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COVID-19 deaths in decline, but community still on alert

TALI FEINBERG

The Jewish community in Johannesburg has experienced a dramatic drop in COVID-19 deaths since the surge in July. “So far in September, we have only had two COVID-19 deaths in Johannesburg, and we are seeing no excess deaths compared to the past five years,” says Chevrah Kadisha (The Chev) Chief Executive Saul Tomson.

“The reported sharp drop in deaths due to COVID-19 in the Jewish community is indeed good news,” says Barry Schoub, the founder of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) and professor emeritus of virology at the University of the Witwatersrand. “It parallels the positive trends indicating that the current COVID-19 epidemic is declining [in South Africa]. So, for example, the daily increase in cases has dropped markedly from 5.37 during lockdown level 5, to 0.11 at present in lockdown level 1.

“In the general population, the daily mortality rate has similarly dropped steeply from a high of 572 on 22 July, down to 114 on 1 September, and now 39 on 21 September, according to the COVID-19 South Africa dashboard,” says Schoub.

At the peak of the pandemic in South Africa, the South African Jewish community had one of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the world, possibly due to our ageing community. “In July, there were sadly 48 COVID-19 deaths in the Johannesburg Jewish community, and total deaths for July were

Kadisha residential facilities (Sandringham Gardens, Our Parents Home, Selwyn Segal, Arcadia, Sandringham Lodge, and Sandringham Square) have had no new COVID-19 infections among their nearly 1 000 residents.

Tomson says these homes are all still under strict lockdown. “We were cautious prior to the national

disease. In a number of countries, the second wave has been even more severe than the first. Israel is one such country,” says Schoub.

“The important lesson is that while the South African epidemic is certainly easing, 500 to 1 500 daily cases are still being reported,” Schoub says. “Even when it does come down to a few sporadic

director of the Community Security Organisation (CSO), Loren Raize. “In August, we monitored 15 people on the programme, and in September, so far, we have had six join, three of whom are still currently on the programme.”

Delia Kaplan, the deputy director of Cape Town’s Highlands House for the Jewish Aged, says the home had

family to visit residents in the garden under strict conditions,” he says.

In Pretoria, the Jaffa Aged Home had no cases of COVID-19 from 20 July until one resident tested positive in mid-September. She is in isolation. The home is still under lockdown.

“Visitors can come to the fence and speak to a resident from five metres away. Residents cannot leave unless for emergencies. We opened the dining room last week so that the residents could eat a *yom tov* meal together, but with screens and distance between them. They can also go to the garden. We continually reassess the situation,” says the home’s director, Mark Isaacs.

Experts warn that in spite of the promising numbers, now isn’t the time to let down our guard. “What we do while opening up as a community going forward may have an effect [on increasing infections], and there are many in our community with elevated risk of severe disease if infected with COVID-19,” says Professor Jeffrey Dorfman, extraordinary associate professor in medical virology at Stellenbosch University.

“Some precautions should be near universal. This includes continued wearing of masks in public places, particularly public indoor spaces. As much as I value public shul services, I feel that masks, social distancing, and limits on attendance should probably remain for now. Singing seems to create particular risks, and shul rules need to continue to reflect this. Personally, I have been to public prayers, but only outdoors, with no immediate plans to change that.”

Professor Lucille Blumberg, the deputy director of the NICD, agrees. “COVID-19 is still with us. We are alert for resurgence. The risk groups for severe illness and death remain the same, and these vulnerable groups and their close contacts need to ensure that they continue to be cautious. This applies to gatherings around *yom tov*. Home gatherings are of concern. While there are protocols in place in synagogues to reduce transmission, at home, people let their guard down, especially among family and friends. Care homes need to continue to take the necessary precautions.”



Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

lockdown, and now we need to remain increasingly vigilant as the national lockdown eases. The pandemic is very much ongoing, and the elderly are still very vulnerable. There is, understandably, mounting pressure from families wanting to visit and residents wanting to get out, but essentially the risk profile hasn’t changed. All the good work we have done means that the vast majority of residents haven’t contracted it, and we want to keep it that way.”

Indeed, Schoub warns, “Acute viral epidemics follow a broadly similar pattern – the epidemic curve rises fairly rapidly to reach a peak, and then falls off again over a short period of time. Importantly, the virus doesn’t disappear and will still be circulating in the population at a low, perhaps even imperceptible level.

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“The disappearance of overt cases of disease often leads to complacency and a relaxation of care to prevent infection. The inevitable consequence is the advent of the second and subsequent waves of the

an isolated incident of COVID-19 in which a resident passed away on 28 August. The home is still under lockdown, and residents can’t leave unless for medical reasons. On their return, they isolate for 14 days.

However, many restrictions within the home have been relaxed, and families can visit by appointment under strict protocols. Every visitor, including staff and contractors, has to complete digital symptom screening before entering the premises. The situation is constantly assessed, but “there is a sense of hope and renewal”, she says.

In Durban, one Jewish individual in a COVID-19 ward passed away in September, but COVID-19 wasn’t confirmed as the cause of death. In August, one Jewish person who had COVID-19 passed away, while two were unclear. Beth Shalom Aged Home Chairperson Solly Berchowitz says that one of the previously reported positive cases at the home passed away.

“We are still in lockdown with only essential resident movements. Late last week, we started allowing

“Some precautions should be near universal. This includes continued wearing of masks in public places, particularly public indoor spaces.”

110 which is a 129% increase compared to the five-year average,” says Tomson. “In August, there were 17 COVID-19 deaths in the Johannesburg Jewish community, and a 24% increase in the five-year average for the month.”

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AUTO AFRICA

Solo or in shul, plans afoot to keep spirits up on Yom Kippur

JORDAN MOSHE

“Yom Kippur is certainly going to be markedly different this year. I haven’t booked to go to shul, so I’ll be spending the time quietly at home. I don’t know how I’m going to make it uplifting. Usually I find the Kol Nidreh with the choir very uplifting, but now? Who knows?”

Glenhazel resident Sheryl Serebro’s Yom Kippur conundrum is probably experienced by a lot of us as Yom Kippur approaches. Under COVID-19, iconic experiences like *kapparot*, extensive fast-breaking meals, and moving choral performances will be conspicuously absent this year, leaving a gaping hole in the traditional *yom tov* experience for many of us.

While some shuls may be holding a service in some form, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar is going to demand no small amount of personal effort if it’s to be spent meaningfully. Nonetheless, members of our community are preparing to uplift themselves in



various ways, from song and meditation, to contemplation and reminiscence.

“Yom Kippur is going to be incredibly different this year,” says Kayla Ginsberg, a student activist. “I’m used to long meaningful *tefillot* full of song and pouring my heart out to Hashem. While I’m still lucky enough to be going to shul, many aren’t able to go or partake in their usual traditions.

“It’s suddenly up to us to forge the tools to connect, and many are feeling lost and disconnected. However, life is as good as you make it, and the same goes for your *tefillot*. You have to know Hashem is there, regardless of whether you’re standing in a beautiful shul or an empty field.”

Some are opting to go to shul with renewed appreciation, and odd though the outdoor davening experience may be, Glenhazel resident Norma Mervis is excited at the prospect. “Being outdoors is quite exhilarating for me after my experience on Rosh Hashanah,” she says. “I felt a closeness to Hashem more than ever before.”

“Corona has made me appreciate my shul and davening with the community. I don’t think

I’ll ever take for granted the opportunity to get closer to Hashem and experience davening in all its glory.”

With services shortened considerably, actuary Gregg Horwitz admits to feeling conflicted in his emotional attachment to the *yamim noraim* this year.

“In light of COVID-19, I look at Yom Kippur with a ‘just get through it’ mentality,” he says. “I’ll be attending shul services, but it’s the length and intensity of the service that often provide the distraction to enable an easy and swift fast for me. Having a shortened service means that I’ll have to endure the day with methods not yet attempted, which is unsettling to say the least. This Yom Kippur is about resilience for me.”

People who’ve opted to remain at home have also developed new ways to approach the *chag*. Among these are Temple Israel Heritage Chairperson Reeva Forman, who will be spending the day with Jonathan, David, and Bonnie (her two cats and dog).

“My dining room has become my religious space, filled with traditional prayers, songs, tears, and smiles,” says Forman. “I’ll be joining my voice with others, reaching through the ceiling and yearning to connect with Hashem.”

For copy-editor Kevin Levy and student Megan Gordon, meaningful meditation will be key to the day, while clinical psychologist Dorianne Weil looks forward to sitting with her family and having courageous conversations, acknowledging what they love and appreciate about each other.

“We will also be talking about the times we felt hurt, misunderstood, or dismissed,” she says. “We will introspect and access the hurt we have caused, and pledge to ourselves to do better, to be more mindful, and create the space to forgive ourselves and step into the new year with compassion and resolve.”

As a newly married man, chorister Gary Aberman will be spending Yom Kippur for the first time in 15 years not singing in a choir but davening with his wife at home.

“In previous years, I was in the routine of arriving at shul before everyone, doing my security shift, going to sing, driving home, watching series only to go to bed, wake up to check the time, watch series, go to shul, sing, and wait for Yom Kippur to be over and break the fast with family,” Aberman says.

“This year, I have chosen to find *kavod* in my

Continued on page 5>>

Yom Tov / Shabbat times				
25/26/27/28 September				
CL	MS	FB/CL	FE/YTE	
17:47	18:37	17:48	18:38	Johannesburg
18:27	19:20	18:29	19:21	Cape Town
17:36	18:27	17:37	18:28	Durban
17:55	18:46	17:56	18:47	Bloemfontein
17:58	18:51	18:00	18:52	Port Elizabeth
17:49	18:41	17:50	18:42	East London
CL – Candle-lighting YTE – Yom tov ends				
MS – Motsei Shabbat FB – Fast begins FE – Fast ends				

Torah Thought

Love dew, need rain

“May my words fall like rain, may my speech flow like dew.”

So goes the introduction to Moshe’s famous speech using evocative imagery. As he speaks to the Jewish people about their future and destiny, the trials that are still to come, and their ultimate return to the land after exile, we imagine this speech as cool water descending from heaven onto a parched earth.

Why dew and rain – two such similar metaphors used together? Rashi tells us that everyone loves dew – it nourishes the plants without inconveniencing anyone. You never hear people complain about “going out in such dewy weather”! But then, why rain?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein says that dew indeed nourishes without

putting anyone out, but it does so only in a minimal way. For a really good soaking, you need actual rain.

The same is true in our spiritual lives. We often hear a “short vort”, a “warm fuzzy” that makes us feel good and gives us inspiration without actually requiring much (if anything) from us. This is good – and necessary – this is dew. But it’s not rain. Rain is sitting down to study for two hours, reading the book, grappling with new concepts and what they mean, asking questions, and searching for answers. It’s far more challenging, but that’s where the real growth lies.

One of my teachers, Rabbi David Aaron, told me that “spirituality without discipline is just a hobby”. Hobbies add richness and interest to our lives, but they are rarely

our major accomplishments. If we take our spiritual lives and our relationship with Hashem seriously, we need to be willing to undergo some degree of hardship and deprivation in this pursuit.

Mark Twain once attended a speech by a famous orator. When asked afterwards, “Wasn’t that speech great?” Twain responded, “I think not. He didn’t demand anything great from us.”

Our Judaism shouldn’t be all work and no play, and endless effort without fun or inspiration. We need the dew in the Jew (forgive me!), but we need the rain too.

Shana Tova!

Rabbi Sam Thurgood,
Beit Midrash Morasha



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Grief for passing of ‘earth angel’ who worked to save lives

NICOLA MILTZ

She lived with pain for years, but this didn’t stop much-loved infant swimming instructor Rikki Kotzen, 31, from dedicating her adult life to saving lives and being everyone’s “earth angel”.

As her devastated husband Ryan, 34, buried his wife of one year hours before Rosh Hashanah last week, he thought about all she had been through and lamented that she would never get to do the things they dreamt of doing together.

In spite of hiding it well, Rikki, 31, wasn’t a well woman. She had struggled with her health for years and had overcome many bouts of serious ill health including breast cancer and Lupus, a chronic, long-term, autoimmune illness that causes inflammation and pain in many parts of the body.

Although she had spent 38 days in hospital during lockdown in June and July, news of her sudden and untimely passing last Thursday during the early hours of the morning still came as a shock.

“It was totally unexpected. She was getting better, and things were looking up,” said Ryan.

The day before she died, she had experienced a lot of pain, but towards the evening he said she felt better.

“We ate dinner, watched TV, she spoke to her friends and family, and then we kissed each other and said good night.” He said.

She didn’t wake up.

“I’m a shattered mess. She meant the world to me,” said Ryan, “Being surrounded by family and friends and reading all the beautiful messages about how she touched people’s lives has helped.”

Tributes have continued to pour in for the popular, energetic, and dedicated swimming instructor who friends this week described as an “earth angel” who would go out of her way to help others.

“Rikki would circle the earth a million times for her friends,” said Nicole Tozzi one of Rikki’s best

friends. “She had a magnetic energy that would pull you in and draw out the absolute best in you.”

“Riks didn’t have it easy growing up, but in spite of setbacks, nothing slowed her down or caused her to give up. She was a fighter and a warrior,” she said.

As a child, Tozzi said Rikki suffered a near fatal drowning incident. “Instead of remaining fearful of the water, she turned water safety into her life’s work. She vowed never to let another child be in a similar life-threatening situation if she could help it.”

Ryan said that when Rikki heard about the swimming programme in America which taught water-survival skills it was an “ah ha” moment for her.

He encouraged and helped her to set up the Infant Aquatics Academy which has taught hundreds of children water-survival skills from the age of six months up. Sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on the business. However, Rikki was looking forward to re-opening next week after Yom Kippur.

“Rikki lived to help people,” said Tozzi. “I could fill books with the amazing things she has done. When

a woman who worked with Rikki’s late mom was struggling financially, Rikki, then in her mid-twenties, financially supported her with no strings attached and nothing in return. She did it to honour her mother’s memory.”

Another close friend, Lee-Anne Levy, told the *SA Jewish Report* that Rikki organised her entire wedding.

“Rikki and I got engaged on the same day. She knew we didn’t have the means for a wedding, so she took it upon herself to plan my entire wedding from beginning to end. She even bought my wedding dress.”

“While planning her own wedding, she made sure that my husband and I had the wedding of our dreams. She thought of everything right down to the leopard-print chair covers and wedding cake.”

Levy said Rikki used her experience in event planning to involve the community, from arranging the cake to the photographer and videographer. “She even swapped swimming lessons in exchange for things. Nothing was too much for her, she wanted everything to be perfect, and it was.”

During the chaos of planning her own wedding, she rallied everyone she



Ryan and Rikki Kotzen

could, from industry suppliers to personal friends to anonymous donors for assistance, and put together the most beautiful *simcha* for the couple.

stop me from lifting her up and twirling her around on the dance floor.

“Because of our situation, we made the most of every good day. When we hit a bad health patch, we pulled together and focused on planning what we would do when she was better.”

The couple met when Rikki was in hospital after a hijacking incident several years ago which caused her Lupus to flare up. Out of boredom, she logged onto Tinder, the dating site, and hooked up with Ryan who was online.

“We went out for dinner as soon as she was discharged, and the rest, as they say, is history,” Ryan said.

He said Rikki overcame many struggles in her lifetime, having come from a broken home with financial difficulties. This and her experience as a behaviour coach enabled her to care deeply for others.

“She had the most beautiful soul, and was always putting others first,” he said.

The coupled planned to travel once Rikki’s health improved.

“She was about to qualify as a teacher of other trainers, and the plan was to spend the winter months travelling overseas training future instructors while I worked remotely.”

They dreamt of having children.

Tozzi said Rikki was her best friend.

“More than that, she was my sister by choice, my family, my confidant, my go-to girl. No one can ever replace the void she has left in my heart and in the world,” she said.

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The artist, the ConCourt judge, and RBG

PETA KROST MAUNDER

The last time retired Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs saw his dear friend, United States (US) Supreme Court Judge Ruth Bader Ginsburg was when he delivered a unique lace collar created by acclaimed South African artist Kim Lieberman at the end of 2018.

Bader Ginsburg died, aged 87, on 18 September after a long illness, and the world is mourning this political and feminist icon. Since she became the second woman ever to serve on the US Supreme Court in 1993, RBG (as she was affectionately called) has been a leading voice for gender equality, women’s interests, civil rights, and liberties.

Lieberman learnt about RBG in July 2018 and was taken with all that she stood for. Once she realised that the US judge collected and wore lace collars, she was determined to make one for her.

Lieberman described RBG as having challenged and transformed gender-based laws and perceptions for decades. “She must have been pivotal at the start of the feminist era,” said Lieberman “She continued to press issues of that nature. People celebrate her integrity and her stance, and what must be the dignified yet fierce way she had to uphold and place her value system.”

Lieberman contacted Sachs as soon as she could because she knew he was a close friend of RBG.

“I emailed him [in August 2018] about my idea, asking him if he had a route to get the lace collar to her. He said he would gladly take it to her himself if I could make it by November, as he was going to Washington DC then,” said Lieberman. She made it and delivered it to Sachs in Cape Town, and he personally took it to the already ailing US judge.

Sachs had been friends with RBG for about 20 years at the time, having met her at the US Supreme Court when gathering ideas for building the Constitutional Court in South Africa. After being introduced to her and invited to her chambers, visiting her became a “must-do” whenever he was in Washington DC.

RBG and her late husband, Marty, then came to visit Sachs in South Africa to see the Constitutional Court about 10 to 15 years ago. “She adored our court, loving the warmth and friendliness of the building,” he said. Her delight in the court Sachs was so involved in developing was his all-time favourite memory of her.

Because of him, RBG went on to write the foreword for *Art and Justice*, a book on the art collection of the Constitutional Court of South Africa. It turns out that an artwork of Lieberman was featured in the book.

When Sachs took Lieberman’s collar to RBG, he recalls having to wait a while to see her because, in spite of her ailing health, she was working out with her trainer. He smiles at the memory of how RBG

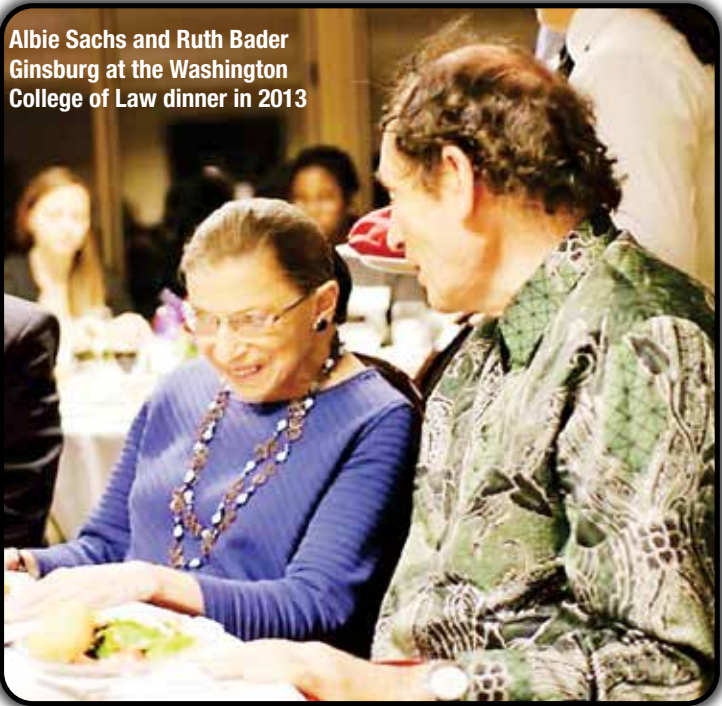
“looked like this tiny person who would be blown away by the wind, but she had a vice-like grip and was incredibly strong”.

He recalls her opening the box with the collar in it, and her eyes lighting up. “She gasped, literally gasped. She said she was thrilled, and felt and touched the collar, and put it back on the soft, dark cushion and said, ‘Albie, I can’t wear this, it’s a work of art. I’m going to rather frame it’.”

Sachs told the *SA Jewish Report* this week, “Ruth was very careful that we shouldn’t take photographs of her wearing the lace collar as she didn’t want her station to be involved in anything commercial as in to promote Kim’s work.”

However, he said he was “so happy” to take the collar to RBG because he knew that Lieberman had created it for her out of deep respect for all she stood for. Also, he said, it was no coincidence that Lieberman was working in lace, and RBG was interested in lace collars. It made sense to him that she would want to give her this gift.

For Lieberman, the mission that connected her to RBG began in a mud bath on the Italian island of Vulcano. “I was chatting to an American woman I’d just met, and I mentioned



Albie Sachs and Ruth Bader Ginsburg at the Washington College of Law dinner in 2013

that I make conceptual art and lace,” recalled Lieberman. “She asked if I’d heard of Judge Ginsburg. She told me that she wears lace collars to make political, feminist statements. You can just imagine the shivers I had. So many of the concepts she spoke of I embed in my lace works. I knew I had to make RBG a lace collar. I immediately also knew how it would look,

and the concepts it would convey – the same concepts with which she imbues her own collars.”

Early on as a judge, RBG decided that as her male counterparts wore ties, she would wear feminine collars as a feminist stand. But feminism was only one part of this complex and fascinating woman, who also loved art and opera.

Sachs described his late friend as “very solid, grounded, firm, and decent” about being a judge, a woman, and a dear friend. “She had an extremely sharp mind, quick but not witty and smartass – that wasn’t her style.

“She had a deep and profound sense of justice, being there to protect the vulnerable. So, although she became famous as a feminist legal advocate and strategist, which was central to her work, it didn’t stop her from engaging in other areas where people were being unfairly treated by the law.”

RBG recognised that people thought she offered a different vision of the world to that of Donald Trump, Sachs said. However, she “lacked bravado, and instead was thoughtful and modest and very determined to do what was right”.

COVID-19 could decimate communities, warns WZO official

TALI FEINBERG

As Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman ends her decade-long term as head of department of diaspora affairs at the World Zionist Organization (WZO) in October, she is more determined than ever that Jews across the religious and political spectrum are respected and represented in their communities and in Israel, and that they have a strong connection to the Jewish state.

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* during Israel’s hard lockdown, she says this is even more important in the light of recent events. She is deeply concerned about the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and its financial fallout will have on diaspora Jewish communities for generations to come. Describing the scenario as a possible “catastrophe”, she predicts that young families with now limited resources will choose to forgo expensive Jewish education for their children in order to make ends meet.

They also might choose not to belong to a shul if they can’t pay membership fees. These decisions will have long-term effects for generations to come, as their children grow up without a Jewish identity. This in turn may have an impact on the sustainability of communities.

“The seeds are being planted now. We will see the fruits only in 20 to 30 years. Leaders must reconsider what they do in the near future not to lose these young families,” she says.

Having visited South Africa a number of times, Yehoshua-Braverman says she greatly admires the community and loves visiting our shores. She is especially impressed with the work of the South African Zionist Federation and the South African Friends of Israel in building a relationship with South Africans who aren’t Jewish but care deeply for Israel.

“This is amazing in my eyes. To see people who aren’t Jewish embrace Israel is really inspiring. It’s not something to be taken for granted, and I can see how much effort is put into this.”

However, she was very surprised to see that the Orthodox and Progressive communities here don’t mix, and that Progressive Jews are often excluded from communal events and Jewish school campuses.

“We need to be more inclusive, more respectful, and more tolerant. I was surprised and disappointed, and would like to see Orthodox events and environments opening up to include others. Every Jew is entitled to his or her own political opinions and religious beliefs, and should have a voice. I’m against blurring differences. The Torah has many faces, and we should embrace it. I would say the same if it was the Progressive excluding the Orthodox.



Gusti Yehoshua-Braverman

It’s not enough to say, ‘We are against discrimination’, and then in our own communities exclude others.”

In turn, she has campaigned tirelessly for Progressive Jews to be acknowledged and represented in the Jewish state, especially the rights of Progressive Jews to have space to pray at the Kotel.

“The Kotel issue isn’t only about a place to pray, it’s a symbol of these Jews not being respected by the state,” she says.

“The Kotel is wide enough, and a compromise was made, but it was rejected by the state. Meanwhile Reform and Progressive Jews around the world are donating to Israel and advocating for it. They give money for universities and hospitals. They see Israel as their homeland, but Israel looks at them as foreigners. I think the state of Israel didn’t realise the damage it caused between Israel and the diaspora around the decisions regarding the Kotel.”

A week after the historic signing of the Abraham Accords and a few days into Israel’s lockdown, Yehoshua-Braverman says that Israelis across the spectrum saw the peace agreement as a moment of joy. However, she describes a deep feeling of mistrust in the government, which went from championing annexation one minute, to casting it aside the next in favour of the peace agreement. Annexation was extremely difficult for diaspora communities to accept, and she is relieved that it has been put aside. But this approach of changing policy at a whim has been carried through to decisions about the lockdown, and she says many Israelis see these changes as prioritising politics over the health of the people.

She hopes that the Abraham Accords will eventually lead to peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and that the Palestinian leadership will realise it “takes two to tango” and choose to soften its hard-line stance on negotiations.

She is critical of the Jewish Nation State Law declaring that Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people, passed by the Knesset two years ago, and emphasises, “Israel should be a Jewish state, there is no doubt about that, and it needs to remain democratic. We must act according to Jewish values, and respect minorities.”

The challenge of young people feeling distanced from Israel continues to grow. Asked how to combat this, she says, “Step by step. We need dialogue, not preaching. There is so much disinformation. Many young people mix the politics of the Israel government with what Israel stands for. Israel isn’t just its government, it’s so many other things. This is what we need to show. At the same time, large numbers of young people in the diaspora refuse to give up on their connection with Israel.”

No matter what Yehoshua-Braverman chooses to do next, she says, “I see myself as having an obligation to serve the Jewish people and to protect the rights of each one, within the diaspora and in Israel.”

Avinu Malkeinu singing sensation has SA roots

TALI FEINBERG

A six-year-old boy singing an English and Hebrew version of *Avinu Malkeinu* with passion and gusto has gone viral around the world. This story, however, begins in Durban and Cape Town, where his mother, Nina Shapiro, grew up and raised her adopted sons before emigrating to Perth, Australia.

The video shows Benjamin “Bibi” Shapiro singing, “I’m sorry for all I did wrong ... I’ll try to be better forever and ever ... I’ll try to be, the best that I can be ... I’ll try to do what’s right and be the best I can be,” before switching to the Hebrew words of *Avinu Malkeinu* with a spirit far beyond his years.

Even though his mother tries to keep her children off social media, the clip unintentionally went viral, and she has been interviewed internationally.

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* after Rosh Hashanah, Shapiro admitted “Interviews don’t fill me with joy, but South Africa will always be the home of our heart, and I can’t agree to speak to American and Australian publications and not ‘my own’.”

She adopted her sons as a single mom, and they attended Chabad of the West Coast’s Sinai Academy for three years before they emigrated. “I feel a close connection, it’s an amazing school, and we were all very happy there,” she said. She credits Sinai Academy and the school her son attends in Perth – Carmel School – with developing his love for Judaism.

It was never her intention for Bibi’s clip to be in the public eye. “It was a massive shock. I sent it to family and the boys’ Jewish Studies teacher at school. She taught him the song, so I thought it would give her a lot of *nachas*. She asked if she could share it with other teachers. Soon after, a friend said she saw it on another friend’s Facebook page, and asked if she should request that they take it down. I said, ‘yes please’, and thought that would be that.

“Then I got a message from a friend in Boston and another in Cape Town – it just got bigger and bigger. By the end of the day, I realised asking people to take it down wouldn’t make a difference. I was really upset. But after speaking to people I trust, I got greater clarity. I realised this was

obviously Hashem’s plan – he wants the message to reach the world in this way, and I had no choice.”

Although Perth isn’t under lockdown, Shapiro believes that a video of a Jewish boy singing with devotion and joy will give people a lot of comfort at this time. Another factor in its popularity could be that people are looking for connection while they celebrate the high holidays alone. Bibi being a person of colour could also be a factor in people wanting to know more.

“When I adopted the boys, we adopted each other. I always imagined my own biological genetically Jewish children, so what has been amazing has been to discover that their *neshomas* [souls] are Jewish – they just came to me in a different way,” Shapiro said.

In a year in which the Black Lives Matter movement has dominated headlines and many have championed the rights of black Jews, Shapiro said, “If I had to have a message for the world, it’s that Jews don’t come in a box, they do look different, and everything isn’t always as it seems.”

She hasn’t experienced any objection to her family and her children’s race. “I’ve only ever received support. I’ll never forget, I was in Durban, going to shul for the first time with Bibi, and I was terrified how people would respond. I had spoken to Rabbi Pinchas Zekry, who said I had his full support, but I was still worried. As I was walking in, another rabbi, Rabbi Mark Friedman,

came up to me and said a *brocha* over Bibi and kissed his forehead. I cried. It was profoundly supportive. It’s carried on like that.”

Shapiro always imagined she would have girls, “so when I learned that the adoption agency had matched me with a boy, I thought, ‘well he will be able to sing in shul on the *bimah*’. My mother was very musical, and I wanted to pass that on. It’s always been a dream of mine, and Bibi is musical in talent and in his *neshoma*. He’s always been connected to Jewish music. From when he was a baby, he responded to it.” In the video, one can see he’s not just reciting words, he puts his whole soul into the song.



Photo: Nina Shapiro

Benjamin ‘Bibi’ Shapiro with Choni G on a video call

Solo or in shul, plans afoot to keep spirits up on Yom Kippur

>>Continued from page 2

own home with my wife where I will be focusing on my davening and not on the time. I won’t be checking football scores or how many pages till the end. I’ll be saying thank you for everything I have right now.”

In the absence of a choir, some will fill their homes with song. Nursery school teacher Stacey Lipschitz intends to uplift her mood by singing and davening from her balcony, while Bev Goldman, the national president of the Union of Jewish Women of South Africa, and her husband, Dennis, the choirmaster of Pine Street Shul, will be conducting their own at-home service.

“Although we won’t be able to participate in the communal yizkor service, I’m already anticipating feeling even closer to my roots, feeling closer to Hashem, feeling more spiritual and more at peace with myself,” says Goldman.

“No interruptions, no interference, just the two of us surrounded by a feeling of gentle togetherness and calmness.”

Others such as the Angel Network’s Glynne Wolman and retired serviceman William Bergman


intend to spend the day in reflection with family.

“As one grows older, one seems to reflect on the past,” Bergman says. “My most cherished memory of Yom Kippur is going to and sitting in shul with my father. Unfortunately, I can’t go to shul with my family as my children and their families are in Canada, but my heart is with them.”

He recalls a time during his career as a soldier when a young rabbi doing his national service flew up with the troops in a C130 transport aircraft to Grootfontein, carrying a Torah so that he could hold a service there for the Jewish servicemen who couldn’t get home for the *chaggim*.

Bergman also recalls growing up in Bloemfontein, when the original shul used to be so full over the *chaggim* that there was an overflow into the adjacent shul hall.


“I think about that old shul being across that way from a local dairy that made the most delicious ice cream and as children, we used to *gallish* [crave] an ice cream while trying to fast. That was the main conversation, which of course made fasting worse!”



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Since the clip went viral, South African Jewish singing sensation Choni G (Choni Goldman), the brother of Sinai Academy Principal Zeesy Deren, has offered to work with Bibi in creating more music, and Shapiro has agreed.

“It’s like being invited to the queen for tea! It’s the highest compliment in the Jewish musical world. He created an acapella backing track, and when Bibi heard it, his eyes shone. The next day, they did a video call. Although Bibi is very shy, Choni was great with him, and made a video using clips of their interaction.” This has also been shared widely.

Says Goldman, “When I first saw the video, I thought ‘he’s adorable and can keep a key’. He has a huge personality, and is very talented without realising it. He sings with meaning and passion. I’m willing to nurture this if he wants to explore it further.” They may do more collaborations in the near future.

Although Bibi doesn’t understand social media and doesn’t know about the video, he knows “something is up”. People come up to him, although I tell them he doesn’t know about the video. “He knows that his singing makes me really happy, and has made a lot of other people happy. He knows that Hashem has given him this gift, and he mustn’t be shy to share it.”

Shapiro says it’s important that parents understand that any content they share of their children can go viral, even if intentions are good.

So, what’s next for the young singing sensation? “Both my boys and our rabbi’s son sang *Avinu Malkeinu* on the *bimah* on the second day of Rosh Hashanah. It was exactly what I envisioned when I heard I was getting a boy,” says Shapiro. “It’s like coming full circle. The whole congregation was crying. It was so beautiful. I would like that to continue.”



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Appreciating every day as a gift



As we head toward Yom Kippur – effectively our annual judgement day – how many of us contemplate what this means for us?

This weekend, G-d is meant to decide who will live and who will not. This is such a huge issue to contemplate, something most of us would rather avoid.

The truth is, wondering about it and ruminating over what could happen is certainly not going to achieve anything but angst and despair, which isn’t productive or even vaguely helpful.

And so, we make our apologies, asking forgiveness from those we have wronged, and contemplate how we can improve our lives.

The point, as I see it, is that every single day of our lives is a gift. This is my take-home learning from Yom Kippur this year.

Gifts are something to cherish. Yes, of course, there are those who look a proverbial gift horse in the mouth, and if their gift doesn’t measure up to their standards, they discard it or don’t appreciate it.

Most of us, though, aim to use our gifts wisely and with love.

That means appreciating every day we have, and making the most of it. It means waking up in the morning, and wondering what we can do to make this day special. What can each of us do to make the world a better place? How can we spread some happiness or enhance someone’s life?

Now, perhaps this sounds far-fetched and a bit airy fairy because who is going to remember to do this every day? Life is busy, and there is so much to worry about and do. We all have stresses and strains that keep our minds occupied and often keep us awake at night.

We all have a great deal on our plates at any given time and, while living life to the fullest may be something we contemplate on Yom Kippur, is it really doable?

I think it is. Like any habit, you need to put it in place and work on it daily until it becomes an integral part of your life.

There are many who before they go to sleep at night, write down something or three things they are grateful for from the day. Others do this on social media. Some even blog about it.

There are as many who lie awake at night with regrets, beating themselves up about things they did that they aren’t happy with. How many times every day do you say something ugly (in your head) about yourself? How many times a day do you judge or say something unkind about someone else? There are few who aren’t a little guilty of this. I can’t say I’m squeaky clean either.

We do this every day, so why can’t we make a point of waking up to do something worthwhile and positive.

For some, that may be feeding the starving or changing the world. For others, it may be making their child smile or laugh. It also may be keeping in touch with an elderly aunt and calling her regularly.

It could be making a commitment to doing charity work, or even putting money aside for charity. Perhaps just making an effort to greet people when we go about our business every day would be good.

It doesn’t have to take much – or it could take everything that you are – to make each day that much more special.

Our story on page 3 about Rikki Kotzen features a woman who gave life her all in spite of much hardship and pain. And while her life was cut short just as she was found true happiness, she still managed to live life to the full.

In her case, she was constantly reminded of her mortality. We don’t need that to appreciate what we have.

It’s so easy to be grumpy and look at all the things that are wrong in our lives. When you focus on that, you can find so much. But if you look at life as a gift, it automatically looks better. You hear the birds singing, and notice the blossoms on the trees. Somehow, even fasting on Yom Kippur seems like something to treasure and savour.

Over Rosh Hashanah, I got to see a few precious people in my life, most of whom I haven’t spent time with for ages because of lockdown. Yes, we were masked and kept a social distance, but I can’t tell you how I valued those hours of connection. That’s what happens when we are deprived of something, and then get it back.

My point is that we shouldn’t wait to be deprived of something or for something to be threatened before we value it and make the most of it.

Our lives are so precious, let’s make the most of every day we have.

I think of the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg (see page 4), who died on Rosh Hashanah, and really made the most of her wonderful life. She never seemed to let an opportunity to do something positive pass her by. She also refused to let anyone stop her from doing the right thing.

Even though her latter years brought numerous bouts of cancer, she didn’t allow that to slow her down. She just kept fighting for people’s legitimate rights.

The truth is, we don’t get to decide when our time is up, but we do get to choose what to do with the time we have. Let’s make a positive difference. Are you with me?

Shabbat Shalom and G’mar Chatima Tova!
Peta Krost Maunder
Editor

Malka Leifer’s evasion of justice - an indictment of us all

OPINION

REBBETZIN WENDY HENDLER



The ugly Malka Leifer saga began 12 years ago, when three sisters, Dassi Erlich, Ellie Sapper, and Nicole Meyer, came forward in 2008 and reported to the Adass Israel school in Melbourne that they had been sexually assaulted by the principal, Malka Leifer, over a period of seven years, from 2003 to 2008 while they were teenagers.

The school board met, and its response was to put Leifer on a plane to Israel that very night and spirit her out of the country to escape any form of justice and accountability.

Little did they suspect that these sisters wouldn’t keep quiet, and would agitate until the Canberra authorities opened a case in 2013 for her extradition from Israel to Australia to face charges of 74 counts of sexual abuse, including rape and sexual assault.

They would fight not only for themselves but for eight other students whom they knew had also suffered similar abuses but were unwilling or unable to report them.

And so began a legal saga of seven years of agony, with 71 court hearings in Israel, to finally reach the point on Monday this past week, when judges ruled that Leifer was fit to be extradited to Australia to face justice in the country where the alleged assaults were perpetrated.

Why has it taken so long for a case of this seriousness to go through the Israeli justice system? How is it possible that Leifer was able to live in freedom for a number of years before she was arrested in 2014, and for many more years after she was released?

From the outset, she successfully employed a tactic of feigning mental illness to evade extradition proceedings. This tactic worked for almost eight years. It took an undercover investigation by a detective who tracked Leifer’s daily movements and found her to be living a normal lifestyle to expose these fraudulent claims.

In 2018, she was re-arrested, with further victims from the West Bank claiming they had been abused by her during her years in Israel.

In spite of personal pleas by Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to intervene to speed up the process, the case dragged on.

Almost seven long years followed the initiation of the case against her. Can one even begin to imagine the hardship of these years for Dassi, Ellie, and Nicole, the hopes that were dashed after each hearing?

How is it that the Israeli legal system failed these victims so thoroughly? Why is it that the rights of alleged sexual predators are prioritised over those of the victims time and time again?

Three courageous sisters who were preyed on in the most horrific manner by their principal, a woman they revered and trusted, have repeatedly had to disrupt their lives to travel to Israel from Australia to attend court hearings. They have experienced disappointment and frustration more times than one can conceive of

in this never-ending story.

And yet they persevered against all odds.

They drew on support from people all around the world who have taken these brave young women into their hearts. The whole world watched, and is celebrating this decision with them. But what a struggle it has been.

And what a terrible indictment it is on the Adass Melbourne school authorities who facilitated her flight from the country and who sought to protect her from justice. It also says so much about the Israeli justice system where this circus played out.

What an indictment of then Health Minister Yaakov Litzman, who is said to have interfered in the legal process in order to have Leifer, a member of the Chassidic group to which he belongs, freed from prosecution.

How far do we still have to go until we reach a place where victims are put first, where their pain is considered, and the damage to their lives is understood and appreciated? Did the perpetrators not give up their rights over those of their innocent victims when they chose to harm them?

It’s easy to point fingers overseas when cases happen far from our shores. But are we as a community here in South Africa any different? What’s our track record in holding the perpetrators of sexual offenses liable, civilly or criminally?

I believe we fall far short of the mark. We are often desperately determined to believe in the innocence of the person we know, the person who is a respected member of the community.

We castigate the victims, calling them liars, hysterical females, people on a witch hunt, and we do our best to undermine them. Not all of us, certainly, but enough of us to make a difference.

In our minds, we all believe that victims should be protected and supported. However, when push comes to shove, as soon as the person implicated is part of our own lives or close to us in some way, we tend to want to explain away their misdeeds.

And the victims, once again, get left out in the cold.

Is it then any wonder that few victims are willing to come forward, and that perpetrators walk freely in our community, to offend again and again?

As we approach Yom Kippur, I believe that it would be a powerful act of repentance for each of us to look inwards, and ask ourselves whether we are guilty of this subconscious allegiance. Are we able, personally and practically, to demonstrate a “no tolerance” approach to abuse in our community? Don’t we owe this to those we care so much about? I believe we do.

Wishing you all a *ketiva vechatimah tova*.

• Rebbetzin Wendy Hendler is a director and co-founder of KoleinuSA, an organisation fighting abuse that provides a confidential helpline for victims. It also has an advocacy and training wing to raise awareness of child abuse and domestic violence in the community, runs workshops for primary school children to help prevent child sexual abuse, and helps organisations formulate anti-abuse policies.



Malka Leifer, right, is brought to a courtroom in Jerusalem on 27 February 2018

Photo: AP Photo/Mahmoud Hleal, File

Preamble to the Constitution “the mezuzah of the country”

NICOLA MILTZ

Successful businessman and philanthropist Robbie Brozin had never read the awe-inspiring preamble to the Constitution when he was invited to become a trustee of Constitution Hill five years ago.

When he took the time to read it properly, it changed his life. “It blew me away, I got goosebumps,” he said this week.

“I knew it was a world class Constitution, but I’m embarrassed to admit I didn’t know too much about it or about Constitution Hill,” said Brozin. He has since dedicated his time to making sure the preamble, the Constitution and what Constitution Hill stands for strike the same patriotic chords in the lives of ordinary South Africans.

“I see the preamble as the mezuzah of the country. It provides so much hope and comfort, and I’m prepared to fight for it,” said Brozin. He refers to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson’s unequivocal assurances many years ago that South African Jewry had nothing to fear, and that the country would be good for Jews until Moshiach came – and even better afterwards.

“The rebbe’s blessing and the preamble to the Constitution give me hope at a time when our community needs a positive comforting message. We really are a miracle country,” he said.

This week, coinciding with Heritage Day, an online exhibition and archive is being launched that tells the story of the making of the Constitution and Constitutional Court.

It falls under the umbrella of “We, the People”, a movement launched last week by the Constitution Hill Trust that is aimed at inspiring a global movement of active citizens working for change, united in diversity, according to Brozin. “The Constitution, as our founding document, embodies the movement’s values and principles,” he said.

The online exhibition has been spearheaded by curator



Trustee of Constitution Hill Trust Robbie Brozin meets with attorney Lwando Xaso and curator Lauren Segal at Constitution Hill

and historian Lauren Segal and legal mind Lwando Xaso, former clerk of the court under retired Constitutional Court Judge Edwin Cameron.

The ambitious project has been three years in the making, and involves a collaboration of more than 60 people. Segal and Xaso have worked tirelessly to create the interactive exhibition, which animates the Constitution to bridge the gap between its values and ideals and people’s lived reality.

The project is very close to Segal’s heart. Her time at Constitution Hill dates back 17 years, when she headed up the team that set up the heritage precinct around the new Constitutional Court and developed the prison museums. She worked closely with late Chief Justice Arthur Chaskalson, who was appointed by Nelson Mandela to be the first president of South

Africa’s new Constitutional Court.

“There are many ways to look at Heritage Day. It can be about braaivleis, it can be about people wearing traditional costumes. At this site, our heritage is the spirit that was created through the Constitution,” she said.

“Our broad vision is to ensure that the Constitution is brought alive in the minds of young and old South Africans. We do this by telling the story in a multi-format way through the voices of the story tellers involved, through young people, and through techniques like animation,” said Segal, who has co-authored several books and curated and designed the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre museum.

“We want every single school pupil in the country to come to Constitution Hill, if not physically, then virtually through our site. We want them to understand how

this country was born so they can recognise that it happened through the blood, sweat, and tears of enemies who sat across from each other at the negotiating table. This is Heritage Day for us.”

Echoing her sentiments, Xaso said, “The idea is for everyone to own this story, whether you are Jewish or Xhosa, this is your history too,” she said.

History, Xaso said, can be represented in many ways from very diverse points of view. “We have chosen to tell the story of the making and the meaning of our Constitution from the perspective of those who struggled to free South Africa and who set out to build a united country based on human dignity, equality, and freedom,” she said.

The virtual exhibition was guided by the preamble of the Constitution, calling on South Africans to “Recognise the injustices of our past; honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land; respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.”

“I’m a preamble nut,” said Brozin, “The first three words, ‘We, the People’, emphasises the country’s struggle for human rights, and calls on us to be

involved in transforming our country.

“I believe the preamble is the vision for South Africa. It’s our North Star. If we follow it, we can never stay lost. Reading it inspires confidence, pride, comfort, and security. Most importantly, it should inspire action. It demands of us to roll up our sleeves and do the work to make the vision real. I see it as the blueprint of our collective responsibility to our country, which has been born by the sacrifice of so many. We honour them by playing our part.”

The “We, the People” campaign includes a number of forthcoming creative initiatives. Last week, the remaking of musical legend Hugh Masekela’s hit piece *Thuma Mina* (Send Me) was released. It’s a musical collaboration between the Hugh Masekela Foundation and Constitution Hill involving many of South Africa’s greatest artists performing together as The Masekela All-Stars, produced at Constitution Hill.

The online exhibition, launched on Thursday, 24 September, will be a go-to site for pupils and teachers, and a portal for researchers and scholars to reach archival collections related to the Constitution.

• For more information, go to www.ourconstitution.co.za

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US presidential debate in Samson Pavilion

NICOLA MILTZ

The presence of South African steel tycoon Eric Samson and his wife Sheila will be strongly felt during the first United States presidential debate between Democratic nominee Joe Biden and United States President Donald Trump next week.

The two political opponents are set to square off for the first time on stage next week at the Sheila and Eric Samson Pavilion at the Health Education Campus of Case Western



Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio.

Samson, a South African steel tycoon, built Macsteel group, one of the country’s largest companies. He is said to have donated generously to the university which led to the building of the high tech, ultra-modern Sheila and Eric Samson Pavilion. According to reports, the gift makes the Samsons among the largest donors to the Cleveland Clinic where Eric Samson underwent successful heart surgery. Sheila is also a patient.

Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic established a new health education campus in Cleveland, Ohio. The campus opened last year, and features the 477 000-square-foot (44 314m²) Samson Pavilion. According to its website, students from the university’s schools of medicine, nursing, and dental medicine learn, study, and collaborate together on the 11-acre campus.

The presidential debate, which is scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 29 September, will be moderated by Fox News anchor Chris Wallace, and will feature 15-minute segments on six topics: the Supreme Court, COVID-19, the economy, race and policing, election integrity, and both candidates’ records.

We are one – a photographic portrait

ILAN OSSENDRYVER

When the world was sent into lockdown because of COVID-19, our religious gatherings were brought to an abrupt halt. Synagogues, mosques, churches, and temples, the broadcasters of fervent prayer and meditation, had their inner sanctuaries silenced. An eerie silence.

No more children running the corridors, the absence of sermons, and the invisibility of friends at prayer time. Places of worship are traditionally the heartbeat of the community, the soul glue to bind the community together.

As the months have passed, levels of lockdown have changed and currently, with limitations, worship is now allowed and strictly regulated prayer can refill sanctuaries of worship.

This reawakening offered the opportunity for a beautiful portrayal of people at prayer. Through my lens, I realised that no matter what religion you are, each has a mask and each is at prayer as one. We are all the same, mask or not.

The socially-distanced solitude of prayer portrays peace, and in so many ways, seems more meaningful. No distractions. More direct prayer without interference. As it has been through the millennia, prayer is the tool to reach for help, to better the world, to save a soul from corona death. To pray for an unseen enemy of the earth to go away, and never come back.

In the end, no matter what religion we believe in, we are one on this delicate earth.

• *Ilan Ossendryver is the SA Jewish Report photographer. He has been a photojournalist for more than 25 years covering international news such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Gulf War, the war in Lebanon, the Israeli Jordanian peace agreement, and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.*

Photos: Ilan Ossendryver



Less boss is more in the new world order

OPINION

RONEN AIRES



I'm a recovering control freak. Growing up as a Gen X-er, my parents and my parents' parents made sure we cut our teeth on three very simple truths: 1. hard work; 2. more hard work; and 3. leadership. The latter only happened if you worked hard though. Very hard. Like until-you-retired-due-to-exhaustion. That kind of hard.

Our generation was taught to revere great leaders, ones that held the power, the secrets, and the right to control anything in their domain. And we all wanted to be one.

But that's not the shape of the new world order. Old patterns and top-heavy structures are dissolving themselves into the abyss of chaos. There is mass disruption in our society and in our environment. We're seeing young professionals in companies disconnected and disillusioned with the current



leadership.

And if you think COVID-19 is to blame – you're wrong.

For decades, these young

people have fought against hierarchical structures that were too rigid, too slow, and far too punitive for their liking.

They were arguing for shared, collaborative, and flexible working environments pre-pre-COVID-19: a way of working that negated "the leader" and replaced it with "the tribe".

Today, with the current pace set on relentless, change as we are experiencing it is rough and it's ruthless. And if it's not calibrated, it will take you out with the trash.

COVID-19, it seems, has given rise to a sense of necessary urgency that we didn't want, but needed. How will old-school organisations survive if they're not able to adapt fast enough? They won't.

As more and more leaderless structures are mushrooming, they are proving more robust, quicker to gather, and quicker to respond to conflict, change, and inequality. Leaders need to be strong now – in a different way. They need to release control, and make it okay to be human in the workplace,

while driving their teams with inspired thinking towards greatness.

Perhaps the idea of a "leaderless" society isn't so much advocating the absence of a leader as it is the reshaping of the front-runner, with less ego, less bravado, less control. More transparency. More empathy. More creative collaboration.

This is easier said than done, of course. I've spent the past 20 years consulting to large companies on how to rewire themselves to be more relevant to the younger consumer and professional. As a company that hires young people, I've realised the extent to which I need to upgrade my own leadership style to ensure that I don't become irrelevant in my own organisation.

For those of us who are still a work in progress, just take a look at how leadership is changing at high-school level. Instead of the antiquated prefect system that celebrated

individuals, there are now self-directed committees consisting of students of various ages using design thinking principles and technology to co-create magic.

And there's a lot of heart that follows that smart, as young ones are showing us how to infuse empathy, kindness, and resilience in creating initiatives. These initiatives will not only better their schools, but their communities too.

These are the new leaders. This is the new order. And less, is the new boss.

• *Ronen Aires is the founder and chief executive of Student Village, is a thought leading pioneer of Afrillennials, and a long time scholar of the generation gap. He has spent more than two decades understanding and researching generational behaviour and statistics.*

Did the government do the right thing?

JORDAN MOSHE

South Africans have endured a tough time under the lockdown imposed by the government in March, from extended alcohol bans to crippling job losses. While the country is still reeling, many of us question whether the government did the right thing. Were the draconian measures justified? What has it achieved?

Advocate Mark Oppenheimer and philosopher Dr Jason Werbeloff grapple with these questions in their newly released book: *Lockdown: Did Government Do the Right Thing?*

They attempt to understand the consequences of lockdown by studying statistics and weighing up the ethical and moral dimensions of the government’s choices.

Says Oppenheimer, “Our aim is to use moral principles to evaluate whether the government has done the right thing.”

The project they started in April takes the form of a dialogue between the authors, avoiding burdening readers with statistically heavy and academically impenetrable material.

“We spent of a lot of time carrying out research, making sure the stats were up to date and really thinking about the problems involved in lockdown,” says Oppenheimer.

“Effectively, the government made a choice about saving lives, a decision that isn’t as straightforward as one might assume. Every choice has

consequences.

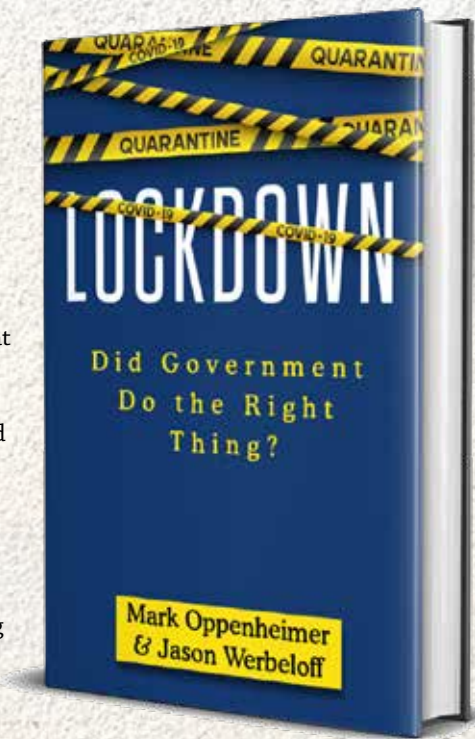
“Essentially, we believe that the government needs to be sensitive to the shifts which have taken place over time,” he says. “A strenuous lockdown may be justifiable at certain times, but if matters improve and mortality rates drop, reality demands a change of approach.

“We wanted to find out how dangerous lockdown really is, who it’s dangerous for, and who can benefit from it. Unfortunately, lockdown has become a political issue, with people picking a side and ignoring the facts which don’t suit them. We aimed to avoid that and instead piece all opinions together.”

Their findings have highlighted a number of worrying facts, among them the contraction of South Africa’s gross domestic product in the second quarter by an annualised 51%. In the long term, this could have devastating consequences for our country’s health, leaving many unable to afford medication or starving to death for lack of money for food.

“This is a toll that isn’t being exacted on Northern Europe despite its measures,” says Oppenheimer. “You can’t have a one-size-fits-all model. It’s well and good to impose a lockdown in America where a \$3 trillion (R50 trillion) bailout is possible. This will never happen in South Africa.”

Oppenheimer believes that the only legitimate grounds for a lockdown is the buying of time to ensure that the country’s healthcare system can cope with a rise in cases. Beyond that, its justification proves less compelling.



“There are four different groups of people we identified when it comes to contracting the virus. The asymptomatic; those who get it but can recover at home; those who get it and require hospitalisation; and those who, despite being hospitalised, will die in hospital because of the virus,” says

Oppenheimer.

“Lockdown saves only the third category, nobody else. It was instituted to better prepare the medical system, after which we must allow events to take their course. An indefinite lockdown aimed at eradicating the virus isn’t feasible because it comes for you when you reopen the country.

“You can’t stop the virus. All you can do is buy time and get the healthcare system ready. Waiting in lockdown until a vaccine comes around just isn’t an option for South Africa.”

Oppenheimer says this begs the question why we have allowed lockdown to persist in spite of seeing that our healthcare system is able to cope with the rise in cases. Government predictions have proven grossly inaccurate, and in spite of this being glaringly obvious, the approach used hasn’t changed.

“Lockdown hasn’t been sensitive to changing realities,” he says. “Because there was a paucity of information in February, caution seemed best, and many of us were happy to go into lockdown for three weeks. It may have been the best choice at the time.

“However, persisting with it without taking into account the change in expected mortality rate or hospital preparedness makes lockdown potentially illegitimate.”

Since the onset of lockdown,

South Africa has charged thousands of citizens for violating various restrictions, including buying cigarettes and walking their dogs. According to Oppenheimer, this suggests that the emphasis has shifted from saving lives to controlling citizens, as well as overlooking the secondary consequences of lockdown.

“Cooping people up for so long leads to social unrest,” he says. “We’re seeing it in America, and now in South Africa with the Clicks issue. If you keep people at home, they will get upset. Our economic turmoil has social consequences. Crime is escalating, and protest is on the rise.

“Further along, we may see political consequences, perhaps regime change, or at least a big dip in support from people who feel betrayed. The knock-on effect will be huge.

“We have to recognise that lockdown is a complex problem which demands deeper consideration,” Oppenheimer says. “Some decisions have been wrong, but there was good reason for them at the time. We must reflect on the government’s decisions, and ensure that the ones made in future are appropriate.”

• *Electronic copies of ‘Lockdown: Did Government Do the Right Thing?’ can be purchased at <http://smarturl.it/LockdownBook>*





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Mandy Wiener exposes the truth around whistleblowers

Renowned investigative journalist and talk-show host Mandy Wiener has written a book about the experience of whistleblowers in South Africa in the hope that it might change the law. We ask her some questions.

What inspired you to write *The Whistleblowers*?

In 2018, I had several meetings with one whistleblower about writing a book about their story. It didn’t happen then, but I was inspired by their journey and began to look at the contribution made by so many others in South Africa. The more I spoke to various whistleblowers, the more I realised that their experiences were enormously problematic and concerning, and a spotlight needed to be shone on it.

What do you want readers to take from this book?

I want people to appreciate the whistleblower experience fully, but also that it’s not always so clear-cut. Not all whistleblowers are pure, angelic, and perfect. Many are flawed, and there has to be some proximity – if not complicity – with those responsible for wrongdoing. I also want people to understand the sacrifice made by those who choose to stand up and speak the truth.

How did you research the book? What did you do, and how long did it take?

It took about a year and a half and a lot of convincing, coaxing, and earning of trust. It also took a lot of time and travel, going out to various parts of the country to sit down with various whistleblowers and listen to their stories. Some of them are incredibly complex, so it took some unpacking and untangling too.

How did you select the whistleblowers you write about?

This is by no means an exhaustive collection of whistleblowers. These are not the “best” or most obvious people. I could have included so many others. This selection is entirely subjective with no clear criteria. I just wrote about those whose stories captured my attention for some reason or another. I also wanted to include a cross section of experiences – good and bad – and from the public and private sector.

What are the common threads (other than the fact that they were all whistleblowers) between these people?

Their lives are clearly altered by their experiences in many ways. In most instances they are treated as pariahs, pushed to the fringes of society, condemned, unemployable, tainted in some way. They are damaged or suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but incredibly proud about what they have done.

Were there any surprises in your research?

I don’t think I fully comprehended the impact the experience has had on many of these individuals and how they are treated. I was surprised that they weren’t lauded, celebrated, and appreciated. Instead, they were vilified and so many of them were despondent about the outcome, which I found troubling.



Mandy Wiener

What was the most difficult part of writing the book?

The burden and responsibility of carrying individual trauma, and ensuring that it’s properly portrayed to readers was very difficult. In some of the stories, whistleblowers have been killed, and this has to be handled with sensitivity. Also, I had to ensure that those who are thinking about blowing the whistle aren’t deterred from doing so. There had to be a positive outcome and encouragement for people to come forward and expose the truth.

I imagine it takes a great deal of courage to become a whistleblower. What inspired most of these people to take this mostly life-changing risk?

In difference circumstances, it was different things. For some, it was a deep-rooted commitment to the truth and doing the right thing. For others, it was self-preservation. In some instances, it was accidental. I think there’s a spectrum of whistleblowers, from those who have enormous integrity and principle and do it out of a sense of justice to those who are pushed into a corner. On the other end, there are those who have a late change of heart, and are perhaps

motivated by ego and act to save themselves.

Some whistleblowers’ lives are devastated by their attempt to do right. For them, was it worth it?

The reaction is generally mixed. Some absolutely believe it was worth it because money has been returned to the fiscus and corruption has been exposed. The public now knows about the wrongdoing that has been exposed, and this is invaluable. In other instances, it’s not worth it because there has been no action, no justice, and no accountability. There has been a failure to do all of these things and instead, the whistleblower has paid the price.

Do you believe it’s worth it?

It’s so difficult for me to say if it’s worth it. I don’t know how I would react if I was put in that position. I like to think that I would do the right thing, but I can’t be sure I would. We have to encourage whistleblowers to come forward and expose wrong doing, so it has to be worth it. But a lot has to change if that is to happen.

What did you learn from researching and writing this book?

There has to be fundamental, systemic changes to the legislation and the framework of whistleblowing if we are going to encourage others to come forward. The current system isn’t sufficient to protect whistleblowers in a practical, real way, unfortunately. We also have to change the way society treats people who speak up. Instead of “othering” them or treating them as *impimpis* (informers) or trouble makers, they need to be placed on a pedestal, celebrated, and employed.

What impact has this particular book had on your life?

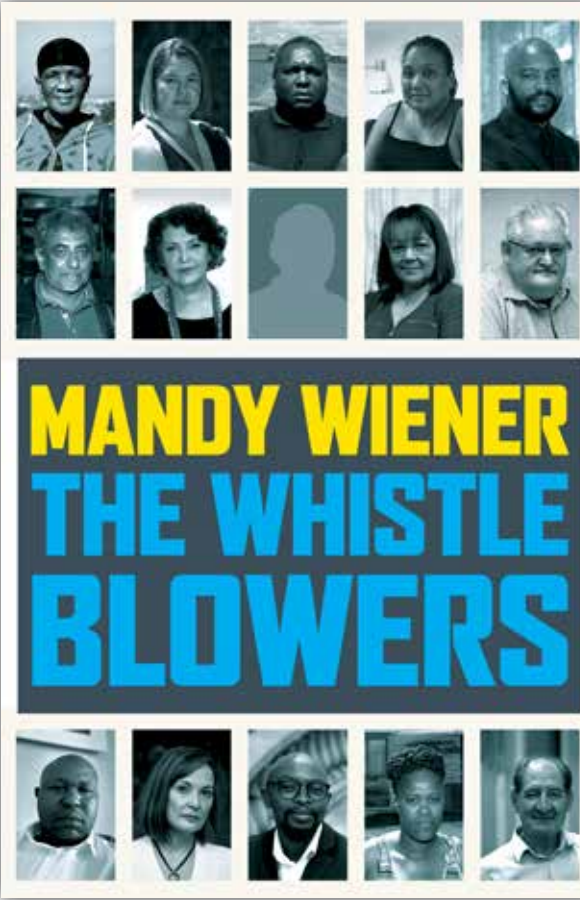
It has made me appreciate the personal sacrifices made by individuals, and I have a much better understanding of the risks people take. It has also made me reflect on how I would act if placed in such a position.

Following the release of your book, are there legal and other changes you would like initiated regarding whistleblowers?

I hope this book raises awareness about the failures of the legal system and the framework in place. I hope to use this exposure to advocate for some kind of change. There are examples of legislation in other countries that we could follow – perhaps a Section 9-type set up – an independent, government funded “whistleblower house” such as in the Netherlands, which protects whistleblowers.

Writing this book was probably a tough journey. How do you feel now it’s out, and what’s next?

It always feels like a great relief once a book is “born”. Also, a lot of this book was written during lockdown while trying to home school two kids and taking on a new job on radio. So, no new big adventures planned for a while. I’ll be concentrating on my 702 show for now.



Anton Harber

Professor Anton Harber, one of the most respected media minds in South Africa, has released his latest book, *So, For The Record*, a book said to be the most important examination of the fourth estate since apartheid. We got further details.

What inspired you to write *So, For The Record*?

It was essential to confront what happened at the *Sunday Times* when it was duped into the South African Revenue Service’s “rogue unit” saga, and other stories that aided state capture. What led our biggest newspaper and one of our most respected investigative teams down such a dangerous and destructive path? I could see that it wasn’t just a mistake, but a deep and systemic problem, and it wasn’t just a problem of one newspaper, but reflected the state of all of our journalism and news media. If we are to address these issues, we have to first understand the problem, and a deep dive into the *Sunday Times* and the Gupta Leaks stories was one way to show both the highs and lows of our journalism.

What do you want readers to take from this book?

I hope the general reader gets a better understanding of the workings of newsrooms, and an appreciation of the value and importance of good journalism as well as its limitations and flaws. I hope that journalists are pushed to re-examine their professional practices, assumptions, and prejudices. Journalism is an essential public service, but it’s in our hands to try to determine whether it does good or harm, or at least more good than harm.

How did you do your research? Where did you look, and how long did it take?

It took two years of interviews, probing, investigation, searching out documents, and recordings, reading old newspapers, and arm-twisting the reluctant into talking to me. One interview took me a year to set up, for example. And then I had to piece this mass of information into a coherent and readable narrative. The hard part is always to pick out the important and interesting material, and discard the mass of secondary detail that one has collated.

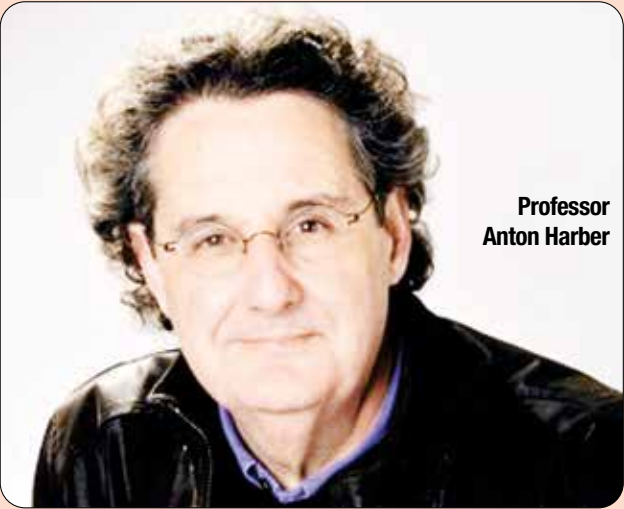
Were there any surprises that you came across, and what where they?

Too many. I didn’t expect to find myself writing about brothels, honeypots, spies, and brown envelopes. Perhaps the biggest surprise was to find out how the State Security Agency and Police Crime Intelligence were deliberately trying to mislead and play journalists for nefarious political ends – and how easily some journalists fell for it.

What was the most difficult part of writing this book?

As is so often the case in investigative work, dealing with sensitive sources is complicated and messy, particularly whistleblowers. These are people who risk their lives and livelihoods to get information out. They seldom get recognition or real protection. They are also often complicated people with, quite naturally, a high level of paranoia.

on the record about pitfalls of SA journalism



Professor
Anton Harber

Following your book, what changes would you like to see in the media?

We are going to have to find a sustainable way to fund journalism. Until we do that, we don't have enough resources and diversity to do the work, the research, the fact-checking, the probing, and all of that. First and foremost, we need to get the industry back on a healthy financial footing.

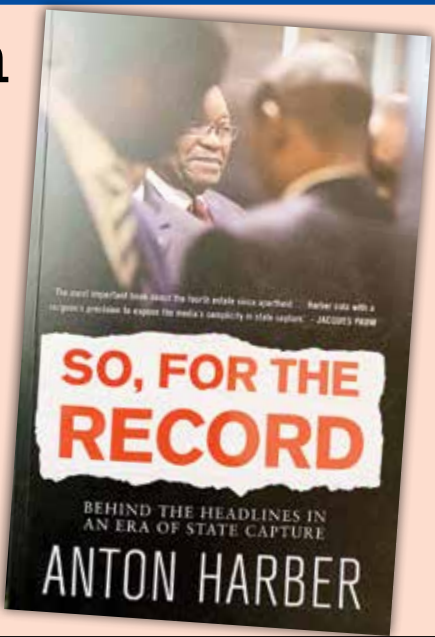
What reaction have you had so far to your book, and do you anticipate anything further?

It's early days, but I know there are a

number of people who won't like it, and will nit-pick it, eager to find my mistakes and shortcomings. But that's part of the game. I wanted to provoke discussion and debate.

Researching and writing this book was probably a tough journey. How do you feel now that it's out, and what's on the cards for you?

At the moment, I would like to be sipping a double dram of heavily-peated Islay single malt, with a touch of ice, somewhere with a beautiful view. Maybe after that I can start planning another book.



Finding out that members of our tribe (journalists) were complicit in state capture can't have been easy. What's your reaction to this?

Writing about my peers, colleagues, and friends was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it meant that I had a unique perspective as something of an insider, with 40 years in the media industry. But it also meant that I had to be prepared to lose a bunch of friends and make a new set of enemies. That's journalism, I guess.

What should the journalists/editors have done to ensure they weren't complicit?

Anyone can be duped and make mistakes, but what was shocking in each of the three cases I looked at was that the newspaper stuck with one single – and dangerous – narrative for months and even years. At the root of this was an arrogant journalistic culture, a hangover from the days when the *Sunday Times* had real power, and a failure to recognise that those days were over. They wanted simple stories of good and evil, and forgot that the people and situations they wrote about were complicated, contradictory, and sometimes both good and evil. They thought they were still the gatekeepers, and hadn't woken up to the world of social media where everyone can just walk around the gate.

What do you, as a professor in journalism and someone who has inspired many top journalists, want to say to those in the media who were entwined in state capture?

You must embrace both the scope of journalism, and its power to do good (as in Gupta Leaks), but also its limitations, flaws, and capacity to do harm. Realise how fundamentally our world as editors and reporters has changed, how much less power and authority we can assume, and how much harder we have to work to earn and keep that credibility and influence.

In the "old days", there was an unspoken code that we didn't write badly about other media/publications. That seems to have disappeared, and media houses have no qualms about attacking each other. How do you feel about that?

Good riddance, I say. Not that we need to attack each other, but we do need to hold ourselves accountable in the same way we demand it of others who wield public power. Media criticism and self-criticism aren't just a necessity to improve our work, they are a moral and political imperative. Besides, we are learning that to practice journalism transparently makes for better journalism.

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Getting tough on gett abusers

TALI FEINBERG

Getting a divorce is tough enough, but having your spouse refuse you a gett (Jewish divorce) can be torturous. This is where Go Getters – the South African Gett Network has stepped in to help.

“All the cases we work on are tragic because they always involve long-term abuse,” says Michelle Blumenau and Balu Nivison, the co-founders of the organisation. “The nature of gett refusal is abuse – one person exerting power over another. It generally involves financial abuse too.

“We most often become involved via the Beth Din. It will flag the intractable cases, and we see how we can help,” says Blumenau, pointing out that it’s unusual for gett activists to have such a good relationship with the Beth Din.

“We’re supported by a legal team and volunteers. We try to understand the refuser’s network – family, work, friends, people who can influence them,” says Nivison. “Abusers like to do so in the dark. We focus on moving what they are doing into the light – it makes them extremely uncomfortable. For instance, we might let his best friend know that he isn’t paying maintenance for his kids.”

The first case they worked on was the reason they started the organisation. “The husband had an affair with a non-Jewish woman, and left his first wife and children after it came out that he’d fathered a child with his girlfriend,” says Nivison. “He went on to father two additional children while still married.

“After their civil divorce, the man planned to marry his girlfriend while still married to his Jewish wife [according to Jewish law]. He refused to give the gett unless he was paid R2.5 million by his first wife.

“We worked relentlessly on this case with the help of the Beth Din and the Union of Jewish Women. The new couple and their three kids emigrated to the United Kingdom after the man was put in *cherem* [excommunicated] in South Africa. We pursued the husband to the UK, and worked with the Beth Din there. This case went on for years until the UK Beth Din threatened him with *cherem*. He relented and gave the gett.”

In another case, “The marriage had broken down beyond repair. Neither would move out,” Blumenau says. “For seven years, they continued living together in the most terrible circumstances. He was committing financial and other abuse. He was very adept at abusing the court process too. A trial date would be set, and he would fire his lawyers a few days before. He did that three times. The fourth time, the wife took her kids to court. The kids asked to see the judge privately and begged the judge to sort out the civil divorce immediately.

“She got her divorce that day, and the gett was included in the divorce settlement,” says Blumenau. However, in spite of being ordered to give the gett within 30 days, he refused. As this was a religious couple, Go Getters liaised with two rabbis the man was close to. “The rabbis defended him, which was extraordinary. We threatened arrest as he was in contravention of a court order, and that’s how we got

gave the gett to avoid exposure, but continued to pursue access to the children. “One of the children eventually spoke out, saying that the father had been sexually abusive.”

In its most recent case, Go Getters sent a letter to the husband’s company explaining that gett refusal is the Jewish equivalent of gender-based violence. This was just prior to level-5 lockdown. “We got the gett during level 3, with the women, dayanim, and witnesses in masks,” says Nivison.

The organisation has had four cases in which the wives refused to accept a gett, some of which are still unresolved. In one, the husband had several affairs and his wife refused the gett to prevent him from remarrying. “The case was eventually resolved after civil proceedings, as there was a significant financial incentive for her to accept the gett,” says Blumenau. “Women refusing to accept a gett is on the rise, but men refusing to give the gett is still more common.”

The case of Hermann “Hershy” Fried is by far the organisation’s toughest case. His divorce in Israel was never finalised, as he left the country in spite of a court order prohibiting him from doing so. There is a warrant for his arrest in Israel.

He has since gone from country to country, keeping his wife tied to their non-existent marriage. “Balu has a friend from Vienna where Hershy’s wife lives, and we got involved after her friend alerted her to the case,” says Blumenau.

“We put a post on Facebook to pressurise Hershy’s community in the United States to respect the Israeli *cherem*. When the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] came for him, he fled to South Africa within days of our post,” says Blumenau.

He then travelled between Cape Town and Johannesburg, always staying in the heart of the Jewish community, before leaving for Dubai, where he was barred from shul services, according to Go Getters.

“This case is still unresolved but not without tremendous effort in South Africa. Then Rosh Beth Din Rabbi Moshe Kurstag and the South African dayanim were absolutely magnificent. The last we heard, someone from St Moritz, Switzerland, told us that they wouldn’t let him join their minyan.”

Go Getters’ dream is to “go out of business”. “We live for the day that ways are found to extricate women in particular from their dead marriages. There is already a way out for men. We like to believe that where there’s a rabbinic will, there’s a halachic way,” says Nivison. “We believe that by the Orthodox world not actively seeking an acceptable solution, we add to the abuse.

Blumenau suggests that Jewish couples getting divorced should ideally secure their gett prior to their civil divorce. “If you don’t, you must highlight this for the judge, and insist that there is a clause that mentions the gett in your divorce agreement,” she says.



Balu Nivison, left, and Michelle Blumenau

that gett,” says Blumenau.

“The wife paid about R900 000 to get her divorce, which she funded via her cancer pay out. He was obligated to pay just R12 000 a month all in, and after the divorce, he left the country.”

In a third case, they supported a woman whose “well-regarded” husband was abusive. “Initially, she had no strength to even pursue a gett – she was broken and traumatised,” says Blumenau. “All her children were in psychiatric care. We saw that he was being protected within his community, whereas she had been ousted. He was withholding the gett as he wanted access to their children. She had psychological reports advising against it.

“The Beth Din asked for additional reports. We helped her explain to the rabbinic authorities that there were sufficient reports [advising] that he shouldn’t see the kids,” says Blumenau. The husband eventually

If you’re considering divorce, don’t do it now

TALI FEINBERG

As families are forced into lockdown together, the fault lines in relationships become clearer, which has increased divorce in some countries by as much as 30%. In South Africa, a number of local lawyers report the same phenomenon.

Sasha Goldstein, a family law specialist attorney at Bregman Moodley Attorneys, says, “Our firm has seen an increase of about 35% to 40% in divorce consultations. Enquiries seem to be of a much more urgent nature.

“First, lockdown has proven unbearable for many who find themselves in unhappy or abusive marriages, and second, clients have more time on their hands. Before COVID-19, for many, starting the divorce process was a low priority. Many were daunted by the process, and couldn’t find the time to research lawyers, consult, and start the divorce process.

“It suits many couples to avoid initiating the process as they live completely separate lives while married. By taking away the office and replacing it with work-from-home situations, many couples are finding themselves having to take another look at their marriage.

“If someone is truly unhappy or in an abusive relationship, they should first consult an attorney to find out their options and ‘get their ducks in a row’. Many clients, especially women, feel they are trapped in unhappy marriages due to

financial dependence on their spouse. After consulting with an attorney, they will find out they actually have more options than they thought.”

Says Goldstein, “Don’t be scared of the [divorce] process. Many clients feel a lot more at ease after the initial consultation, and actually wish they had done so sooner.”

Divorce attorney Hugh Raichlin says he hasn’t witnessed a noticeable increase in divorces in his practice. However he notes that “financial difficulties are a well-known cause of problems in a marriage, and the lockdown has created a pressure-cooker effect for many families. It appears that there are also couples that have experienced an improvement in their relationships.”

As an attorney and a qualified mediator, Raichlin says, “It’s always recommended that parties see a therapist before embarking on divorce. Very often, what seems to be insurmountable problems can be overcome with therapy. The couple will still be raising their children, attending school functions and celebrations together, so it’s in everyone’s interest to avoid a total breakdown in communication.

“I encourage both parties to attend mediation sessions to start a conversation about how to get divorced amicably, thinking about the best interests of their

children, and ideally drafting a parenting plan to set in place the parameters for raising their children together but separately.

“This includes discussing maintenance and the division of assets, with a view to entering into a settlement agreement that can be made an order of the court, without a full-blown, expensive trial.”

“It’s definitely worthwhile to wait until things normalise prior to making a life-altering decision to get divorced,” advises attorney Yossi Shishler. “One of the greatest challenges that people wanting to get divorced are faced with is strained finances. Generally, most households are able to just make ends meet on two salaries. Under lockdown, finances are strained, and in a post-divorce scenario, those two salaries will now have to finance two households. It is always a worthwhile exercise for parties to consider the financial implications of divorce prior to proceeding.”

Clinical psychologist Beverley Marcus says, “Lockdown puts a magnifying glass on the cracks that are already there. Couples whose marital issues were masked by the hustle and bustle of everyday life may find themselves in a fragile and vulnerable space, leaving things feeling broken beyond repair.”

Children may be particularly impacted by divorce under lockdown. “In the current situation, everyone is traumatised to a greater or lesser degree, and this includes children. All of the constants that they could previously rely upon have been taken away. A child whose parents are divorcing during lockdown is likely to experience quite complex trauma that will hook into all the other losses.

“They may feel as if their world is falling apart, and if this is the case, it’s important that the child is provided with a safe therapeutic space to help them process this trauma, deal with the loss, and adjust to a different family structure.”

Says attorney Graeme Krawitz, “Some people are rushing into divorce, and should wait for life to return to ‘normal’ before making such a life-changing decision. The impact of divorce will affect the entire family for decades to come.

“It’s best to consult an attorney, and consider the financial and other ramifications of a divorce, and also the matrimonial regime under which one is married. Courts are running at a reduced capacity and more slowly than normal because of lockdown procedures and reduced staff. For couples with or without children, the division and distribution of assets, housing, adjusted standards of living, and all other concomitant financial considerations must be carefully weighed up.”

Dana Labe, a clinical social worker based in Johannesburg notes that everyone is in survival mode, which means dysfunctional patterns are heightened. Four particular behaviours are the most damaging: criticism, blame, contempt, and stonewalling (the silent treatment). To prevent these, Labe says it is vital to prioritise respect. “You may feel like you are drowning and your partner is on the shore, but in fact you are both drowning and doing your best to get to shore,” she says.

If it’s clear that a marriage is over, “Lockdown is a good time to decide if you want to get divorced, but it’s not a good time to execute it,” Labe says. “Try to hang in there and get help, even if just for the short term. It is not necessarily going to save your marriage, but it will save your sanity. The practicalities of getting divorced right now aren’t easy. Some can pull it off, but this time requires fortitude, patience, and respect.

Regarding children, Labe says, “What happens between parents is the playground your children walk on. It can have shattered glass, or be a safe environment.” If a divorce is respectful and their well-being is prioritised, children can emerge relatively unscathed. “If we can’t make a good marriage, we have the opportunity to make a good divorce,” Labe counsels.





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Yom Kippur – how it changes us

OPINION

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

To those who fully open themselves to it, Yom Kippur is a life-transforming experience. It tells us that G-d, who created the universe in love and forgiveness, reaches out to us in love and forgiveness, asking us to love and forgive others. G-d never asked us not to make mistakes. All He asks is that we acknowledge our mistakes, learn from them, grow through them, and make amends where we can. No religion has held such a high view of human possibility. The G-d who created us in His image, gave us freedom. We aren't tainted by original sin, destined to fail, caught in the grip of an evil only divine grace can defeat. To the contrary, we have within us the power to choose life. Together, we have the power to change the world.



in the Torah. Jewish law applies to every aspect of our being, from the highest aspirations to the most prosaic details of quotidian life. Our library of sacred texts – Tanakh, Mishnah, Gemarra, Midrash, codes and commentaries – is so vast

explain to his fellow Greeks what Jews are. The answer he came up with was, “a nation of philosophers”.

So high does Judaism set the bar, it's inevitable that we should fall short time and again. Which means that forgiveness was written into the script from the beginning. G-d, said the sages, sought to create the world under the attribute of strict justice, but He saw that it couldn't stand. What did He do? He added mercy to justice, compassion to retribution, forbearance to the strict rule of law. G-d forgives. Judaism is a religion, the world's first, of forgiveness.

Not every civilisation is as forgiving as Judaism. There were religions that never forgave Jews for refusing to convert. Many of the greatest European intellectuals, among them Voltaire, Fichte, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Frege, and

Heidegger, never quite forgave Jews for staying Jews – different, angular, counter-cultural, iconoclastic. Yet in spite of the tragedies of more than 20 centuries, Jews and Judaism still flourish, refusing to grant victory to cultures of contempt or the angel of death.

The majesty and mystery of Judaism is that though at best Jews were a small people in a small land, no match for the circumambient empires that periodically assaulted them, Jews didn't give way to self-hate, disesteem, or despair. Beneath the awe and solemnity of Yom Kippur, one fact shines radiant throughout: that G-d loves us more than we love ourselves. He believes in us more than we believe in ourselves. He never gives up on us, however many times we slip and fall. The story of Judaism from beginning to end is the tale of a love of G-d for a people who rarely fully reciprocated that love, yet never altogether failed to be moved by it. Rabbi Akiva put it best in a mere two words: *avinu malkeinu*. Yes, you are our sovereign, G-d almighty, maker of

the cosmos, king of kings. But you are also our father. You told Moses to say to Pharaoh in your name, “My child, my firstborn, Israel.” That love continues to make Jews a symbol of hope to humanity, testifying that a nation doesn't need to be large to be great, nor powerful to have influence. Each of us can, by a single act of kindness or generosity of spirit, cause a ray of the divine light to shine in the human darkness, allowing the *shekhinah*, at least for a moment, to be at home in our world. More than Yom Kippur expresses our faith in G-d, it's the expression of G-d's faith in us.

• *Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks is an international religious leader, philosopher, award-winning author and respected moral voice. He served as the chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth from 1991 to 2013. This piece was taken from rabbisacks.org*



The blessing in the (salad) dressing

LAUREN BOOLKIN

After Yom Kippur, I crave umami – that cheek sucking feeling that is said to bring about contentment and fullness. Well for me, at least. Although umami is often associated with Asian food, it's more enigmatic than that. It's something beyond taste. I achieve my sense of umami through the combination of lemon juice, olive oil, and a touch of garlic and fresh herbs.

Fresh artichokes have become a regular on my fast-breaking table. They look spectacular heaped in a giant bowl (or in a mini bowl this year) with the dressing gleaming on top.

This dressing is also amazing on a Fattoush salad.



Artichokes

- * 12 artichokes
- * 1 lemon juiced for soaking the artichokes

Method

Bring a large pot of salted water to the boil. Fill a bowl with cold water and the lemon juice. Trim the artichoke stalk and using a sharp knife, cut off the top third of the artichoke. Rub the artichoke with the lemon skins from the lemon you squeezed and then remove the inner choke by cutting around the furry bit.

Boil for about 20 minutes or until a knife can pierce the centre.

Drain upside down and then pour over the dressing while they are warm.

Dressing for artichokes and Fattoush

- * 10 tbsp lemon juice
- * 20 tbsp olive oil
- * 1 handful of mint leaves
- * 2 handfuls of Italian parsley
- * 2 cloves of garlic
- * 1 tsp salt (you may need a bit more, please taste the dressing)
- * Black pepper

Fattoush salad

Ingredients

- * 2 pita breads sliced open into two pieces
- * 2 packets baby tomatoes (I like the coloured ones)
- * 2 Mediterranean cucumbers
- * 1 red onion
- * 2 tsp Sumac (it's a red spice)
- * 2 handfuls coriander
- * 1 small packet radishes
- * (Red pepper diced if you like it)

Method

Fry the pita bread halves in some sunflower oil until crispy, and then set aside on a paper-towel covered cooling rack to drain and cool. Slice the tomatoes in half. Add your deseeded chopped cucumbers. (There is no need to peel them). Peel and dice the red onion, and add it to the bowl with your thinly sliced radishes and chopped coriander. Before serving, roughly break up your pita breads and dress with the artichoke dressing.

Basque cheesecake

Even the cheesecake is forgiving! I'm a yenta. I hate not being in the

know (time of confession!). So, when my bestie in Australia informed me that she was having a Basque cheesecake for dinner, I was determined to find out what it was.

A Basque cheesecake is basically a flop-proof crustless cheesecake. It's meant to get burnt and crack. It can also be made the day before, thus rendering it completely stress free. It isn't the prettiest cheesecake, but it's the most delicious one.



Ingredients

- * 920g cream cheese (I use the Woolies one that looks like Philadelphia)
- * 1½ cups of sugar
- * 6 eggs
- * 2 cups thick cream
- * 1 tsp vanilla essence
- * 1 tsp kosher salt (don't use normal salt – it's too salty)
- * ⅓ cup cake flour

Method

Preheat your oven to 200 degrees centigrade (yes, I know it's hot), and line a 24cm springform tin with baking paper. You will need two pieces – one to go from north to south, and one to go from east to west. The paper must stick up above the tin as the cake rises high before its descent. Place your tin on a baking sheet.

Beat the cream cheese with the sugar until it's smooth, and you can't feel the sugar if you rub a bit between your fingers. Add the eggs one at a time, wiping down the sides of the bowl after each addition. Add the cream, vanilla, and salt. Sift the flour and add to the cream cheese mixture. Beat well for at least five minutes.

Pour into your springform tin, and bake for 60 minutes. The cake will be brown and burnt on top. Don't worry if it wiggles in the centre when you remove it, it's meant to!

The meaning of life can be found in a sukkah

JORDAN MOSHE

Every Jewish holiday plays an integral part in our lives. Be it Pesach or Shavuot, every chag on the Jewish calendar colours our daily lives in some way and shapes our perspective of current events.

But if ever there was a chag with the potential to help us get through COVID-19, it's Sukkot.

Coming after the intensively holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, Sukkot is sometimes overlooked and its significance underappreciated.

We tend to associate the holiday with flimsy constructions erected outside our homes and a fruit that closely resembles a lemon, but there's much more to this holiday relevant to our lives under a pandemic than we might think. We just have to look to the book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes).

Every Jewish festival is characterised by the reading of a particular Biblical text, which enhances the day by capturing certain feelings or themes which define what the day is really about.

On Pesach, we read Shir Hashirim (the Song of Songs), an allegory of the relationship between G-d and the Jewish people. During Shavuot, the Book of Ruth is read, a narrative set in the harvest period, and which relates to the festival because Shavuot also occurs at the time of the spring harvest.

On Sukkot, we read Kohelet. Written by King Solomon between 450 to 200 BCE, the book grapples with what it means to be human, and the meaning of life. For the greater part of the narrative, however, the text is seemingly characterised by sobriety and scepticism, its opening lines asserting that everything in the world is utterly futile.

For all his accomplishments, wealth, and success, Solomon repeatedly implies that no matter

what man does, his efforts will always prove to be in vain, making prominent a profoundly pessimistic premise that seems at odds with the celebratory nature of Sukkot.

However, there could be more to the text than we realise. For if we look closely at what Solomon says, we may recognise that the solution to the futility of life is to embrace such a reality and learn to live in the here and now. It all begins with looking beyond ourselves.

"Kohelet could almost have been written in the 21st century," says Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the

related to his obsession with the "I" and the "Me", says Sacks. The more he pursues his desires, the emptier his life becomes.

"Of all things people have chosen to worship, the self is the least fulfilling," he says. "A culture of narcissism quickly gives way to loneliness and despair."

Many of us have experienced something not unlike Solomon's situation since the onset of COVID-19. Our priorities have been rearranged, our focus has shifted, and any belief that the self lies at the centre of everything has been proven utterly absurd. We have discovered the importance of helping others, living in the present, and finding meaning in the daily lives we so often overlooked and perhaps even took for granted.

Solomon himself ultimately finds his greatest comfort in the simplest of things, and this

is perhaps what the festival of Sukkot is really about.

The sukkah itself reinforces this idea. A simple dwelling that cannot withstand strong winds, it represents the fragility of life but also champions the simplicity of the things that really matter in our everyday lives, whether we're living through a pandemic or not.

"The power of Sukkot is that it takes us back to the most elemental roots of our being," says Sacks. "It's the time we ask the most profound question of

what makes a life worth living."

Having prayed on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to be written in the book of life, Kohelet forces us to remember how brief life actually is, and how vulnerable.

"Joy, the overwhelming theme of the festival, is what we feel when we know that it's a privilege simply to be alive, inhaling the intoxicating beauty of this moment amidst the profusion of nature," he says.

The fact that Jewish tradition maintains that the final day of Sukkot is when our judgement for the coming year is actually sealed is therefore no coincidence. Called Hoshana Rabbah, it's considered the final day of the divine judgement in which our fate is determined. If we learn from Sukkot and the lessons of King Solomon, it stands to reason that our lot for the coming year is finalised at the end of Sukkot.

Only after having fully appreciated what we have, the lives we lead, and the fragility of life, can we fully appreciate the signing of our lot for the year ahead.

Sukkot is therefore seemingly the Jewish response to our pandemic reality. We now know what it is to live with insecurity, to develop appreciation for our friends and family, and to find joy in the everyday. The simplicity of sitting in a sukkah (built outdoors where fresh air and social distancing are more possible than anywhere else) can perhaps help us grasp the opportunity we have been afforded to better appreciate what we have, and recognise who is really in charge of our lives.



A family meal in a modern-day sukkah

former chief rabbi of the United Kingdom. "Here is the picture of ultimate success, the man who has it all – the houses, cars, clothes, adoring women, the envy of others – he has pursued everything this world can offer from pleasure to possessions to power to wisdom.

"Yet, surveying the totality of his life, he can say only, in effect, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless."

Kohelet's failure to find meaning is directly

A column of WIZO South Africa

WIZO celebrates achievements and new beginnings

Rosh Hashanah has brought new beginnings for all of us and the hope that the special connections and support of family, friends, and community, will continue when the threat of COVID-19 is a distant memory.

Over the past few months, WIZO (the Women's International Zionist Organisation) has been constantly in the news in Israel. Fighting for women's rights, maintaining excellence in WIZO schools, and being recognised by the Israeli government for the network of philanthropic projects that stretch the length and breadth of Israel are only some of the milestones that make us such proud members of this international organisation.

WIZO Israel proudly promoted the Bill for Equal Rights and Pay for Women and Men in the Workplace passed in the Knesset on 24 August 2020. As women's rights activists, WIZO works tirelessly to promote gender equality on all fronts. Women's empowerment is one of the founding principles of the organisation since its inception in 1920. Lobbying against domestic violence is ongoing, and WIZO provides safe-houses, training, and work opportunities for women forced to flee their homes, often with small children in tow. As leaders against gender-based violence, WIZO also offers a helpline and counselling for the perpetrators of abuse, and the lines are busy day and night.

Esther Mor, World WIZO president, was one of four women in Israel to receive the Eshet Lapidot Award for philanthropy on behalf of WIZO. Mor was also invited to the signing of the Abraham Accords at the White House in Washington DC last week. What an honour for

her and for WIZO, demonstrating the esteem with which the organisation is held not only in Israel but around the world!

The day before Rosh Hashanah, the chairperson of World WIZO's early age department visited Neve WIZO (WIZO South Africa's jewel-in-the-crown project), accompanied by Avi Mottola, Israel's deputy director general of the ministry of welfare. Each of its five cottages had exquisitely laid *yom tov* tables, and the children at each home shared

warm and tender stories of their lives before and after coming to live at Neve WIZO. In one of the houses, Mottola met Hila, a soldier in the Patriot Regiment who came to celebrate at the home. Mottola was moved to tears, and at the end of the visit he said, "I couldn't have started the year in a more

significant place than Neve WIZO".

On the home front, WIZO has hosted a number of informative webinars, WIZO societies have committed themselves to outreach projects in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, and WIZO's Wheelchairs of Hope have been donated to needy children around the country.

The WIZO Elise Gift Shop is officially online, with a stunning range of hand-picked homeware, baby gifts and more at significantly reduced prices. Shop.wizo.co.za

Finally, please save the date for WIZO South Africa's conference on 22 November 2020, with guest speaker Trudy Gold, renowned British historian and Holocaust educator, and the former chief executive of the London Jewish Cultural Centre.

May we all be inscribed in the book of life, and a *gmar chatima tova*.

This column paid for by WIZO SA



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Lessons from commodity trading

One of the most important lessons that I learned as a commodity trader was that we aren't nearly as smart as we think we are. Fifteen years in the business taught me that whereas we might know on an intellectual level that low prices will rise and high prices will fall, somehow that information doesn't translate into behaviour because knowledge on an intellectual level isn't the same as living and feeling it.

Take holiday packing for example. It's really difficult to pack successfully in one climate for an excursion to another. If it's hot where you are, even knowing without doubt that you are travelling to another region that is in the midst of a freezing winter, it's impossible to really picture just what that will feel like. Even if we know it intellectually.

I have even noticed that with my children. If after lunch, when their tummies are full and they are satiated, my wife asks them what they want for supper, they will answer that they are "full" and she needn't worry about that.

Experience has taught her that they aren't so much as lying, but are just unable to imagine a time when they won't be feeling as they are. It's not impressive, but we are hardly any different.

Which brings me to the COVID-19 situation. South Africa has done remarkably well. Although there was a time when hospitals were full, people were very ill, and many were dying, we still managed to get through it brilliantly.

For the most part, people were compliant and tried where they could to adhere to the rules that had been set. Even more impressive was that although some of the regulations were irrational and made little sense, there

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



seemed to be an understanding that this was something that needed adhering to.

The situation over the past few weeks has been positive. Until last week, new cases were falling, and the government was able to announce the implementation of a level 1 lockdown.

But like commodity prices, we also know that it's unlikely that it will remain as it is. Lessons out of Israel and the United Kingdom very clearly show that second surges are to be expected. And that they are more difficult to contain.

Whether it's because of compliance fatigue, economic pressure, or the need for human connection, not only can they be deadly, but also very difficult to manage. Much like packing a suitcase for another climate, it's hard to imagine what it will be like, but we need to accept that we had better make sure that we are prepared.

I'm not fearmongering. The point is not for us to bolt our doors and spray Doom in our coffee. It's not for us to live in perpetual anxiety and to stop living a life that we need to live. It's simply to be aware that even if we have eaten lunch and we feel content, dinner time will come when we will be hungry. Also, we must be cognisant of the fact that climates change, and that even if commodity prices are low today, it doesn't mean that they won't rise tomorrow.

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

Reflections on returning to shul



ABOVE BOARD

Shaun Zagnoev

The rhythms of Jewish life largely revolve around the synagogue. It's where community members regularly come together for prayer, study, and to celebrate festival and life-cycle events. In addition to the religious aspect, our shuls provide a vital social function and support system, not just for members but for occasional attendees as well. It has often been said that one of the hallmarks of our community is its non-judgemental nature when it comes to degrees and modes of religiosity. As a result, people feel quite comfortable attending different synagogues, knowing that as a matter of course, no-one will question their presence or look askance at them.

In view of this, the prolonged closure of our shuls has been one of the most difficult aspects of the lockdown for our community. Thankfully, conditions have since eased to allow for a resumption of communal prayers – subject of course to necessary strictures – in time for the *yamim noraim*. It was uplifting indeed to celebrate Rosh Hashanah in shul, the first *yom tov* of the year where this was possible, and to see once more throngs of community members on their way to or returning from services.

That communal prayers could take place at all was due to the enormous effort to ensure that proper protocols and facilities were put in place beforehand. For that, I pay fulsome tribute to all those responsible, from Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein and the staff of the Union of Orthodox Synagogues through to the various rabbonim and synagogue leadership. A special thank you is due to Professor Efraim Kramer for his extensive work with different communities countrywide to implement safe ways to attend shul. I further commend our community as a whole for its co-operation in adhering to these

protocols, and urge that it continues to do so for the remaining *yamim tovim*.

Hate speech under the spotlight

Hate speech cases in South Africa have been on hold since the Supreme Court of Appeal declared last November that sections of the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act were vague and overly broad, and hence unconstitutional. This week, the Constitutional Court convened to adjudicate this all-important matter (*Qwelane versus SA Human Rights Commission and Another*, case number 13/20). It's a complex matter, one that entails a difficult balancing act between determining what can be regarded as legitimate freedom of expression and what constitutes hurtful speech that violates equality and human dignity and should therefore be proscribed. The outcome of this case will have significant ramifications for how the South African Jewish Board of Deputies will approach the courts for relief in terms of confronting cases of antisemitism, as well as for its long-running complaint against Congress of South African Trade Union International Relations Secretary Bongani Masuku. Consequently, the board worked with the SA Holocaust & Genocide Centre, which was an *amicus curiae* (friend of the court) in the case, to ensure that the specific concerns of our community were given expression.

• 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

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