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# South African Jewish Report

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## Light at the end of the tunnel after heavy COVID-19 losses

**TALI FEINBERG**

The Johannesburg Jewish community is reeling from unprecedented COVID-19 deaths during the third wave of the pandemic. But in spite of these tragic fatalities, the vaccine is clearly having a positive effect.

“We are dealing with many sad losses at the moment. We’ve just had the 200th Jewish death from COVID-19 in the Johannesburg region since the beginning of the pandemic,” says Chevrah Kadisha Chief Executive Saul Tomson. “We’ve had a 35% increase in deaths over normal levels year on year. June this year was extremely high, and we expect that July will be just as harrowing. The winter waves are definitely worse.”

“The third wave has put a huge strain on our operational team. It’s working through the night, six days a week, and running up to eight funerals a day,” Tomson says. “That’s a funeral every hour. The load is intense.”

While some burial staff have contracted COVID-19, “There hasn’t been a moment when they’ve said it’s too risky. It’s a small team that’s completely committed. In spite of the pressure and volume, it continues to operate with efficiency and compassion.”

Tomson says the Chev also relies on volunteers, and there is a huge amount of logistics and paperwork behind the scenes when a COVID-19-positive community member passes away. This is in the context

of hospitals and the department of home affairs being overwhelmed with deaths.

Some of the toughest moments have been funerals for young people. “We have seen some young deaths, but it’s not the norm. The average age of COVID-19 deaths is 77 years old. One of the worst days

Local virology expert Professor Barry Schoub explains why the Jewish community has been considerably more seriously affected by COVID-19 than the general community. “First, the majority of the country’s Jewish population resides in Gauteng, the province which has been by far the most

severity of disease and hospital admission. Third, the penchant for functions and get-togethers, often discarding COVID-19 precautions, is an important yet preventable contributor.”

Says Tomson, “The funeral streaming that we started in December has made an impact. The

funeral is streaming now, and can be found on the Chev website.”

In spite of all the negative news, there’s a ray of light at the end of the tunnel. “Our staff was vaccinated nearly two months ago with the Johnson & Johnson [J&J] vaccine, and it has been a game changer,” Tomson says. “Very few have got COVID-19, and we’ve had zero staff hospitalised. It’s effective against the current variants. The same goes for our cemetery staff and volunteers, who were also vaccinated with J&J. They have a lot of public contact, but they’ve been only mildly symptomatic or completely asymptomatic.”

Says Schoub, “Vaccine rollout in countries with high coverage has drastically reduced the extent of severe infection, hospitalisation, and death. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), which has now reached 59% population coverage, the tally of daily cases per million population was 423 as against 202 for South Africa [on 6 April]. However, the daily death rate per million population was only 0.5 per million population for the UK as against 5.5 per million for South Africa.”

Johannesburg general practitioner Dr Daniel Israel says, “The vaccine is an absolute ray of hope. Studies show that in spite of the fact that some people have had only one dose of Pfizer, and have still caught COVID-19, the incidence of people becoming very unwell after having been vaccinated

**Continued on page 3>>**



Photo: Trevor Sachs

**Roseline Copans from Golden Acres  
getting vaccinated by Catherine Mohale,  
Unit Manager at Sandringham Gardens**

was when we buried a husband and wife at the same time. We’ve done funerals for couples a week or two apart, but never both at the same time. We had to ask a whole set of halachic questions – it was totally unprecedented. It’s also very difficult when families can’t attend if they are COVID-19-positive,” he says.

severely affected in the country. As at 6 July, Gauteng accounted for about 62% of the total number of cases in the country. Second, the median age of the Jewish population is 45 years, against a national average of 26 years. Age has been well documented to be the major determinant of

professionals who used to video Barmitzvahs and weddings are now at the cemetery all day, streaming funerals. While that’s an upsetting thought, it has created much-needed income for them. And it’s a gift to the families by allowing members who can’t be there to be part of the service. Virtually every

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**ChevrahKadisha**



# Hope and heroes after Sandringham Spar robbery

MIRAH LANGER

He wears a Spar puffer jacket, a shy smile, and conducts himself with calm humility. Yet, while he might seem unassuming, in a moment of extreme danger and fear when Sandringham Spar was overrun by 10 gunmen during a robbery this week, Justice Buthelezwe Moyo proved himself a superhero.

“Through all the chaos and danger, our security guard, Moyo, was able to think with clarity, put his own life at risk, and serve the bigger purpose. He

Shabbat times this week		
Starts	Ends	
17:13	18:05	Johannesburg
17:34	18:29	Cape Town
16:53	17:47	Durban
17:14	18:07	Bloemfontein
17:05	18:00	Port Elizabeth
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managed to sound the fire alarm, resulting in all 10 assailants fleeing,” says Maria Hajiyyianni, who along with her husband, Nic, has owned the store for 12 years in the heart of what’s nicknamed “the kosher strip” next to Glenhazel.

“This happened at a crucial point during the robbery as the assailants headed towards the cash office,” she says. The robbery happened at approximately 15:20 on Monday, 5 July. “There were 10 of them, and they were all armed. They were obviously scouting, and had been in the store going up and down. My husband suspected something, and went to check the video footage.”

The robbers then suddenly sprang into action, overpowering the CAP guard standing at a lookout point outside, and the security guards in the store. The rest moved to the cashiers to demand money. The cashiers cannot actually open the tills without a password, and this enraged the robbers, who then started beating two cashiers with a gun and punched another in the face.

“They then ripped the cash drawers out of the tills,” Hajiyyianni says. Although she was at home recovering from COVID-19 at the time of the attack, she was told by those present that the gunmen then “started towards the cash office”.

That’s when Moyo managed to press the fire alarm, “and these guys got scared and fled”.

The scene before Moyo stepped in was “absolute chaos”, says Hajiyyianni. “Watching the footage, you can see there was just so much fear, and for him to put himself in the front line and think, ‘I just have to do this’, well, people

have to know that it’s not all about the bad that happens, we need to look at the good and see who our heroes are.”

Besides Moyo’s bravery, there are many others to whom the Hajiyyiannis want to pay tribute. “It’s the outside customers that lent a hand, the guys from Hatzolah, and those from CAP, the community, and its endless messaging and support. We’re so grateful.”

“Amongst all the chaos, from corona to crime, you know what, there’s hope. And that’s enough for us to carry on. At one point, I thought of throwing in the towel, but the day after the robbery, the fact that all my staff showed up [was inspiring]. I was so worried they wouldn’t show up, but they all came. And I thought, if they can do it, I can do it too.”

Hatzolah attended to the three injured cashiers,

the investigation. CAP is working with the police in this regard.

“Let’s try and see if we can bring these guys to book because what happened isn’t right,” Hajiyyianni says. “In the 12 years that we’ve been here, we’ve never had an incident. You know, G-d is being good. We are protected, and I think he will continue to protect us, but it shouldn’t have happened,” she says, not just pointing to the robbery, but its brazen and aggressive nature.

The Hajiyyiannis, who are Greek, have been profoundly moved by the support shown by the Jewish community. “What I want to come out of this situation is a message of gratitude. This was a hectic experience, but there is another side to this that is about human connection and care.”

Hajiyyianni says that when they took over the store, they knew nothing about kashrut, and it has been “a learning curve”. Now, they celebrate, what she says is an “intimate relationship with their customers. Everyone has just banded together showing solidarity, love, and encouragement.”

Along with giving thanks for this support, her desire is to celebrate Moyo’s example of quiet courage. “He’s loyal, dedicated, and passionate about his work. He always knows wrong from right. He’s one of the unsung heroes in our workplace that make all the difference in this very fallen world.”



Justice Buthelezwe Moyo and Maria Hajiyyianni

and while one was concussed and stayed home to rest, the other two, like their colleagues, chose to return to work the next day. Since then, Spar’s head office has also played a role, offering trauma counselling to staff and assisting with

Moyo was at first hesitant to describe his actions during the drama. As Hajiyyianni puts it, “he sees it as just doing his job”.

However, the father of four, aged 40, whose wife, Precedes, works at the deli section of the store and was there during the robbery, says, “I was patrolling inside the shop. When I was going towards the door, the lady that I work with in security showed me with signs that something was happening near her. When I checked, I saw everyone lying down. That’s when I crawled over to press the fire alarm.”

Asked about how he feels about the fact that it was his action that brought the robbery to an end, he says, “I’m happy that there was no one who was badly harmed. It makes me proud of my work.”

## Torah Thought

### Exile is a state of being

In *parshas Massei*, the Torah traces our journey in the desert by listing all 42 camps that we passed through. This is a forerunner for Jewish history. Even the most superficial knowledge of Jewish history reveals that a large chunk of it has been spent in exile. Under the nations of the world, the Jewish people suffered immensely. How are we meant to understand this? There are four main points to appreciate.

Chazal tell us that the Jewish people are so beloved by Hashem, that when they were sent into exile for their sins, Hashem accompanied them. The greatest demonstration of His love is the fact that the Jewish people have survived almost 2 000 years of persecution and numerous attempts to annihilate us. So great is this miracle, it surpasses the collective miracles of the exodus of Egypt and our wandering in the desert and in the land of Israel.

Second, when the Jews wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, their survival was supernatural – they were wholly dependent on Hashem.

He rained down bread from the sky, provided a well of water, and protected us with seven miraculous clouds. This was the education needed to sear into our consciousness the perspective that Hashem is the source of everything, and we must strive to fulfil His will.

Land, prosperity, and institutions of statehood were put at the Jewish people’s disposal not as goals in themselves, but as a means for the fulfilment of the Torah. When Jews lost sight of their true purpose and began to emulate the ideals of the nations around them, worshipping wealth and prosperity, they were deprived of those things that they had begun to worship, leaving their land with only the Torah to guide them.

Exile was meant, first and foremost, to benefit and perfect us. The Jewish people witnessed powerful empires disappear while we endured, devoid of might and majesty, but loyal to Hashem. How many times have Jews been offered a doorway to earthly pleasure and security if only they

renounce their loyalty to G-d? How many times did Jews scorn the lure of wealth and pleasure and even sacrificed their most precious treasures in this world – their wives, children, brothers and sisters – for Hashem?

Chazal tell us that a third benefit of exile was to inspire conversion. Indeed, there have been many great converts in our history.

Fourth, the Jewish people were scattered throughout the world for our protection. If we were all under the jurisdiction of one ruler, he would attempt to destroy us all.

Exile isn’t just banishment from Israel. Exile is a state of being that also applies to individuals. Every person experiences tranquil periods when he finds it easy to learn Torah and pray with concentration. Yet when times are hard, he struggles. It’s specifically at these times that he mustn’t become empty of Torah and prayer, rather, he must strive to sanctify “desert” periods.

Rabbi Yonatan Landau,  
Ohr Somayach Savoy





# Keeping a low profile in the Swazi tinderbox

NICOLA MILTZ

The smattering of Jewish residents living in troubled Eswatini breathed a sigh of relief this week at the brief calm in the mountain kingdom following days of violent unrest by pro-democracy protesters and police.

“It was very tense last week, but things have calmed for now,” said local resident Frances Aron, who lives in Mbabane.

She is one of between 30 to 50 Jewish residents who live in the tiny nation of 1.1 million people.

The landlocked and impoverished kingdom of Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland, was rocked last week by brutal clashes between security forces and demonstrators calling for democratic reform. King Mswati III has ruled the country for 35 years.

Demonstrators barricaded roads and looted and set fire to businesses owned or linked to the royal family, while videos posted on social media before an internet blackout alleged that security forces had viciously assaulted demonstrators. There have been many deaths, some say at least 60, and countless severe injuries from beatings and shootings, the numbers of which are still unconfirmed at this stage.

The protest has been simmering for some time, but moved up a notch in May after the alleged killing by police of law student Thabani Nkomonye, which angered students and teachers.

Protests escalated late last month, as youths took to the streets demanding democratic reform in the tiny country where the king leads a lavish lifestyle amidst rising poverty.

*Daily Maverick* this week released graphic images and video footage of murder and torture allegedly at the hands of the Royal Swazi Police Service and the Umbutfo Eswatini Defence Force, showing a kingdom in which human rights and media freedom don’t exist.

There have been allegations of torture and abduction of pro-democracy activists and journalists.

“The pandemic and unemployment have exacerbated suffering,” said Aron. “People are tired of living on Coca-Cola and mielie meal, and want to be seen and heard.”

Aron, who lives alone, said she was relieved this week when things calmed down enough for her to leave home to get supplies including gas and food.

It was unnerving not to have internet access. “I couldn’t contact anyone, there was no Facebook or WhatsApp, and there were a few days of uncertainty and worry, but things seem okay now and I have been able to stock up,” she said.

A Jewish Mbabane resident who didn’t want to be identified because of the volatility, described the situation as a “temporary recess”.

“It’s calmer. We’re waiting to see what happens,” she said, pointing out that “there are very few Jews in the country, and they are all keeping a low profile like everyone else, especially during the unrest”.

“Things aren’t back to normal because nothing has been



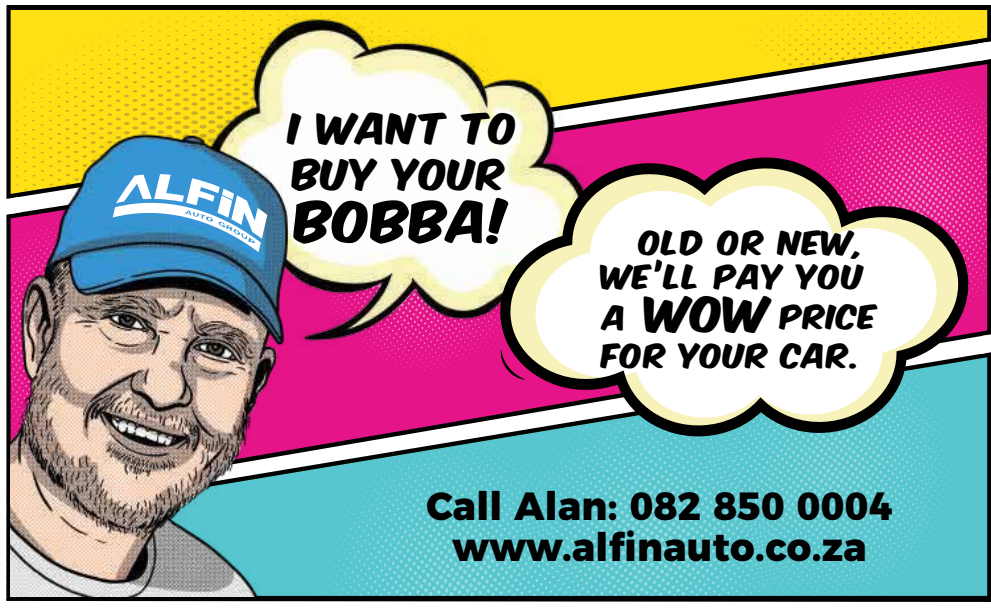
resolved. There is an army and police presence and a no-nonsense curfew from 18:00 until 05:00. Businesses close at 15:30, the internet is still very limited and slow, and schools are closed. But there is a sense that we must just relax and keep things calm. People are at home, no one is provoking or protesting for the moment while we wait.”

There is no “Jewish life” in Eswatini, in which a community comes together to celebrate *simchas* and *chagim*. The majority are expatriates including Israeli aid workers.

Israeli humanitarian aid agency IsraAID earlier this year dispatched a medical team to Eswatini to support the country’s vaccination rollout. It’s understood that some workers continued their operations from South Africa while the protests were in full swing last week.

Regional ministers were sent to Eswatini over the weekend to try to defuse the crisis, but left without properly engaging the opposition.

According to reports, opposition leaders said the government had handpicked only a few less-critical civil society leaders to meet the three ministers of the Southern



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African Development Community (SADC) on Sunday. A number of civil society groups accused the Eswatini government of excluding those who are calling for multiparty democracy in Africa’s last absolute monarchy.

Members of several Eswatini civil society groups then gate-crashed the meeting, demanding to be included in talks.

Eswatini’s acting prime minister, Themba Masuku; Foreign Minister Thuli Dladla; Justice Minister Pholile Dlamini Shakantu; and a few church and civil society leaders met South Africa’s minister of international relations, Naledi Pandor; Botswana International Affairs Minister Dr Lemogang Kwape; and Zimbabwe Foreign Affairs Minister Frederick Shava, representing SADC’s security troika tasked with addressing regional security threats.

It was agreed that the SADC

ministers would go home and return at a later date to meet the opposition delegation. A date for this next meeting hasn’t yet been set. SADC ministers will try to facilitate an “open national dialogue”.

Aron told the *SA Jewish Report* that it would take time for things to resolve. “We don’t know what will happen tomorrow. The protests could erupt again. It’s sad. People want a Constitution and fair representation. Time will tell how this plays out.”

The anonymous resident said, “For now, the shops are open, there’s food, limited internet, and we have power. Unless you are on the streets after curfew, there’s no fear, and the government has told people to go back to work.

“Things are fragile, we aren’t back to where we were. We’re waiting for dialogue, so I guess you could say that we’re in limbo, but there are good winds blowing. I’m hopeful.”

## Light at the end of the tunnel after heavy COVID-19 losses

>>Continued from page 1

is little to nothing. If one looks at the countries where vaccinations have taken place, vaccination has really made the rates of COVID-19 drop to almost nothing. Vaccination is the way to go. It’s the only way we’re going to get out of this.”

Meanwhile, all Chevrah Kadisha residents over the age of 60 got their second dose of the Pfizer vaccine last week. “With the massive increase in community deaths in June, only one Chevrah Kadisha resident has died from COVID-19. That’s staggering, given their age and frailty. With our staff being vaccinated and all our protocols in place, it shows the power of the vaccine in preventing spread and severe illness,” Tomson says.

He says they were scheduled to get the second dose only in mid-July, “but our team phoned the health department every day and were relentless. We got our entire allocation 42 days after the first dose [the minimum time in terms of government policy], and our team immediately got to work. They went room to room, vaccinating virtually every resident. We were at the top of their list for the second jab. It shows the tenacity and commitment of our

care team. My message is that vaccines work. I’ve seen it first-hand. We’re so grateful.”

Tomson says the Chev has been extended on all three fronts. “The Chev is unique in that it not only cares for the aged, vulnerable, and frail, who have been severely impacted by COVID-19, it also offers financial relief to indigent families, who have been severely affected by the economic fallout of the pandemic. I don’t know any other organisation that does this. It’s also a burial society. We have been extended beyond imagination.

“Financial relief is ongoing,” he says. “It isn’t changed by the different waves [of COVID-19]. We’ve experienced a significant influx of families needing financial assistance – a 15% increase over the past year. Younger families are also needing additional financial help.

“I keep thinking that without the support of the Jewish community, nothing we’ve done in this pandemic would have been possible,” Tomson says. “There are ongoing challenges, and it’s an ongoing partnership with the community. It has been so since 1888, and we are blessed.”



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# Untimely death inspires medical aid SOS

NICOLA MILTZ

The tragic and untimely passing of Kyle Onay, 37, from COVID-19 last week has devastated those who knew and loved him, but his death has inspired the community to create a fund in his name to help those without medical aid.

People were shocked last week when Onay, who appeared fit, strong, and healthy, landed up being taken to Edenvale Hospital, a government hospital, when his condition became critical.

Onay, who had diabetes, didn't have a medical aid. When his best friend, Yoni Margalit, heard that he was in a government hospital, he pulled out all the stops to have him transferred to Netcare Milpark Hospital.

It's impossible to speculate whether Onay would have survived COVID-19 if he had had medical aid, as his condition deteriorated fast. But the distressing passing of a young man in his prime has been the ultimate wake-up call to many about access to private medical care.

For the majority in the community, medical aid is a given, something taken for granted. However, Onay's passing has shone the spotlight on the rapidly growing need for assistance in this area. Although the public healthcare system offers excellent care at some institutions, it's most often overwhelmed and resources are stretched.

Tributes flowed last week as news

of Onay's passing spread. Onay, who used to run and go to gym, tested positive for COVID-19 on Tuesday, 22 June, and passed away just more than a week later. He was described as a *mensch*, someone who was kind, loved doing good deeds, and spreading joy.



Kyle Onay

"Kyle was my best friend. He always looked on the bright side and was loved by so many. He was an amazing human being," said Margalit.

"We did our undergraduate and honours degrees together. He was a pole holder at my wedding, and was at the birth of my children. He came with us on holiday, he was part of my family," he said.

When Margalit, a Community Security Organisation responder and businessman, heard that his friend was being taken to Edenvale Hospital, he sprang into action to have him admitted to a private facility.

"I called Hatzolah, and we tried to see what could be done. I was told it would cost upwards of R60 000 a day, and I told Hatzolah I would make a plan," he said.

Onay was transferred to a private facility where a R200 000 deposit was required. It was mentioned that should Onay require long-term care, the costs would go up substantially. Margalit signed surety for it.

He contacted Onay's former brother-in-law and boss at AuctionInc. (a real-estate auction house), Ari Ben Yitzchak, and together, they put the word out in the community to raise

funds.

"I didn't realise how popular Kyle was until the money started to come in. Huge support was generated, soon covering all costs," said Margalit.

Sadly, Onay's condition worsened, and he passed away in the early hours of Wednesday, 30 June.

His death led to an outpouring of love on social media and support from members of the community, and soon gave birth to the Akiva (Onay's Hebrew name) Fund.

The fund is being set up to assist those in need with medical and hospital plans, prioritising the elderly and those with comorbidities. It's part of the SOSA Medical Project, which stands for Shiur-on-Sally's Alley (registered as SOS for the Aged). The SOSA Medical Project was started last year by Rabbis Ari Hoppenstein, Shaun Wingrin, Lionel Horwitz, and Russell Davidoff.

It aims to provide funding for members of the community who can't afford medical aid and private hospital care. It

received the backing of the Beth Din and the chief rabbi earlier this year.

Said Margalit, "We have collaborated with the SOSA Medical Project, and while it's still early days, we're hopeful that donors will support this community initiative.

"The aim is to ensure that every Jewish person who lacks funds – at least in Johannesburg – has access to some sort of medical cover when needed."

Said Ben Yitzchak, "Kyle had an impact on so many people's lives around him. He brought out the good in people. Without knowing it, he influenced others to take on good deeds and be a better person. He was always smiling and positive. Lately, he had found his groove, and things were looking up. He became one of our top agents, and received a lot of admiration from his colleagues."

"When people started to hear of his situation, it was incredible how quickly the community rallied." SOSA, a non-profit organisation, was set up several years ago by Wingrin to offer

spiritual support and services to those over 60 in Johannesburg. Interestingly, Onay's father, Peter, is involved and often distributes care packs to people living in Berea. SOSA saw the dire need for medical assistance for members of the community reliant on public health, and Wingrin and Hoppenstein formed the SOSA Medical Project last year during the COVID-19 pandemic. They heard of Onay's plight last week and made contact. "We can see Hashem's guiding hand throughout this journey. Our dream is that no Jew will be left without the option of an affordable hospital plan. The Akiva Fund is powering the SOSA Medical Project. It's a special way to keep Kyle's memory alive," said Wingrin.

"It's a scary situation for somebody who gets sick and doesn't have a medical aid. We're hoping this fund will alleviate this stress," said Margalit.

To contribute, and for further information, contact [info@sosamedical.org](mailto:info@sosamedical.org) or call 011 882 8322.

## SAZF welcomes judicial probe into complaint about Desai's conduct

NICOLA MILTZ

The South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) this week welcomed the decision by the Judicial Conduct Committee (JCC) to launch an inquiry into the SAZF's complaint about retired Judge Siraj Desai.

The SAZF last month lodged a complaint with the JCC against the highly respected Western Cape High Court judge, accusing him of action and conduct "entirely unbecoming of a judicial officer". The SAZF charged that Desai had, over many years, breached the code of judicial conduct, and accused him of being a politicised judge. It also questioned his recent appointment as Legal Services Ombudsman in which his role is to safeguard the integrity of the legal profession.

For many years, Desai has been an active anti-Israel lobbyist and has openly shown support for pro-Palestine activities and lobby groups including the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement.

Acting chairperson of the JCC, Sisi Khampepe this week designated Justice Nambitha Dambuza, a member of the JCC, to look into the complaint "to determine its merits".

Said SAZF Legal Forum spokesperson Rolene Marks, "We are gratified that the JCC has taken on the issue given its serious nature and in spite of strident calls claiming that it should be dismissed.

"The SAZF believes that Judge Desai has made use of the prestige of his office to cause political controversy and advance his private interests including anti-Israel political movements and support for Iran, Hamas, and BDS," she said.

Attorney Daniël Eloff of Hurter Spies Attorneys, told the *SA Jewish Report* that the SAZF's complaint was "well drafted".

"If the chief justice of South Africa could be accused of less controversial and volatile comments, then certainly at the very least this complaint by the SAZF should be investigated and some sort of opportunity for Judge Desai to answer to the complaints against him should be encouraged.

"In the past couple of years, there has been a lot of double standards where some have been held to account and others haven't," Eloff said. "Either this will fizzle out and will be swept under the rug, or it will play out and hopefully get the attention it deserves. If we want to say that this is truly a democracy, then all complaints should be handled equally."

The complaint against Desai spans the period between 2009 and 2020 while he was a sitting judge.

The SAZF said Desai had failed to recuse himself in a case in which he was "obviously conflicted", and involved himself in activities that used the position of his judicial office to promote a partisan political cause.

Desai, who served the legal profession for 43 years, is a well-known social activist and respected jurist.

He retired as a Western Cape High Court judge last year, and almost immediately accepted the ombud position, having been appointed by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

The SAZF has been criticised for the complaint, which it lodged on

10 June, by members of Africa4Palestine and the South African BDS Coalition. They set up a Facebook page called "Hands off Judge Desai".

According to the complaint by the SAZF, last year, Desai while being interviewed on an Iranian YouTube channel, made "inappropriate comments" comparing Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini to President Nelson Mandela.

"To compare a world-renowned peacemaker like President Mandela to the despotic founding leader of a regime notorious for its disregard of human rights, and which is responsible for gross human-rights violations including torture and violence against thousands of people, is an insult to the people of South Africa, the Constitution, and our democratic institutions," its statement said.

It said that Desai had also made "several other shocking remarks" during the interview regarding foreign policy, including referring to the United States – an important trading and diplomatic partner of South Africa – as the "great Satan", which demonstrated that Desai had "engaged in conduct incompatible with his status as a judge of the high court".

The SAZF said Desai in 2009 lent his stature as a judge to the drafting and issuing of the Cairo Declaration, which called for a global movement for Palestinian rights and a boycott of Israel.

In 2015, he gave an order in a review application brought by pro-Palestinian, anti-Zionist organisations and activists against the City of Cape Town. There is allegedly no record in the judgment of him having disclosed his interest in BDS to the parties in that case.

Judge Siraj Desai



In 2018, Desai welcomed Hamas during its visit to South Africa and said, "We hope to make an intellectual contribution to the resolution of the Palestinian issue, but we take our leadership from you, you are the leadership on the ground."

"This, in spite of the fact that the Hamas charter includes direct calls for violence against Jewish people and the destruction of the state of Israel. Using the prestige of the judicial office to publicly promote an extremist organisation is clearly contrary to the precepts underlying the judicial code of conduct," the complaint reads.

Desai told News24 through his spokesperson, Professor Usuf Chikte, that he was "unapologetic in his stance in condemnation of apartheid Israel" and accused the SAZF of employing "*hasbara* [propaganda] tactics in its retaliatory and vindictive attacks" on him.

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# Death, desperation, and making a difference every day

OPINION

DR CARRON ZINMAN



The sheer number of new cases announced every night speak for themselves. For us, it translates into upwards of 20 admissions per day. There are times when every bed and chair is occupied in emergency, and ambulances are lined up outside with patients on oxygen or even CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) in extreme cases. We work as a unit clerking as many new patients as efficiently as we can so that we can get them into a hospital bed.

Our hospital made the decision to accommodate as many patients with COVID-19 as possible, and it has been a moving paradigm, with more and more wards converted into “red” units. COVID-19 now occupies six general wards and two intensive-care units (ICUs), allowing for upwards of 170 patients with 40 in ICU. The ICU patients are very ill, with 80% of them on ventilators. They are a younger cohort – 97% younger than 70, with the average age younger than 55. The same comorbidities are at play, but there are more people who have no comorbidities at all.

Every morning, we walk down to the donning area, where we are wrapped in multiple layers of fabric and plastic until only the area around our eyes is showing. Dressed for battle, we walk through the doors into an ICU that still looks surreal. Every single patient has a mask strapped to their face or an endotracheal tube down their throat. Calm and control no longer exist, and there is often a frantic physician running to a resuscitation or trying to find a bed, a ventilator, or both. COVID-19

remains unpredictable, and the rapidity with which a patient’s condition changes still takes us by surprise. Resuscitations are far more common this time around, and more often than not, the patients are younger than we are. Ventilators and ICU beds are at a premium, and whoever sees an empty bed first calls dibs so that they can move one of their patients up from a ward. We haven’t as yet had to make the decision to take a patient off a ventilator, but there are clear criteria for this eventuality, and there are hospitals which have had to do this.

Patients with COVID-19 need far more oxygen than non-COVID-19 patients do, and when the demand on our oxygen supply soared, pushing us to the limit, the hospital invested in concentrators to serve patients on nasal canulae.

Bed three is occupied by a young woman who has an underlying autoimmune condition. She has been mechanically ventilated for some time now, and is stable. Her mom has contracted COVID-19, and cannot visit her. She has made us promise that if things go wrong, we won’t allow her daughter

to die alone.

We move onto a woman who has every comorbidity in the book. She was on NIV (noninvasive ventilation) and refused mechanical ventilation. She worked very hard to keep breathing through the COVID-19 pneumonia, and survived. She endeared herself to all of us with her gentle nature, her gratitude, and quirky sense of humour – she offered to lend her NIV to our medical officer who was exhausted after a really rough night.

In contrast is the person who chose not to be ventilated, and didn’t survive. Her entire family had COVID-19, and couldn’t visit her. The nursing staff facilitated video calls on a daily basis so that

her husband and children could maintain contact with her. The family even went so far as to request that the video remain on while she passed away so that they could be with her.

There are far more patients this time round who fail NIV and require mechanical ventilation. Once again, we are privy to the final phone calls that they make to their wives to express their love and say goodbye. They are justifiably anxious, and we hold their hands as their eyes drift closed trying to imbue a sense of calm. Ventilating COVID-19 patients is challenging, and we use less usual modes of ventilation and often prone them.

A thought-provoking encounter was with a young pastor who had been very ill in the COVID-19 ICU. I wondered what his take on this pandemic was, and he replied that G-d has nothing to do with illness but will always be with you when you are ill or dying. He said his faith in G-d had been affirmed by profound spiritual experiences in ICU.

We witnessed a disquieting conversation between a patient and Martins funeral parlour. He was making arrangements for his own funeral in anticipation of his demise to save his family the bother.

A bizarre experience was when a man whose

wife had died the day he was admitted to hospital was found eating breakfast while watching her funeral on Zoom. This wave has been a family affair, and there are often several members of a family admitted to the same or different hospitals. It’s not unusual to see a patient in pyjamas and mask being wheeled to visit a spouse or someone in another ward.

It’s difficult to explain the desperation we feel when we admit a pregnant or post-partum woman, and when one such patient dies unexpectedly after being with us for a few weeks. I bore witness to the tears on every battle-hardened nurse and doctor’s face. It was the last straw.

The consequence of the number of admissions we’ve had is the high number of deaths that we’ve had to contend with. Many will haunt us forever, and we drift off to sleep seeing their faces and replaying conversations with their families in our minds.

We feel as if we are treading water and barely keeping afloat. We are exhausted and overwrought. We have been battered by this experience, but know that we just have to keep going. And we reassure ourselves, and each other, that we do make a difference, and that the majority of our patients do go home. We celebrate each survivor who leaves a COVID-19 ward.

• Dr Carron Zinman is a pulmonologist at Netcare Linksfield Hospital.



Dr Anton Meyberg and Dr Carron Zinman

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# The right to speak out

I recall that when I was growing up, people around me would say that Jews shouldn’t stand up against the government because we were lucky to have a home here. If we made a noise and upset the powers that be, there was fear that the government might kick us out of South Africa.

Does this sound familiar? Perhaps the words you heard weren’t exactly the same but something similar.

And, for the most part, South African Jews didn’t rock the apartheid boat. They went on with doing what they did, but didn’t make too much noise against what the government was doing. Having said that, it so happens that there were a number of Jewish anti-apartheid activists who were well known for their bravery and for being Jewish.

Everybody knew that Joe Slovo, Ronnie Kasrils, Arthur Goldreich, Denis Goldberg, Ruth First, and Harold Wolpe, among others, weren’t just anti-apartheid activists, but were Jewish activists. And this made the mainstream community very uncomfortable during the apartheid era. Many chose to ostracise Jewish activists because they disapproved. The truth is, they may not have disapproved of their political beliefs necessarily, but the fact that as Jews, they were standing up against the government.

I know what I’m saying makes many in our community feel uncomfortable. I apologise for that. My saying it isn’t intended to make anyone feel uncomfortable, it’s about asking you to consider who we are in South Africa.

I’m Jewish, yes. I’m also 100% South African. My family has been here for generations, and I’m proud of being South African and Jewish. Both are deeply entrenched in my identity. And as much as I love being a part of this unique special community, I revel in being a part of South African society.

As most of you know by now, I don’t believe I have to hide what I believe to be true, and I’m happy to publish my thoughts. I’m even happy to do it if it challenges the government or the powers that be. I believe that if you don’t stand up against something you believe to be wrong, nothing will change. And, your little voice, no matter how faint it is, is a voice that deserves to be heard.

In the same way we go to the polls and choose the leaders we want, we have a right to voice our opinions and our beliefs as long as we don’t hurt anyone in the process.

Last week, the chief rabbi wrote an opinion piece in *Business Day* clearly pointing out what he believes to be the government’s failure to roll out vaccines timeously.

It’s important to note that our community has been hard hit by COVID-19 in the third wave. We have all felt the devastation of this coronavirus. Seven members of my family – aged between two and 62 – have COVID-19 right now. Had we all been vaccinated, there’s a good chance we wouldn’t be in this situation.

So, can I say I’m very sensitive to this right now?

My point is that there are many members of our community who are angry at the chief rabbi for publicly challenging the government. In their criticism of him, I heard the same kind of sentiment that I recalled as a child – “We shouldn’t rock the boat”; “We shouldn’t challenge the government”; “The government is already on our case because we support Israel, we shouldn’t make a fuss about other issues.”

What’s the alternative? That the chief rabbi and the rest of us just keep our mouths shut and not voice our disapproval about not being vaccinated yet? That we simply eat whatever we are dishd? That we accept our fate whatever it is, no questions asked?

I don’t believe that’s who we are. I believe we are people with a moral backbone who look out for those less fortunate. We are a questioning people who don’t settle for what isn’t acceptable. As such, I believe that swallowing what we know isn’t right doesn’t sit well with any of us.

Now, I know that Professor Barry Schoub, an internationally renowned virologist and the chair of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 vaccines, wrote an opinion piece in response to the chief rabbi. This man, also a key member of our community who has guided us through this pandemic, pointed out what he believed was wrong with what Rabbi Goldstein had written.

When I read it, I was uncomfortable, and thought that it should have been discussed behind closed doors. Why? My first instinct was that Jews shouldn’t be arguing with Jews so publicly.

But, on consideration, I changed my mind. There’s nothing wrong with Jews or anyone voicing their opinion. It’s our human right.

I would hope that Professor Schoub and Rabbi Goldstein have nothing against each other but felt the need to voice their knowledgeable opinions. And once the pandemic is over, I’m sure they will break bread together.

Coming back to what I call the “visitors’ mentality”, in which we believe we shouldn’t challenge the authorities. We aren’t visitors here, we are fully fledged South Africans with the same rights as everyone else. Nobody is going to throw us out.

We live in a democracy and we have the right to voice our opinions. We have the right to stand up and say our piece, whether we are Jewish, Muslim, Christian, or even Pagan. We are all South Africans with rights.

Nobody is going to punish us for having a voice. We have to get past this visitors’ mentality. Look around you and see what our community contributes to our country. We participate fully in our country and, as such, we have rights that nobody can take from us.

We don’t have to hide our light under a bushel. We don’t have to shy away from being heard. We do have to stand for what’s right as opposed to what’s wrong. That last statement isn’t because of the country we live in but because – as Jews – we’re called upon to be a light unto the nations.

And so, we need to stand up for what’s right and against what’s wrong.

I may or may not have agreed with what the chief rabbi and Professor Schoub said, but I defend their right to say it with all my being.

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



# Hope is a formidable weapon

OPINION

SAUL TOMSON



As our community fights the third wave of COVID-19, it’s hard not to feel overwhelmed by fear and uncertainty. What’s there to say when so many of us are reeling from losses – of loved ones, incomes, support systems, and freedom?

Edith Eger who wrote her Holocaust memoir, *The Choice*, in 2017, shared how we always have a choice about what we put into our minds, even though this is very hard to do when we are in the grip of despair. These were the final wise words from her mother, who was murdered at Auschwitz.

Right now, we can choose hope. In her latest book, *The Gift*, published last year, Eger explains that hope doesn’t mean coating garlic with chocolate. I know there’s “garlic” all around us – in abundance. At the helm of an organisation responsible for our community’s most frail and vulnerable people, I witness this on a daily basis. I have seen a significant increase in Jewish families requiring financial and emotional support. I see our burial services team working around the clock, I see families separated from their loved ones in their final hours. Our residential facilities for the aged and those living with disabilities have been in lockdown since March 2020. With an operating budget of R300 million a year and having to fundraise more than 70% of this figure, I know what it’s like to face

disruptions. But with the vaccine drive in the government’s hands and its impossibly slow rollout, we are sadly helpless to prevent the trauma, illness, and deaths that are preventable.

At the Chevrah Kadisha, we are truly blessed that virtually every staff member and resident has been vaccinated, and we are already seeing the benefits. Unfortunately, this hasn’t extended to



Jack and Denise Shmukler after getting their vaccines

the rest of our community and country. There is much we didn’t and couldn’t choose, but we can choose how we focus our thoughts and through which lens we view our world.

King David has given us his age-old formula for walking in this world, and for the choices we can make. “Hope to G-d, strengthen yourself, and He will give your heart courage.” (Psalms 27:14). Hope is what gives us strength. Our hope is that this too shall pass, that when working together, we can rise to what life is demanding of us, and that we have the power to see the good and feel the gratitude. These things give us strength to act and do the right thing no matter

how afraid and vulnerable we feel. And when we struggle with despair or helplessness, we go back to the choice we have to hope again. “Everything is in the hands of heaven, except our belief in heaven.” We aren’t in control – truthfully, we never were, but we do have one choice, and that’s hope in G-d.

When COVID-19 hit our community 15 months ago, I pulled out the Chev’s burial records from the Spanish Flu in 1918. I was desperate for some experience to lean on and

some information to prepare us for what might come. I was astounded at what I found. A hundred years ago, people were burying their small children in significant numbers. I keep this record book open on my desk as a reminder that however dark things look, there’s so much light. This awful virus has spared our young children. Our choice is to see the light and the good, and to strengthen and protect ourselves with gratitude. Our choice is to hope that G-d will help us, do everything we can to strengthen ourselves, and remember that the outcome is in His hands.

Wishing us all the courage and faith to keep on hoping.

• *Saul Tomson is chief executive of the Chevrah Kadisha Group.*



Melanie For Ming, the Sandringham Gardens nursing manager

Photos: Trevor Sachs

an existential crisis every single day – it’s what keeps me up at night.

But I also see tremendous kindness, generosity, and compassion every single day. I get to see the very best of humanity, and that’s what fills me with gratitude and hope.

The pandemic has sadly exposed us to our country’s “third-worldness”. Until now, our incredible, generous and giving community has successfully built countless organisations to care for our every need. Looking after our own since 1888, we’ve created our own aged and disabled-care facilities, our own social welfare and health services, our own schools, ambulances, firefighters, and security organisations. We’ve bought generators, inverters, and dug boreholes to deal with the electricity and water



# Kicked out of class for displaying Israeli flag

TALI FEINBERG

Luke Lange is 12 years old and supports Israel. He's not Jewish, but believes the Jewish state is "a great country", and was concerned about the hatred directed at it during the recent conflict. He decided to express his support by hanging an Israeli flag on his bedroom wall. But when he appeared for online school with the flag behind him, he was told it was unacceptable by at least two teachers – one of whom kicked him out of class for not taking the flag down.

Lange is in Grade 7 at Pinnacle College in Linden, Johannesburg. In an online recording of one class, we see him sitting with the flag behind him. The teacher asks him to take it down. "I see nothing wrong with it," says Lange. The teacher tells him, "It's not going to be acceptable to other people from other cultures and races. So, it's fine for you, and that's fine. But it's not so okay for other people. I need to ask you please not to display it like that."

In another class, the teacher sees it, and tells him, "You are showing that you aren't sympathetic to others' feelings and thoughts. So if you can, please, in my lesson, take the flag down, I would really appreciate that. I would feel like you are respecting me and my thoughts and feelings. I understand you have freedom of speech, thought, and feelings, but we have to do that in a respectful way."

When he doesn't turn off his screen, she kicks him

Screen grab from Luke Lange's online class



experience, especially when the teacher kicked him out and then discussed him with the class, and he wasn't there to defend himself."

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* as a parent of one of the children in the class, and as project manager at the Institute of Race Relations, Terence Corrigan says, "I have nothing but the highest regard for the school and its staff. But as both a parent and a professional political analyst, I find the manner in which this was handled concerning.

"There's a principle here," he says. "It sends a message that offence is enough to shut someone down. Is this really what we want to communicate to our children in a world where they are never going to be able to avoid wildly divergent views?

"Ultimately, it's about consistency," he says. "You can't accept some forms of politics but not others – for example, Black Lives Matter but not Israel. Either it must all be restricted, or you allow a wide, even-handed berth."

Advocate Mark Oppenheimer, who has an interest in constitutional law, notes that, "The underlying premise

of the teacher's position is that people's feelings cannot be questioned and that the best way to respect people's feelings is through censorship, warding off anything that could make anyone uncomfortable. She claims to respect free speech while at the same time demanding that the student remove

his camera and block the background, which would, of course, not be respecting his right to free speech. It might be sufficient to protect his right to private property – in the sense that he's free to have the flag up in his room – but his expression requirement is that he can express that image to others, and she's intruding on that right.

"The situation in which the other child raises the Danish flag is an excellent example of *reductio ad absurdum*," Oppenheimer says. "In other words, she takes the teacher's position and reduces it to the absurd. Her actions say, 'I have put up a flag of another nation, which also has a religious symbol on it [a cross], and if you think that I should be free to have this image up but that he shouldn't be free to have the Star of David in his background, then there's a problem.'"

Oppenheimer says there are double standards at play, and "if you indulge feelings as a reason for censoring, then it's very hard to put the genie back in the bottle".

Mike Aitken, the managing director of ADVTECH schools (which includes Pinnacle College Linden), says, "Our review of this incident is ongoing, and includes discipline considerations, coaching, support, and education/training.

"When viewed in isolation, the video doesn't reflect all relevant events surrounding this incident or align with how we would have wanted this [to be] managed. We are taking action to ensure that our staff are better empowered to deal with situations in online classes that trigger this sort of response. Unfortunately, school holidays and responses since the event have detracted from us using this as a teaching moment as emotions became heated very quickly, and some associated and consequent conduct wasn't aligned with our values.

"We unequivocally accept Luke's right to have the Israeli flag," he says. "We equally understand that for some students, its symbolism is triggering and traumatising, and their rights are as important. As an inclusive South African school, we rely on temperance from everyone as we learn together what a respectful and diverse world can be like.

"We prefer not to have any religious or political symbolism on display in our classes as this can detract from the scheduled teaching and learning process. That being said, we expect this preference and situation to be managed collaboratively and compassionately. We always remain willing to facilitate respectful discussions between students on potentially emotive topics, but prefer these be handled in a planned and managed way so as to derive the greatest understanding and benefit for all parties involved."

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# One of the world’s greatest ‘friendraisers’

MARC LUBNER



I first met Herby Rosenberg more than 25 years ago at the inception of the formation of MA Afrika Tikkun. I had heard about the man’s legal prowess, his sharp wit, and his all engaging style. I became aware very quickly of the magic of the man.

to spread himself across numerous boards. In his later years, Herby became an important ambassador while fulfilling the role of executive deputy chairperson of Afrika Tikkun.

Herby had an ability to engage in multiple projects simultaneously. He could move between the South African Institute of Directors’ meetings to the board of governors of the South African Zionist Federation without missing a step. He had a broad-based intellect that offered advice but always from a highly moralistic perspective.

He was the consummate board member, and had a unique ability to relate to the executives of various entities that he was involved with. His “entertainment

expense” account was something that caused a great deal of mirth within Tikkun. You see, one could see just how many times Herby would entertain key stakeholders with tea and cake, something indicative of the social being that defined Herby. People from all walks of life simply loved him, and for good reason.

In every meeting spent with Herby, he would initiate the meeting with some positive compliment for someone in the room. This habit of his ensured that our meetings would invariably start positively and with an element of human touch.

Herby was rare to anger and quick to find praise. His love and his respect for his wife, Sandra, and his deep regard and love for his sons, Clifford and Stanley, were evident in a way in which he often spoke of them.

While Herby might no longer be with us, his spirit will always be a part of the DNA that defines our organisation.

• *Marc Lubner is group chief executive of Afrika Tikkun.*

# Qhawe Lama Qhawe is laid to rest

HOWARD SACKSTEIN



Herby Rosenberg and I came from different sides of the political tracks. There was a threat, a gun, a raid on my offices as a young student activist. We were destined to fight, but instead, we became close friends.

A lawyer by profession and businessman by practice, Herby would regale us with stories about his time driving a luxury Cadillac motor vehicle which he gave up to find meaning in serving his people and the people of South Africa.

The first time I met Herby, he told the story of rushing to airforce headquarters in Pretoria where his son was stationed, upon hearing of the Church Street bombings, telling the story of cradling his injured son in his arms. He told the story of the first time his son danced with Herby’s wife, Sandra, after recovering from his injuries. Herby cried, we cried too.

As its director general, Herby lead the South African Zionist Federation into a political powerhouse that towered seven stories over the skyline of Doornfontein, and lead South African Jewry.

The world changed, and Herby changed too. He embraced the new South Africa with vigour and enthusiasm. He and Bertie Lubner would re-define the Jewish community’s contribution to the new South Africa. Nelson Mandela gave him his nickname of *Qhawe Lama Qhawe* (the Hero of Heroes), and never a better description there was.

Herby was a founding member of Afrika Tikkun, the *SA Jewish Report*, and South African Friends of Ben Gurion University. His energy and passion drove everything he did.

When he took people round an Afrika Tikkun school, Herby would burst with pride. The kids loved him, they would

run to him, surround him, hug him, and hold on to him as if drawn to their saviour.

Herby’s list of patronages and directorships included the Worcester School for the Deaf and Blind, Medunsa University, and the Jewish Telegraphic Agency in New York, where Herby was the only South African on its board.

Herby would often say that you don’t fundraise, you “friend-raise”, that life was about relationships and connections between people. Regardless of whether you were the chief executive or car guard, Herby would treat you with the same respect.

Always immaculately dressed and in later years with a dapper cane, he was as much at home in the boardrooms of Johannesburg as he was in the bush, where he would describe his hand reared elephant “Jabulani” and how it would smell his cologne in the Kapama Game Reserve.

When I gave a public speech, Herby would often lead a standing ovation and would tell whoever would listen that he was my mentor and taught me everything I knew. In truth, I could never aspire to be half the man that Herby was, a giant of his people, who served the people of South Africa, its Jewish community, and world Jewry with such honour and distinction.

In 1986, Herby gave me a gold Cross pen with a Star of David on its clip. It was accompanied by a note that applies more to Herby today than it ever did to me. The note read:

“The Jews have always faced a dual challenge, having to fight their oppressors and to fight for the preservation of their singular identity”. How poignantly was this expressed in Alterman’s *The Battle of Granada*, a poem that portrays the remarkable Shmuel Ha’Nagid (Samuel the Governor), Hebrew poet, scholar, statesman, soldier, who 900 years ago was leader of Spanish Jewry and at the same time chief minister of state for the Berber King of Granada and commander of his army.

Alterman sets a battlefield scene where Samuel, the Jewish general, is being addressed by a Spanish commander. The Spaniard tells him in this rough translation of Alterman’s exquisite Hebrew that apart from the military campaigns of Granada:

“...you have another war, a war of your own, an unending war. It is the war of your people whose shepherd you are It is the war of your language whose host you command. It is the war of your children whose teacher you are to teach them the meaning of your antiquity...”

Herby leaves behind a loving wife and two beloved sons. His memory will forever be a blessing on the people of South Africa.

• *Howard Sackstein in the chairperson of the SA Jewish Report.*



Sandra and Herby Rosenberg

# Farewell to a mensch of the struggle

JONATHAN ANCER

Norman Levy, a *mensch* of South Africa’s struggle for liberation, has died. He was 91. Norman and his identical twin brother, Leon, began their political activity as school boys and campaigned for freedom and equality all their lives.

The brothers stood in the dock with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu, Joe Slovo, Helen Joseph, and 150 other leaders of the liberation movement in South Africa’s “trial of the century” – the 1956 Treason Trial.

In an interview with the Levy brothers in 2020, I asked them if they were the last living Treason Trial defendants.

“Could be,” Norman said, and the twins rattled off names of fellow activists who were on trial with them. All the people they named had died.

“I’m not sure about the last, but I think it’s safe to say that we are one of the few left,” said Leon.

“I think you mean we are two of the few left,” corrected Norman.

The brothers were born on 7 August 1929 in Johannesburg. Their parents, Mary and Marc Levy, were immigrants from Lithuania.

The boys had just turned six when their father died. It was a difficult time for their mother, who had four children to look after, and the twins spent a lot of time on their own.

The brothers had similar ideologies but took different paths to becoming radicals. Leon joined the socialist-Zionist youth movement Hashomer

Hatzair, but Norman rode headfirst into leftist politics when he was 14.

He had gone on a bicycle ride around the streets of Hillbrow and turned a corner into a gathering that was being addressed by Hilda Watts, the Communist Party candidate for the Johannesburg Municipal Council. He was enthralled by what he heard, and the next week, joined the Young Communist League.

When he was 17, Norman joined the Communist Party of South Africa, and the South African Congress of Democrats.

Norman, who became a teacher, was involved in the Defiance Campaign of the early 1950s to protest against unjust laws, and later campaigned against the National Party’s evil Bantu Education system.

He was also involved in the area committee of the Communist Party, which was operating underground. A month after Mandela and company were sentenced in the Rivonia Trial, the state cracked down on anti-apartheid activists.

Norman was arrested on 3 July 1964, and placed in solitary confinement where he endured endless interrogation sessions at the hands of the notorious Special Branch. The state eventually charged him and 13 other activists, including the lead counsel in the Rivonia

Trial, Bram Fischer, under the Suppression of Communism Act.

Norman, who was married with two small children, was found guilty and handed a three-year prison term.

He knew what the risks of being involved in the struggle entailed, and resigned himself to serving his sentence at Pretoria Central.

He could write only one letter every six months, he had no newspapers or magazines, and was allowed very few visits, but he used his time to study for an honours degree in history.

When Norman was released in 1968, he arrived home from prison to find his five-year-old son, Simon, upset. Simon had found a dead bird which he held in his hand.

Norman looked at the bird and saw that the family was frozen, realising it would take them time to thaw.

Although he was free, Norman was prevented from working in his profession and restricted in his movements, so two months after his release, Norman and his family went to England. Leon, who had been detained under the 90-day detention laws, and his wife, Lorna, had already left the country.



Norman Levy

In exile, Norman worked for a gentleman’s clothing shop and then won a fellowship to complete a PhD at the London School of Economics. He became a professor at Middlesex University.

Norman returned to South Africa after the African National Congress was unbanned, and helped design affirmative-action frameworks for the labour relations forum of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa. Mandela appointed him to the Presidential Review Commission, which looked at reforming the public service.

He eventually retired in 2011, and wrote his memoir, *The Final Prize*, in which he reflected on his involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle.

Patric Tariq Mellet, an activist who was in a communist cell with Norman in the 1980s, described him as “a great comrade, friend, and mentor ... and a real gentleman”.

“It’s very sad as one by one, this generation of amazing human beings passes on,” he said.

Norman was diagnosed with lung cancer eight weeks ago, and died peacefully at his Cape Town home surrounded by his family.

Principled, humble, good-humoured, and selfless, Norman remained steadfast in his commitment to building a just South Africa. In spite of his enormous contribution to the fight against apartheid, he never considered himself a “struggle icon”.

Norman is survived by his children, Deborah, Simon, and Jessica, and his identical twin brother, Leon, the last living member of the 1956 Treason Trial.



# Cadena's rescue teams work to repair the world

MIRAH LANGER

Among the dozens of rescuers desperately searching through the rubble of the collapsed Champlain Towers South building in Surfside, Florida, was a team of five men, two women, and a dog named Oreo.

Clad in yellow T-shirts with a Magen David, they were volunteers from international Jewish humanitarian aid group Cadena. As they have done in disaster relief across continents, they worked unrelentingly, putting Jewish values into action.

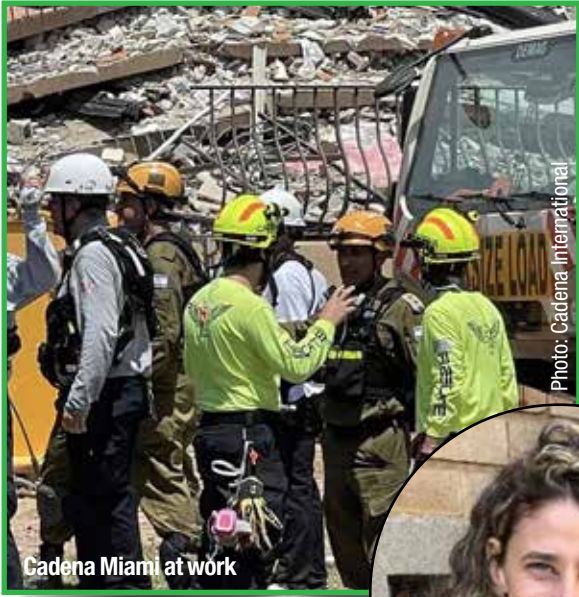
"The volunteers really gave their heart. As soon as they were called, they put aside their day jobs, said goodbye to their spouses and children and, risking their lives, went to work, day and night, at this disaster site," said Cadena's director of international alliances, Miriam Kajomovitz, who is currently located in South Africa.

"We always go within a few hours wherever we are needed in the world. In Florida, the GoTeam [of emergency volunteers], even brought specialised technology that uses heat detection to find signs of life. They did all they could in every way but, sadly, this time, it was very hard to find people alive."

Kajomovitz said the way in which the building fell made rescue efforts extremely difficult. "Usually a search and rescue mission takes place after something like an earthquake. In that situation, the building falls in different ways so you can get gaps in which people are found. But in Florida, the building fell like a sandwich, one layer on top of the other."

"Yet, we always had hope because in a previous mission in Nepal [after an earthquake in 2015] we found a person alive in the rubble after six days. However, although the volunteers worked through the night and tried everything they could, they were able to recover only dead bodies."

The volunteers in Cadena's team were from Mexico, and had been specially trained by Israel's Rescue



Cadena Miami at work



Miriam Kajomovitz

One. Like 8 000 other international Cadena volunteers offering various forms of humanitarian help, their day jobs range from doctor, engineer, student, psychologist, to everything in between. What they share is a passion for service and representing the Jewish community.

In Florida, besides the rescue team, Cadena also organised 20 psychologist volunteers who are continuing to debrief residents, family members of the deceased, and neighbours. In addition, it co-ordinated donations for those Tower residents who have lost everything.

This civil society organisation originally started amongst the Mexican Jewish community after Hurricane Stan hit the country in 2005. The community collected trailers full of donated food for the victims, but there was no one to deliver it, so five Jewish men did the delivery.

"When they got there, they saw how much misuse took place. Horrible things sometimes happen at

scenes of humanitarian aid: food is used by men as weapons to get sexual favours, or it is stolen to be sold off." After that, the community decided to form a group that would make sure that the help it offered would go where it was needed.

In terms of Cadena's Jewish connection, Kajomovitz said, "We're not religious; we're not political. What we take is the culture of *tikkun olam* [repair the world] and make it a reality. Everything is done in the name of the Jewish community."

In Latin America, for example, it's clear that the public perception of the Jewish community has changed as a result of the work of Cadena, Kajomovitz said. People often saw the community as "closed in", but now Cadena has gained so much respect for its work that many non-Jewish people chose to volunteer and global corporations have teamed up with it.

The organisation has 10 formal offices around the world, and has assisted hundreds of humanitarian missions and projects globally. It has three branches of service: emergency, education, and prevention, and will go wherever needed.

One of its newest offices is in South Africa, where it aims to serve as a beacon of hope not just for this country but the continent at large. Previously, it has sent volunteers to assist aid missions in Kenya and Mozambique. Now, it hopes to co-ordinate these kinds of efforts from a central office here. When it comes to South Africa's humanitarian needs, the challenge is vast, Kajomovitz said. "To begin with, you don't have emergencies, you live in one!"

"It sounds strange, but normally with humanitarian

aid, you have a hurricane and everyone pays attention, but when there are problems that have been going on for 55 years, it becomes normal. People often choose to ignore or just accept it."

However, Cadena believes that there are powerful opportunities to bring change. Most recently, it has been working collaboratively on giving people who have access only to pit toilets a special powder that uses bacteria to eat up waste. It's a project Cadena chose specifically because it wasn't "sexy", said Kajomovitz, and thus didn't get much public attention.

Educational initiatives are also being introduced including an international competition in which school children are tasked with designing their own real-world solution to a social problem.

And, the organisation is hoping to begin training volunteers in emergency rescue to form GoTeams for disaster relief.

Although COVID-19 has curtailed some of its plans, Cadena is hoping to grow its connections to the South African Jewish community. Those interested in becoming a volunteer can contact Kajomovitz at [miriam@cadena.ngo](mailto:miriam@cadena.ngo).

As Cadena builds up its presence in South Africa, it does so with humility. "We accept that we also need to learn if we want to help. Usually [humanitarian groups] never ask people what they want - we assume we know, and it's not respectful. Instead, our job is to find out about it from the community itself," Kajomovitz said.

Cadena also encourages a sense of humanity in its policy of "hand-to-hand" help. This means there is always direct contact between the giver and the receiver. One reason for this is to ensure that resources are distributed fairly and correctly, but there is a more profound reason. "We always try to create an interaction - that for that time period, we are just there together, and we can feel we are the same. I think that's what will change the world at the end."

south african

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# Speaking out against the government – right or wrong?

**Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein** wrote a piece in Business Day on 29 June criticising the government for its slow vaccine rollout. It got a mixed response, but some felt strongly that he shouldn't have done it. The SA Jewish Report questioned him about it.

## What inspired you to write an op-ed in a mainstream newspaper about vaccines?

Government's negligence in vaccinating this country goes beyond politics. It's a moral issue, a matter of life and death that touches on one of the cornerstone values of the Torah – the sanctity of life. We know that *pikuach nefesh*, saving lives, is paramount, and that "to save one life is to save a world". Every day of delay means more people die. It's that simple. Had the government vaccinated South Africans at the rate it should have, we wouldn't be suffering the death and widespread serious illness of this third wave.

## Why did you blame the government for it?

The government insisted on running the procurement and rollout. Responsibility for its failure lies with it. At the same time, this isn't a blame game, that was never my objective. I wrote it to add my voice to the public pressure while there's still time to prevent further suffering and death from a fourth wave, which may be only a few months away.

## What purpose did you believe an opinion piece like this would serve?

When public pressure around an issue increases, in a vibrant democracy, it can shape and influence government action. My article adds to that public pressure. Since publication, various other public figures have come forward to criticise the government, including Professor Shabir Madhi, one of the country's top experts in this field, who echoed my accusation that the government has blood on its hands for bungling the vaccination campaign. Public pressure is building.

## What reaction did you get?

The article has resonated with many people within and beyond our community who fear serious illness and death and feel utterly vulnerable to government's vaccination failures.

## Professor Barry Schoub, a leading virologist, took you on publicly in the media for the piece you wrote. Why do you believe he did this?

He obviously disagrees strongly with the views I put forward in my article. He believes the government's vaccination programme has progressed well.

## How do you feel about him doing this?

The open exchange of ideas and airing of different perspectives can only be a good thing for our country. People can then make up their own minds about whether they agree with Professor Schoub that the government's vaccine rollout has been well-executed.

## He pointed out numerous points you made, claiming they weren't true and correcting them. What's your response?

Nothing in my article was untrue. I had two professional researchers check my facts. Not a single fact in my article has been successfully challenged or overturned. Actually, since publication, various national experts, in letters to the newspaper, have defended the facts in my article and refuted the points raised by Professor Schoub. And Professor Madhi, an internationally recognised virologist and former president of the World Society of Infectious Diseases, has reaffirmed a number of the points I made, especially the government's terrible mistake in selling off our supply of the AstraZeneca vaccine. Contrary to Professor Schoub's support for the government's decision, Professor Madhi, who in fact led the AstraZeneca trials, said "there was a complete blind spot to the critical evidence" regarding the vaccine's efficacy and safety, and that the government ignored the recommendations of the World Health Organization, directly causing untold extra hospitalisation and death.

## How do you feel now about the vaccine situation?

The vaccination rate remains desperately low. Unless we dramatically speed up vaccine procurement and rollout, we will suffer further serious illness and death. More pressure must be put on the government. Lives are at stake.

## Have you had any response from the government?

No formal response, but senior politicians from within the African National Congress have told me in private that they support the position I've taken. It's important to realise that there are many in the government who aren't happy with the state of affairs on vaccines – or, for that matter, government's stance on Israel. If we keep silent, how can they speak up? We must be bold, and stand up for what's right so that we inspire others to do the same and strengthen the hand of the many good people in government.

## Why do you believe it's important for you to be vocal about issues of government that you believe are wrong?

Silence is acquiescence. This was true during the days of apartheid, when our official community organisations were silent right up until the end. It was Chief Rabbi Rabinowitz who had the courage to challenge the apartheid government. It was true, also, during the Zuma presidency, when state capture and government corruption were almost normalised. Official community organisations were again silent, and I was the one who publicly called on President Jacob Zuma to resign, joined the protest movement, and even amended the prayer for government that we say on Shabbos so as not to pray for the president. I believe it's important to speak up for truth and justice, whether the issue is a racist regime, a corrupt government, or a negligent vaccine rollout in the midst of a deadly pandemic.

## Many in our community might say that, as Jews, we shouldn't rock the boat in this country. What's your reaction to this?

We cannot adopt a ghetto mentality of defensiveness and fear. What do we have to fear? This isn't Putin's Russia or Communist China. It's a free country with freedom of speech, a free press, robust, independent courts, and those rights and freedoms are enshrined in our Constitution. My public challenge to the government is rooted in an optimism and faith in South African freedom and democracy.

With the right approach, we can make a difference. Many of the critics have a misguided strategic understanding of how to influence the government. They believe we need to tread lightly, talk softly and meekly. But when it comes to government relations with Israel, we've seen how ineffectual this approach really is. Indeed, in spite of years of gentle, non-boat-rocking diplomacy, the government's approach to Israel remains unchanged, as demonstrated by its deeply hostile and one-sided comments on the recent Gaza conflict. Clearly, the quiet, behind-the-scenes strategy has failed, and will continue to fail. It's incumbent on leaders to speak up, to be bold, and make our views clear to the government. Seeking to appease and placate the government isn't just a betrayal of personal integrity, it's not even a successful strategy. In any robust democracy, governments expect robust criticism. That's how a free society works. If we have the self-respect to tell the truth and stand up for ourselves, there's more chance the government will learn to respect us

## Many have criticised you for being so vocal against the government in this regard. How do you feel about the criticism?

My speaking out is good for our community because the interests of the Jewish community and South Africa as a whole are aligned. A negligent vaccine rollout is, equally, a threat to South Africa and the Jewish community, as was state capture and apartheid. To speak out on these issues is, therefore, in the ultimate best interests of the Jewish community. We aren't an island unto ourselves. Our destiny is intertwined with South Africa. If this country thrives, then we as a Jewish community will thrive. And if it fails, then so will our community. We cannot be silent when the future of our country depends on making our voices heard. We must fight for a better country. And we do that by joining the public debate. I'm optimistic. We can make a difference. Change is possible.

# Building Judaism, one Lego brick at a time

## MIRAH LANGER

There are many ways to build the Jewish people. However, Yitzy Kasowitz has discovered perhaps one of the most unique one brightly-coloured Lego brick at a time. This one-time Yeshiva school dropout is now the founder and creative genius behind the only Jewish Lego company in the world.

Whether it be a Lego menorah, dreidel, Purim grogger, seder plate, or mezuzah cover; whether your dream build needs a sukkah, Shabbos table, or even a shul with a barmy boy inside; whether you want to add Israeli Defense Force (IDF) soldiers or "Mayer the matzah baker" to your mini-figure collection; if you want to experience the grandeur of constructing a to-scale, historically precise model of the second Beit Hamikdash or Temple Mount, Jbrick is the source.

Kasowitz, who lives in Miami with his wife and business partner, Channie, and their four children, comes from a Chabad background. He is the eldest of eight children who first grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, as his parents were sent there by the Lubavitcher Rebbe as *shlichim*, and later in Minnesota.

His first piece of Lego was a red fire truck, and since then, he has been lit up with a passion for the product. He has always loved building and creating. While a teenager, he realised that a life of full-time study wouldn't suit his disposition, and instead trained in wood work, electronics, mechanical drafting, engineering, and any construction pursuit he could find. He worked on cabinet making, home remodelling, and also taught martial arts.

"The rest of the story is *hashgacha pratis* [divine providence]," he says. One day about seven years ago, he saw an advert in the paper for a Lego mosaic build at the Minneapolis Arts Institute.

That week, his son skipped a karate class to come with him to the show. At the venue, Kasowitz spoke to the owner of a company doing custom Lego builds, who offered him a job. Although he started off in customer service, they soon spotted his creative talent, and he became their master Lego builder.

When the company received a commission to do some Christmas displays around town, the owner suggested that since Kasowitz was Jewish, he should add a menorah. He came up with a design within an hour and enjoyed the experience so much, he suggested that the company sell it as a kit. The owner wasn't interested, but suggested Kasowitz pursue the idea himself.

"I put it together fast and, taking a risk, made a hundred sets. I told all my friends, my wife told hers, we put in on Facebook, and, boom, within a week, we were sold out!"

From then, on he and his wife realised that they had found a huge gap in the market. Even Jewish actress Mayim Bialik tweeted her support as they crowdfunded their design dream. As Kasowitz invented one Jewish-themed kit after another, be it biblical, traditional, Israeli, or cultural

in nature, the interest exploded. The company now sells globally with the aim of creating "as many smiles around the world as possible".

Channie, who is a qualified financial planner, takes care of the business side of things, while Yitzy is given the creative reins. What makes their business unique is that although it's independent of the Lego company, they use only authentic, brand new Lego for all their kits. The Lego company doesn't cover modern military and religious themes, which opens the market for a company like Jbrick. However, Lego also doesn't sell its pieces wholesale. While Kasowitz

knows that he could make a far higher profit and have an easier production process if he simply made a knock-off version of the brick, he refuses to do so, not wanting to compromise on quality and integrity.

Instead, he has to painstakingly source the pieces for his kits from original Lego packs purchased from retailers and sellers around the world. It's by mixing and matching various pieces, as well as adapting some and adding in elements and parts such as different textured stickers to create IDF badges or a special fabric *tallis*, that the kits are created. The ingenuity behind it is startling – an original alarm clock set is turned into a giant soldier; flames that once fanned a rescue kit now adorn the altars of the ancient temple.

Kasowitz himself loves all the usual pleasures of Lego – the imaginative problem solving, inventive thinking, and fun it promotes. However, his real passion is for the higher purpose it can serve when it comes to celebrating Jewish history and tradition.

"There have never been proper Jewish-themed Lego sets. When I was a kid, I never had that opportunity. When I'm designing a set, a lot of thought goes into how it could be playable, functional, and really used for Jewish education, offering motivation and inspiration."

For instance, he always adds in three coins to any *tzedakah* box kit that he sells so that not only does the child build the box, they can immediately also fulfil the *mitzvah* of giving charity. The seder plate isn't just decorative, but designed with a special curve so that it can be used as a functional part of Pesach practice.

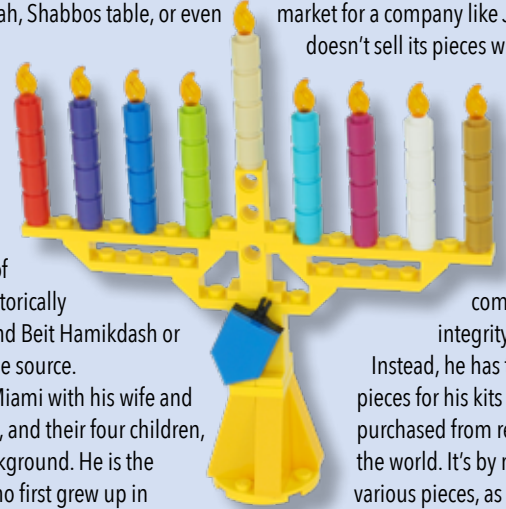
His biggest passion is currently the *Beit Hamikdash* model he designed. To ensure complete accuracy, research included about three years of investigating numerous original biblical sources as well as incorporating the latest archaeological discoveries. His process has been so rigorous that as a by-product, he has now become a world-expert on the matter.

Jbrick has also recently opened an educational arm in which he gives talks, including online, weaving biblical history with the Lego art. Even in the instruction manual, he places historical facts alongside step-by-step guidelines to ensure that those building the model can experience deeper spiritual resonance.

While the current model is made to a 1/613 scale, his dream is to upscale this to a 1/35th build. This would mean that a mini-figure could be used proportionally, allowing the awe-inspiring scale of the building to be highlighted. He would also love to add in interactive elements such as cross sections, flickering lights, and sound effects.

Reflecting on his journey towards Jbrick, Kasowitz is moved at how his life has turned out. When he realised he wasn't going to pursue Yeshiva or the rabbinate, he worried that his parents would be disappointed in him. "Now, they're thrilled, and it's gratifying to have made them proud," he says.

"I'm happy with what I've done so far. Yet, I know there's a lot more to come. I feel like I'm part of the system, that G-d gave me certain skills and talents that I need to share with others. We're just getting started."









# Israeli agritech beats the African heat

STEVEN GRUZD

By 2050, the world’s population is expected to be close to 10 billion people. Innovative technology must be harnessed to feed them all, and tiny Israel is at the heart of this global agricultural revolution. Israel’s agritech innovations were showcased in a webinar titled “Small farms, big returns: powered by Israeli technology” hosted by the South Africa Israel Chamber of Commerce on 1 July.

Israel’s agricultural innovation has already been shown to have great benefits for African countries in a world growing hotter and drier.

Amit Lev, the trade and investment commissioner at the Israeli embassy, said that technology alone isn’t enough for successful agricultural investments. “You need good

partners and a good business model.” Lev mentioned some Israeli agritech that has been successfully used in South Africa and Africa. Projects included a drip irrigation system that uses gravity to distribute water to fields, insurance schemes for smallholder farmers, and ready-made kits for irrigation and fertilisation especially geared to the small farmer. In Ethiopia, agricultural loans are made that give farmers access to specific Israeli inputs such as seeds and pumps. Yields of tomatoes increased 64% in a year. Agri-entrepreneur Guy Sela is vice-president of agronomy at CropX, an Israeli company started in 2015. CropX gathers data from above and below the ground through sensors that look like elongated mushrooms that are easy for farmers to install. The sensors measure moisture, temperature, and nutrients in the soil among many other readings. They are paired with a sophisticated online farm-management app which aids in irrigation,



fertilisation, and crop protection. CropX has about 500 000 acres under management across the world in diverse crops such as coffee, onions, bananas, citrus, avocados, and sugarcane. It also has clients in South Africa. South African born Israeli Jason Blumenthal is an agritech analyst at the Kinneret Innovation Center (KIC) in Israel’s north. The

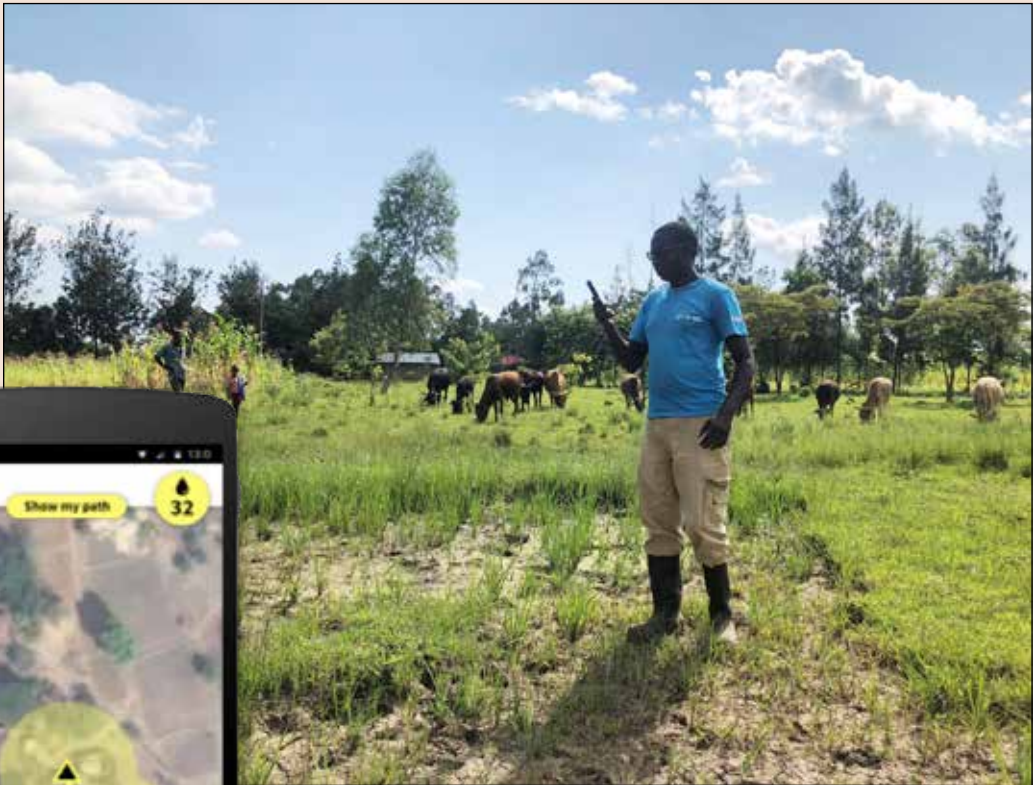
KIC acts as an accelerator and tech hub for connecting all the links in the agritech value chain, from farmers and scientists right up to investors. This drives innovation in an integrated ecosystem. One of its programmes trains university students to train high school students to think innovatively. The students take part in an annual competition in which they can win mentorship from KIC for a year. KIC has brought hundreds of high-tech agricultural jobs to its region. Another ex-South African, Dr Clive Lipchin, is the director of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies and the Center for Transboundary Water Management. He spoke about Israel’s world leadership in waste-water recycling, especially for irrigation. This is especially important in the context of climate change and the need for non-conventional water sources. Sewage poses massive pollution and health challenges. Lipchin explained how Israel has pioneered the treatment of “grey water” – the run-off from sinks, basins and showers – to make it safe for irrigation. Off-grid units use solar panels rather than electricity to power a “vertical green wall” in which the water is purified. The system is used to grow high yields of tomatoes in greenhouses, for example. It could easily be adapted for use in rural South Africa where electricity is scarce. He stressed the importance of bringing in local government and communities when implementing such projects. Finally, Gil Siaki, head of afforestation at the Keren Kayemet L’Yisrael-Jewish National Fund, talked about the Israeli experience of planting trees as deserts are expanding due to climate change. His work involves watershed management – making the most of collected rainwater to make environments habitable. He demonstrated a project Israel has been running in arid Turkana in Kenya since 2014. There, they had the challenge of making saline clay soil suitable for planting indigenous trees and growing crops. Villagers were taught how to nurture seedlings and build terraces to harvest water. Israel’s agricultural innovation has already been shown to have great benefits for African countries in a world growing hotter and drier. Israel can now make African deserts bloom.

## Zapping malaria with artificial intelligence

TALI FEINBERG

An Israeli start-up which aims to eliminate malaria using artificial intelligence (AI) has won first place in the IBM Watson AI XPRIZE Competition. Its work could have a real impact in Southern Africa. On accepting the prize, Arnon Houry-Yafin, the chief executive and founder of Zzapp Malaria, said, “We will dedicate the prize money to one ambitious goal: demonstrating that rapid malaria elimination is possible in sub-Saharan Africa.” Zzapp Malaria won \$3 million (R42.7 million), as well as the People’s Choice Award as the most inspiring team. The AI XPRIZE is sponsored by IBM Watson, and recognises initiatives using AI to tackle some of humanity’s most pressing challenges in areas such as healthcare, education, global development, and exploration. “Zzapp Malaria’s mission is to end malaria by treating water sources where mosquitoes reproduce,” says Michael Ben Aharon from Zzapp Malaria. “In tropical environments, those sources are often hard to find. We use AI to predict where stagnant water bodies are likely to occur, divide the work of treating them between fieldworkers, and track progress in real time. “Each field worker can access the platform via a mobile app that’s built for simple mobile phones, with optimised battery usage for areas without a stable power supply and full useability even without an active internet connection.”

Their goal is simple: to eradicate malaria worldwide. “It’s a revolutionary goal, as the current paradigm suggests malaria in sub-Saharan Africa can be controlled or reduced but not eradicated. We believe we can change that,” says Ben Aharon. “Israel eradicated malaria and so did Florida, Greece, Egypt, and southern Italy. It can be done, and we believe our technology can do it. We’ve done it in Israel, and we can do it throughout the continent.” Malaria is a huge burden on health systems. “The cost in human lives is immense, as it mostly threatens pregnant women and children under five. We could save tens of thousands of people in the region. Malaria exacts a heavy economic toll as well. It’s estimated a country’s GDP [gross domestic product] is lowered by more than 10% every year due to the impact of malaria. Eradicating the disease can be a huge boon to people’s lives, healthcare, and wealth. “We seek to do the most good wherever we can. It just so happens that 95% of deaths from malaria occur



in sub-Saharan Africa, that’s why we’re here. We’ll use the XPRIZE to expand our operations worldwide. We have a pilot project ongoing in São Tomé and Príncipe to show that malaria can be eradicated in an African, tropical environment. We’re also seeking partnerships with governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and health agencies worldwide for more pilots, and these funds will make it possible.” While the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions organisation may protest against an Israeli company working in Africa, Ben Aharon says, “In Judaism, there’s a concept of *pikuach nefesh* (the sanctity of human life) which can cancel even something as strict as Shabbat. Without getting into the politics of this, the idea that making a political point is more important than human lives is something even most people who dislike Israel’s policies would have a hard time

committing to. We’re here to save lives, we can argue about politics after we eradicate malaria.” Asked when we’ll see the impact of this technology in Southern Africa, he says, “At the end of the day, we’re a technology company. We provide a service and a software solution for local partners. We depend on the government or local NGOs to work with us to implement our solution. We would absolutely love to work in South Africa if we had the right partner. Over the past few years, we’ve been working with Robbie Brozin, the visionary behind Goodbye Malaria, and exploring projects in the region.” Goodbye Malaria is a social-benefit organisation and an African-run initiative founded by Brozin and other African entrepreneurs. It facilitates public-private partnerships, bringing together the private sector, the governments of Mozambique, Eswatini, and South Africa, as well as The Global Fund, while supporting malaria elimination programmes. “We hope to bring Zzapp Malaria to South Africa specifically and Southern Africa in general very soon,” says Ben Aharon.





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# ‘Checkmate’ as chess table returns to Jewish hands

TALI FEINBERG

“At this Jewish table, the murders of our families were planned,” says activist Grant Gochin, who has campaigned relentlessly for Lithuania to acknowledge its role in the Holocaust. “The table was stolen from a Jewish family by murderers and thieves and the main murderer is Lithuania’s national hero. SS officers played chess at this table. After 80 years, it’s back in Jewish hands.”

Gochin, who is an ex-South African and lives in California, bought the table from the descendants of Jonas Noreika, a notorious Nazi collaborator who played a major role in the annihilation of Lithuanian Jewry. Noreika worked in the *shtetls* where many South African Jewish families come from. They were at the mercy of his cruelty, which he exercised with brutality and efficiency. There were almost no survivors.

Gochin says that when the table was finally in his possession, he wanted to cry. “It’s a simple chess table, but it acknowledges and memorialises the Jewish families taken away from us. It shows that the wheels of justice turn slowly, but they do turn.”

Announcing the news on Facebook that he had bought the table, Gochin wrote, “This chess table was owned

by Leibas and Rocha Orlanskis. It was in their home on Vaizganto 11, in Plunge, Lithuania. The Jews were thrown out of their homes and all possessions were stolen by Lithuanians. The genocidal Lithuanian murderer, Jonas Noreika, took possession of this house and acquired the furnishings in 1941, including this chess table. He played chess on this table with his SS buddies.

“The murders of countless Jews were discussed at this table, including presumably those of my own relatives. Eighty years since this table was stolen from its Jewish owners, I have now purchased it back from relatives of the Noreika family. It now belongs to me. The table will go to a museum where its story can be told, as an artefact of genocide. Life is an extraordinary journey. I’m profoundly moved by the circle of history.”

Gochin told the *SA Jewish Report* that the Orlanskis had been a prominent Jewish family whose home was opposite the town’s shul.

The house was callously taken by Noreika and his family, where he also stole all of their possessions. Importantly, his ownership of the table and takeover of the Jewish house places him firmly at the site of the



annihilation of Plunge’s Jews. He was just one of many Lithuanians who took Jewish homes and property. From the house, he had a front row seat to the Jews being

imprisoned in their own synagogue in horrific conditions before being taken to their deaths.

“I’m angry that they murdered our families but are still using their possessions,” he says. “We have nothing tangible from the victims. They were murdered and their property was plundered. Lithuanians took over their houses and held auctions to sell their possessions, pocketing the proceeds. Who knows how many Jewish items remain in Lithuania? The country has never come clean about the scale of atrocity and robbery.”

The Orlanskis may have escaped to Siberia and survived the Shoah, but most of Plunge’s residents weren’t so lucky. They were murdered in mass graves in a forest outside the town in late June and July of 1941 – exactly 80 years ago.

“Noreika took the table with him as he moved a number of times. He was apparently a great chess player, and it was a prized possession. He wasn’t just a murderer, but a thief,” says Gochin.

In her book *The Nazi’s Granddaughter*, which exposes Noreika’s heinous deeds, his

granddaughter, Sylvia Foti, writes about how she first came across the chess table when researching his life in Lithuania. Relatives “recalled the fine furniture [at the house in Plunge], especially a round table engraved with a chess pattern”. She was told that “uncle Jonas loved to play chess. Everyone who visited admired that chess table and the handsome chess pieces sitting on top.” She goes on to describe her horror at finding out that he took over the house of Jews right by the shul where they were imprisoned.

“Yes, it’s ironic that the table is now in the possession of a Jew,” says Gochin. “It shows how history has been inverted, and Lithuania honours its murderers as national heroes.”

While we can never bring our families back, Gochin wanted to turn the tide of history and own the table as a symbol of what was lost, and stand up to Lithuania’s Holocaust denial. “Noreika still has relatives in Lithuania who were in possession of this table. I had a local friend go in and offer in excess of the value of the table.”

He did it “because this table is evidence of a crime, and evidence needs to be preserved. It’s now in a safe place [in Lithuania]. I’m looking for a final custodian that will protect it from anyone who wouldn’t want it to exist.” He says it’s unlikely he will transport it all the way to South Africa, but he would consider a museum or educational institution in Lithuania “to teach Lithuanians what their grandparents did”, or in the United States (US).

For him, it’s a bittersweet moment of victory in a long and thankless fight. “At the end of the day, it’s evidence. They [Lithuania] have lied so much, that the most miniscule piece of evidence is a victory. The table represents how even the most simple of things were stolen. The plunder and rape was so complete, that this one tangible piece allows us to identify history. So yes, it’s a victory – against the Lithuanians that did the murdering, and against today’s Lithuanians that deny these crimes.”

While he has allowed himself a triumphant moment, his battle is far from over. Gochin has spent the past 25 years documenting and restoring signs of Jewish life in Lithuania. He has restored more than 50 abandoned and neglected Jewish cemeteries, and has written a book about his family’s history in Lithuania. He works tirelessly to expose Holocaust revisionism within the Lithuanian government.

It entails spending countless hours combating fake news in all spheres, lobbying governments and institutions, writing hard-hitting opinion pieces, giving talks, and shining a light on Lithuania’s Holocaust crimes wherever he can. He has made such a nuisance of himself, he doubts he will ever be allowed back into Lithuania. It’s therefore unlikely that he will see and touch the table in person unless he brings it to the US.

However, he remains focused, dedicated and motivated. “Think of your grandparents being victimised that way. When it’s your family, you can’t stop. You can’t stand by. I’m not able to.”

## Putin holds up Israel as a model of unity

CNAAN LIPSHIZ – JTA

Vladimir Putin clearly likes to talk about Jews and Israel. This time, he suggested that Israel offered a good model for his designs on Ukraine.

The Russian president’s previous remarks about Jews include the joke he told at a panel on energy in 2017 about a smartass Israeli soldier who was quizzed by his commander on how to engage multiple enemies. The soldier’s advice: send more troops.

In 2019, hearing about the financial challenges of a rabbi in Crimea, Putin joked, “So the Jews have problems with finances!” Then he told the rabbi, “*Todah rabah* [thank you very much].”

But Putin’s latest take, which came during a television appearance on 29 June, went quite a bit further, affording rare

insight into how he thinks about the Jewish people. Essentially, he suggested that Slavic people take their cue from Israelis, and unite as one people in spite of different ethnicities, origins, and maternal languages.

In his annual live question-and-answer session cum news conference, Putin was asked why Russia hadn’t formally classified Ukraine as a hostile country in spite of the low-intensity war between the two countries since 2014.

“Because I don’t think that the Ukrainian people are unfriendly

people to us,” the Russian leader replied, pointing out that Ukrainians and Russians “are generally one people”.

Putin went on to offer Israel as a model. “Look, Jews come to Israel from Africa, from Europe, from other countries of the world. Africans are black, yeah? People come from Europe – they

speak Yiddish, not Hebrew. They seem to be unlike each other, but all the same, the Jewish people value their unity,” he said.

Putin has had strong emotional ties with Russian Jews that have been reflected in a series of favourable policies. Under Putin, the authorities have cracked down on antisemitic hate crimes, and Jewish communities have received the equivalent of millions of dollars in restitution for properties confiscated by the communists, helping to fuel a cultural and religious revival.

The earliest of those contacts was with a Jewish family who lived in his family’s apartment block in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. They helped take care of Putin as a boy with his parents working long days.

“They were observant Jews who didn’t work on Saturdays, and the man would study the Bible and Talmud all day long,” Putin wrote in one of his biographies. “Once, I even asked him what he was muttering. He explained to me what this book was, and I was immediately interested.”

Another influential Jewish figure for Putin was his wrestling coach, Anatoly Rakhlin, who sparked the young Putin’s interest in sports and got him off the rough streets of Leningrad, where Putin would get into fights while his parents worked. At Rakhlin’s funeral in 2013, Putin reportedly was overcome by emotion, and ditched his security detail to take a short, solitary

walk.

In 2014, during a visit to Israel, he met his former German teacher, Mina Yuditskaya Berliner, another influential figure in his life because she gave him the language skills that later helped him climb the ranks of the KGB (Committee for State Security). They had a two-hour chat in her rented apartment. Afterward, he bought the place for her. Berliner left Putin the apartment in her will, and it was returned to him after she died in 2018.

Russia’s two main Jewish communal organisations see Putin as a friendly force for Russian Jews. At the same time, tens of thousands of Russian Jews began leaving in recent years as Putin tightened his grip on the Russian media, courts, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, other minorities, and what little remains of freedom of expression.

As for the Israel comparison, Ukrainians tend not to agree that “Ukrainians and Russians are a single people.” One pro-democracy Kyiv news site called Putin a “broken record” on the topic.



Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks at the Fifth World Holocaust Forum at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum in Jerusalem on 23 January 2020

Photo: Yonatan Sindel/Flash90

Putin has had strong emotional ties with Russian Jews that have been reflected in a series of favourable policies.



# A good day for an argument

My parents were married for 55 years, and I’m certain that not one of the 20 075 days that they were together was a day without argument. So intrinsic this was to their relationship, one of the main reasons that my father forced my mother to go for medical tests that would discover that she was ill was the fact that she wasn’t fighting with him nearly as much as she should have been. Agreement with him meant that something was seriously wrong.

Meals in our home were never the candle-lit kind. Discussions were never settled with, “to each their own” and a “please pass the salt”. My father would remain unsettled until he was summoned into the kitchen for a dressing down (that we all could hear), after which he would return, somewhat sheepish, but content nevertheless.

I come from a long tradition of robust debate. As Jews, we all do. We interpret, we argue, we “prove”, and we extrapolate. The Talmud isn’t a law book. It was an attempt to “settle” the Mishna, but in fact has allowed us to continue to wrestle with the concepts that ultimately define who we are. Maimonides, while living in Egypt, wrote and published the *Mishneh Torah*, which was an attempt to combine religious law and philosophy and serve as a code of laws that teaches as well as prescribes conduct. As magnificent as the work was and is, initially it encountered tremendous backlash, not because of inaccuracy but simply because it had the potential to shut down debate. A sign of terminal illness.

Criticism can be an important, albeit painful, part of growth. The ability to take on board relevant comments while rejecting those which are not is a challenging but ultimately critical

## INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



factor in our development.

Which is why I’m perplexed by the mounting pressure not to criticise, not to debate, and not to “undermine” when it comes to the government, the handling of the COVID-19 crises, and the vaccine rollout. In the past week, there has been increasing criticism, not of the issues but of criticism itself.

I know the pressure I have come under not to “rock the boat”, to “be grateful”, and not to “undermine” the government’s efforts. I have been labelled as attention seeking and scurrilous, amongst other things, because I have done so. And whereas, given my family background, it takes more than a few barbs to offend me, it nevertheless does perplex me. Comment, criticism, and debate are important. There will be times when I will get it right, sometimes only partially so, and sometimes I will get it wrong. But I won’t stop commenting because it makes anyone uncomfortable.

I’m certain that I’m not the only one facing pressure to be silent. And I’m certain that buckling to this pressure won’t serve us. Not as a country, community, or personally.

Social media might have confused argument with insult. And whereas there’s very little justification for disrespect, there’s almost no argument for silence and blanket acquiescence.

That’s our legacy. And it’s one worth defending.

## A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

# Passing of a heroic generation



## ABOVE BOARD

Shaun Zagnoev

Although apartheid was designed to entrench white power and privilege in the country, a substantial minority of those who fought the system were themselves white and of those, a strikingly high proportion came from the Jewish community. It resulted in a good deal of suspicion and hostility towards Jews from the National Party regime, and indeed, it remains a persistent source of antisemitic sentiment in right-wing white circles to this day.

Today, only a handful of “struggle” veterans are still amongst us from the critical early post-war decades – in retrospect the building blocks of what became South Africa’s new, non-racial, democratic order in 1994. This week, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) paid tribute to one of the last of these veterans, Norman Levy, who died in Cape Town at the age of 91.

Together with his twin brother, Leon, (who the SAJBD honoured a few years ago with the Rabbi Cyril and Ann Harris Human Rights Award), Norman became involved in anti-apartheid activism from an early age and went on to play an active role in such pivotal events as the Defiance Campaign, the Congress of the People, the founding of the South African Congress of Democrats, and the Treason Trial. He was subsequently imprisoned for three years under the Suppression of Communism Act and afterwards, went into exile. Following his return to South Africa in the 1990s, he was involved in various post-apartheid nation building initiatives before his eventual retirement.

In taking a stand against injustice and being prepared to pay the high price for doing so,

Norman and those like him set an example that all South Africans today can learn from. That so many of those activists came from the ranks of our own community is something that can inspire us to continue to safeguard the legacy they left us.

## COVID-19 updates, guidelines, and advice

Distinguished virologist Professor Barry Schoub is among those who, from the outset, have been at the forefront of educating and guiding our community in facing up to the COVID-19 pandemic. From 14 July, Schoub (who is also the chairperson of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 vaccines) will be presenting the latest data on the pandemic, analysing, explaining, and talking people through the latest figures as well as answering any questions our community may have.

This is part of the SAJBD’s information campaign to help the community negotiate the copious, complex, and ever-growing body of information out there. As with previous such campaigns run by the Board, the details can be found on our Facebook site and website ([www.sajbd.org](http://www.sajbd.org)). Those who have questions or need advice can email the Board on [sajbd@sajbd.org](mailto:sajbd@sajbd.org).

• 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

## A column of Yad Aharon & Michael

# Tell us about those in need

School teachers are an exceptionally trustworthy source of information when it comes to the children in their charge, and a call recently made to me proves this point.

The concerned teacher of a child in her class and her older brother witnessed the children coming to school with just a slice of bread and, occasionally, a piece of fruit to last the entire school day. The teacher reached out to find out if Yad Aharon could step in to remedy the problem.

The single mother of two was going through a painful divorce. As a result of COVID-19, her salary had been halved, which made it impossible for her to feed her children adequately. When the teacher approached her, she agreed to receive help from Yad Aharon. She watched in disbelief as her first fresh-produce food parcel was loaded into her car, together with a kiddies school lunch box (Ohr Natanel) filled with treats. At this point, she could no longer hold back her tears.

In addition, she and her children loved the nutritious meal from the soup kitchen. Last but not least, they were taken to Pre-Loved by Yad, where they could choose warm clothing.

A short while later, the teacher called Yad Aharon to report on the difference in the general well-being of these children. They came to school warmly dressed, were much more active on the playground and,



whereas they previously sat on the sidelines during break, they now also had lunch treats to enjoy with their peers.

It didn’t take this mom long to develop a sense of belonging to the Yaddies family. “The tears I shed at our first meeting were tears of relief that I would no longer travel this road alone. I’m so grateful to my daughter’s teacher for introducing me to this unbelievable organisation, which has embraced my family and answered our prayers,” she said.

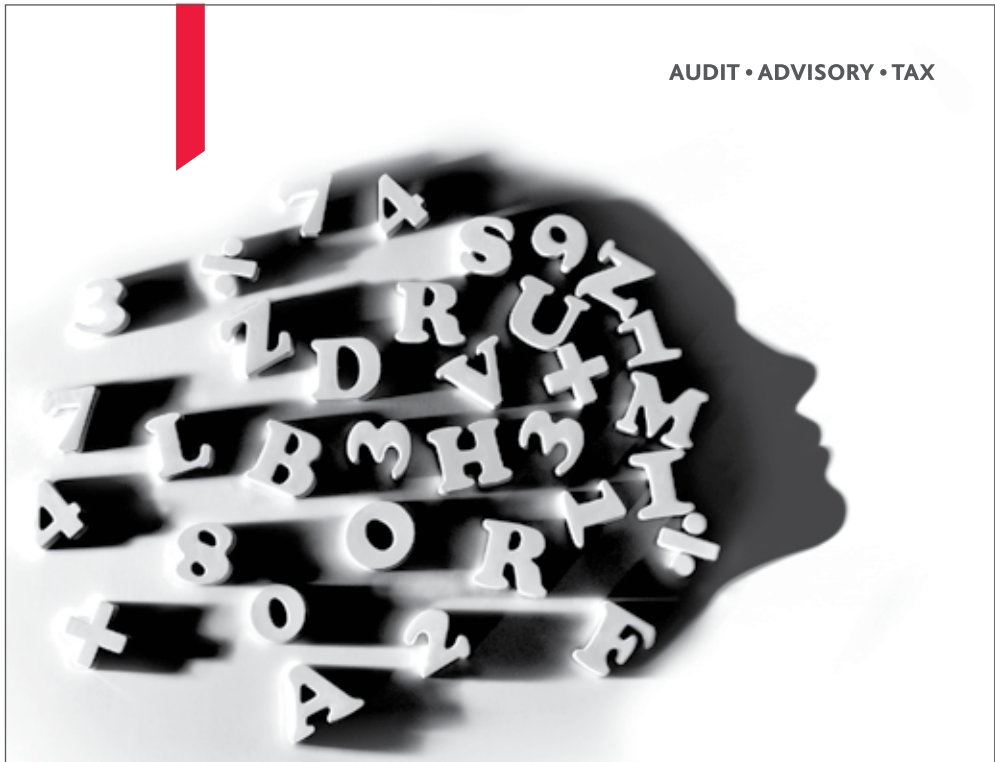
Until a few years ago, the number of families receiving

food assistance from Yad Aharon was such that Yad could rely on its own knowledge of the needs of existing beneficiaries and new applicants. However, the longstanding economic crisis exacerbated by the devastating effects of COVID-19 has resulted in unprecedented growth in need to the point that Yad now relies on community members to share important information about any family who may require food assistance.

I find this spirit of working together to address hunger empowering and effective, and it brings to our attention desperate families who may have otherwise fallen through the cracks. You are our eyes in the community, and we need your assistance more than ever in our joint endeavour to follow the Torah principle, “When you save a life, you save a world!”

This column is paid for by Yad Aharon & Michael Food Fund

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## Letters

## FOREIGN CITIZENSHIP A WAY FOR DESCENDANTS TO CLAIM DUE BENEFITS

In response to Choni Davidowitz's letter, "Why seek citizenship of murderous Lithuania" (*SA Jewish Report* 18 June 2021), both my parents were fortunate to have narrowly escaped the clutches of Hitler, and managed to build a modest life for themselves in South Africa, bereft of their loving family consumed in the fires of the Holocaust.

I grew up with a strong admonition from my parents never to buy German goods or befriend the German girl in my class. One day, my mother received an invitation from the mayor of Weiden, Germany, her home town, inviting her back for a holiday, all expenses paid. She tore up the letter.

Although they both became naturalised South African citizens, they still retained their German citizenship and diligently made the annual visit to the German consulate in Johannesburg and then Pretoria to ensure that their papers remained updated. For them, it meant that they were able to claim restitution (*wiedergutmachen*) and with this money, they were able to live comfortably and see out their latter years free from any economic angst.

It also enabled myself, my children, and grandchildren to obtain German/European Union passports, which subsequently allowed my son and his family to relocate to England in order to obtain the best medical treatment for their son.

This wasn't available in South Africa.

Nothing can make up for the six million Jews whose lives were brutally cut short and the unspeakable horrors perpetrated on the victims, but the survivors and descendants are now able to reclaim what was rightfully theirs – Lithuanian or German citizenship – and by so doing, realise benefits long overdue.

The only way to keep this reprehensible part of history alive is by educating the world and particularly its youth by way of educational programmes, visits to museums, and journeys to the scant remains of a vanished world.

**- Marion Bloch, Johannesburg**

## Mental-health programme helps KDVP pupils and staff cope

In response to increasing anxiety about safety as a result of rising COVID-19 infection levels, King David Victory Park Primary School recently engaged in a mental health awareness programme to help pupils, staff, and parents brave the storm.

"The campaign focused on pupils, staff, and parents being mindful, relating, exercising, having self-compassion, and being grateful for the ability to cope with the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic," said a representative.

"Some want to hide away from all the bad, and others are active and fearless, ready to help and make a difference."

Everyone mobilises their fight or flight response differently. High threat in the environment connects us to feelings of imminent threat going back to our early lives, associated with persecution and the fragmentation of self.

"We would like to salute our educators and pupils who are being vulnerable, self-compassionate, finding meaning, embracing the suffering, and connecting through the shared humanity of the pandemic experience. It helps to note that the world will eventually return to normal, and this isn't forever. In the meantime, just keep doing your best!"



### Grade 6 pupil Jamie Balkin takes part in KDVP Primary School's mental health awareness programme

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