herzlia School in Cape Town, and a pioneer of Jewish education, but when Alexander Levin died in 1960, he took with him a wealth of wisdom and knowledge in spite of the fact that he had written a book in Hebrew about his life.

Levin's recently rediscovered, translated, and published autobiography, titled *Education – My Life: Memoirs of a Hebrew Teacher* gives us insight into who he was and the historic events he witnessed.

Levin was born in Lithuania in 1882, and grew up in the *shtetl* of Pilvishok, part of the vibrant Jewish religious world that was destroyed in the Holocaust.

After early religious studies in a yeshiva, he became a teacher, specialising in modern Hebrew. He witnessed pogroms and how Jews grappled with choices and challenges at the time, including the early Zionist movement. He even witnessed the beginning of the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 as he was walking down the streets of St Petersburg the moments that events unfolded.

Arriving in South Africa in 1928, he immediately became a pioneer in Jewish education in Cape Town, going on to become the founding headmaster of Herzlia School in 1940, eight years after he originally proposed the idea.

Says Michael Belling, who recently translated the book, "Published in 1954 by the Histadrut Ivrit, his book was soon forgotten, apart from a mention in a much later bibliography published by the Kaplan Centre [for Jewish Studies at the University of Cape Town]." Belling says the manuscript was rediscovered about four years ago. Levin's family then decided to have it translated and get it published in English.

"They weren't just interested for themselves, but realised its value as a source of first-hand Jewish history in a time of change and upheaval," Belling says. "This includes the Zionist revival, a portrait of a lost Jewish world, and descriptions of Jewish life in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s."

"Alexander's first-hand, rich, and unique experience of travel, events, and people is on multiple levels: Eastern Europe, Herzlia, and wider South African Jewish history," says his grandson, Mervyn Levin.

For him, the book is important first because it has superb recollections of the diverse range of people he met throughout his life across many countries. It also has Levin's in-depth and fascinating observations and perspectives on education, community, and Jewish life. Finally, "The autobiography is a unique and authoritative contribution to the establishment of Jewish education in South Africa," Levin says.

The book is published in collaboration with United Herzlia Schools (UHS) and the Kaplan Centre. Says UHS Director of Education Geoff Cohen, "It's incredible to think that while European Jews were being slaughtered, people such as Alexander Levin had the vision and foresight to establish a place of Jewish learning at the tip of Africa. In the 80th year of Herzlia's existence, it's interesting to see how it all started and who the early pioneers were in creating a Jewish system of education."

Professor David Benatar of the philosophy department at the University of Cape Town was one of the earliest readers of the English translation. "Although it's an account of one person's life, it provides an insight into a bygone era," he says.

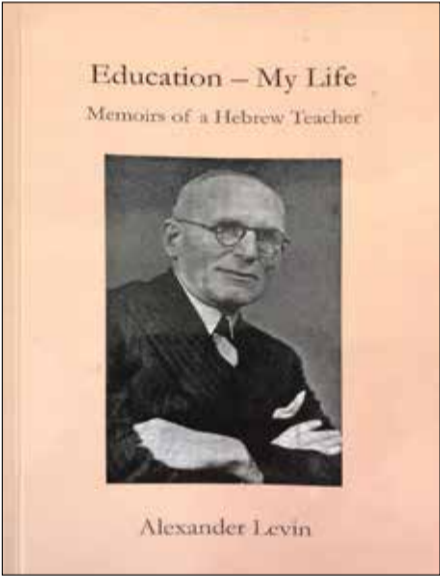
"The reader is transported back in time, and given a taste of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, the hardships there, the disruption of emigration, and Jewish life in Cape Town from the 1920s. As such, the book is an historical resource.

"There are too many highlights in the book to enumerate, but for me they included references to such people as Joseph Homa (after

whom Herzlia's Minyan Yosef Shul is named), as well as Zalman Avin and other colleagues at the Cape Town Talmud Torah, out of which Herzlia grew," says Benatar.

"The description of Mr Levin's arrival by ship in Cape Town and the sight of Table Mountain is a poignant reminder that the natural landscape is much more enduring than we inhabitants of it. Usually our stories die with us. Autobiographies preserve memories, of which this book contains many – both happy and harrowing. It's a fascinating read."

Former Herzlia educator and principal, Solly Kaplinski, worked hard behind the scenes to ensure the book made its way out of obscurity. Writing from Jerusalem, he says, "To be a pioneer is daunting and intimidating. It requires immense bravery and courage in the face of enormous odds. Alexander Levin was the first in an inhospitable climate in South Africa and in the shadow of the *Shoah*, to take the reins of a fledgling and untested school and to take the plunge [in establishing a Jewish school]. All who followed stood on the shoulders of a giant who deserved more credit and recognition in subsequent years.



"The book sheds light on a little-known period in the development of Jewish education, Hebraic scholarship, Zionism, and communal life in South Africa, and it begs the question: why should parents decide to send their children to an untried and untested school of modest means? This was also a time when the *cheder* was the option of choice. It says something about those pioneering parents who put their trust in Levin. And it says even

more about Levin. His relevance as an outstanding educationist is of value to students, teachers, researchers, and communities. I believe the book will be a driver for further research, exploration, and community engagement.

"Finally, the book also sheds light on the impact of distinguished academic graduates from Lithuania on Jewish education, studying the Hebrew language, and being connected to Israel," says Kaplinski.

"The 'Litvak DNA' – Jewish community, Jewish education, Hebraic studies, and Zionism – runs strong through the South African Jewish community and expats abroad thanks in the main to the influence of Alexander Levin and his peers from Lithuania who emigrated to South Africa."

Writing in the foreword, Kaplan Centre Executive Director Adam Mendelsohn says, "South African Jews often describe two features that lend a distinctive air to Jewish life in this country. The first is the common Lithuanian origins of a significant portion of the Jewish population. The second is the elaborate school system that educates the majority of Jewish children in Cape Town and Johannesburg.

"This memoir connects these two features of South African Jewish life. His account roots the history of Jewish education in South Africa into a much longer and larger story. In doing so, Alexander Levin offers us a new way to understand and appreciate the cultural legacy of Lithuanian Jewry on these shores, and how strands of this legacy are still enmeshed with us in the present day. It's a fitting tribute to all that made the present possible."

• *'Education – My Life: Memoirs of a Hebrew Teacher' is available for purchase from the Herzlia uniform shop at the high school campus, and from Kollel Bookshop in Johannesburg.*

Bible Quiz a nail-biting adventure

PERSONAL STORY SHIRI KAPLAN

This year, I got into the final round for the top 16 contestants in the International Bible Quiz, broadcast live on Yom Ha'atzmaut on 15 April.

The Bible is the greatest compendium of tales ever compiled, with murder, infidelity, bloodshed, sibling rivalry, deceit, love, war – every plot twist imaginable.

The South African finalists included Liron Krawitz from King David Victory Park, Temima Goldfein from Hirsch Lyons, and myself, representing King David Linksfield.

The highest achievers usually embark

on a two-week Tanach camp in Israel. My brother, who represented South Africa in the quiz in 2019, described the camp as the best two weeks of his life. But the intrusion of COVID-19 meant that the camp translated into a five-hour online tour on Zoom. I felt invigorated seeing the battlefield where young David vanquished the giant, Goliath, but honestly, it didn't replace the in-person camp we'd been looking forward to for so long.

It was exciting to be broadcast on Israeli television. While sitting there, I received pictures of my friends watching me from a projector in the school hall. My heart swelled as I realised how many people across the world were supporting me. I felt honoured to represent my school and my country.

On the eve of the finals, I received a heart-warming message from Rabbi Gary Braude, who said, "I hope that the more you learn, the more you will see that the Tanach is an unfinished book, a story of the Jewish people that continually unfolds with all the modern miracles and challenges as occurred in biblical times. I hope you will see yourself as having a chapter to write in that narrative."

It wasn't what I dreamed about when I watched my brother in Israel two years ago, but it was a special and a pivotal moment in my life.



Shiri Kaplan

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Israelis move heaven and earth to resist climate change

SIMON MATTHEWS

As climate change becomes an emergency, the initiatives Israel has in place to combat it domestically and through international collaboration can only stand the planet in good stead.

An Israeli broadcast last Thursday, 22 April, livestreamed from Jerusalem, focused on these initiatives, marking the 51st anniversary of Earth Day.

“Global challenges require global solutions, and climate change knows no boundaries,” said Israel’s foreign minister, Gabi Ashkenazi. “Decisive action is needed urgently.

“Israel is working with the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Palestinians, among others, on several environmental projects,” he said, emphasising that climate change is a priority for the Israel’s foreign affairs ministry. “Israel’s arid climate and lack of natural resources has made it a world leader in smart farming, agritech, and food technology.

“Using advanced technology such as satellites and drones, Israel has increased food productivity and minimised environmental harm. Israeli start-ups are pioneering work in alternative protein and food sources. Greening projects will benefit future generations, our children, and their children.”

International embassies,



Israeli Foreign Minister
Gabi Ashkenazi

diplomatic partners, and government representatives across the globe all came together to deliver messages of support for Israel’s green initiatives.

Environmental projects spearheaded by Israel are found all over the world. The installation of Israeli irrigation technology in Hanoi in Vietnam is one example of Israel turning crisis into opportunity. Another is a sustainable urban gardening venture in Riga, Latvia. The Israeli ambassador to Latvia, Orli Gil, said, “This groundbreaking project, in collaboration with Israel, allows us to connect with the soil and attract beautiful butterflies to the area.”

Said Gila Gamliel, Israeli minister of environmental protection, “Extreme weather, food insecurity, and land degradation mean climate change is a threat to international peace and security, and global citizens must engage in climate action. Governments must engage in co-ordinated policy integration, and innovation in science and technology is key to addressing these challenges.”

A new climate bill was recently adopted by Israel to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2050, and bolster co-operation between all stakeholders to promote regional stability.

Said Maoz Fine, a marine biologist in Eilat, “In southern Israel, coral reefs are resistant to bleaching from global warming because the coral was forced to adapt to the naturally

high water temperature levels there.

“Israeli research to understand the mechanism of coral thermal resilience is important because in only 30 years, 50% of global coral reefs have been lost. This research will give other countries the toolbox to improve their coral bleaching resilience.”

Climate activist Yosef Abramowitz said, “The forestation of dry desert is an Israeli innovation, overcoming water scarcity to decrease the size of its deserts and passing on the knowledge to other water-challenged nations in a ‘pay it forward’ approach.”

Professor Uri Shanas, the founder and chief executive of TIME (This Is My Earth), said his start-up’s mission was to focus on “biodiversity hotspots, biogeographical regions significant in the number of species that they hold which are under immediate threat”.

“Around the world, 50% of hotspot areas are privately owned, and through membership contributions, we purchase these global areas with unique ecosystems in order to protect them.”

Alla Voldman, the director of strategic alliances at The Good Food Institute Israel, said, “Improving lifestyles in developing countries means that meat consumption is rising, which has an impact on the climate and increases microbial resistance and disease outbreaks. Alternative protein is produced in Israel at fewer external costs, without the possibility of zoonotic diseases, and is a huge economic opportunity.

“Major international food company uptake ensures this is no longer a niche market in food or

agritech. Alternative protein comprises cultivated meat, plant-based meat, and fermentation [micro-organisms producing animal proteins], and is one of the hottest investment fields in the Israeli tech industry.”

Israel’s transformation into a low-carbon, sustainable economy is fuelled by similar internal projects: renewable energy storage, clothing printed by 3D printers, environmentally-friendly concrete, and turning dirty plastic into construction sheets, to name a few.

Closer to home, Utilis is an Israeli company which detects leaks and saves billions of gallons of water globally. Said chief executive Elly Perets, “Our company’s technology processes microwave signals from satellites to detect water leaks for governments and water corporations. Algorithms detect suspicious points of water leakage, sewage, drainage faults, and water accumulation on the ground.”

The company’s technology has been implemented in 400 projects in 55 countries, including the United States, Italy, the United Kingdom, Chile, China, and South Africa.

Climate-change mitigation is no longer on the back burner. Israel, from the Dead to the Red Seas, is a shining example of what can be achieved when civic society and government combine in public-private partnerships to heal the world and commit to a smarter, greener future.

• For further information, go to <https://www.earthday.org/earth-day-2021/>

Flocking to raise funds for Yeshiva Primary

Yeshiva Primary School “flocked” north, south, east, and west before Pesach in an innovative fundraising campaign to build shade sails on the school playground. Nine flamingo flocks made their way around Joburg, “nesting” on the lawns of primary school pupils and teachers in the early hours of the morning and at lunchtime, leaving after a small, voluntary donation was made to the Parent Teacher Association (PTA).

From Fourways to Glenhazel, every child at the school was successfully “flocked”, and no family escaped. The PTA managed to raise enough funds for beautiful shade sails over the playground.



From left, Yeshiva parents Simone Weil, Jacqui Schewitz, Lisa Klotz, Lauren Defries, Simone Kahn, Nicole Mandelberg, Lauri Isserow, and Nikki Meyberg

KDS kids in their element with new library

It’s often said that a library is a cathedral for books, a museum for stories, where silence is law and the librarian rules. This idea was flipped on its head with the launch of the magnificent new Elements Media Centre at King David Sandton (KDS) Primary School, which aims to reinvent learning.

The centre was driven by the passion of Natalie and Ian Lutrin on behalf of the Lutrin family in honour of Ian’s late mother, Shelley Anne Lutrin, who in the early 1980s, with no existing library at KDS, walked from classroom to classroom, pulling a wagon filled with books, determined to get every single child to read.

The interior is inspired by earth, air, water, and fire, with each element bringing its own explorative magical experience. Within fire, students can read and play in the tepees, discuss ideas around the proverbial campfire, play on the giant magnetic Scrabble board, or lose themselves in the largest Where’s Wally feature in Africa. Flued columns and a wave table create an “under the sea” experience in the water theme, where students read on spinning shell chairs beneath a giant whale. Tree snakes and



KDS pupils enjoying the new Elements Media Centre

tree pods provide a comfy reading space within the earth element, and the final element, air, brings to life the digital space. As if this isn’t enough, the ceiling displays the universe, its planets, and stars.

“It lends itself to stimulating lessons using top-of-the-range technology and equipment, and creates the perfect environment to collaborate, communicate, and create views and ideas,” says Asher Marcus from Hubo Studio, the architects of the centre.

“It’s a magnificent, safe place for our students to use on a daily basis, where a trip to the library becomes a magical learning experience,” said Lynne van Dellen, the head of school at KDS.

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Cubans to the rescue

Being blessed with five children and not enough time in the day to give them all what they need, we have begun considering importing a few Cuban youngsters to help our children to be children. Because Cuban kids, much like their doctors and engineers, apparently offer something unique that we simply can't find here in South Africa.

South Africa's obsession with Cuba and her people had me wondering if there wasn't something that I was missing. First, the African National Congress (ANC) imported doctors to assist in our fight against COVID-19. The move took place at a time when our own doctors were unable to find posts, and yet the outcry from local doctors failed to stop the initiative.

And now, in their latest Cuban import programme,



it was announced that 24 engineers from Cuba had arrived and been welcomed in order to assist with water, sanitation, and infrastructure. According to the

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



department, "The highly-qualified Cuban specialists will assist as advisors at provincial and local levels across the country, sharing their vast skills in the areas of mechanical, electrical, and civil engineering, as well as project management."

Not everyone was happy. Political parties and labour organisations criticised the government's decision to obtain help from Cuba at the expense of local talent. Labour union Solidarity went so far as to send the department a list of 120 South African engineers who it said were qualified, competent, and willing to help fix the country's water infrastructure. The union said it was unjustified to import foreign workers in the midst of an unemployment crisis, with South Africa's official unemployment rate at almost 33%.

But the ANC remains undeterred. It's clear that the government knows something we don't. And it cannot be without good reason that it places such immense faith in the quality and expertise of this remarkable nation.

To be fair, I have never met a Cuban I didn't like. Not that I have ever met one. But I trust the research the government has done, which made me wonder if there isn't a pool of talent that could be the answer to some of our other challenges.

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What if we could consider Cubans to fill roles at home and in our community? With the shortage, for example, of qualified Hebrew teachers, it could well be time for the South African Jewish Board of Education to start importing them from Cuba? Work visas won't be a problem, and they must be known to be the best in the world (the ANC will provide references).

Further, I know of many a shul and community in search of a rabbi. Why not bring in a newly minted Cuban one? *Mashgichim* for the Beth Din? Car guards outside KasherWorld? Community Security Organisation volunteers? Talk show hosts for ChaiFM? The list is endless.

I have taken this strategy home. It has to be said that

my wife isn't fully on board with this, but I have started to threaten our children with bringing in Cuban substitutes if they don't clear the table when I ask them to. Because, G-d knows, I will find a willing Cuban child who will. And they are the best at it. Apparently.

All said, we do need to be grateful to the Cubans. So often as South Africans we underplay the talent that we have, the training, ability, and quality of what our own country has to offer. We need to be grateful to the Cubans and the ANC for reminding us that in spite of what the government is telling us, our qualifications and skills are pretty decent and our kids aren't not nearly as lazy as we thought they were. Even if they don't clear the table when we ask them to.

Eternal vigilance - the price we pay for democracy

On Freedom Day, Wendy Kahn, the national director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), at the invitation of the MEC for sports, arts, recreation, and culture, participated in a Freedom Day walk to Chris Hani's house in Dawn Park, Boksburg. Many of us remember the national trauma occasioned by Hani's assassination by right-wing fanatics back in 1993, and how close this came to derailing the negotiation process. Thankfully, good sense prevailed, and almost exactly a year later, on 27 April 1994, South Africa's first fully democratic, non-racial elections were held. Appropriately enough, when new public holidays were introduced, the date chosen for what would be Freedom Day was 27 April.

The 1994 elections ushered in a new era of freedom and equality for the country. After many decades of racial discrimination, violence, and repression, the famous opening words of the Freedom Charter, "South Africa belongs to all who live in it", were poised to be realised. Well aware that "the price of democracy is eternal vigilance", those responsible for framing the new post-apartheid order instituted safeguards to prevent those hard-won democratic rights and freedoms from being eroded. They included a Bill of Rights in the new Constitution, which entrenched the rights of all to dignity and equality.

Regrettably, the manner in which two Jewish candidates were treated recently when being interviewed for judicial

office clearly violated these rights. Both were subjected to a barrage of questions pertaining to their Jewish identity in a way that no other candidates were subjected to regarding their religious identity or affiliations. One was even pointedly asked about his level of religious observance, implying that this might have a negative impact on his ability to fulfil his judicial duties. The statement we released earlier this week drew attention to the prejudicial nature of this statement, which ran "contrary to the basic constitutional principles of protecting our citizen's rights to practice their religion without fear or discrimination". We further pointed out that no other candidate had been questioned about their religious practices.

It was also disturbing, to say the least, that questions posed to both candidates focused extensively on their association with the SAJBD. The SAJBD itself is the acknowledged representative elected body of South African Jewry mandated to uphold the civil and religious rights of the community, including combating antisemitism. We asked why it was that an organisation with the objective of protecting constitutionally sound principles of religious freedom and fighting hate would be so objectionable to members of the panel of the Judicial Service Commission (JSC). Equally disquieting were the barrage of questions concerning the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Why was this issue brought up at all in this

forum, and why was it that only Jewish applicants, not Muslim, Christian, or other, were grilled about it in this way? From the questions asked at the JSC interviews this month to Jewish candidates, one unfortunately has to ask whether the principles outlined in the Constitution apply equally to members of the Jewish community.

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

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