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2021



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# Honouring true leaders who create hope



In the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we all just tried to adjust to this about-turn in our way of life and survive until it ended. But then it didn't come to an end as we had hoped.

And so, hope began to fade among our community and in the broader country.

At unique times like these, leadership is about bringing renewed hope to people. It's all about stepping into a void and being those who refuse to succumb to depression.

The Absa Jewish Achiever Awards, to be held on 7 November 2021, will give the *kavod* to these people. It's they who literally gave us a lifeline and showed us the path towards a better future. It's them that we want you to nominate right now for this year's awards.

They gave us hope. They gave us a reason to be proud. They gave us the vision we had lost.

Now it's time to honour them, and it's up to you to nominate them.

Who were the people who helped us to see the silver lining? Who helped you to find a way forward when it looked like the road had come to an end?

Who reached out to our community with a lifeline? Who gave us hope during and after the riots and pillaging in July? Who showed us a different way of doing things that would benefit us all?

Leadership may be natural for some people, but it's never easy to stand up against negativity and pessimism. It's never easy to go against the grain, no matter what. And then to be able to get others to follow your lead is even more difficult.

Being a leader in such circumstances is true leadership, and it's because of this that we have made this year's Absa Jewish Achiever Awards all about those leaders who brought hope in

this tough time we are living through.

We still have our favourite awards that don't necessarily pertain to this time, but span a longer period.

The nine categories are:

### ABSA BUSINESS ICON AWARD

Awarded to a Jewish person who has achieved iconic status within the business community.

### ABSA BUSINESS LEADERSHIP AWARD – FROM COVID TO HOPE

Awarded to a Jewish person who has played a critical leadership role in business during this period.

### ABSA PROFESSIONAL EXCELLENCE – FROM COVID TO HOPE

Awarded to a Jewish person who has achieved national recognition and acclaim in their profession during this period.



### ENTREPRENEUR AWARD

Awarded to a Jewish person who has a proven track record in entrepreneurial ventures.

### COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

Awarded to a Jewish person who has served the Jewish community with remarkable distinction.

### EUROPCAR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AWARD

Honouring the leadership, success, and overall contributions of distinctive Jewish women in business or in the broader South African community.

### LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

In honour of Helen Suzman, this is awarded to a Jewish person who has contributed in an extraordinary manner over a long period of time.

### ARTS, SPORTS, SCIENCE, AND CULTURE AWARD

Awarded to a Jewish person who has excelled in any of these spheres.

### HUMANITARIAN AWARD

In honour of Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris, this is awarded to a Jewish or non-Jewish person who has contributed substantially to the betterment of the lives of the people of South Africa.

Nomination closes at 17:00 on 3 September, so please find the nomination forms at: <https://www.sajr.co.za/absa-jewish-achiever-awards-2021/>



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### ABSA BUSINESS LEADERSHIP AWARD: FROM COVID TO HOPE

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### ENTREPRENEURSHIP AWARD

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### COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

Awarded to a Jewish person who has served the Jewish community with remarkable distinction.

### EUROPCAR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP AWARD

Honouring the leadership, impact, achievements, success and overall contribution of distinctive Jewish women in business or in the broader South African community.

### LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD in honour of Helen Suzman

Awarded to a Jewish person who has contributed in an extraordinary manner over a long period of time.

### ART, SPORTS, SCIENCE AND CULTURE AWARD

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## Community called to back anti-corruption body

TALI FEINBERG

A proposition for a new, independent anti-corruption body landed on President Cyril Ramaphosa's desk on Tuesday, 24 August, and those who have spent years toiling to make it happen are asking the South African Jewish community to support it in any way it can.

"Our community was burnt by the actions of the 'Gupta minyan' during state capture," says community stalwart Mark Hyman. He is the founder and director of a new organisation called Citizens for Integrity, and played a key role in putting together the memorandum sent by nongovernmental organisation (NGO) Accountability Now to the president this week.

"Corruption has decimated other Jewish

communities living in failed African states. This is relevant to us all. As Jews, we cannot stand by and let corruption happen. We need to get behind this process."

Accountability Now proposes the formation of a Chapter Nine anti-corruption body provisionally called the Integrity Commission. Chapter Nine institutions refer to organisations established in terms of Chapter 9 of the South African Constitution to guard democracy.

One of Accountability Now's directors, Paul Hoffman SC, says that this specialist, elite, and independent anti-corruption body would help to prevent, combat, investigate, and prosecute the corrupt in our midst.

"Serious corruption, be it in the form of state capture, 'covidpreneurism', or orchestrated looting and rioting is the number-one threat to the rule of law and the

success of our Constitution," says Hoffman.

Accountability Now has advocated the need for such a body for more than a decade. It believes it has now become a matter of urgency due to the shrinking economy and unrest being fomented. "The beauty of the Chapter Nine umbrella is that the body cannot be closed down as easily as the Scorpions were dissolved," says Hoffman.

In the memorandum that was sent to the president and Parliament this week, Accountability Now called for the introduction of a constitutional amendment and enabling legislation for the establishment of constitutionally compliant anti-corruption machinery of state in South Africa.

"Serious forms of corruption like grand corruption, state capture, and kleptocracy in South Africa are criminal violations of

fundamental constitutional and human rights. They are literally killing many South Africans, mostly the poorest, and some of the whistle blowers," says Hoffman.

"The anti-corruption machinery of state in South Africa isn't fit for purpose, especially regarding serious corruption in all its forms," he says.

Hoffman says Ramaphosa was asked in Parliament in 2019 to consider the establishment of a Chapter Nine anti-corruption body, to which he replied that he would "mull over" the "refreshing idea".

Then, in August 2020, the African National Congress (ANC) National Executive Committee (NEC) instructed cabinet to set up new anti-corruption entity. It envisaged a stand-alone, single, permanent, and independent body, capable of dealing with corruption without fear, favour, or prejudice. That resolution hasn't been acted on openly yet.

However, in his State of the Nation address in February, Ramaphosa announced that there was a long-term plan for a new anti-corruption body that reported to Parliament, but he would need to consult about it over the next two years.

"He clearly didn't see it as urgent then, but we disagree, as South Africa is sliding toward failed-state status," says Hoffman. "So, we sat down and prepared a constitutional amendment and enabling legislation. To get there, we have proposed a divorce between the NPA [National Prosecuting Authority] and the justice department so as to secure the independence of the NPA and eliminate the influence of the executive branch of government over it.

"We also proposed a definition of serious corruption which is those cases in which more than R5 million is involved. Only cases of serious corruption will be dealt with by

this new commission. The idea is that it will be a 'one stop shop' with a branch in each province. It will investigate and prosecute under one leadership, as the Scorpions did before it was disbanded," he says.

"All aspects of serious corruption will be dealt with by this one body," he says. "It will be overseen only by Parliament, and have its own accounting officer. Parliament will determine the name of such a body in the process of legislating it.

"The Hawks will carry on – they will lose jurisdiction only in dealing with serious corruption. The NPA will also continue, but the prosecuting of serious corruption will go to this new body. We also say that this new body must be given guaranteed finances – it should be entitled to 0.03% of the national budget in the preceding year.

"It will have civil jurisdiction and the capacity to recover loot, seize and preserve proceeds, and ensure that they are restored to those who were looted," says Hoffman. "We hope that a good half of the estimated R1.5 trillion of state-capture loot will be recovered within a year of this body being formed. The longer we leave it, the harder it is to chase up. Already, banks and professionals caught up in state capture and exposed at the Zondo Commission are low-hanging fruit."

He says the reason they have done this now is because "we believe its time has come. First, the ANC NEC asked for it. There might be slightly different terminology, but nothing we are proposing is different to what it asked for in August last year. Then, in July 2021, the Democratic Alliance announced that it wanted the Hawks to be converted into an anti-corruption body under Chapter 9. This is a step in the right direction, but we believe it's not enough in the current

Continued on page 3>>>



## MIRACLE OF MIRACLES

Behind the scenes at Miracle Drive this week. Chabad House's Rabbi David Masinter works with Bradley Longbottom to produce this now cyber show-stopping annual event.

Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

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# Abbas call to Ramaphosa – routine chat or political move?

TALI FEINBERG

In what local political analysts describe as a “fairly routine phone call”, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas made a telephone call to South African president Cyril Ramaphosa on the afternoon of 19 August 2021.

According to local sources, they discussed recent events in the Middle East, and expressed support and friendship for one another. But could this call mean

more, especially because Ramaphosa chose to speak to the head of the more moderate Fatah movement? “There remains a very close relationship between the Palestinian Authority [PA] and the ANC [African National Congress],” says local political analyst Daniel Silke. “Certainly I think from an ANC perspective, the Abbas faction is the preferred faction the ANC wishes to deal with rather than Hamas.

“There’s obviously a cordial relationship between Abbas and Ramaphosa. If South Africa is looking to engage in the Middle East, it’s engaging, it would seem, via the Abbas faction. Whether or not this has any impact on the broader Palestinian issue, I don’t think one can really surmise much. There are aspects relating to the African Union [Israel joining the African Union as an observer], and that’s why there’s been this communication.”

He notes that there are also different factions in the ANC, ranging from moderates to radicals.

“From Ramaphosa’s point of view, he would want to keep channels of communication open more with the Abbas faction, rather than allow radicals to become more influential

within ANC thinking. One could argue that this is an attempt to keep mainstream Palestinians like Abbas as the predominant players for the ANC when it comes to discussing the Palestinian issue.”

But fellow political analyst Steven Gruzd notes that South Africa also talks to Hamas, and Hamas’ top leadership has visited South Africa, been hosted by the ANC, and has met senior government officials. “So, I don’t think we can read anything into the fact that they’re talking to the PA as opposed to Hamas. South Africa believes in talking to both, and in fact wants to use its offices to try and bring the sides [of the Palestinians] together. There have been attempts to do so before, which haven’t been very successful.

“It also comes after the granting of observer status at the African Union to Israel, which upset South Africa. It condemned it, and it might be playing into that narrative as well,” Gruzd says.

Says another local political analyst, Dr Ralph Mathekga, “Having a conversation with Abbas is more sensible for Ramaphosa. It creates less diplomatic tremors than would be the case had he engaged with Hamas. Ramaphosa is being careful. A direct call to Abbas expressing solidarity would most likely not bring about controversy. But engaging Hamas as an institution might result in some local and international leaders having concerns.”

Sara Gon, the head of strategic engagement at the Institute of Race Relations, says, “the telephone call between Abbas and Ramaphosa doesn’t appear to have any import unless

Abbas is trying to shore up support for Fatah in some way, pending any future elections. While the ANC supports Hamas, I imagine Ramaphosa wouldn’t be keen to show too much support or contact with it, because Hamas unashamedly wants to destroy Israel and has partnered with Iran to do so.”

The SA Jewish Report reached out to the Palestinian embassy for comment, but didn’t receive a response by the time of going to print.



Cyril Ramaphosa



Mahmoud Abbas

## Torah Thought

Rabbi David Nossel



### Prostrating before the King of King of Kings

There is a three-word phrase in our formal prayers that conveys the essence of Judaism.

Being such a powerful phrase, it features appropriately in every formal prayer service, as well as in the highpoint of the prayers of the high holidays.

The phrase forms part of the Aleinu prayer, composed by Joshua ben Nun upon entering the holy land. In the Aleinu prayer, we declare our indebtedness to G-d for having given us a unique relationship with Him, “and we bow, prostrate, and express our appreciation before *Melech Malchei haMelachim*, the Holy One, blessed be He”.

The phrase “*Melech Malchai haMelachim*”, which means “The King of King of Kings” contains the key to understanding what being Jewish is all about.

Who are these three sets of kings? The first king is obvious. It’s G-d. G-d is the king of the universe – *Melech haOlam* as we refer to Him in all our formal blessings. The world is G-d’s. He has the

power. He calls the shots. He is its king.

The second reference to kings must refer to a group of people who also have power, who also call the shots. But if G-d is king, how can that be? The answer must be that G-d is a very special king – a king that chooses to share his kingship and confer his royal power on others, empowering them to be rulers in their own right. G-d does call the shots. It’s just that one of the shots He calls is to call on people to call the shots too.

And the third reference to kings? Who else could possibly be king other than G-d and His human co-royal partners? The third set of kings must refer to people who are unable to see themselves as being crowned by G-d, but they are willing to be crowned by people. And so it becomes the responsibility of G-d’s royal partners to take a feather from G-d’s crown and use their own crowns to empower those people and coronate them as kings as well.

This is what it means to be Jewish. The Jew recognises that G-d is king of the world.

In addition, he or she recognises that G-d conferred His royal powers on a people to be royal too – “a kingdom of priests”. And ultimately, it’s the responsibility of His Jewish royal priests to confer their royal powers onto others, to empower and elevate them to their own personal kingdoms, to play their own part in taking care of the world.

*Melech Malchei haMelachim* – the King of Kings of Kings. Quite possibly the most profound three Jewish words of all. And yet, there doesn’t seem to be a single official translation that translates them accurately. The message seems to have been lost in translation.

Our task over the high holidays in particular, and at every formal prayer service in general, is to correctly translate these three words, not only into English, but into our lives as well, and thereby accomplish our majestic mission as Jews.

south african

Jewish Report

The source of quality content: news and insights

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# Bodybuilder weighs in on hate messages after Yeshiva talk

NICOLA MILTZ

One of South Africa’s biggest TikTok sensations, bodybuilder Noel Deyzel, known for posting fitness and nutritional tips and workout routines, received hate messages on social media after speaking at Yeshiva College Boys High School last week.

The bodybuilding guru, whose TikTok account has amassed 3.3 million followers and almost 80 million likes, is popular among teenagers.

He was invited to present a motivational talk at the Jewish school about his life and times, and how to use social media to do good.

After posting photographs on Instagram about his talk to the audience of young male adults, he received messages of hate on social media.

His response on Instagram was quick and to the point.

“I have received some awful messages and even death threats for my last story where I visited a Jewish school on their request to talk about how I use social media to create positive change in my life and the world! Let me state clearly, I don’t preference any race, color [sp], sex, or religion etc! I care for the development and upliftment of people irrespective of who/ what they are.”

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies immediately reached out to Deyzel and offered its support.

National Director Wendy Kahn commended Deyzel for his “phenomenal” response, and for standing by his convictions, saying that he made it very clear that he didn’t discriminate.

Deyzel, who is also a YouTuber, entrepreneur, and social-media influencer, inspired the boys with heartwarming snippets about his life and how he managed to uplift

himself from a troubled childhood in which his father was mostly absent.

Yeshiva College head of Kodesh, Rabbi Meir Zaiden, said the student leadership arranged the 30-minute talk in assembly last Thursday, 19 August, for Media Week. He said Deyzel’s presentation was inspiring and well received by the boys.

“He gives the impression of being strong and powerful, but he came across as very human. The boys were impressed about how he overcame his difficult childhood.

“IT’S A SAD SITUATION WHEN SOMEONE IMPARTS POSITIVE MESSAGES AND THIS IS MISCONSTRUED BY SOME WHO TURN IT INTO SOMETHING POLITICAL.”

He gave over very positive messages about how to form healthy lifestyle habits, create lasting inter-personal relationships, how to choose friends wisely, and of course how to look after your body and use social media as a platform for good.

“I think this was the first time he has spoken at a school,” he said.

Zaiden was unaware that Deyzel had received hurtful messages on social media after posting about his talk at the school.

“It’s a sad situation when someone imparts positive messages and this is misconstrued by some who turn it into something political,” he said.

He said Deyzel explained to the boys during his talk that he had received negative feedback on social media early in his career which used to hurt him, but he had learnt how to handle it and not let it stand in his way of spreading healthy, good tips for life. After the talk, Deyzel removed his white t-shirt, and some of the boys signed their signatures on it, which was a hit.

Deyzel has said on his videos that he was bullied as a youngster for being skinny and tall which motivated him to become a bodybuilder. He started his career by creating a YouTube channel in 2008. He began uploading motivational fitness-related

videos ten years later, and gained thousands of followers after embracing TikTok under the name “noeldeyzel\_bodybuilder” where he continues to upload short videos.

Joey Levin, 17, a Grade 11 student at Yeshiva College and the head of the media committee, reached out to Deyzel by email a few weeks ago.

“I wanted to get somebody who had a positive message, somebody relevant that the boys would listen to and enjoy. He seemed like a good choice,” he said.

So, Levin found Deyzel’s email address online and wrote to the famous TikTokker inviting him to speak.

He wrote, “I’m running a media assembly next week, 19 August. The theme is how media can change the world for the better. You truly are an influencer who inspires so many and uses their platform for good. It would be an honour for you to come and say a few words about yourself and what media means to you and how you use your platform for good. I know you are a busy man, and I understand if this is completely bizarre ask.”

To his delight, Deyzel responded a few hours later saying, “Sounds cool. I will try to shuffle things around to accommodate.”

“Deyzel came across as kind, open, and chatty. He gave a great talk, and there were a lot of questions afterwards. His take-home message was that we are the masters of our destiny and can make changes provided we put in the time and effort and have resilience. I was upset to see that he received hateful messages after such a positive experience.”

Levin said he emailed the celebrity and said that the boys of Yeshiva College had his back, and also didn’t stand for any hate or prejudice.

Deyzel who grew up with a single mother who worked two jobs to put food on the table, says on one of his videos, “Be mindful who you let into your life.”

He has told his followers, “My father wasn’t present for the greater part of my life. Things were very tough. I know there are others now or previously facing similar situations. Remember, life is a matter of choices. We can allow our greater potential to be suppressed by our upbringing, or we can choose to fulfil the opportunities we were denied. Life is a matter of choices, and every choice you make makes you.”

Deyzel didn’t respond to a request to be interviewed by the *SA Jewish Report* at the time of going to print.

Community called to back anti-corruption body

>>Continued from page 1

circumstances. The NPA is unable to do its work on corruption because of saboteurs planted within it by [former president, Jacob] Zuma. Rather than swim against the tide, handpick independent experts for a new organisation so that it can do its work properly.”

Hoffman says this change is important and urgent for us all, but particularly for the business community, which holds the key to turning the beloved country around.

“New investment in South Africa won’t occur if the perception is that it is a corrupt country. But if the government ‘walks the walk’ on countering corruption, confidence will grow that investment is safer. Also, it’s about keeping to the rule of law and realising the promise of the Constitution and its Bill of Rights. Poverty, inequality, and joblessness can best be addressed via the vigorous growth of the economy.”

Willie Hofmeyr, the retired head of the asset forfeiture unit at the NPA, and also a founder and director of Citizens for Integrity, has also put his weight behind the

initiative. “Given where we are in South Africa, we need a body whose sole focus is corruption,” he says. “The Jewish community has always been at the forefront of change in South Africa. Corruption is our biggest challenge since apartheid. It’s the biggest threat our country faces, and it’s a war that we cannot afford to lose.”

Hoffman is asking the community to be “active and participative citizens, and write to the president and the secretary of constitutional review in Parliament expressing your support”.

In addition, he says, “Accountability Now is a small section 18A compliant NGO that’s entirely reliant upon donations to do its work. All directors and trustees are unpaid volunteers, and its overheads are kept to the barest minimum. If you are of a mind to support Accountability Now, a pay gate portal is available on its website.”

Visit the integrity commission page, [www.accountabilitynow.org.za](http://www.accountabilitynow.org.za), for more information and a look at the draft bills proposed.

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# Doctor sets her sights on being Jozi mayor

NICOLA MILTZ

If elected, Dr Mpho Phalatse, the Democratic Alliance’s (DA’s) mayoral candidate for the City of Johannesburg, would be the first female executive mayor of Johannesburg – the country’s economic hub.

The DA’s decision to choose Phalatse, a medical doctor, has been applauded by many who say she is a hardworking woman of integrity. However, it has also been met with some anger, all because she once publicly declared her support for Israel.

DA leader John Steenhuisen announced his list of mayoral candidates for the upcoming local government elections earlier this week.

Member of the provincial legislature, Jack Bloom, the DA’s shadow minister of health, told the *SA Jewish Report*, “Mpho is highly principled, and dedicated to making a real difference in people’s lives. She has achieved as a medical doctor and also when she was the MMC [Member of the Mayoral Committee] in charge of health and social development. She had great success in extending the operating hours of clinics. She will strive for better services, and won’t tolerate any corruption.”

Phalatse was suspended in 2018 from her post as MMC for health and social development pending an investigation after publicly expressing support for Israel during a South African Friends of Israel (SAFI) conference in June 2018. It caused outrage amongst the anti-Israel lobby.

Following a post on social media this week by SAFI congratulating her on her nomination, anti-Israel organisation Africa4Palestine, replied by posting a warning to its followers on Facebook.

“Spoiler alert!!!” the post said. “Apartheid Israel sympathiser running for mayor in Johannesburg South Africa is approaching local government elections – voters, take note!!”

Phalatse told the *SA Jewish Report* this week that it was a contentious issue, and acknowledged that there were those who were aggrieved. “Plans are being made to engage with all parties on the issue. The DA believes in a two-state solution. We believe in human rights for all and for peaceful coexistence,” she said.

In 2018, Phalatse was a MMC in Herman Mashaba’s DA-led government in the City of Johannesburg before the African National Congress (ANC) took back the mayorship.

She was reinstated to her position after an investigation found no wrongdoing on her part and after she made a public apology to the people of Johannesburg for the remarks made at the conference,

which she said were taken out of context.

At the conference, Phalatse called herself and the City of Johannesburg a “friend” of Israel. Her statement, spread on social media, subsequently led to the ANC and Economic Freedom Fighters calling for her immediate dismissal.

The investigation found that she didn’t contravene the DA’s policy position on its “commitment to a two-state solution in which a secure and prosperous Israel coexists peacefully alongside a secure and prosperous Palestine”.

She apologised to the residents of Johannesburg for remarks which caused “confusion and hurt” to



Dr Mpho Phalatse

some. She went on to say that she recognised that the conflict in the Middle East was a “challenging and sensitive subject which, if not approached with the required consideration, causes acrimony in our diverse society”.

Referring to the part of her address circulated on social media, Phalatse said listeners weren’t afforded the full context of her statement, and were offended as a result.

She pointed out that the unpublicised component of her speech had addressed “the commitment of the DA and our government to achieving freedom, fairness, opportunity, and diversity in Johannesburg”, a qualifier which she maintained placed her words in the correct context.

Mashaba, who she may end up facing in the battle for Johannesburg, said at the time that Phalatse had proven to be a high-performing MMC. “Her leadership of her departments has been instrumental in the achievement of extended operating hours at city clinics and the rollout of our substance-abuse facilities,” he said.

“Residents of the City of Johannesburg, especially those in need of primary healthcare and social services, would be best served by the return of MMC Phalatse, and affording her the opportunity to contribute to a healthier and more socially cohesive city.”

SAFI welcomed the news of Phalatse’s appointment as the DA mayoral candidate.

Spokesman Bafana Modise told the *SA Jewish Report*, “Dr Phalatse,

along with many other candidates from across the political spectrum, has a pro-Israel and pro-peace stance, which is in line with the viewpoints of millions of South Africans who support the Jewish state.”

“Phalatse has a noteworthy history and commitment to working for the City of Johannesburg and has incentivised many innovative projects in her position as MMC of health and social development. The decision to appoint Dr Phalatse as their mayoral candidate shows there is a voice for Israel supporters in political positions, and speaks to the very strength of our democracy,” he said.

Phalatse said she was excited by her nomination. “I’m excited about what this means for the residents of the City of Johannesburg. The city is in a state of decay, it needs urgent intervention to get back to the kind of city it’s supposed to be as the economic hub, not only of South Africa, but the African continent.”

Asked about her plans should she be elected mayor, she said, “It’s important to understand where the city is when you make this call. So much has declined in terms of infrastructure and service

delivery, things like electricity, water, roads, traffic lights, and transport. This will be our starting point – to get the basics right.”

She said it was imperative to improve internet and fibre, especially in disadvantaged communities, during the COVID-19 pandemic so that workers and students could work remotely and not have their lives interrupted.

She said she was excited to bring to the office of the mayor her 15 years of experience working in the public service, including three working as MMC for health and social development in Johannesburg.

“The city deserves so much better. I’m ready for the challenge,” she said.

The ANC this week said regional and provincial structures would nominate three mayoral candidates, and they would be interviewed and screened before the party announced its candidates. ANC Deputy Secretary-General Jessie Duarte said this week that the party had submitted its candidates on time, but wouldn’t release the names yet.

Steenhuisen selected Geordin Hill-Lewis as the candidate to take over the reins from Cape Town mayor Dan Plato.

The DA chose former spokesperson and Deputy Federal Chairperson Refiloe Nt’sekhe as its candidate for mayor of the City of Ekurhuleni, while retaining its mayor in the City of Tshwane, Randall Williams, as well as Nqaba Bhanga in Nelson Mandela Bay.

# Jewish SA expat killed in Afghanistan “didn’t die in vain”

TALI FEINBERG

Recent events in Afghanistan may seem like a million miles away, but the story of the late Private Gregory “Greg” Sher brings them a lot closer to home. Born in 1978 to a Jewish family in Johannesburg, Sher was killed in the early days of 2009 while fighting the Taliban.

Although his family emigrated to Australia in 1986, his legacy lives on in South Africa, and recent events have opened old wounds for family and friends here and around the world.



Private Gregory Sher

“The past few days have brought up a lot of memories,” says Mandy Strimling from Johannesburg. Strimling met Sher when she visited Australia on holiday, and his welcoming personality meant that they became good friends.

“The people trying to flee Afghanistan now are running away from the same regime that Greg fought against. He was there to help these same people. So for those who knew and loved Greg, it’s definitely opened old wounds.”

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* from his home in Melbourne, Sher’s father, Felix Sher, says that his son didn’t die in vain. “I understand that as a consequence of current events in Afghanistan, you might be thinking of all those soldiers who sacrificed their lives and their families. It’s not all negative however. An entire generation of women have been educated, Bin Laden was dispensed with, Al Qaeda was weakened, and much infrastructure, including schools and hospitals were built. The Taliban aren’t really united and cohesive as a whole. They may fragment when in power due to tribalism. Hopefully, the zealots will be contained, and some conservative common sense will prevail.”

Says his mother, Yvonne, “The Almighty might have decided to take Gregory in the most common way – accident, illness, or murder. But he chose the most honourable way. As a soldier sacrificing his life to do good.”

The second-born of their three sons, Sher’s passion for service and protection began at a young age. In a “last post” account of his life written by historian Aaron Pegram, which was made into a film at the Australian War Memorial, Pegram describes how “his love of Yiddishkeit earned him the enduring love and respect of all who knew him”.

“After leaving school, Greg worked for his father in the finance business, and at 19, he joined the Community Security Group, a professional security team that oversees the protection of Jewish schools, synagogues, and special Jewish events. Greg was, in every respect, a pillar of Melbourne’s Jewish community.

“Greg possessed an interest in soldiering at a very early age,” the account continues. “In 1998, he joined the Army Reserve and became a part-time rifleman. In November 2002, Greg was among a rifle company of army reservists deployed to East Timor to address the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in the region. On his return to Australia, Greg successfully qualified as a member of the Special Forces.

“He transferred to the 1st Commando Regiment in Melbourne, a part-time unit which enabled him to continue his involvement in the Community Security Group. It was around this time that Greg met his partner, Karen.

“In November 2008, Greg’s regiment deployed to Uruzgan province in southern Afghanistan – the first deployment of an Army Reserve force on combat operations since World War II. Greg and his unit provided security for the Afghan population in areas controlled

by Taliban insurgents. Not wishing to cause his family any concern, Greg had told his parents he was off on a lengthy training exercise.

“It was on one such operation around midday on 4 January 2009, that Taliban insurgents fired rockets into the compound where Greg and other members of the task group were resting before heading out on patrol. One of the rockets struck Greg before detonating on the perimeter wall of the patrol base behind him. Greg was killed instantly.”

The account describes Sher as “a highly skilled and experienced soldier. His comrades affectionately knew him as ‘the super Jew’. At the ramp [send-off] ceremony in Afghanistan, Greg’s brothers in arms had a Star of David made for him to lie under [instead of a cross, as the ceremony began in a chapel].”

When Australia left Afghanistan in 2014, “I asked if I could have that Magen David,” says Felix. “It was sent to me, and it now hangs in the shul of the cemetery where Greg is buried.”

Reflecting back on the ramp ceremony, he recalls that a number of Afghans asked to be there. “They signed an Afghan flag which they sent back with him. He really connected to people.”

Yvonne shares a story that brings this home. “When he was teaching Afghan soldiers how to use a new weapon, they were calling him ‘Mr Greg’. And when Greg left, the captain, who was there, said to the soldiers, ‘Did you know Mr Greg is Jewish?’ They said, ‘No, we’ve never met a Jewish person in our lives’, and ‘Wow, this is special, if this is what Jewish people are about.’”

Sher’s body was returned to Australia, where he was buried with full military honours in a traditional Jewish funeral at Melbourne’s Chevrah Kadisha Cemetery at Lyndhurst. He was 30 years old.

The Shers didn’t even know their son was in

Afghanistan, and were awoken at 03:00 while on holiday, by their son, Barry, breaking the news to them. They had to rush home in the middle of the night, where they were met by the military. While it has taken them time to come to terms with his death, they are grateful that he has been honoured in many capacities and that their government continues to engage with them as a military family.

“He loved the military, he loved adventure. He called himself ‘a protector,’” says Felix. “What really drove him was hearing that the Taliban was throwing acid in the faces of young girls going to school, and the harsh treatment of women.”

For Strimling, hearing that Sher had passed away at such a young age and in such circumstances “was surreal and hard to come to terms with. He was almost larger than life.”

While her friend has been honoured in many capacities, Strimling wanted to bring his legacy back home to where it all began. He attended Glenhazel Primary in South Africa, so she decided to donate a trophy to the school in his honour. The Greg Sher Remembrance Trophy for community service and helping others is given out every year. “It’s given to a child who shows up and does what Greg would have done, exemplifying what he stood for,” she says.

Strimling believes that Sher’s connection to this country remains strong. “He still has family here. But he’s connected in other ways too. I was involved in a really bad car accident about a year after he passed. The paramedic told me that I shouldn’t be alive. But I had a photo of Greg in my wallet, and I saw it as a sign that he was protecting me.”

She says death in such a faraway place has made her realise “how connected everyone is in spite of so much distance”. In light of recent events, she says, “I don’t think he died in vain. His death holds meaning. He was given a task, and he completed his mission. He wouldn’t see it as a sacrifice but as a service.”

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# Looking for the lighter side



Most of us are feeling a little fragile and exhausted. Many are suffering from what would otherwise be diagnosed as low-grade depression, but I’m not sure you can give a blanket diagnosis to such large numbers of people.

I’m not a psychologist, but I can only go on what I see and hear, and I do believe we are all having an extraordinarily challenging time.

This has been a long and tough year – one like nothing we have ever experienced before. I recognise that it’s the second year of this pandemic, but somehow, it didn’t seem so bad when it was in the early days. We were still getting used to life under lockdown and behind masks. There was a novelty value, and it didn’t seem so endless.

My children never let me forget how convinced I was that lockdown or COVID-19 would be brief and forgettable. I told them that we would laugh when we reminisced about it from the beach in December. Well, so much for that. By the time we were together on the coast, we weren’t allowed on beaches because of COVID-19 and we were once again under lockdown.

Now, although many of us are vaccinated and ready and raring to move forward, the end isn’t quite in sight. And for so many, the long, difficult period we have lived through has soaked into our bones and makes us feels like, no matter what we do, there’s no end in sight.

People seem to get angry quickly and don’t want to witness, read, or watch anything that’s uncomfortable, depressing, or violent because we have too much in our lives already.

We are all looking for inspiration, something to make us smile, laugh, or just feel like there’s a lighter side to life, like there is some hope.

When *SA Jewish Report* chairperson Howard Sackstein had a webinar with the most positive business leaders – advertising executive Mike Abel, Discovery chief executive Adrian Gore, and Nando’s Robbie Brozin – the response was overwhelming. It attracted a massive audience of 23 224, and a significant number told Sackstein that that the webinar had inspired them. A few even said it had saved their lives. It lifted people’s spirits, and made them able to see a future, something better down the line. We all really, really need inspiration and hope.

This plays out in people’s reaction to stories in this newspaper.

Our community responds well to stories about South Africans in other countries and stories that we can relate to, but don’t really touch our lives. They also respond well to wacky, offbeat stories.

But when we wrote about the tragic death of a South African woman at the hands of people she had helped, people were devastated. Some literally didn’t want to read it.

It wasn’t about the gruesome details, but living in South Africa, the murder of someone in the community is devastating and instils fear in all of us.

Amazingly, we haven’t had such stories in the paper for a long time. This has been the first in more than two years. And as someone pointed out, it’s important to tell such stories because it means that it matters to us when someone is killed.

When it no longer matters, we have a real problem on our hands.

The point is, right now, the trauma and horror that touches our lives is too close for comfort. We can’t deal with it.

We need a break from trauma, violence, death, and sadness.

We really long for uplifting *simchas* and happiness to share with those we care about.

Just the thought of being able to spend time with my whole family for a Shabbos is like a dream, something I long for. To share a joke or have a good – even challenging – discussion across the table seems so precious.

The time for that is up ahead. We all know it intrinsically. Exactly when, we don’t know. Will it mean a booster vaccine? Again, we don’t know. Will it be next year? Who can tell? However, we can be certain the time will come.

Until then, we need to find ways of staying positive and hopeful. Firstly, it’s important to get off our own backs. If you aren’t feeling thrilled about life, that’s okay. If you are battling, get help.

I had a chat last week to Rabbi David Masinter, who this week held the uplifting Miracle Drive to raise funds. In him, I see someone who finds ways to remain positive because he spends his life trying to uplift others. He does it by introducing them to Pirkei Avot and *tehillim*, but also by putting up colourful sculptures of the words “Be Kind” and other simple but thought-provoking phrases in public spaces.

He also gives work to people in need to create beautiful Jewish art for others. (See page 9.)

Now, can I categorically say he is always happy? I wouldn’t be able to do that, but the ability to keep helping and uplifting people cannot be harmful.

So, Rabbi Masinter has inspired me to try my very best to do one small thing every day to make someone else’s life a little better.

I’m not talking about giving millions to charity because I simply can’t do that. I’m talking about little things that could be big things to certain people – and every day, I will decide what that will be.

I’m hoping that this will put smiles on other people’s faces, which in turn will put one on my own. I would love to spread joy and smiles because I believe we all need it. Who wouldn’t?

Anyone going to join me?

Shabbat Shalom!  
Peta Krost Maunder  
Editor

# US withdrawal from Afghanistan – winners and losers

OPINION

HARRY JOFFE



The Taliban had a famous saying, “You have the fancy watches, but we have the time.” With this cryptic line perhaps summarising the reason for the failure of the United States (US) in Afghanistan, it’s important to analyse the winners and losers from the US’s chaotic withdrawal.

It must be said, to begin with, that the Middle East as a whole is the loser. One of the main reasons that the US decided to pull out of Afghanistan is to be able to better focus its resources on those who it perceives to be a far bigger threat, namely Russia and China.

This pull out is all part of the US’s strategic pivot to Asia. Add to this the fact that the US no longer needs the Middle East’s oil, and it’s clear that the US is fast losing interest in the whole region. While some might rejoice, there is no doubt that the region will be worse off for the US’s absence.

Having the US involved in the Middle East, for all its failures and errors, still helps to maintain a semblance of stability in that chaotic region. With the US gone, other actors will step into the breach, and it’s likely that they will favour power and might over any rules-based system. Long term, this won’t be to the region’s benefit.

Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey – the region’s big powers – are no doubt enjoying seeing the US get a bloody nose, and know that seeing the US depart the region allows them automatically to increase their power and influence by default. However, behind the scenes, they are all also well aware that they don’t benefit from more instability in the region.

Iran and China border Afghanistan, and Russia and Turkey are close enough to feel any rise in fundamentalism in the country. All four countries are keeping relations with

be left to their own devices to counter this. They also know that the US doesn’t have the stomach any more for long, drawn out campaigns, which is precious what the Middle East requires. Israel, in particular, will be watching for three key developments:

1. Will the US stay in Iraq? If the US leaves Iraq, then it will be well and truly showing its lack of any interest in the Middle East. At least if it keeps its small force in Iraq it will have some active interest in the region. (Apart from passive bases in the Gulf states and a very small force in Syria.)
2. Will this foreign policy debacle make President Joe Biden more reluctant to do a deal with Iran? This might well be the one unintended positive result for Israel from the Afghanistan debacle. Biden cannot afford another foreign policy failure, and this will mean he will most likely push harder for the “longer and stronger” nuclear deal we have been hearing so much about from the US side. The nuclear deal isn’t likely to be agreed to in a hurry, and the US is likely to toughen its position.
3. How will the Gulf states react? The Gulf states must now surely realise – if they didn’t know this already – that the US wants to disengage as much as possible from the Middle East, which leaves them to deal with Iran without their “big brother” in the forefront. While the US would probably assist them if they were invaded, it’s unlikely to get involved for anything less than that. The Gulf states can, as a response, react to this in two different ways. Either they can enter into a detente with Iran and de-escalate tensions, or they can draw closer to Israel, the only power in the region they can rely on. This second option would probably mean the Saudis would at last open diplomatic relations with Israel. It remains to be seen which option they will choose, but either way, they won’t want to make a decision too hastily but rather carefully weigh up their options. Israel will be watching their next move with great apprehension, but again, this could end up in a significant gain for Israel, although it’s by no means as certain as point two.

Although the US has had an embarrassing failure in Afghanistan, international geopolitics is seldom binary. In other words, just because the US has lost doesn’t mean everyone else has necessarily gained. Only when it becomes clear where the nuclear deal is going and on which side the Gulf states will fall, will it become clearer which countries have shown a net gain or loss.

Events in the Middle East are complex and often turn out in totally counter intuitive and unpredictable ways. Many experts and commentators might find they have passed judgement on this one a bit prematurely.

• Harry Joffe is a Johannesburg tax and trust attorney.

The region's big powers are no doubt enjoying seeing the US get a bloody nose...



**TALI FEINBERG**

"Presilience" is much more than simply ensuring business continuity in case a negative event happens," he says. "It's about high performance and outcomes that make us better than we were before. It's about constant learning and adaption to seize

**Dr Gavriel Schneider**

Meanwhile, his first business expanded, and at its height, in about 2010, it had 150 employees and had conducted operations in more than 30 countries.

He says people often either over or underestimate their capabilities. "We all have a lot of skills to keep ourselves safe, make good decisions, and work cohesively. The challenge is that our survival instincts are wired towards flight, fight, freeze, or panic. We often get paralysed in difficult situations. But think about what Viktor Frankl said about his time in the concentration camps – even there, he could control how he saw the world."

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# I got to leave Poland

PERSONAL STORY

DANI SACK



Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote, “The living owe it to those who no longer can speak to tell their story for them.” At the time of writing, I have just returned from a week-long journey through Poland and Lithuania.



We travelled through cities and concentration camps, forests, and ghettos. We laughed, sang, cried, screamed, talked, and sat in silence. We expressed shock and anger, gratitude, and love. I’m almost grateful to be in quarantine on my return to Israel as it has given me the opportunity to rest, process, and reflect.

The first thing I noticed about Poland was the greenery. As our bus zoomed past field and countryside, my vision was a blur of green – trees, bushes, and tall grass. It was easy to be deceived by the foliage, and our tour guide was quick to remind us, “Every leaf, every blade of grass, and every patch of soil is splattered with Jewish blood.”

The death camps didn’t allow us to forget.

Treblinka laid bare contrasted starkly with the materiality of Majdanek, but I struggled to conceptualise the reality of both.

Auschwitz, arguably the greatest symbol of the Holocaust, felt like a falsity. How was any of this real? How did the Nazis get away with massacring six million Jews in camps like these, camps that span acres of land, sometimes in plain sight, not even ashamedly hidden behind the tall trees of the Polish forests?

And yet, as I walked through these mass graveyards, I felt thousands of souls walking with me. I heard their cries and their pleas as we stood in a gas chamber singing, “*Shema Yisrael*”, and as we said the memorial prayer in front of the destroyed crematoria.

The forests’ tall, spiky trees bore witness to the millions that lay buried beneath their soil. Our feet trod lightly on soft earth, the blood of our people having brought life to the dense moss and underbrush.

Each city was filled with people giving us dirty looks as we sang our Chassidic *niggunim* loudly, standing outside old shuls that have been converted into a myriad of things – supermarkets, libraries, piles of rubble.

I was shocked as we walked through the old ghettos of Vilna and Krakow, the streets now filled with picturesque cafés and pumping bars, the only remnant of the atrocities that occurred there a few old street signs and some

Yiddish writing on the walls. When I closed my eyes, I could almost imagine that the hundreds of voices were Jews and not tourists.

As our plane touched down in Israel, I felt an avalanche of emotions – exhaustion, relief, sadness, and gratitude – mostly gratitude.

I got to leave Poland. I got to come back to my beautiful homeland, and I have a future.

I have life, and I intend to live it to the fullest, for my ancestors, for those Jewish souls that never got to leave.

*Am Yisrael Chai!*

• Dani Sack is on Bnei Akiva’s MTA gap year programme, studying at Midreshet Harova seminary in Jerusalem.

## Remedial education helps children thrive in the mainstream

OPINION

ANDREA GOLDBLATT



Discovering that your child has a learning disability is traumatic for most parents. Parents often respond with a wide range of emotions, they may feel anger, confusion, fear, even grief. Their hopes and dreams for their child are shattered.

Some parents are in denial and blame the school, teacher, or their spouse, while some may feel a sense of guilt and blame themselves. Some parents fear society’s reaction, and worry about their child being rejected.

Their fear stems from the stigma attached to learning disabilities and the misconception that they are associated with low intelligence.

This is far from the truth as in order to be diagnosed with a learning disability, a child’s IQ needs to be within the average range. Further, many children with dyslexia or autism have an average to above-average IQ.



Inside a King David Ariel classroom

Parents’ fear and anxiety needs to be acknowledged and validated. They need time to process what they have heard and most importantly, to be told that with the correct support and early intervention, their child will be able to learn and fulfil their potential.

Learning disabilities affect how people make sense of information, communicate, or learn new skills, and include difficulty reading, writing, and difficulty with mathematics.

A learning disability has a negative impact on the students’ academic performance, hinders learning, and often results in emotional and social struggles.

Children with learning disabilities require an environment that supports their difficulties and addresses their unique learning needs. They require a different way of learning, and may benefit from various teaching methods.

Sometimes educators use teaching styles which may not meet the needs of some of the pupils, or they may teach at a pace which accommodates only pupils who learn very quickly. Children with learning disabilities don’t respond to traditional methods of teaching, and are likely to fall behind if they remain in a system that is unable to meet their needs. This often leads to frustration and feeling overwhelmed.

Further, through constant struggle and failure, they may develop negative self-esteem and poor self-confidence. Low self-esteem and a lack of confidence has a negative impact on learning and academic success, and can reinforce a cycle of failure and negativity.

Children with learning difficulties often lack social skills and find it difficult to interpret social cues. This can cause difficulties amongst their peer group, and can lead to feelings of loneliness and rejection.

With early support and intervention, the gaps created by the learning disability can be bridged and allow the child to succeed at school. Early diagnosis and intervention is of paramount importance.

This is because learning and development are at their peak during a child’s early years. The earlier the difficulties are addressed, the less likely they will become entrenched and lead to behavioural and emotional problems.

Remedial schooling caters for the learning needs of children who lag behind academically and who are

struggling in the mainstream.

These environments give learners the opportunity to reach their full potential through smaller classes, allowing for individual attention, on-site therapy, differentiated learning, and an adapted curriculum. In such an environment, teachers and therapists work collaboratively.

One of the main goals of a remedial school is to ensure that pupils are equipped with the tools required to move into the mainstream education system. This includes teaching specific skills and strategies to focus on strengths and improve areas of weakness.

Although the focus is on the consolidation of early foundational skills and support for academics, social and emotional learning is equally important. Many children with learning difficulties suffer from anxiety, particularly performance anxiety. They fear failure, and are often task avoidant.

In a supportive learning environment, they are encouraged to persevere, and their self-esteem improves through success. Children also learn skills to help them manage their emotions more effectively, as well as being taught strategies to regulate their behaviour. They are taught social skills to assist them in managing peer relationships. In such an environment, the emphasis is also on developing life skills such as problem solving, higher order thinking skills, and reasoning.

More children today are being diagnosed with learning disabilities for a number of reasons. Although barriers to learning have always existed, a lack of knowledge, fewer available educational professionals, as well as the stigma associated with a learning disability meant that pupils’ needs weren’t always recognised or addressed. These children may have been overlooked and labelled as slow or naughty.

Factors such as trauma, stressors in the home environment, and anxiety disorders can contribute to the development of a learning disability. Children with significant anxiety disorders or who are overly stressed are often emotionally unavailable for learning. We have noticed a significant increase in the number of children that have been diagnosed with anxiety.

This is possibly due to the disruption children have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. High levels of grief, uncertainty, and stress as well as constant exposure to news about the pandemic seems to have had a significant impact on anxiety levels. Children who suffer anxiety have difficulty concentrating in the classroom, and their output and learning is impaired.

Social media and online usage have become an integral part of young children’s lives. However, over-reliance on digital technology has been found to exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression and even result in mental-health concerns.

Research has shown that children who reported using digital media many times a day are more likely to show symptoms of inattention, difficulty organising and completing tasks, and difficulty sitting still. Too much screen time can also lead to moodiness and irritability.

In the words of Sally Ann Knowles, the principal of King David Ariel, “Every school is a microcosm of the society in which it exists. The pressures, concerns, and consequences faced by our society are invariably reflected by parents, teachers, and pupils.

“The world has become a global village constantly bombarded by information and consumerism. It’s thus incumbent on all educators to equip their pupils with both the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills required for them to succeed and to develop the resilience, confidence, and EQ (emotional intelligence) to thrive.”

• Andrea Goldblatt is clinical director at King David Ariel.

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# Rabbi and craftsman perfect the art of charity

SAUL KAMIONSKY

Two people from two different backgrounds – Rabbi David Masinter and artist Leonard Nyathi – have come together with the goals of teaching, educating, uplifting, and spreading the message about the need for charity around the globe.

Masinter, the rabbi of Chabad House in Johannesburg and the founder of the fundraiser Miracle Drive, was looking for a good craftsman who could also teach in the most destitute areas.

He came across Nyathi, a master craftsman whose business struggled before Miracle Drive recognised his talents and commissioned custom artworks.

Masinter told Nyathi, “Let’s identify the artists, bring them together, train them, and I will buy in a whole bunch.”

Encouraged, Nyathi started working with Masinter. “We worked as a team, an unusual team,” says Masinter. “The only thing we have in common is that we both like to teach.”

They started hiring and training underprivileged people. “We normally hire street kids and people with disabilities,” says Nyathi. “We also give training to people that don’t have an education. The rabbi and I decided to employ people so that they could make a living.”

Masinter says they found underprivileged artists in the most remote areas, and improved their skills. “When you find a skill within a person, you improve not only that skill but every other aspect as well,” he says.

Nyathi and the other artists are turning Jewish objects into what Masinter calls “African art”. All the artworks are handcrafted and hand painted – from ceramic mezuzah cases and ceramic dreidels to ceramic arks and a set of three ceramic grating plates (meat, parev, and dairy). It can all be purchased on the online Gallery of Goodness and Kindness, set up due to COVID-19. According to Masinter, they also “have a whole bunch” of non-Jewish products.

“The gallery online is only the beginning,” says Masinter. “We are building a proper gallery like the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art – a proper beautiful online gallery to promote South African art, underprivileged and other artists, one that can bring a smile to people’s faces.”

Asked if they have a marketing and sales strategy, Masinter says, “A hundred percent. That’s why this thing is going global. We also doing displays in different shopping centres, and we are taking it overseas.”

Nyathi is thankful for Masinter’s help. Now, he and the other artists can afford to pay their rent and support their families. “If it wasn’t for Shabbat, we were going to close this business,” Nyathi says.

When people praise his artwork, Nyathi says he feels “over the moon” and “recognised” in his heart.

Asked where the funding comes from for the materials, Masinter says, “Where required, I will do the funding, but the idea is to make it self-sustainable. This thing is global. We have already got orders from overseas. We are changing our world for good. Everyone should be energised by this. We can do much more.”

Masinter believes every Jew is obligated to uplift the spiritual and material welfare not only of every Jew, but also non-Jews as well.

“Therefore, we cannot live as South Africans only focusing on Jewish things when we have a fortune of programmes, from kids programmes to teenage programmes, to senior-citizen feeding programmes. We have to worry about everybody. You can’t live in a country where millions of people are living in squalor and say, ‘It’s not our problem’. The way to [help] is through job creation, and this project is helping with that. We have 21 libraries in the city in underprivileged areas. We have the whole learning programme for primary school children. We have a job-creation programme, and now during COVID-19, we went into this programme, which is self-explanatory. A rabbi and an artist have come together to turn the world upside down for good, with one thing in common, a passion for art and education.”

Masinter’s charitable work is based on two



philosophies, “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime” and “You don’t have to stay down, you can uplift everybody.”

Asked how long he has been doing his charitable work, he says, “I’m a Chabad rabbi. Every Chabad rabbi does charitable work. We don’t talk about the past. It’s about what we could be doing. You must energise people to copy what we are doing. We can’t sit here with millions of people living in squalor. We should all be asking what are we doing to assist welfare in this country, Jewish and non-Jewish.”

• The Gallery of Goodness and Kindness can be found at: <https://tinyurl.com/rhm4mf73>

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**TALI FEINBERG**

Pfeffer noted that a “coalition builder” is someone who

Pfeffer has noticed one major shift, namely in foreign policy,

**SAUL KAMIONSKY**

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# The dispersal of the Bukharian Jews

SAUL KAMIONSKY

The story of the Bukharian Jews, a community with deep roots in Central Asia, is sadly coming to an end, but the community’s legacy lives on in the United States and Israel, where most of the remaining Bukharian Jews now live.

Uzbekistan-born Bukharian Jew, Ruben Shimonov, told of this little known Jewish group which emanates mostly from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, countries in the heart of the Asian continent.

Speaking to a virtual audience via Zoom at Limud@Home last Sunday, 22 August, Shimonov said the different layers of culture,



The dynamic history of Bukharian Jews

cuisine, music, and language in the region were an amalgamation of all the different cultures of Central Asia, and were also reflected in the small but deeply-rooted community of Bukharian Jews.

The Bukharian Jewish story begins with the Babylonian conquest of the ancient land of Israel, Judea, and subsequent exile of Jews east of the land of Israel to other regions of the Babylonian Empire, namely present-day Iraq and Iran.

The Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Achaemenid Empire in 539 BC. “Under the Achaemenid Empire, the king was a more benevolent king and he allowed Jews to return to rebuild Jerusalem and the *Beit HaMikdash*,” said Shimonov. “But many Jews stayed as they now felt safe and secure under this new reign and moved even farther east of this new large Achaemenid Empire. This, folks, was Central Asia.”

Shimonov believes that the Bukharian Jews were more integrated with the local non-Jewish communities in Central Asia than, for example, the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe.

“Even though Bukharian Jews for a large part of their history lived in quarters [*mahalla*], there was constant interaction with the dominant societies amongst which they lived,” said Shimonov. “For example, the shashmaqam musical tradition is influenced by Soviet Islam, but many Bukharian Jews became the gatekeepers of this tradition.”

According to Shimonov, there are 250 000 Bukharian Jews in the world. Most of them now live in Israel or the United States, primarily in the New York City borough of Queens.

“In Uzbekistan, there are fewer than a thousand Bukharian Jews left – mainly elderly folk who are staying behind because it’s harder for them to emigrate,” said Shimonov. “Jews in Uzbekistan are

highly protected; their safety is preserved. And Jews do go and visit Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, where there is one kosher restaurant and a couple of synagogues. But our story is quickly coming to an end in our place of origin.”

In the Tajikistan city of Khujand, where Bukharian Jews once enjoyed a rich communal life, the last remaining Jew, Jura Abaev, died in January this year. Zablon Simintov, a carpet trader who is the last remaining Jew in Afghanistan, is reportedly safe as the country comes under the control of the Taliban.

Shimonov, who emigrated from Uzbekistan three years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, said the main reason for the low numbers today was the struggle of the Bukharian Jews living in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan under the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

“State-sanctioned antisemitism and dispossession or marginalisation of Jews was part of that story even though there were more ups than downs. And then, the subsequent new instability of the newly formed independent republics – whenever new countries are formed after the colonial past there is more often than not a lot of political, social, and economic instability,” he said.

“As a democratic minority, we felt that even more. So, the urgency to leave was clear and present. In the decade of the late eighties to mid-nineties, we went from having the majority of our community living in this place where we had lived for centuries to the majority of our community living in a new diaspora. In Uzbekistan, the real impetus to leave was more about everything I mentioned than antisemitism coming from our Muslim neighbours.”

“Our Muslim neighbours were our friends, and we baked bread with them,” Shimonov said. “This is different to Jews coming from the Arab world, where Arab nationalism and Zionism came to a head in a way that the Jews were sadly caught in the crossfire.”

In contemporary times, Uzbekistan-born billionaire Lev Avnerovich Leviev and Israeli Dorrit Moussaieff are two of the Bukharian Jews who have made an impact. Known as the “king of diamonds”, Leviev annually sent large quantities of Passover food to Chabad emissaries in the Commonwealth of Independent States to distribute to Jews in these communities. Moussaieff, the former First Lady of Iceland, promoted Icelandic culture and artistic productions in the international arena.

## move that saved Judaism

Katz said several lessons could be learned from this story.

He drew a comparison to US President Abraham Lincoln at the time of the American Civil War in the 1860s, who freed slaves.

“One of the things he’s famous for is that he surrounded himself with people who disagreed with him in order to build the best coalition and understand that he didn’t have all the right views in a time of discord,” said Katz. “So, many of his secretaries – like his treasury secretary, his war secretary – were people who were actually his political rivals but he brought them in because it was really important for him to listen to them. It was pragmatic because he knew the social capital he was going to gain from it. It was also hopeful because he wasn’t so caught in his ways that he couldn’t hear them out or heed their warnings. That is exactly what Ben Zakkai is doing. Not only is he creating this plot of land where he is going to save Judaism, but he is the kind of guy who tends to think about politics in the way he governs.”

Another lesson is to try to seek compromises, just like Ben Zakkai did with Sikkara.

A further lesson is to have love and kindness, not regret and hatred. Katz discussed what happened when Ben Zakkai was leaving Jerusalem with Yehoshua, and they witnessed the destruction of the Temple. “Don’t be bitter, my son, for we have another form of atonement which is as great, and this is [an] act of love and kindness [*gemilut hasadim*],” Ben Zakkai told Yehoshua.

An additional lesson is not to be afraid of people. If they kill you, you won’t be dead for eternity as there is life after death. But the supreme king of kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, lives and endures forever and all-time, and if he kills you, you are dead for eternity.

“Yochanan doesn’t know if he is going to heaven or hell,” said Katz. “I truly believe that’s because he doesn’t know whether he made the right call or not – he doesn’t know if the pragmatic decision he made was better than going for broke and asking for Jerusalem to be saved.”


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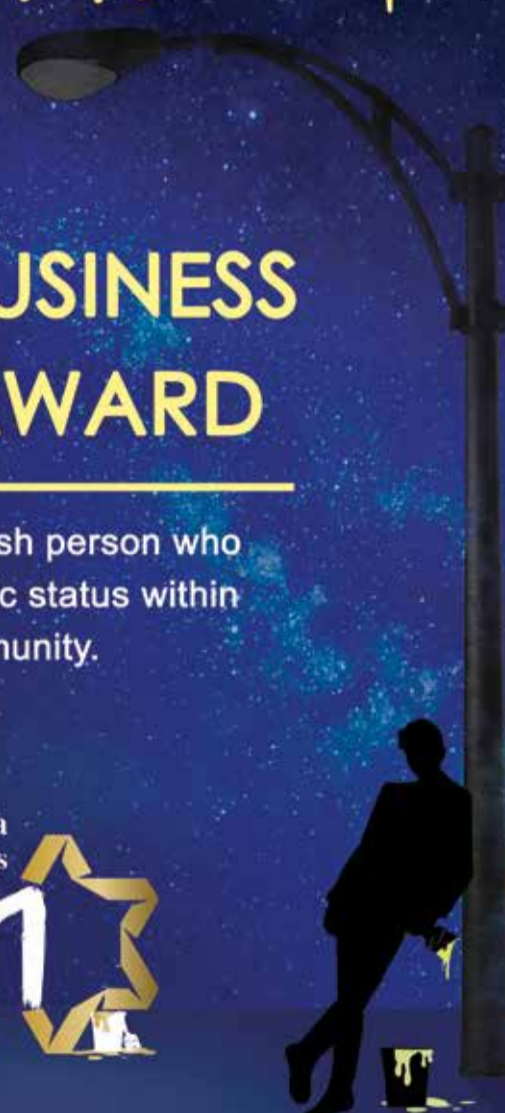
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# Spain turns back on citizen applications

ORGE CASTELLANO – JTA

**B**ernardo Pulido spent more than \$29 000 (R440 630) on genealogical documentation, Jewish heritage certificates, attorney fees, and trips to Spain to prove his Sephardic heritage.

But last month, like so many others attempting to gain Spanish citizenship through a 2015 law promising to right the wrongs of the Spanish Inquisition that expelled Jews, Pulido received a rejection letter from the Spanish government.

Pulido, a 61-year-old engineer from Caracas, Venezuela, drew a parallel between the decision and the Inquisition, which forced many of his ancestors to flee in 1492, fearing for their lives. For Venezuelans, a Spanish passport represents a way out of a country in the midst of a deep economic and humanitarian crisis. He plans to appeal the rejection.

“It hurts me a lot because we have complied with all the requirements and followed the law. Many lawyers have told me that how the law is being applied to us now is illegal,” he said.

Newly published citizenship data from Spain’s justice ministry reveals that just in the past quarter alone, 2 276

applications were turned down, compared to a total of three before this year.

Of the 150 000 total applications that have been submitted since 2015, 33 485 people have been granted citizenship to date. Only about 6 000 have been accepted in the past quarter. Applicants from Venezuela, Colombia, and Mexico have been severely affected.

The sudden shift, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency has learned, is driven by a fear of fraud and is the product of what some experts say are retroactively implemented bureaucratic standards for applications. The Spanish government denies any changes in the application process.

To be eligible for a Spanish passport, applicants have to put forward evidence of medieval Sephardi ancestry through heritage certificates and family trees. They also have to demonstrate special links to Spain and Spanish language skills through tests.

An internal notice issued by Spain’s General Directorate of Legal Safety and Public Trust indicates that a change in the interpretation of the law took effect last October. Previously, government notaries were the first intermediary for applicants, sending applications along to government officials or directing applicants to gather more materials. Since October, government officials have stepped in, rejecting applications previously approved by the notaries and not giving applicants a chance to submit further documentation before issuing a rejection letter.

Additionally, Spain’s justice ministry had previously approved many applications with Sephardic heritage certificates from organisations such as the Union Sefaradi Mundial and the Jewish Federation of New Mexico. Today, the ministry is accepting only certificates issued by the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain, which ceased issuing them on 31 July so that it could get through a backlog of applications. (The federation is, for the time being, still issuing certificates to Sephardim who have been living in Spain for at least two years and wish to apply for Spanish citizenship on the basis of residence, but that’s something it has done since the 1990s.)

“The government was previously approving lots of cases with the very same certificates and documentation that are being denied now,” said David Arevalillo de la Torre, a lawyer from Madrid who is currently handling hundreds of rejection cases.

The Spanish “Law of Return” as it is sometimes nicknamed, has also closed its new application window entirely for the near future. It will need parliamentary approval to be reopened.

In a statement to JTA, the ministry denied any change in the way the law is being interpreted but said that it was cracking down on suspected fraud perpetrated by some applicants. According to a recent article in *El Pais* daily, a police report sent to the ministry at the end of 2018 alerted it to the existence of a criminal organisation behind alleged fraud.

“The grounds for denial may be varied and different in each case,” the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain wrote in an email to JTA. “There is no common typology through which the files are denied. What we can assure is that, after six years of collaboration with the ministry of justice, the work carried out has been rigorous and

professional at all times.” Sometimes the federation certificate isn’t enough, as in the case of Carlos Rizzo of Venezuela, whose mother and aunt, both senior citizens, had their federation-backed applications denied last month. Rizzo is one of a significant number of applicants now appealing rejections for themselves and for



A ceremony at Spain’s Royal Palace in Madrid in 2015 marks the passing of a law granting citizenship to Sephardic Jews

Photo: Juan Naharro Gimenez/WireImage/Getty Images

family members. “I have no choice but to appeal until the very end. This is an injustice in every sense of the word,” Rizzo said.

Applicants have one month to appeal after receiving a rejection letter. After that, the Spanish government has up to 90 days to give an official reply. But several attorneys involved in the process said that appeals often tend to go completely unanswered.

If their appeal is answered and rejected, applicants can sue the government as a last-ditch effort to gain citizenship. The appeal process leads to additional lawyer fees, since individuals cannot legally file the appeals by themselves.

“It’s only after an administrative appeal that the applicant can go to litigation before the Supreme Court,” Arevalillo de la Torre said.

There is another option for those fleeing desperate situations: Portugal passed a similar bill in 2015, granting citizenship to Sephardic descendants. Data from last year shows that 23 000 people have obtained a Portuguese passport through the law.

But the Portuguese law is more restrictive because it requires applicants to prove ties with a specifically Portuguese Sephardic community. The smaller Jewish communities of Lisbon and Porto are the only organisations that can approve applications, which must show ties to one of them.

Officials in Washington and Spain have expressed outrage over the wave of Spanish rejections. United States House Representative Teresa Leger Fernandez, a Democrat from New Mexico, raised the issue with the White House and the state department.

In Spain, two members of parliament, Valentina Martinez and Pablo Hispan of the conservative People’s Party, have also asked the government for further explanation, the *El Mundo* daily reported. If the current trend continues, experts predict that tens of thousands of applications will be rejected in the coming quarter.

Pulido plans to sue the government if his appeal is neglected or overturned.

“In my family, we are very disappointed by these decisions. Our intention is to return to Spain and contribute with our skills and knowledge to their society,” he said. “I don’t understand how there is so much lack of appreciation on the part of the Spanish government.”

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# Support, not stigma, key to addressing postnatal depression

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

"Women feel we have to be superheroes, but it's being vulnerable that really makes us into supermoms," says Feige Swimmer.

Together with Devorah Rothman, Swimmer is the co-founder of Achoti (My Sister), recently rebranded as Mom Squad, a community of women helping each other through the unique struggle of postnatal depression (PND).

The name change came during COVID-19 as a way of emphasising the group's value in bringing moms together – those who have been through PND and those who are facing the diagnosis – especially at this time.

Swimmer's own experience with PND a few years ago led her to start the group. Less than two weeks after giving birth to her third baby, Swimmer faced devastating news. Her mother-in-law, her main source of support, had a car accident and was subsequently diagnosed with cancer. Left alone with two boys and her newborn girl, Swimmer crashed. "I sought help, but I was put on the wrong medication," she says. "I couldn't eat and sleep for months, and I couldn't mother my kids properly. I was in survival mode, depleted of energy. It was tortuous."

Swimmer eventually hit rock bottom. "It was only by allowing myself to be vulnerable that I began to recover. I had to open up, accept help from my friends, and find the right doctor. That changed everything."

Swimmer realised that by asking for help she was actually giving her friends the greatest blessing. When she was later asked to support Rothman who was suffering with severe PND, Swimmer embraced the chance to pay it forward. From visits to phone calls to walks, Swimmer spent hours helping her new friend deal with the struggles she'd previously faced. "I said and did the things I wished someone had done for me."

As Rothman slowly began to recover, she suggested to Swimmer that they offer similar support to other PND sufferers. "Women in these situations feel very alone,"

says Swimmer. "We'd become sisters, we'd been in the same mental space, and there was zero judgement. There was a connection, someone who just got you, who said it's not your fault, it's going to take time. Even your best friend, your mother, or your husband can't fully understand."

And so what ultimately became Mom Squad was born. Made up of former PND sufferers, the organisation volunteers to chat to, visit, and practically assist moms suffering from PND. It also plans to resume in-person support groups as a way of fostering further connection. Mom Squad refers PND sufferers to appropriate medical professionals and helps those who are questioning whether they have PND. "Moms can sit on the phone with us and just sob if they need to," they say.

After calling for volunteers on the Joburg Jewish Mommies Facebook group, Rothman and Swimmer were inundated with responses. They're proud to be breaking the stigma about PND, and to be empowering women to come forward. "After my experience, I realised there's nothing to be embarrassed about," says Swimmer. "Just letting someone else know that they're not alone means my job is done."

Mom Squad volunteer Ahuva Raff struggled with PND for years. Giving birth to her first child at the age of 21, Raff felt overwhelmed. "I was angry and emotional," she says. "I saw a therapist because I knew something was wrong, I just wasn't sure what it was." The therapist

had limited PND experience, and failed to refer Raff to a doctor. "PND is really a chemical imbalance, and you can talk about your feelings, but without the right medication, you're not going to recover."

Raff eventually stopped therapy, mistakenly thinking she'd recovered. "They say it often hits those with type-A personalities, those who have to have things in control – that was me. I could never get to that organised point again. I was calm, but I became anxious and irritable."

Four years later, Raff had her second child and was prescribed Eglonyl to treat anxiety. "It kept me calm, but it wasn't enough, and I often forgot to take it. I'd say I was fine, but I wasn't. I was screaming the house down at my oldest child." By the time Raff fell pregnant with her third baby, her day-to-day functioning was basically non-existent.

Six months pregnant and driving her kids to swimming, Raff accidentally ran over a man's foot. "That was my turning point. Thank G-d he wasn't actually hurt, but after that I crumbled because I realised that in my state, I could have actually killed someone."

Raff went to her gynae, broke down, and was finally prescribed the right antidepressant. "It was a game changer, I felt like a totally different person. Everyone gets PND in different forms, but regardless of the severity of your case, your whole experience can change if you deal with it."

For some, COVID-19 has added a whole new dimension to their baby journey. Not only did Becky Horwitz face the traumatic loss of her beloved mother-

in-law weeks before her second daughter was born in February 2020, the country was also plunged into hard lockdown weeks after her daughter's arrival.

"To be a parent in these unprecedented times was completely unnerving," says Horwitz. "I was already taking Eglonyl to help with milk production for breastfeeding, and it was definitely taking the edge off emotionally." Yet when the prescription ended, she began to feel the walls close in.

"I knew instinctively that I wasn't okay," says Horwitz. "I had previously struggled with circumstantial anxiety and depression, so I knew the signs." Caring family members got the Horwitz's a night nurse, but this was short-lived due to the COVID-19 threat. "At one point, my mom came to stay for about a week and I managed a few consecutive nights of uninterrupted sleep which felt like winning the lottery." Yet COVID-19 restrictions made support from extended family and friends less accessible.

Horwitz suffered with feelings of failure, loneliness, and gut-wrenching guilt. "I faced anxiety and crippling self-doubt that left me reeling, nauseous, and with no appetite or strength. I had thoughts of running away and leaving my precious babies and beloved husband. I had never felt such utter helplessness and hopelessness."

It was through articulating her feelings that Horwitz ultimately found comfort. She saw a counsellor and psychiatrist who prescribed medication, but it was the emotional support from someone who knew what she was going through that made all the difference. Through friends, she connected to the Mom Squad community. "Feige Swimmer was my rock. She congratulated me on seemingly small things like understanding that I needed help and asking for it."

PND is something you learn to live with, says Horwitz. "Yet, I know that I can send a message to my support group any time of the day or night, and nine times out of ten, another mom will be having a hard time too. That connection, for me, is where the healing lies."

Connect with Mom Squad on [www.facebook.com/momsquadsa](https://www.facebook.com/momsquadsa)



Feige Swimmer and Devorah Rothman



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# Five PhDs push the

MIRAH LANGER

*"The best thing about doing a PhD is being able to have the time and luxury of thinking. It's three years, and yes, it's very busy, but your job is to think, create, and contribute something new. That isn't something many people get given the opportunity to do."*

*This is the reflection of Ruby Birin, a Johannesburg-born and now Oxford-University-based doctorate student in archaeology, one of five PhD students which the SA Jewish Report interviewed to get an insight into the space of contemplation and creativity behind such studies.*



**RUBY BIRIN -  
ARCHAEOLOGY  
OF SOUTHERN  
AFRICA**

Birin originally chose archaeology as a "good crossover" between her interests in history, classics, and geography.

Since then, she has thrived in the field, having taken part in excavations in Israel and Italy, as well as working as a lab technician.

For her DPhil in archaeological science, as the degree is termed in Oxford, Birin is working to establish the chronology of the Middle Age and later Stone Age in southern Africa.

"My work is trying to explore when new technologies are invented. Where do we see these new innovations popping up? And how do they spread across the continent?"

"This is the period in which we start seeing art and culture represented. We start finding things like ochre which can be used as paint, and engravings on shell, beads, and ostrich eggs. We know people are starting to do things a little bit differently and with more complexity."

Birin says that a vast amount of work has been done in excavations and dating of artefacts from this period. She's now collating the research to establish spatial and temporal patterns – "whether we can spot where and how quickly these things are spreading".

Though her findings are still at a preliminary stage, it can be seen that even in the same places at the same time, people go through periods of rapid change and yet are also making autonomous decisions: "There is a wave where people make lots of the same things and then also periods where people are making very different things from each other – even their neighbours. Humans were diverse as they are today. We all come from this very complex and vibrant history, and it's really remarkable how we can see that through the material artefacts that people have left behind."

Birin says she would like to continue to do research in the future, although she's also interested in museum work and bridging the gap between academia and the public where she "could make these ideas exciting, innovative, and interactive and so that people can have ownership over their own past because if we're not doing it for people to understand their own past, then what's the value of doing it?"

### JESSICA VAN JAARSVELD - ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS PHILOSOPHY

Jessica van Jaarsveld's love of her area of study is clear when she reveals that she even thanked her (then-master's degree and now PhD) supervisor in her wedding speech!

However, Van Jaarsveld's initial university studies at the University of Johannesburg began in a strikingly different field from her current pursuit. She started with aeronautical engineering, for which she developed, she quips, "a burning, passionate hatred". She switched to a politics, philosophy and economics degree, and then stayed with philosophy. Now she's an internationally renowned and award-winning expert in environmental ethics.

In some ways, she says, her engineering and

philosophical studies stemmed from the same "desire to understand how the world worked behind the scenes. If engineering was the black-and-white mechanics of it all, philosophy opened up a whole world of questioning and critical thinking that I hadn't really come across before," Van Jaarsveld says.

Her research focuses on a new theory of human development that pushes back against the limitation of looking only at economic measures, instead casting for a more holistic viewpoint. "The leading voice in that kind of counter movement is called the capabilities approach, which looks at what people are actually able to be and do in everyday life; what choices and opportunities are available to them," she says.

While these models talk about the need to live in and with concern for nature, there is little discussion of what that actually entails. "I'm trying to expand on what that means, and argue what it would take in terms of government policy to really protect that."

Furthermore, it's often polarised by those that see nature as having its own intrinsic value and others that evaluate it according to what purpose it serves for humankind. "I'm arguing for a middle ground, which I'm calling green anthropocentrism. This acknowledges that human concern very much comes into our value perception, but not in a way that reduces the environment to just its material resources. We value the environment because it's a core component of what being human is."

Van Jaarsveld's doctoral studies have coincided with her entry into motherhood, with a toddler by her side and another baby on the way. Her research has bridged her Jewish and South African identity. "Philosophical methods of conversational interrogation and arguing have such strong parallels in Judaism and Jewish education; it's how we would attack a portion of Gemarah in the same way, with the same logic," she says.

Her work has resulted in her applying the indigenous concept in sub-Saharan Africa of *ukama* – a theory that extends from *ubuntu*, which is between people, to the relationality of the human and non-human community. "There are these absolutely beautiful theories that encompass the idea of mutual coexistence," Van Jaarsveld says.

### DAVID FACHLER - JOHANNESBURG JEWISH HISTORY

David Fachler, who qualified as a lawyer in South Africa, left for Israel in 1999 and began studying again, this time in the field of contemporary Jewry. He decided to pursue his doctorate in the subject as a long-distance student with Associate Professor Adam Mendelsohn at the University of Cape Town.

While at first, his focus was on the *ba'al teshuvah* movement in the 1970s (the return of secular Jews to a religious way of life), his research has branched out into multiple facets.

For example, the shifting focus of the office of the chief rabbi over the decades illuminates some of the key questions regarding communal identity. "There's always been that tension of how you see yourself. In terms of a universalist approach, as a rabbi for the whole community, or do you want to focus on strict religious observance? Where do you draw the line between diversity and communal discipline?"

Jewish educational institutions have also grappled with curriculum design and the type of Jewish identity they shape. "There was a big argument in the 1950s and 1960s about the division of the Jewish Studies curriculum," Fachler says, whether Hebrew was to be

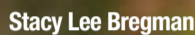




**SAUL KAMIONSKY**

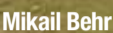
Bregman, now the sixth highest-ranked South African in the Rolex Women's World Golf Rankings at number

However, her dad encouraged her to play at Killarney on Sundays, and she participated in all the junior camps there. One day, he took her to play nine holes and Neville Sundelson, the World Amateur Champion 1973 and bronze medallist at the 1969 Maccabi Games, was playing leisurely in front of them.



Behr doesn't play any other sports as he is concentrating on golf. The left-handed golfer is working

Asked about the impact of COVID-19 on golf, Bregman admitted that she had "struggled quite a



Bregman has sound advice for Behr and other young golfers in South Africa. "If you have the determination and dedication, and you show some kind of shine, this is definitely a profession that you can enjoy. It's a game for all. This and tennis are probably the only two sports that you can really make a good living out of. The prize money and the gap is starting to narrow between men and ladies. There's hope for women's sport, and golf is definitely one of them."

- Ben Levitas, Cape Town

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# Pandemic’s unintended consequences

There aren’t many positive things to be said about living through a pandemic. The loss, the fear, anxiety, and financial impact cannot be understated, nor the impact on our children who have lost years of opportunity. But that doesn’t mean that there aren’t unintended consequences that can be good or bad.

A well-known and catastrophic example occurred in China in the 1950s. In 1958, Mao Zedong decreed that Chinese citizens should destroy the humble sparrow because the birds were eating much-needed grain in a country where hunger was a constant companion.

Dutifully, people took up the challenge, shooting the birds, breaking up nests, smashing eggs, and beating drums to scare the animals and prevent them from landing to rest. After two years, hundreds of millions of birds were dead as the sparrow approached extinction across China.

But smashing the sparrow resulted in one of the most devastating famines in recent history, killing between 15 and 40 million Chinese citizens (the exact number remains subject to ferocious debate).

Why? Because it turned out that sparrows didn’t just eat grain. They also ate insects, including locusts with a more voracious appetite for crops. With its major predator effectively side-lined, the locust roamed rampant across China.

This is a colourful way of suggesting that we don’t have a clue about what the future ramifications might be from this unprecedented social experiment



**INNER VOICE**  
*Howard Feldman*

we’re living through in our fight against COVID-19.

Although we might now know what the future holds, there are many positive unintended consequences that are worthy of our attention. What are they for me? There are many.

I have learned the names of my colleagues’ children. And the names of their pets. I know that Stacy’s (not her real name) son likes to wear her daughter’s ballet outfit, and that Daphne’s husband said no to her adopting a mentally challenged pug.

I have learned that Stephen’s pool service comes on a Wednesday, and that Greg is responsible for making his kids’ lunch. And that he’s not good at it. I have learned that Gail’s husband brings her tea just when she needs it most.

My colleagues have learned that my internet wobbles in the afternoon, and that my Kreepy Krauly skims the pool whenever I’m recording a podcast. I have had meetings with people on intravenous drips and shouted at others to take a break. Because I can see in their virtual eyes that they are working too hard.

I have learned to ask how they are, REALLY. And they have asked me the same. And I have answered truthfully. Because I know they genuinely want to know. And that they genuinely care.

As strange as it might be, I have learned more about my colleagues during this time than I would have learned working day to day in an office.

Because the pandemic might have distanced us from each other. But it also invited us into the homes and lives of those we work with.

No one would have chosen to live through a pandemic. But some of the unintended consequences are worth appreciating.



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## The detritus of Durban – 20 years later

On 2 September at 20:00, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), in partnership with the *SA Jewish Report*, will be holding a webinar to mark the twentieth anniversary of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism (WCAR). That now notorious gathering, held in Durban in August-September 2001 turned out to be a watershed event in the ideological war against Israel, and by extension against its Jewish supporters in the diaspora.

The ostensible purpose of the conference was to provide a forum in which the international community could join in confronting the evils of racism wherever it manifested in the world. Instead, it was allowed to degenerate into an Israel-bashing kangaroo court. Durban 2001 has since come to be regarded as a defining moment in which the ideology and strategies of the global anti-apartheid movement were adopted as a means of demonising and delegitimising Israel on the world stage.

South African Jewry was well aware that Israel would come under heavy attack at the WCAR. What hadn’t been anticipated was how virulent and all-pervasive the onslaught would be, particularly during the preceding non-governmental organisation (NGO) conference. Even more unexpected was the extent to which radical anti-Israel sentiment would spill over into overt antisemitism. Vicious antisemitic tracts were openly sold in the streets and placards expressing admiration for Hitler combined with regret that he never “finished the job” brazenly displayed. Jewish participants at the NGO conference were subjected to continual harassment, vilification, and abuse. The few challenges they were able to mount against the tide of invective confronting them were consistently sabotaged, such as when a press conference and the antisemitism commission had to be cut short after being disrupted, and a workshop on Holocaust

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



**ABOVE BOARD**  
*Shaun Zagnoev*

denial was cancelled because of a planned march on the venue by 10 000 demonstrators.

It was probably the most in-your-face series of attacks against the Jewish community in more than half a century. Just a few years previously, South Africans had negotiated an end to white minority rule and embarked on a hopeful new future based on the fundamental democratic values of equality, inclusiveness, and freedom of expression, belief, and association. It therefore came as a particular shock to local Jewish participants at Durban to find themselves in an environment where those values were so palpably and unashamedly flouted.

The upcoming webinar will look back on what happened at the WCAR together with the long-term impact of those events and how world Jewry has responded. We have put together an impressive panel of local and international experts for the occasion, several of whom were present at the original conference. They include former Canadian minister of justice and Canada’s envoy on antisemitism, Professor Irwin Cotler; Ambassador Tova Herzl (Israel’s ambassador to South Africa at the time); UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed; Felice Gaer, the director of the Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights; and David Harris, the chief executive of the American Jewish Committee. Local speakers include SAJBD President Mary Kluk, National Vice-Chairperson Marc Pozniak, and Tamar Lazarus, all three of whom are Durban veterans.

I invite you all to join us for what should be a very stimulating (if rather sobering) event. To register, go to [bit.ly/sajrweb118](http://bit.ly/sajrweb118)

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


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