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# South African Jewish Report

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## Mount Meron tragedy devastates South African family

TALI FEINBERG

**Y**ohanatan Hevroni was so excited about going to Mount Meron for Lag B'Omer after not having been there for seven years, he arranged a bus for his community to get there. This time, he went as a beloved husband and the father of three girls. He wouldn't return alive.

The 27-year-old tzaddik who lived in Givat Shmuel in central Israel leaves behind his children and wife, Tanya Hevroni (nee Taback), who made aliyah with her family from Johannesburg in 1997.

Hevroni was one of the 45 people who died senselessly in a stampede at the annual Mount Meron Lag B'Omer celebrations on Thursday, 29 April, the largest peacetime tragedy in Israel's existence.

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* from the shiva house on Tuesday, 4 May, Tanya's brother, Eitan Taback, described how events unfolded.

"A rabbi told us that on the way there, Yohanatan said how amazing it was to see the influence a tzaddik had after he had died [referring to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, whose life is celebrated by thousands on Lag B'Omer at Mount Meron]. And after Yohanatan passed, we saw the amount of influence he had on everyone around him – the children he taught, people with whom he learned Torah.

"At 03:00 on Thursday night, Yohanatan's mother got a phone call from his phone," said Taback. "They said 'his phone had been found in Meron, but we can't find him'. Immediately, search parties were sent to hospitals and Meron itself. No one had any answers. After searching everywhere, they decided, with heavy hearts, to check the morgue, and that's where they found him."

Kalanit Taub, a volunteer emergency

medical worker with United Hatzalah of Israel, described the devastation she encountered at the scene. "We saw stretcher after stretcher coming up the hill, with people performing CPR on them as they were running. I just saw bodies lying on the ground to my left and right. They all looked completely whole, completely fine, no broken bones, no blood. When we learned about [dealing with] a mass casualty incident, the first thing you're supposed to do is treat the injured because those are the ones you're more likely to save. But I didn't see anyone injured. All I saw was people who weren't breathing, who didn't have a heartbeat. I thought, 'Where are the injured people? Everywhere you look, everybody's dead!'

"There was nothing we could do for any of them, we all tried our hardest, and we were completely unsuccessful," she said. "The line of bodies kept getting longer and longer. Within seconds, they were out of body bags. We were taking thermal blankets to cover these people. And then we were out of thermal blankets. We didn't have anything to cover the bodies with. There were just too many of them."

Taub is also a member of the psycho-trauma unit. "I walked up the hill, and there were so many people in shock. People screaming hysterically, staring into space, and lying on the ground in foetal positions, unresponsive. I probably treated a hundred psycho-trauma patients. Meanwhile, [community emergency response team] ZAKA set up a tent that became the station

where all the lost kids went. They were just naming kids one after the other separated from their parents. But not all were reunited because some of those parents died."

By a miracle, Hevroni's family managed to arrange his funeral for that day at 17:00. Because it was just before Shabbat, they expected few people to attend. But thousands arrived to pay their respects.

"The extent of his impact on people was so

birthday a few days before the tragedy. "It would be the last celebration we would have together. There was so much happiness," Taback said.

Two years ago, the family faced a major crisis when Tanya was diagnosed with cancer. "Yohanatan was there the whole time. He was a full-time father and mother. Now it's the other way around. Tanya will have to be both the mother and the father."

He said his parents, Ofra and David Taback, have been by his sister's side from the moment they heard that Yohanatan was missing. "My parents are strong. They're trying to be

there for Tanya and the family. They've been here night and day." Family around the world have joined in their grief.

Taback said his sister is devastated, but the support of the community had helped tremendously. "One thing we can take from this is that the Jewish nation will always unite in these situations. We must be there, one for each other, as brothers and sisters are meant to be," said Taback. "Just be good to each other. We don't need to wait for disasters to unite us. As the Jewish people, that's who we are."

Meanwhile, young South Africans on a gap year in Israel said the disaster had hit

close to home. Many of their contemporaries attended the celebrations at Mount Meron. Dean Chaitowitz, who is at Yeshiva Eretz HaTzvi in Jerusalem, said he would have been there if enough boys from his yeshiva wanted to go.

"It wasn't an official yeshiva trip, but they said that if there are enough kids, they'll organise a bus to go. I'm trying to absorb as much of Israel as possible on my gap year, so I wanted to go. But in the end, there wasn't enough of a demand. I was upset that I didn't go, but when we found out what happened, I was shocked. I could easily have been there; our whole group would have gone. Hearing about yeshiva boys getting killed really hit hard, just knowing that it could literally have been any of us."

Dani Sack who studying is at the Midreshet HaRova seminary in Jerusalem, said, "My group wasn't going to go to Meron, but hearing about the tragedy nonetheless was a huge shock to the system, especially since some of our friends were planning to go.

"It was jarring considering we'd been so close to Meron, and also celebrated with dancing and singing that night. The fact that so many of those wounded and killed were young people put into perspective the magnitude of what a gap year entails. Being away from family is scary enough, but to think that a simple celebration on Lag B'Omer could turn deadly is terrifying.

"At Midreshet HaRova, we sang and said tehillim at the Kotel in honour of those who were killed. All the Torah we learned on Sunday was *l'iluy nishmat* [for the elevation of the soul] of the 45 we lost. In Israel, the mood over Shabbos and the weekend was solemn. You could feel the loss in the air. It's really surreal being here during this moment, something that the Jewish national will remember forever."



Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein lights a memorial candle at the Meron tragedy memorial at Mizrahi Shul in Johannesburg

clear," said Taback. "One rabbi bought a book of poems that Yohanatan wrote. They were about the simple

things in life, and recognising the good in all other human beings. One of his students shared how he came to learn with Yohanatan and be inspired by him, but after their lesson, it was Yohanatan who told his student that he was inspiring."

He described his brother-in-law as a "quiet guy, with a gentle soul, who always had a huge smile on his face". He and Tanya married in Israel and went on to have three daughters, aged six, four, and two. They celebrated their eldest daughter's sixth

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# Emotions run high as JSC denies discrimination

NICOLA MILTZ

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) has called for a face-to-face meeting with the Judicial Services Commission (JSC) to resolve tensions following the recent JSC interviews of Jewish judges, which the Board described as discriminatory. The JSC this week denied that its interviews of Jewish candidates for appointment to the Bench were discriminatory and anti-constitutional. It said it was “factually incorrect” to say that Jewish applicants were targeted at interviews. The Board told the *SA Jewish Report* on Wednesday, 5 May, that this week’s JSC statement was “unfortunate”. Said National Director Wendy Kahn, “The SAJBD had already requested a meeting with the JSC prior to it issuing this statement. Notwithstanding the JSC’s denial this week that it had done anything wrong, we believe that the nature of the questions put to the candidates was irregular and discriminatory, and as such, in conflict with the fundamental constitutional right of all South Africans to equality and freedom of belief and association. It’s unfortunate to politicise such an august

Shabbat times this week		
Starts	Ends	
17:16	18:06	Johannesburg
17:42	18:34	Cape Town
16:58	17:49	Durban
17:19	18:09	Bloemfontein
17:13	18:05	Port Elizabeth
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body.” She said the Board continued to call for a face-to-face meeting with the JSC as it believed it was a “more constructive way” to address issues than through the media. In recent weeks, the SAJBD accused the JSC of targeting Advocate Lawrence Lever and Judge David Unterhalter when they were asked questions about their Jewish identity and practice. It also described the JSC’s questioning of both men as “discriminatory and anti-constitutional”. In a statement last week, Kahn said, “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. 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 practice 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. It’s also extremely disturbing that questions posed to both Advocate Lever and Judge Unterhalter focused extensively on their possible association with the Board. “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.” In response, the JSC said this Tuesday that the SAJBD was selectively quoting parts of the interviews. It rejected claims that no other candidate was questioned on their religious practices except those of the Jewish faith. It also labelled the claims by the SAJBD as factually inaccurate. “The questions relating to the association with the SAJBD dealt with concerns that the organisation supports Zionism which is viewed as a discriminatory form of nationalism and potentially in conflict with the values contained in the South African Constitution,” read the statement. “The questions on this score were raised with



Judge David Unterhalter

the two candidates following letters of objection received by the JSC in respect of Judge Unterhalter from various organisations, including the Black Lawyers Association. This is part of JSC practice intended to afford candidates the opportunity to respond to objections lodged against their candidature.” The statement continued, “It’s not factually correct that other candidates who aren’t of Jewish descent weren’t asked questions related to their religious affiliations.” There were other candidates who were asked questions relating to their religious or cultural beliefs, the statement said. Said Advocate Mark Oppenheimer, “After watching Judge Unterhalter’s interview, it’s striking how many questions were about his brief stint at the SAJBD and how few questions were about his qualifications. The ratio indicates a failure on the JSC’s behalf to ask pertinent questions about his ability to hold judicial office. The volume and repetition of questions about the Board should be of concern to all South Africans who care about the important attributes of those who take up

office at the highest court in the land.” Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein expressed outrage at the “conduct of the commissioners of the [JSC] in their questioning of the two Jewish judges”, describing it as “racist and antisemitic in effect, if not in intention”. He called on JSC commissioners to retract and apologise for their comments. He also called 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 the entire process. The JSC recommended Lever for a vacant position in the Northern Cape. The JSC also recommended lawyer Norman Manoim for a vacancy on the Gauteng High Court Bench. Both have been referred to President Cyril Ramaphosa for appointment. Unterhalter didn’t make the final list of nominees. Meanwhile, the Council for the Advancement of the South African Constitution is reportedly considering legal options regarding the recent interviews by the JSC for appointment to the Constitutional Court.

## Torah Thought

### “Louder!”

Tragedy struck in Meron, Israel, last week. Dozens of deaths and injuries in a horrific collapse as thousands were celebrating the joyous day of Lag B’Omer. My wife and I were privileged to be there a few years ago, and it was an incredibly inspirational experience. Our hearts go out to the bereaved families, and we wish the injured a complete and speedy recovery. Sadly, the Jewish people are no strangers to tragedy. Usually, though, it has been inflicted upon us by those who hate us. One section stands out from the rest in this week’s parsha. It’s known as the Tochecho or The Rebuke. There we read a whole litany of disasters that will befall our people should we abandon the G-dly way of life. The tradition is that the Torah reader himself takes this aliyah, and when he reaches the relevant section, he lowers his voice to soften the blow of these terrible curses. For 24 years, I produced and hosted South Africa’s only Jewish radio show, *The Jewish Sound*. Once, my guest on

air was Rabbi Shlomo Riskin of Efrat, Israel. He told the story that as a child growing up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, one Shabbos, he went to daven in the shul of the Rebbe of Klausenberg. Originally from Hungary, the Rebbe was a spiritual giant of a man who had lost 11 children in the Holocaust and never sat *shiva* because he was pre-occupied with saving lives. After the war, he settled in America and developed a large following. Subsequently, he relocated to Israel and among other things, set up the Laniado Hospital in Natanya. That Shabbos, The Rebuke was being read. When it came to the part of the curses, the reader did what he always did. He lowered his voice. Suddenly, the Rebbe shouted in Yiddish, “*Hecher!* (louder).” The reader was confused. He was simply following the tradition of generations. Perhaps he wasn’t hearing right, so he continued reading in the softer tone. “*Hecher!*” thundered the Klausenberger Rebbe. “Let the Almighty hear what is being read! All the curses have already been fulfilled.

Rabbi Yossy Goldman  
Life rabbi emeritus  
at Sydenham Shul



Now there must be only blessings for our people.” Many of our sages have described the Holocaust as the birth pangs of Moshiach, and the ultimate redemption. Never will there be a repeat of such calamities. We have endured more than enough of exile, wanderings, pogroms, and persecutions. The curses, in all their tragic, cataclysmic imagery have materialised. Now there must be only goodness, happiness, warmth, and blessing for *am Yisrael*. At the end of The Rebuke, G-d says, “And I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember, and I will remember the Land.” As He remembers us, let us remember Him and our covenant. May we prepare for Shavuot and the giving of the Torah with earnestness and joy. May G-d and His people always remember each other. Amen.



# Israel travel ban leaves SA olim high and dry

TALI FEINBERG

On Monday, Israel implemented a ban on its citizens travelling to South Africa, Ukraine, Ethiopia, Brazil, India, Mexico, and Turkey amidst fears of COVID-19 variants. But the ruling has left many South African *olim* angry and frustrated, with one saying she felt like she was being “held hostage”. “This affects all of us. We all miss our families desperately,” says Sarah Spiro. “I was supposed to fly on Saturday night to spend time with my very ill father,” says Robbie Singer. “I asked his physician to give me a motivating letter to present to the special committee but he said he couldn’t do that because he’s very ill, but not dying. He has been very ill for the past six years. He needs surgery in the next few weeks. I’m anxious and frustrated.”

Another South African in Israel, speaking on condition of anonymity, says, “My son and daughter were due to fly on 5 May. My father is terminally ill and, by the looks of things, doesn’t have much time left. My kids are extremely close to their grandfather, and it was important for them to see him. In addition, their dad lives in South Africa, and they haven’t seen him in 18 months or more. This was all explained in a letter submitted to the panel that decides on exceptional cases, but they were told theirs doesn’t qualify. I know it’s for the best – truly I do – but it’s devastating.”

Another South African who didn’t want to be named says, “Both of my parents are sick with COVID-19, and my application to travel to South Africa to be with them was denied. They said it didn’t meet urgent humanitarian needs.”

“My son, 18, is finishing his final year of school in Israel. I haven’t seen him since August last year when he returned to Israel after the initial lockdown,” says a South African mother who didn’t want to be named. “We’re missing so many milestones. He will more than likely be moving into a lone soldiers’ apartment while he waits to hear when he will enlist in the army. We were planning for him to visit us in July. We can’t travel there as we’re not vaccinated at this point. I’m devastated to be honest.”

For many South African *olim*, this is just one of many travel bans that have had an impact on their lives, families, and businesses over the past year. “My husband travels regularly back and forth to South Africa for work. The travel bans have had a serious impact on our financials,” says one woman who wants to remain anonymous. “My mother had a ticket booked to

come and visit us and see her four grandchildren in August 2020, but due to corona[virus] it wasn’t possible. These travel bans are keeping us from earning an income and denying us our families.”

“My business is in South Africa, and I can’t travel due to the restrictions,” says Steve Zeff. “We have had to restructure roles within the company in order to continue. It’s frustrating because my business is based on trust and reputation. It’s a legal and technical minefield. But I can’t physically get in front of clients, and Zoom and Google Teams isn’t always ideal.”

“The draconian Israeli travel restriction was received with a great deal of dismay and, in some families, profound distress,” says local expert Professor Barry Schoub, the chairperson of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 vaccines. “Why, with Israel’s world-beating vaccination programme is the country closing



down instead of opening up? Why South Africa, where COVID-19 numbers are relatively low?

“To understand these severe measures, one has to appreciate why South Africa could threaten Israel’s hard-won achievement. It’s unfortunate that South Africa is the global epicentre of one of the most serious coronavirus variants of concern – the variant B.1.351 – possibly the most resistant of all the variants to vaccine-induced immunity,” Schoub says. “It’s true that the Pfizer vaccine used throughout Israel is effective against the variant. It’s also true that the travel screening precautions and quarantine regulations would greatly reduce, but not eliminate, the risk of B.1.351 being imported into the country.

“However, B.1.351 currently comprises only a tiny and insignificant percentage of



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virus strains in Israel. The country’s economy is opening up, and life is returning to normal. Israel’s public health authorities could now ill-afford for these hard-won gains to be imperilled by the circulation of the most problematic of the viral variants imported from travel from South Africa. They have therefore deemed that only under the most extreme of humanitarian circumstances may any exceptions be made.”

from this decision. We are talking to COVID-19 headquarters in Israel, building a relationship, and sharing data with them. There’s a lot going on behind the scenes. There are many who want to travel for *simchas*, or people who are desperate to see their families. One can request a visit on humanitarian grounds, but only in extreme situations.”

Deputy Israeli Ambassador to South Africa Hila Rose Fridman echoes these sentiments, saying the embassy has even consulted local experts to engage with Israel’s COVID-19 committee. “But South African experts can’t argue otherwise. They don’t think there is a basis to change Israel’s decision.”

Fridman says Israel takes into account many factors when considering exceptions to the travel ban. She knows people are struggling with the ban, “which is why the embassy has decided to host a webinar answering consular questions this upcoming Sunday, 9 May, at 20:00. More information can be found on the embassy’s website and Facebook page, ‘Israel in South Africa’.”

A glimmer of light in the situation is that aliyah flights are still allowed. “We have a flight of 27 South African *olim* going on 8 May after Shabbat,” says Amar Arran. “It was meant to go at 21:30, but we requested that it be moved an hour later so that those who are *shomrei* Shabbos have a little more time. This will be the first and last El Al flight for now. Another 30 *olim* were supposed to go on 22 May, but El Al cancelled that flight, so we will try to arrange it with another airline. *Olim* include youth, the elderly, couples, and families.”

Roz Bukris, El Al general manager of southern and eastern Africa, says, “We want our passengers to understand that we do care for them in spite of the challenges we are facing. We wanted to avoid disappointment as we have been trying to get flights here since January, but circumstances beyond our control have forced us to cancel.

“Unfortunately, one doesn’t know what the next day will bring. We hope to resume on 3 June from Tel Aviv and 5 June from Johannesburg. However this all depends on the Israeli government’s decisions regarding the South African variant.”



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# Preventing stampedes ‘is a science’

TALI FEINBERG

As the dust settles after the Mount Meron disaster, questions will be asked about how it happened and why. Local expert Professor Efraim Kramer says stopping stampedes requires training, expertise, and planning, as just one “spark” in a crowd can have deadly consequences.

“It’s complex, emotional, and difficult to talk about stampedes, because people die needlessly. Whether it’s a football stadium or Mount Meron, people are going there for joy, yet it turns into tragedy. There’s no real place for blame because it needs a full investigation,” says Kramer.

**“A stampede is a terrible way to die. It’s a slow asphyxiation. You can’t breathe for two to four minutes. The weight of a crowd like that can push over a wall.”**

He shared his perspectives with the *SA Jewish Report* as an expert in emergency and mass gathering (event) medicine. Kramer is the former head of the division of emergency medicine at the University of the Witwatersrand, and professor of sports medicine at Pretoria University.

He has specialised in emergency, disaster, and stampede medicine for 30 years, and was FIFA’s tournament medical officer at the FIFA World Cup Russia in 2018. Since then, he has been actively involved with FIFA Medical. He

is also involved in teaching and researching mass gathering medicine, including soccer-stadium stampede prevention and the management of disaster medicine, having been actively involved in assistance missions after earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, floods, and volcanoes.

“A stampede is a terrible way to die,” he says. “It’s a slow asphyxiation. You can’t breathe for two to four minutes. The weight of a crowd like that can push over a wall. It’s tons of pressure. Then, if people fall down, they have no time or room to get up, and others trample on them. People either walk [over those who have fallen] or fall over themselves. So you also see severe trauma injuries.”

Kramer says preventing stampedes requires legislation, management, planning, risk assessment, logistics, and most of all, training. “In almost every incident I’ve seen like this, there has been no training. You can have 1 000 policeman and 1 000 stewards, but if no one is trained to recognise the signs of stampedes, they can easily happen. All it takes is one ‘spark’.”

He alludes to one person falling over in a stadium passage, or one fight that broke out in a stadium, which led to many people dying in stampedes in the past.

Kramer explains that medically, responding to a stampede is often counterintuitive to what a medical professional would normally do.

“In other mass disasters, you triage people who aren’t unconscious and prioritise them over unconscious victims who you may leave. But in a stampede, you immediately do CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation] on the asphyxiated, non-breathing victims, because they usually have a healthy heart and you

want to get oxygen back to that heart. You do CPR for half an hour to get the heart to start pumping again. You do CPR on every single non-breathing person, and then they do survive. So you don’t run it like an accident. You don’t take them to hospital – you work tirelessly on the scene.”

He says in crowded environments, it’s essential to keep the flow of people going. Even if they are walking in a narrow area, like the site where the Mount Meron tragedy occurred, as long as there is a flow of people, it’s likely to be safe. “But as soon as something goes wrong – like someone falling – it quickly perpetuates a vicious cycle.”

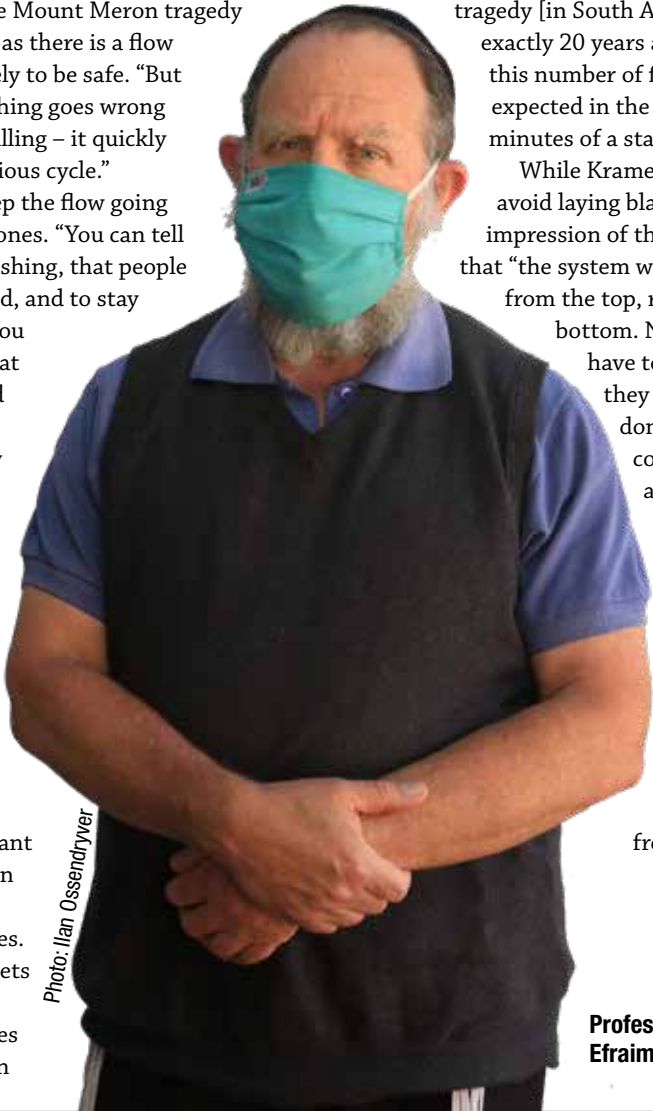
One way to keep the flow going is to use megaphones. “You can tell people to stop pushing, that people are getting injured, and to stay where they are. You can tell people that are being crushed to turn on their side, as then they can still breathe. You can control things verbally. Communication is crucial, and it needs to be planned beforehand.”

In his work with football stadiums, other small but significant changes have been implemented to prevent stampedes. For example, tickets are sold offsite to prevent stampedes should tickets run

out. In addition, spectators are allowed only to sit in a seat, no one is allowed to stand or sit anywhere else. This controls numbers and keeps pathways open. “In 2021, crowd management is a science that needs to be learnt before disaster strikes and people die,” he says.

Kramer has seen similar numbers of deaths at other stampedes. For example, 43 people died at the Ellis Park Stadium tragedy [in South Africa] exactly 20 years ago. He says this number of fatalities is expected in the first five minutes of a stampede.

While Kramer wants to avoid laying blame, his first impression of the tragedy is that “the system went wrong ... from the top, right to the bottom. Now, they’ll have to do what they should have done before – control the amount of people, manage risk, train personnel, and so on. It needs to be a well-oiled machine to stop people from dying.”



Professor Efraim Kramer

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## Why SA is calling on Cuba, come

KAYLA RACHBUCH/JNF SA

Rivers running down streets, cavernous holes outside houses, and buckets next to toilets. These are just some of the sights that Glenhazel residents have become all-too-well acquainted with over the past few weeks.

Speaking to ChaiFM, Lionel Greenberg, the councillor for Ward 72 in the City of Johannesburg, said problems with water delivery in the city had been lying dormant under our feet for years, and had become “malignant”.

“An amount of R170 billion would be required to repair water and electricity infrastructure in the City of Johannesburg. This could take 10 to 15 years to do”, Greenberg said.

Glenhazel is a microcosm of what’s happening in neighbourhoods and towns across the country.

“Climate change, population growth, and lack of investment is putting increasing pressure on South Africa’s water resources,” said Michael Kransdorff, the chairperson of the Jewish National Fund (JNF) in South Africa, a leading international Jewish environmental organisation.

“Recognising that water is the next big crisis we face, the JNF has sought to facilitate the sharing of Israeli water expertise in South Africa. To this end, we have organised tours of Israel, the world leader in water management, and hosted local conferences. We are holding a water webinar with international thought leaders on Thursday at 19:00, called “Hell or high water: the untold story of how Israel is sharing her water miracle with South Africa”.

Nevertheless, the South Africa government

seems hell bent on relying on the expertise of Cuba, not Israel, to provide solutions to our water problems. It has seconded the help of 24 Cuban engineers at a cost of R64 million to assist it to implement a sustainable water delivery system.

But the true state of Cuba’s water infrastructure leaves a lot to be desired. Years of political malaise, sanctions, drought, and



infrastructure decay, have made clean running water a rarity for many Cubans.

Only 11% of the country’s population of 11.2 million receive piped water at home 24 hours a day. For more than 50% of households, water is available only sporadically, typically receiving about two hours of running water every five days.

That’s to say nothing about the drinkability of the water. In many areas, chemicals aren’t available for water purification, resulting in carnivorous fish being used to eat the parasite-carrying mosquito larvae that can be found in drinking water.

Just last week (29 April 2021), Cape Town residents were advised by the city “to refrain from drinking municipal water until further



**NICOLA MILTZ**

"We were granted an unbelievable level of access to a minister of state security, which we are grateful for. She gave us assurances about our safety and security, and showed a willingness to engage with the community. She also understood where we are coming from as a minority community that's vulnerable to attack – one that's a bigger target than the average South African. She understood this."

Dlodlo said the security threats felt by the Jewish community were felt by all South Africans.

"You hear about the failures of intelligence, but one does not hear about the work that intelligence does that keeps all of us safe. We have a fantastic team across the agency that works very hard and whose primary responsibility is ensuring territorial integrity and also protecting the sovereignty of our nation," she

"We had a direct threat issued to say if we do intervene in Mozambique, we will face the fire. Our military is ready for that. And so are the intelligence agencies across crime, defence, or national intelligence services. We are all on high alert. We are part of the regional intelligence bodies that are monitoring the situation."

Israel has always gladly offered its expertise to other countries, especially in Africa. One such example is Innovation: Africa, a non-profit organisation that has brought Israeli technology to more than 300 rural villages across the continent, providing electricity and clean water to more than 1.8 million

• For more information about the webinar, as well as how to get involved, contact the JNF on 011 645 2579. To register for the webinar: <https://www.sazf.org/hell-or-high-water>.

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A photograph of a woman with long, wavy blonde hair, smiling at the camera. She is wearing a black top with a large, colorful, abstract pattern on the front. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be an outdoor setting with greenery.



## Mother’s Day follows Lag B’Omer tragedy

This Sunday, there is one South African-born mother who won’t be celebrating Mother’s Day. Tanya Hevroni, who is the mother of three little girls, is mourning the senseless death of her husband who was killed in the Lag B’Omer stampede on Mount Meron last Thursday.

She, like so many other mothers, is now forced to come to terms with what it means to be a single mom.

She’s not alone. There are many more in Israel who lost their loved ones in this tragic incident in which 45 people died and more than 150 were injured.

It was a celebration that all those who went looked forward to, but went horribly wrong. Lag B’Omer is the one night when observant people can really celebrate during the counting of the Omer. It’s 24 hours in which people can marry, cut their hair, and do a whole bunch of things they can’t do between Pesach and Shavuot.

While I have always enjoyed celebrating Lag B’Omer, I knew very little about the annual gathering at Mount Meron. Since this largest peacetime tragedy in the history of Israel last week, I have unfortunately had reason to find out more. And the more I looked, the more the irony and horror of what happened emerged.

Shortly before this disaster struck, there was the most incredible joy at the site of Rabbi Simon bar Yochai’s grave. I find the idea of this euphoria turning into terror and then devastation hard to absorb. I can’t even imagine how those survivors are going to live with this. Also, most of them were involved in the stampede that killed people, creating what has been dubbed “Israel’s deadliest civilian disaster”. How do they live with that?

Lag B’Omer marks the day Rav Simon bar Yochai died, but it also falls on the day that ended a plague that killed thousands of Torah scholars who had studied with – among others – Rabbi Akiva. I have to admit the fact that we are living through a pandemic (or a plague, call it what you will), which has mostly now been stopped by mass vaccination in Israel, gives me the shivers. This event was the very first mass gathering in Israel since the start of the pandemic, and it was allowed only because of the huge success of the vaccination drive.

Then, I read that 110 years ago, in 1911, 11 people were killed and 40 wounded when they fell from a balcony on Mount Meron on Lag B’Omer. They were said to have fallen about seven metres when the railing around the grave collapsed. It’s way too similar to the events of last week. Back then, it clearly wasn’t safe, and neither was it safe now. Especially not for 100 000 people dancing and singing. Apparently, there was supposed to be a limit of 15 000, but this wasn’t implemented because, it seems, there isn’t a specific body or authority that controls the site.

Every year except 2020, for about 600 years, observant Jews have flocked to this site on Lag B’Omer. Was it a tragedy waiting to happen? And why did it happen this year? We can search for reasons and try to make sense of it, but I’m not sure those answers are forthcoming. I guess it’s a matter of police work and your belief system.

However, I cannot imagine Lag B’Omer on Mount Meron will ever be the same celebration. Maybe I’m wrong. The tragedy will certainly have an impact on hundreds of people being able to view Lag B’Omer as a celebration again.

In fact, it will take Israel a long time to get over this massive loss. I don’t believe anybody meant for it to happen. However, blame is being thrown around. People apparently need to find a culprit, a reason, a bad guy. They can’t blame terrorism or crime. And so, many are blaming the Israeli government. Some blame secular Israelis and others the Haredim themselves.

Do we always have to have someone to blame? Is having someone to blame and potentially charge with a crime going to help bring back these people? Will it make anyone feel better?

I don’t believe so. It certainly isn’t going to bring Tanya Hevroni’s husband back.

While I don’t pretend to know her, I have a good idea that she will step up to the plate and continue to be an outstanding mother to her girls. That’s what mothers do.

And as we celebrate mothers this weekend, I know many mothers who would always get out of a sick bed and do the impossible for their children. Their love knows no bounds.

While we may not all be mothers, we have all had a mother in our lives. And we know the love of a mother. She is the one who was always there for us, even if she had a full-time job. She is the one on whose shoulders we cried when our hearts were broken. Hers was the hand we held that made us feel supported. She was the one who made sure we ate well, kept clean, brushed our teeth, and slept enough.

Her love was and always is unconditional. Being a mother is no easy task, but it’s the most gratifying and precious job in the world. And, having lost my own mother, I know that nothing in the world will replace the person who nurtured my siblings and me, held us when we needed it, and gave everything of herself for us. For my own mother and every mother out there who knows this love, we at the SA Jewish Report salute you!

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



# The law of the land is the law

OPINION

JULIAN RESNICK



When it came to the tragic events at Mount Meron over Lag B’Omer, the writing was on the wall, say many who have written and spoken about it in Israel over the past few days.

It followed disastrous political policy in past years (preceding Bibi Netanyahu’s coalition governments, but gaining momentum under him), which has enabled the Haredi community in Israel to develop a model of exterritorial behaviour – behaviour which assume that the rules don’t apply to them. This reality isn’t dictated by their special needs as a community, but by their politicians as a show of strength.

The only thing that’s legitimate to say to the families of the victims, those who lost their lives, and those who were injured in the compound around the grave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, is that we send our heartfelt condolences and want to find ways to help them in any way possible.

Their pain is immeasurable, and the impact of this awful, tragic event on their lives will accompany them into the future. We need to care for the widows, the orphans, and we will. That’s who we are, and I’m proud of this fact.

And it’s exactly because we care for the widow and the orphan that our response to what happened cannot end with condolences.

We have a responsibility to all of those who live with us as citizens, residents, or visitors to our country, to ensure their well-being and safety. It’s to that end that we created an extraordinary vaccination campaign during

who very rarely interact with each other in meaningful ways for a very long time. Jews and Arabs, secular and religious, modern Orthodox, and Haredi. All living most of the time in our separate tribes and only occasionally – usually in times of trauma – coming together as *am echad* (one people).

The voices coming out of what happened in Meron are diverse. There is the voice which says, “This is the will of G-d.” There is the voice which says (very quietly most of the time), “The Haredi community had this coming to them. Just look how they ignored the rules during Corona.” There are political voices which are already

One of the ways the state cares for its citizens is by enacting laws and ordinances which ensure the safety of all of those who live within its boundaries.

manipulating the situation as they desperately try to form a new collation to rule in coming years (this is the crocodile-tears voice).

To this I wish to add my voice with a very clear Talmudic concept, “*Dina d’malkhuta dina*.” This powerful statement, which appears four times in the Babylonian Talmud, means quite simply, “The law of the land is the law.” I choose to

use a phrase from within the codex of Jewish law for the obvious reason that this tragedy was a tragedy which had an almost exclusive impact on the Haredi community. It’s therefore the duty of the Israel political and administrative leadership to go to this community in a language



Mourners attend a funeral in Jerusalem for one of the victims of the Mount Meron tragedy

this time of pandemic. Our national health system (*kupot cholim*) ensured that vaccines were available to all, irrespective of whether they acknowledged the legitimacy of the Jewish state or not. It’s to that end that the Israel Defense Forces defends all those who live in this country whether they live in Bnei Brak, Um Al Fahm, or Tel Aviv. Viruses and missiles are blind to ethnicity, faith commitments, and political ideologies.

Similarly, when it comes to taking responsibility for the public domain, for health and safety, for building ordinances, for roads, for large-scale public events like sports events, religious gatherings, rock concerts, it’s the state and its agents who must not only take responsibility, but also face responsibility for all of these spaces and situations, irrespective of which populations are involved.

There is no difference between what needs to be done on the Temple Mount during Ramadan, the Arad Music Festival, the Kotel during the priestly benediction, in Tel Aviv during the large Gay Pride Parade, at Meron on Lag B’Omer, and in Rabin Square during mass demonstrations of any political group.

So why was this allowed to happen? We have lived with a model of separate communities

it understands and make it clear that they are acting on their behalf; make it clear that, as this community is an integral part of Israel by virtue of them living here, and irrespective of the attitudes they may or may not have about the secular nature of many of the laws of the state, they deserve to be cared for by the state. One of the ways the state cares for its citizens is by enacting laws and ordinances which ensure the safety of all of those who live within its boundaries.

Politicians who don’t act in this way, whether from the left or the right, secular or religious, are acting in a criminal way, are endangering the people of this country, and have to be removed from office. Only then will our people here (and remember “our people” includes, in my definition, everyone who lives here) be safe and be able to pray, dance, cheer, and march in large numbers.

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



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# Israeli scientists find earliest use of fire in Miracle Cave

TALI FEINBERG

Israeli scientists have uncovered secrets of our evolution deep in a cave in the Kalahari Desert.

A group of scholars from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s Institute of Earth Sciences and the University of Toronto took an exciting step in understanding more about early human activity dating back millions of years. This was due to extensive work in the Wonderwerk (Miracle) Cave in the Kalahari. This includes the uses of tools and fire.

The cave is situated in an ancient cavity in the dolomite rocks of the Kuruman Hills, between Daniëlskuil and Kuruman in the Northern Cape.

“New research has enabled our team to confirm the age of some critical events in the Wonderwerk Cave,” says Dr Liora Kolska Horwitz, an affiliate researcher with the Hebrew University’s National Natural History Collections.

“Using new methods, we have dated the lowest level of the cave with evidence of occupation by prehistoric humans to 1.8 million years ago. In the layer immediately above this that is now dated to between 1.8 million to just over 1.2 million years ago, there was a shift in tool-making capabilities of the occupants. At about one million years ago, there is robust evidence inside Wonderwerk for the use of fire, and this is the earliest evidence of human use of fire worldwide.”

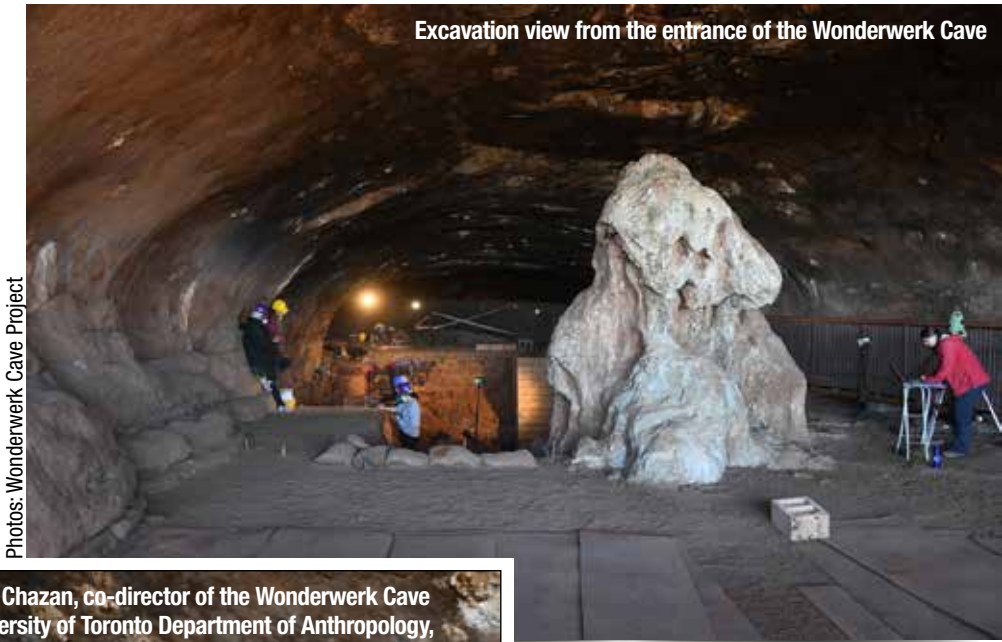
Kolska Horwitz describes herself as a “South African-Israeli. I was educated at Herzlia Schools and the University of Cape Town, where I studied archaeology. While on a visit to South Africa in the early 2000s, I looked for a suitable project to work on. At the time, there were very few people working in the interior of South

Africa and even fewer on the time period that interested us – the earlier Stone Age. The rest of the story is [pre]history!”

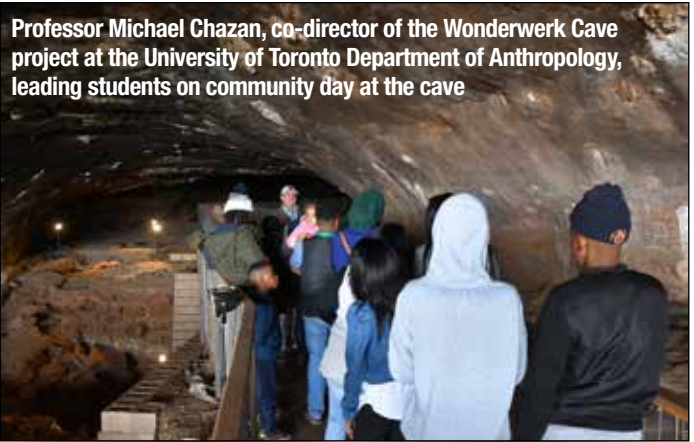
“Wonderwerk is probably the first cave on earth to have housed human activity,” Kolska Horwitz says. “All other sites of this time period were open-air occurrences – so early humans ‘camped’ out in the open. Artefacts have been recovered from sites in the Cradle of Humankind, but these are considered to have been washed into the sites. At Wonderwerk, these finds didn’t fall into the cave or were washed in, but are in situ. The new ages for the site conclusively prove it to be the earliest cave occupation in the world at 1.8 million years ago. Notably, the first stone hand axes found in the cave are some of the oldest-known in southern Africa.

“Wonderwerk has provided the most convincing and earliest evidence for the use of fire by early hominins,” she says. “Human use of fire for defence, illumination, warmth, and most importantly cooking, is thought to have been the driving force of key aspects of human evolution. Cooked food reduced the energy used in digestion, and this led to major changes in human digestive anatomy, tooth, jaw size, and facial shape. The reduced energy expended on digestion could then be channelled to brain growth, resulting in increased brain size.

“The cave is also quite unique in preserving a long and almost continuous record of human activity starting nearly two million years ago



Photos: Wonderwerk Cave Project



Professor Michael Chazan, co-director of the Wonderwerk Cave project at the University of Toronto Department of Anthropology, leading students on community day at the cave

up until the early 1900s – when the farmer who was occupying the cave moved into his farm house,” she says. The cave is 140m long.

The team has been working at the site for 15 years. “I co-direct the Wonderwerk project with Professor Michael Chazan of the University of Toronto,” says Kolska Horwitz. Chazan told the *SA Jewish Report* that “as a Jewish Canadian, it has been fascinating to learn a bit about the Jewish community of Kimberley. The warm welcome we have received when able to join the Friday evening *minyan* has made it easier to be so far from home.”

Professor Ron Shaar of the Hebrew University explains some of their intricate and painstaking work. “We carefully removed hundreds of tiny samples of sediment from the cave walls and measured their magnetic signal. Magnetisation of the sediment occurred when clay grains, that entered the cave from outside, settled on the prehistoric cave floor, thereby preserving the direction of the earth’s magnetic field at that time. Our analysis



A hand axe from Wonderwerk Cave, seen in front of the cave entrance

in the lab ‘unlocked’ this magnetic signal, and showed that some of the samples were magnetised to the south instead of the north, which is the direction of today’s magnetic field. Because the exact timing of these magnetic ‘reversals’ is globally recognised, it provides us with clues as the antiquity of the entire sequence of layers in the cave.”

Professor Ari Matmon, also of the Hebrew University, explains cosmogenic burial dating. “The sand grains outside the cave contain quartz grains that are exposed to cosmic radiation and act as a trap for elements called ‘cosmogenic isotopes’. When the sand grains enter the cave, these elements trapped inside the quartz begin to decay. In the laboratory, we are able to study the remaining concentrations of cosmogenic isotopes and determine when the sand entered the cave and became part of the archaeological layer. This

gives us an age for the archaeological layer.”

“We aren’t an official Israeli excavation as we receive no funding from Israeli institutions or the Israeli government,” says Kolska Horwitz. “Our funding is from international funding agencies but mostly from the Canadian government so, if anything, we are considered a Canadian excavation with Israeli team members, but we also have American, Canadian, European, and South African team members.

“In fact, more than half our research team is made up of local scientists from South African institutions. This includes the University of the Witwatersrand, University of the Free State, Sol Plaatje University, Iziko South African Museum, the National Museum of Bloemfontein, and most importantly, the McGregor Museum in Kimberley, which is responsible for the cave.”

She says they aren’t just involved in researching the past, but are also doing public-heritage outreach work with local communities, dedicated to educating and preserving heritage sites in the Northern Cape.

“For example, every year we organise a ‘culture in the cave’ event, including tours of the cave for local communities. Many people living less than 100km away have never visited the site and don’t know much about the important finds. We also arrange theatre performances on evolution and environmental issues at the cave and in local community centres and schools. These are performed by the Walking Tall theatre group from the University of the Witwatersrand. We also run a field school each year for students in Heritage Studies at the Sol Plaatje University in Kimberley.

“It’s been an exceptional experience and privilege for us to work in this wonderful region, and to engage with our local colleagues and communities in Kimberley, Kuruman, and Bloemfontein,” Kolska Horwitz says. “They have shown us warm hospitality and helped us in so many ways. We look forward to continued collaboration.”

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A photograph of two women smiling and talking. One woman is older with short blonde hair, wearing a pink sweater and a pearl necklace. The other woman is younger with dark curly hair, wearing a blue shirt. They are outdoors, with greenery in the background.

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# What will it take for me to go back to shul?

OPINION

GARY ROSENBLATT — JTA



When I was very young, what motivated me to go to shul on Shabbat morning was the fire station two houses away from the synagogue.

My dad was the rabbi of the only congregation in Annapolis, Maryland, and shul attendance was a family affair. If I behaved during services, my big brother would take me to the fire station afterward, and sometimes the firemen let me sit at the wheel of the hook-and-ladder truck. That made my week.

In recent days, I’ve been thinking a lot about my various experiences with shul attendance over the years. The sad truth is that though I’m fortunate enough to have received my second COVID-19 vaccine more than a month ago, I haven’t been back to shul and I’m not sure why.

It’s ironic because these past few years, I’ve really enjoyed shul – the services, the rabbis, the people, the singing. In my early years, not so much.

As kids, learning to read Hebrew and becoming familiar with the prayers, the goal at services was to be the fastest.

When I was about 10, I attended a family wedding in New York and stood in awe as I took in the sight of what seemed like hundreds of men in black hats and dark suits swaying fervently as they recited the afternoon *mincha* prayer. I zipped through the silent *Amidah* and was waiting for the service to continue. A few minutes went by and then a few more minutes until it seemed everyone had finished.

I asked my brother what the holdup was, and he pointed to a very short older man, eyes closed, still in fervent prayer.

“That’s Rav Aharon Kotler, the head of one of the biggest yeshivas in the world,” he told me.

“What’s taking him so long?” I asked.

“Can’t he read Hebrew?”

As I got older, I learned about the importance of *kavanah*, or intention, putting one’s heart and mind into the words we were saying as we prayed. But during my teenage years, prayer was associated more with obligation than choice.

Over the years as an adult, with shul attendance no longer coercive, I have been blessed to have belonged to three synagogues (in the three states where we lived) that were true houses of prayer. And in each of the shuls, what I have enjoyed most in the service is when our joined voices blend in song, stirring a kind of transcendent feeling of collective prayer and community.

Then came COVID-19, and we had no choice but to stay home. I missed the rhythm of walking to and from shul on Friday evening and Shabbat morning, feeling part of the spirit of the *kehillah* (congregation), and often lingering after services to catch up with friends.

But I became accustomed to staying home, and that had its own pleasant pattern: sleeping later, praying at home, spending more time with my wife and, when the weather allowed, meeting friends – six feet (1.8m) apart – on a bench outside.

I know I’m not alone in my ambivalence about going back to shul now. Going back would be good for the congregation, and probably for us, even though the prospect of COVID-19-limited attendance, singing, and socialising is less than appealing.

Are we just lazy or fearful of becoming sick? Or have we become dependent on the safety and security of keeping close to home?

What would get me back to shul? No, it’s not the prospect of visiting a nearby fire

station after services. It’s the chance to ignite a spark of faith and commitment, and time to take the next step back on the long path toward normalcy.

So there I was, on Saturday, back in synagogue. Sitting alone, at least six feet away from others, and wearing a mask, felt isolating at first, like praying alone in a room in spite of others around me. But gradually, the mood lifted and the familiar comfort of the prayers – and the warm (if muted) greetings from fellow congregants – made me feel at home again. I could get used to this.

• Gary Rosenblatt was editor and publisher of ‘The Jewish Week’ from 1993 to 2019. Follow him at [garyrosenblatt.substack.com](https://garyrosenblatt.substack.com)



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**MIRAH LANGER**

I'm a recovering drug addict, three years clean and sober. My mother bear came out and protected me through eight years of addiction. She stood proud, and still called me her daughter. She helped me through the tough times, and made me the mother that I am today. I'm now sober and have an eight-month-old baby girl of my own. My mom joined tough love groups and helped me on the journey to recovery. She never gave up on me. – **Roxanne Lubie**



# “Lucky to be alive” says Melrose Arch gunshot victim

NICOLA MILTZ

Brandon Regenbaum, who was shot in the face following a foiled robbery at Melrose Arch on Easter Monday, said this week it was “a miracle” he had survived.

“I have been given a second chance,” said Regenbaum, 27, who was in an induced coma for more than a week following major surgery to repair his jaw which was struck by a bullet in the crossfire between security officers and robbers fleeing the scene.

Regenbaum and his girlfriend, Lorian Blechman, 25, were due to leave for a holiday at the coast on the day of the incident. They had met for an early breakfast. Soon after leaving Melrose Arch in separate vehicles, they found themselves unwittingly in the middle of a car chase between fleeing suspects who had attempted to rob Elegance Jewellers and the mall’s security guards in hot pursuit.

Regenbaum took a bullet, while Blechman witnessed the whole event and luckily escaped physical harm.

The *SA Jewish Report* caught up with Regenbaum this week on his first day back at work since the incident. “It’s a miracle that I’m alive. There are no words to describe how grateful I am to everyone from Hatzolah, the doctors who literally saved my life, my family, and the community whose support has been totally overwhelming,” he said.

The Johannesburg businessman said this incident had made him re-evaluate his life after he believed he wouldn’t make it.

“Generally, I’m not a religious man, but I could literally feel people’s prayers while I lay there in the intensive-care unit. It was beyond powerful,” he said.

He has taken to laying tefillin every day, and keeping Shabbos.



Regenbaum said he remembered the incident in vivid detail from the moment he and Blechman left Melrose Arch to being shot in his car, even the ambulance ride to the hospital.

slowly.

He said the bullet luckily missed his tongue and teeth.

His father, Clifford, who was with his son when he opened his eyes for the first time after doctors reduced his sedation, said there were “lots of tears. It was very emotional. There were flashbacks to the incident, but Brandon’s whole support crew was there.

“The whole family was around when he woke up. I just said to him, ‘I love you, my boy’. It was very moving.

“It’s unbelievable that he survived this incident and has experienced a miracle recovery. The emotional trauma will take longer to recover from than the physical trauma, but the couple is seeking trauma counselling. We are just

so grateful to the entire community for the incredible support.”

Regenbaum said he and Blechman had been back to Melrose Arch, and had retraced their nightmare steps. Although the incident was extremely traumatic, the couple has vowed that it won’t stop them from living their lives.

When he visited his workplace for the first time, he could only wave to his colleagues and staff through the window of his car. “I didn’t want to strain my voice and my immune system has taken a knock, so I have been extra

cautious about going back to work. This week, however, I was able to sit at my desk, and it felt like things were getting back to normal,” he said.

Regenbaum said he was “blown away” by the community’s support.

“Lorian and her family have been incredible throughout this ordeal. The community has

“Generally, I’m not a religious man, but I could literally feel people’s prayers while I lay there in the intensive-care unit. It was beyond powerful.”

pulled us through this. I cannot say thank you enough for all the calls, texts, and messages from people and rabbis that I didn’t even know,” he said.

Gauteng police spokesperson Kay Makhubele told the *SA Jewish Report*, “Police are investigating a case of attempted business robbery and attempted murder. It’s alleged that an unknown number of suspects driving in two cars, an Audi Q7 and a Ford Ranger, were in a shootout with security guards after they were intercepted before the business robbery.”

The case is being investigated by the serious and violent crime unit of the South African Police Services. No arrests have been made.

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Michaela Tobias and her mom Shelley

My mom has always been there for me. When I was diagnosed with Type 1 Diabetes, she was there for me every step of the way. She took me to every doctor’s appointment. She held me when I cried. She protected me from people who made uneducated statements about my disease. She created diabetes camps so that I could meet other diabetics and know that I wasn’t alone. She changed the way the family ate to match the way I had to eat. She gave me everything I could ever need to make this disease easier to manage. She had cancer in 2018, and still managed to put my diabetes before everything she had to deal with. She is my rock! – **Michaela Tobias**

Tracy Lubie, her twin, Nicky Trollope, and their mom, Ann Holland

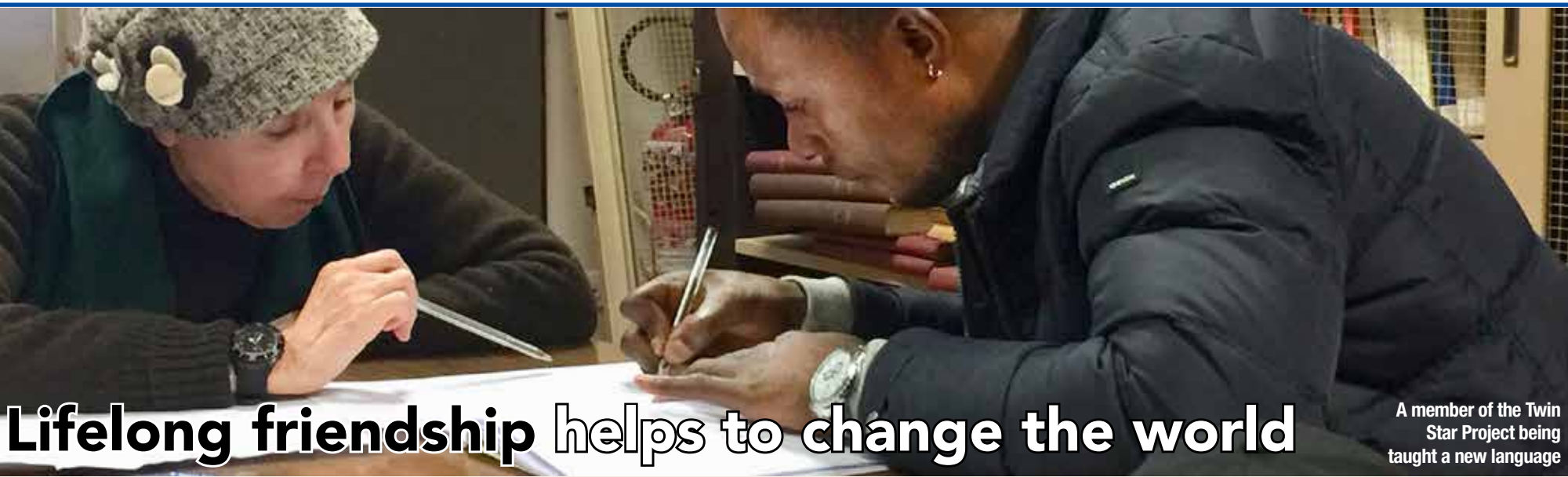
My mother is one in a million and a fighter. She brought up my brother, myself, and my twin singlehandedly after our father walked out on us. She fought for her life giving birth to us, and my brother was only two. She then

Caron Meyerowitz with Seth and Neil

Only once have I stood up and really defended one of my children. My oldest son was three, and he was being bullied on arrival at nursery school by two boys who were five years old. I waited to see this for myself before I acted. Once I had seen these two bullying him, I quietly went up to the ringleader and whispered in his ear, “If you ever start with my son again, I will break both your arms.” They never went near my son again, and I stopped it before it became a school issue. – **Caron Meyerowitz**

My late mom, Shelley, was always so strong and brave. I will never forget how when I was pregnant with my twin boys and she was undergoing chemotherapy for stage-four cancer, she scheduled her chemo sessions to make sure that she would be at the birth of her first grandchildren and would have the strength to be able to help and be there for me in the first few weeks of their lives. Her strength and love for us always came first. – **Jade Kovacs**





# Lifelong friendship helps to change the world

A member of the Twin Star Project being taught a new language

GUY COPANS

A friendship that started more than 50 years ago in South Africa has sown the seeds for remarkable philanthropic success in two different continents. Best friends Glynne Wolman and Dorit Sallis have achieved success in their respective charitable efforts and changed the lives of their beneficiaries. Wolman is the founder of the The Angel Network, a charitable crowdfunding initiative run by a dedicated group of Jewish women that reaches more than 200 000 people across social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Sallis’s Zurich-based nongovernmental organisation, the Twin Star Project, has also had great success since it launched in 2018, giving financial and legal assistance to economic migrants who have fled West Africa and the Middle East for Europe. Wolman and Sallis first became friends in

Gqeberha (Port Elizabeth) in the 1960s when they were only three years old. They were best friends throughout primary school at Theodor Herzl, but Sallis and her family emigrated to the United States in 1978 when she was 13. The two friends lost touch with one another, with Sallis residing in various places, including New York, Russia, London, and her current home, Zurich. Meanwhile, Wolman also lived in various places, including London, Israel, Cape Town, and her current home, Johannesburg. In spite of this long separation, the two were never too far from one another’s thoughts, and in 2016, they reconnected via Sallis’s aunt (who still lives in South Africa). They have subsequently been in regular contact through WhatsApp, but neither initially knew what the other was doing in terms of their philanthropic initiatives. However, since finding out about each other’s organisations, they have collaborated to assist one another. Wolman is providing invaluable support and advice to Sallis and the Twin Star Project, where

she is on the board along with Sallis and seven other people, including two migrants. Sallis is using the same web designer and social media manager from The Angel Network to assist the Twin Star Project, while her husband has provided critical funding for The Angel Network. Wolman founded The Angel Network in November 2015 after being asked on Facebook to assist with funding for matric dance dresses and a Santa Shoe Box. After receiving an overwhelming response, Wolman realised that social networking had the potential to realise a considerable change for good for those less fortunate. The Angel Network now has branches in Cape Town, Durban, Johannesburg, and even Sweden and Sydney, Australia. Through social media, this organisation helps to co-ordinate assistance for a variety of people in need in the local Jewish community and general South African society. Philanthropists and organisations have opened their wallets and hearts, with millions of rand donated to the network.

Rather than merely provide charity on a short-term basis, Wolman seeks to ensure that recipients are given the tools to become self-sufficient and forge sustainable success in their lives and careers – a philosophy that she describes as giving a “hands up”.

However, during 2020, the nature of this assistance changed drastically, as the focus shifted to providing immediate and urgent financial and organisational assistance rather than long-term self-sufficiency. This period has also brought out the best in people, Wolman notes.

“We have met the most phenomenal human beings during COVID-19 who are doing such incredible work on the ground and in their communities. These people have nothing, but still drive around and do the kindest, most benevolent work with no assistance – they are such good people.”

Similar to The Angel Network, the Twin Star Project’s overarching goal is to give a “hands up” to migrants, and help pave the way for them to have a financially self-reliant and productive life.

These migrants face an uphill battle from the moment that they begin their journey. Driven by dire poverty, they travel north through the Sahara Desert to Libya and cross the Mediterranean in dinghies. Tragically, Sallis notes, only about 20% of them successfully make this perilous journey. Many of the migrants who survive then land in Italy, where they struggle to find work after leaving a reception camp, and end up homeless and begging on the streets.

Relying on financial donations, the organisation performs a bridging function,

meeting the immediate survival needs of migrants in the precarious period after they leave the reception camp. Migrants are placed in a halfway house in Italy, and are provided with a raft of financial and legal support, including housing and financial aid for living and medical expenses – be it in Europe or back in their countries of origin.

The Twin Star Project then assists the migrants to find future employment either through training or by funding small businesses, either in Italy or back in their home countries.

There have already been numerous success stories, with one migrant having been given the financial aid to establish a grocery store in Nigeria, while her husband is being given advice and material support to set up a business.

Sallis notes that a similar philosophy to The Angel Network underpins the Twin Star Project’s work.

“Ultimately, I want the people that the Twin Star Project helps to move towards their goal as efficiently and quickly as possible. But I also want to ensure that I take good care of them until they find a long-lasting solution for their careers and lives.”

Contrary to the perception that migrants are opportunists looking to take advantage, they are earnest and salt-of-the-earth people, Sallis says. “I have found migrants to be decent, honest, and exemplary people. Even though they have suffered unimaginably hard times, their kindness and goodness shines through. I want to see them fulfil their potential.”

Sallis has had an illustrious professional career. She is currently managing director of the Joint Chamber of Commerce, which serves as a business bridge between Switzerland, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the South caucuses, promoting bilateral relations between 13 countries in this region.

In spite of this success, she was motivated to create a larger impact on society. She started the project after seeing images on television of migrants travelling from West Africa to Europe on precarious dinghies.

“I saw images of people floating in dinghies and it broke my heart. As a Jewish person, I know all about expulsion and feeling left out, and I couldn’t just let this go by. It touched a deep nerve. I realise that I got lucky in life, and I want to share my good fortune with those less fortunate.

“The Twin Star Project is the culmination of my professional career, and is beyond meaningful. I believe I will continue to do this forever.”

Sallis says the example set during the Holocaust by the Righteous Among the Nations is an example that she aims to emulate.

“Non-Jews have helped Jews in need in the past, and we have to reciprocate in the present. If they could help us then, then we can help those who are in need right now.”

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## Maccabi SA is gearing up for the 2022 Games

**This year, Maccabi SA is celebrating 85 years of sporting pride, having made a significant contribution to the Zionist vision, to the Maccabi Games and to our local Jewish community.**

We were looking forward to honouring this milestone with another excellent performance at the 2021 Maccabi Games in Israel, however Covid derailed our plans. The "Jewish Olympics" was postponed to accommodate the rescheduled Summer Olympics taking place in July 2021. The Maccabiah will now be held from 12 – 26 July 2022.

South Africa has participated in every Games since the 2<sup>nd</sup> event in 1935, performing with distinction from Juniors to Masters. A total of 3486 South African athletes have competed to date, winning an impressive 827 medals, including 288 gold. In addition to representing South Africa and competing on the global stage, the Games provides the opportunity to discover Israel and make lifelong friendships with Jews from around the world – it is a truly exceptional experience.

With just over 400 days to go to the Games, we have kicked off trials for Team Maccabi SA (in accordance with strict Covid protocols). Our focus is on the sports where we have the most interest and talent. There are three age groups, with some variation per sport: Juniors (born 2004-7), Open and Masters (35 years all the way to 120 if you feel you're up to it).

## ARE YOU GAME?

If you would like to compete in any of the following sports, please send your details (including name, cell, email, sport and date of birth) to [admin@maccabi.co.za](mailto:admin@maccabi.co.za) before 31 May 2021.

The cut off for entry varies per sport/age group.  
Please check our social media and website for info on trials that are currently taking place or email us with any queries.

### CURRENT SPORTS

We plan on entering the following sports/age groups, pending final numbers. (M/F = Male/Female)

- Athletics (includes half marathon): M/F, Junior, Open
- Basketball: M, u18
- Bowls: M/F, all ages (from 18 yrs onwards)
- Bridge: M/F, all ages (from 18 yrs onwards)
- Chess: M/F, all ages (from 15 yrs onwards)
- Cricket: M, Junior, Open
- Cycling Road, Time Trial and Track: M/F, Open
- Football: M, u16, u18, Open
- Futsal: M, u16, u18, Open, Masters (35-44 yrs)
- Golf: M/F, Junior, Open, Masters
- Gymnastics: M/F, Junior, Open
- Judo: M/F, Junior, Open, Masters
- Karate: M/F, Junior, Open, Masters
- Maccabi Man/Woman (includes triathlon): M/F, Open
- Netball: F, u16, u18, Open, Masters
- Rugby (incl 7's): M, u18, Open
- Squash: M/F, Junior, Open, Masters
- Swimming: M/F, Junior, Open, Masters
- Table tennis: M/F, u16, u18, Open, Masters
- Taekwondo: M/F, Open
- Tennis : M/F, u16, u18, Open, Masters
- Water Polo: M, u18

Trials for Junior Boys cricket, futsal and water polo have already taken place and entries are closed.

### NEW SPORTS AND AGE GROUPS

We may enter the following if there is sufficient interest and talent:

- Boulderling (rock climbing): M/F, Open
- Cricket: M, Masters (40yrs+)
- Football: M, Masters (35-44yrs)
- Skateboarding: M, Open (from 16+)
- Surfing (short board): M/F, Open
- Water polo: F, u18

### PARALYMPICS

The Maccabiah includes the following Paralympic sports. Please contact us for further information.

- Archery
- Swimming
- Wheelchair Basketball
- Cycling (road)
- Table Tennis
- Wheelchair Tennis

### TRIALS / SELECTION

Trials will be held for most sports and age groups, in both Johannesburg and Cape Town if required. Please keep an eye on our social media and website for details. For Open and Masters swimming, table tennis and tennis, trials may be required pending the number of entries. There are no trials for the following sports, instead selection is based on criteria as indicated:

- Athletics (comparison to SA qualifying times)
- Chess (ratings)
- Bowls (rankings and tournaments)
- Bridge (rankings and tournaments)
- Cycling (participation in events)
- Golf (points from Maccabi events)
- Gymnastics (performance at SA Nationals)
- Martial arts (automatic selection if medal at SA Nationals)
- Maccabi Man/Woman (participation in events)
- Swimming - Juniors (SA qualifying times)

### CONVENORS

Maccabi SA is powered by a team of talented and dedicated volunteers. The role of Convenor per sport is critical for the efficient selection and preparation of Team Maccabi SA. If you live in Johannesburg or Cape Town and think you have what it takes to manage one of the following sports, please contact us asap.

- Football (Junior and Open)
- Martial Arts (Judo, Karate, Taekwondo)
- Swimming (Cape Town based, Junior and Open)

Please note that the cost of the Games has not been finalised. We will communicate all financial info once confirmed, but in the interim we encourage all athletes to register their interest and/or attend trials and compete for a place in Team SA. We look forward to marching into the Opening Ceremony on 14 July 2022, flying our SA flag with pride.



## TEAM MACCABI SA IN NUMBERS

- 20** 20<sup>th</sup> Maccabi SA team since 1932
- 22** Most sports SA competed in at one Games (1993)
- 33** Totals sports SA competed in to date
- 94** Most medals won by SA at a Games (1993)
- 118** Most total medals won by an SA sport to date (tennis)
- 288** Total Gold medals won by Team SA to date
- 378** Biggest Team SA size (2013)
- 827** Total medals won by Team SA to date
- 3486** Total Maccabians that have represented SA to date

WE ARE #TEAMMACCABISA22  ARE YOU GAME?

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forwardzone





A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

## Welcome to new Cape Council executive director



### ABOVE BOARD

Shaun Zagnoev

This week, we officially welcomed on board our new South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) Cape Executive Director Daniel Bloch. Bloch comes from a background in the events and media industry, and has worked with many international companies as a team leader and decision maker on various projects. In terms of his Jewish communal background, he is a graduate of Herzlia High School and recently served on its governing body. He is also a long-serving member of the Marais Road Shul (aka the Green and Sea Point Hebrew Congregation). We congratulate him on his appointment, and look forward to working with him going forward. At the same time, we thank and bid farewell to outgoing Cape Director Stuart Diamond, who is taking up a new communal leadership position in the United Kingdom. It has been a pleasure working with him these past few years, and we wish him all success in his challenging new position.

### Confronting global antisemitism

This week, SAJBD National President Mary Kluk was one of the speakers at the 16th World Jewish Congress Plenary Assembly, titled “5th WJC International Meeting of Special Envoys & Coordinators Combating Antisemitism”. The assembly is the WJC’s highest decision-making body, attended by the leaders of Jewish communities from all around the world. Kluk, who represents our community on the executive committee of the WJC, spoke about recent trends and developments regarding antisemitism in South Africa, and how the SAJBD has gone

### Judicial appointments in SA (continued)

The Board continues to bring to wider attention in the media and in other relevant forums the manner in which two Jewish candidates were treated by the Judicial Services Commission (JSC) during their recently-held interviews for judicial positions. This has been done by commenting in the mainstream media, conducting radio and television interviews, and writing opinion pieces for online publications. Notwithstanding the JSC’s denial this week that it did anything wrong, we believe that the questions put to the candidates were inappropriate and discriminatory, and therefore in contravention of the constitutional right of all South Africans to equality and freedom of belief and association. We continue to pursue the matter with relevant State bodies.

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

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

## Yeshiva programme stands on giant pillars

Yeshiva College Primary School launched a special Pirkei Avot programme this past Thursday, 29 April. Pupils learnt the Mishna of Rabbi Shimon, Chapter 1: Mishna 2, in honour of the late rosh yeshiva, Rabbi Avraham Tanzer, which states the world stands on three pillars: *Torah*, *avodah* (work), and *gemmulut chassadim* (acts of loving kindness). Tanzer epitomised these three pillars and instilled them into the school. Each child also received a beautiful book from Tanzer’s family, which the school will incorporate into its kodesh curriculum.



Yeshiva College Primary School boys

## KDL engineers its curriculum for the future

King David Primary School Linksfield transformed its curriculum into technological learning on a grand scale on Wednesday, 21 April, in honour of World Creativity and Innovation Day. Grade 7s were challenged with designing an ideal media centre for the school, including drawing up blueprints and building models using recyclable materials. Architects were called in to judge their creativity, innovation, and practicality. Grade 6 students brainstormed ideas about what their school should look like and built miniature models according to their plans. Grade 5s created art and design using circular shapes, and Grade 4s made baskets for Shavuot. It was a fantastic day of discovery, problem-solving, and innovation.



King David Linksfield Grade 4 girls

## Victory Park sweeties have bon bons at the bonfire



King David Pre-Primary School Victory Park children enjoying the bonfire

After a spending a week learning the story of Lag B’Omer, children at King David Pre-Primary School Victory Park celebrated with bonfires, marshmallows, and baked potatoes.

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# Deaf swimmer makes waves with Robben Island swim

MIRAH LANGER

After crossing from Robben Island to Blouberg Beach, deaf swimmer Ariella Levin’s grandmother Irene Marx has only one way to describe her beloved grandchild: “You are my crazy, courageous little dolphin.”

Her recent 8km swim, completed in two hours and 23 minutes, is the latest accomplishment of this fiercely determined 22-year-old, who first discovered a love of water splashing around in the bath with her sister. In the water, she has found a world of her own. While she now has cochlear implants, she can’t wear them when swimming, and it’s there that silence brings peace.

Levin’s family didn’t know she was deaf at birth, only discovering it when she was eight months old. One day, her mother, Karen Jankelow, came home and the door slammed shut behind her. Levin, who was in the room playing with her toys, didn’t flinch. The family thought it was perhaps an ear infection, but further medical tests showed she didn’t have any hearing at all.

Over the years, she became one of the youngest people to undergo a cochlear transplant, although it took four operations to achieve full success. With extensive speech and hearing therapy at a specialised nursery school, Levin was able to mainstream into Grade 0 and thrived during her school years. She does rely on lip-reading as well, but otherwise her “bionic ears”, as Jankelow dubs them, have served her well.

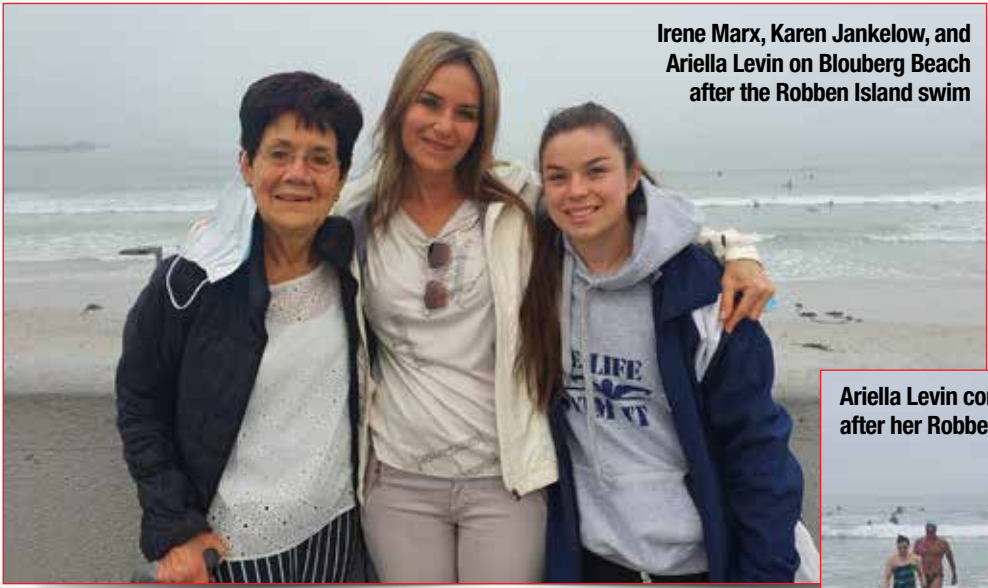
When she started swimming lessons, her teacher soon picked up she was very good at it. At one stage, scheduling conflicts placed her in her older sister, Talia’s, swimming age-group and Levin became determined to keep up with those two years older than her. It was a competitive edge that later helped her to make the school’s A-Team.

Although she would be given a hand signal at galas instead of the usual gun start, causing her always to start a few seconds late, she was unperturbed, saying, “I was still one of the strongest on the team.”

However, it hasn’t always been calm waters when it comes to Levin’s hearing impairment and swimming. When she was seeking to join a squad out of school, she was rejected a few times, being told it was too inconvenient to cater for one deaf teammate when everyone else could hear. Another time, she was told she couldn’t be made a captain of a team because as a deaf person, she couldn’t “motivate the players”.

“But I carried on swimming. I was never going to give up something that I love because of what someone else said,” Levin says.

In Grade 9, Levin discovered her love of open-water swimming after she took part



Irene Marx, Karen Jankelow, and Ariella Levin on Blouberg Beach after the Robben Island swim



Ariella Levin coming out of the surf after her Robben Island swim

in the Midmar Mile for the first time. At first, the jostling of hundreds of people felt overwhelming, especially since “when you are deaf and swimming, you aren’t involved in the outside world”. However, soon Levin found her own rhythm in the water. “It became my time,” she says, alongside the “adrenaline rush of swimming with everyone next to me, making it feel more like a team sport.”

Soon, one Midmar Mile wasn’t enough for her, and she began to push to do multiple sets. She also completed the Sun City Swim, which takes place in a huge dam, and came first in the disabled women division.

Last year in February, Levin completed eight Midmar Miles in memory of her boyfriend, Adam Rabinovitch, who died in a tragic car accident. Rabinovitch, who wore hearing aids, was a responder with Hatzolah, and Levin raised R35 000 for the organisation with her swim.

She still feels the pain of his loss, but remains appreciative of the time she had with him. “I’m very grateful for it. Obviously, I wish it was longer, but we can wish for a lot of things.”

Even her most recent Robben Island swim was marked as an act of commemoration, writing Rabinovitch’s name, as well as that of her late uncle, Leonard Marx, on her back in tribute.

She says in the moments that the race become physically difficult, her mind turned to them. “I thought about how it’s not only about me, I can’t disappoint anyone. And I thought about how Adam and Lenny didn’t get to live out their dreams, so I must push on as I get to live mine.”

Levin was originally inspired to train for her Robben Island swim after reading a book about South African extreme swimmers. “I read it in about a day, and decided I have to do this!”

Her first step was to take ice-baths, in which she immersed herself in freezing water for 20 minutes to acclimatise her body and build up visceral fat.

“It’s a mental game. At first, you are shaking so hard, you could literally generate electricity, but then after 10 minutes, your body just completely calms down. It’s such a serene moment.”

During COVID-19, she began training with coach Cyndi Starr, who previously worked with deaf South African swimmer Terence Parkin.

In December, the family went to Cape Town, and she began swimming in the sea. The night before she was to complete her Robben Island swim through Big Bay Events, the country went into full lockdown and the beaches were closed. Although disappointed, she remained convinced that another opportunity would arise.

That time arrived last month, and Levin, her mother, and grandmother found themselves back in Cape Town. On the

morning, Levin recalls looking at the huge swells and misty conditions in Blouberg with concern. Nevertheless, she was soon on the boat that takes swimmers to the starting point on Robben Island, having already worked out a communication system with the skipper and assistant who follow the swimmers on their route.

While the length of the swim should be 7.5km, at one stage, she veered sideways, extending the time, jokingly declaring it was “because I was overachieving”.

The swim was difficult and exhilarating. At some point, “what’s so nice with the

cold, is that your mind goes blank, but then especially when you can’t see anything around you except the water and the boat, you have to draw on your mental strength to cope”.

“When I was 2km away, I did think, ‘I’m never doing this again’, but then, as my feet touched the sand on finishing, I said, ‘Oh, I am so doing this again!’”

Indeed, Levin says swimming has taught her a lot about having the right attitude to life. “Often when I’m swimming and I really just want to give up or I’m tired, I say to myself, ‘It doesn’t matter how fast or slow you go. Just keep moving.’”

It’s a lesson her mother and sister say has been profound for them too. Talia says as the older sister, she took on the role of teacher to her sister, one that inspired her to pursue a career as a foundation-phase teacher. Levin remains “the light of my life; she is literally my world”.

Jankelow says her daughter has been her teacher. “She has taught me you do things without needing it to be about being perfect. She’s so confident in herself as she is.”

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**I** sometimes wish that I had the confidence that I see in others around me. I wish I had the clarity to say out loud why bad things have happened and what we should be doing about them so that they don't happen again. I wish that I could see things with the simplicity that others seem to when they lay blame for tragedies and the ills in the world. I wish I knew why the horror that occurred on Lag B'Omer in Meron did, and what we are meant to do about it.

But I don't. And in spite of the confidence that others seem to have, I'm not convinced that they do either. Perhaps they are even more unsettled than I am, but don't have the courage to acknowledge it. And perhaps the bravado simply covers up the fear, pain, worry, and realisation that life is precarious and bad things happen.

Bodies hadn't been fully identified or buried before the accusations started. It was, apparently, the Haredim, the police, the secular government who had been wrestling for control of Meron. It was the rabbis, the students, the vaccinated, the anti-vaxers, and it was the "I told you so" crew who predicted this. It was the fact that there is no unity among Jews, and it was because the Israeli government is afraid of the ultra-Orthodox.

If this was a multiple-choice quiz, it might be that the correct answer could be “none of the above”. “All of the above” could also be correct.

Remember all those years ago, before CAP, when hijackings were all the rage? News of a criminal incident would often go something like this.

"Oy. Did you hear that Neville was hijacked?"

"No! Terrible. What car was he driving?"

“Brand-new-out-the-box BM. Seriously looking for trouble!”

"For sure. Really stupid! What did he expect was going to happen?"



We all had those conversations. And although it might seem unreasonable now, in some way, they actually made perfect sense. It was a form of protection from the randomness of the crime and the fear that it could happen to us or to our families. The implication was that if we didn't drive a new-out-the-box BM, then we wouldn't fall victim. The goal was to reduce anxiety and stress by somehow distancing ourselves from the incident. Even if it meant blaming Neville and his car of choice.

This doesn't mean that there are no lessons to be learned from the Meron tragedy. There are, no doubt, many. The investigation into the incident has begun, and chances are that multiple factors will have contributed to the event. And, of course, there are things that we should be doing: seeing the loss through compassionate eyes, feeling the pain of others, and resolving to keeping our blame for a group that we aren't part of in check.

In many ways, South African Jews – perhaps due to our numbers or the fact that many non-religious Jews have returned to observance – are best equipped to lead the way in showcasing what unity means.

We can't know exactly why Meron happened. And we can't know exactly what's expected of us. But it can't do us any harm to consider what it means to each of us. After all, it's unlikely that anyone drove to that mountain in a brand-new-out-the-box BM.

## Letters

## DISPARAGING IMAGE CONTRIBUTES TO STIGMA ABOUT WEIGHT

The article by Mirah Langer, "How COVID-19 lockdown turned eating upside down", *SA Jewish Report*, 29 April, was well written, highlighting how people are struggling to maintain a healthy relationship with food and their bodies since the lockdown.

Unfortunately, the original online and print versions were accompanied by an awful image – one that perpetuates weight bias and weight stigma. I was relieved to see that the online image had already been changed by Friday, 30 April, however, the awful image made it to print.

I'm therefore writing this letter to educate those working in media and healthcare about the dangers of using images that depict people in larger bodies in a disparaging way as it

contributes to weight bias and stigma. Weight bias is defined as negative, prejudiced attitudes about weight, with overt manifestations of weight stigma and discrimination.

Unfortunately, weight bias and stigma have a psychological and physical impact on health, contributing directly to anxiety, depression, disordered eating behaviours, high blood pressure, high cortisol levels, and systemic inflammation. To the person responsible for changing the image online so quickly, thank you for a job well done!

– Gayle Landau, Registered non-diet dietician and certified intuitive eating counsellor, and member of Non-Diet South Africa for healthcare professionals

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

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