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## Teen suicide puts spotlight on mental-health crisis

NICOLA MILTZ

Nothing could have prepared a Johannesburg mother for the moment when she walked into her teenage son's room at daybreak to find his body after he had taken his life in the first week of the new year.

Jared Rubin was 15. As the holiday season ended, scenes of mayhem took place at the family's Waverley home as Hatzolah paramedics tried in vain to resuscitate him. His devastated three siblings watched in shock and horror as their much-loved brother's life slipped away.

"My beautiful boy is gone. I cannot believe this is real," said Jared's mother, Debbie Rubin, still reeling.

Her son's tragic death comes in the wake of a concerning rise in teenage depression and anxiety in the community and worldwide, as children and young adults battle more than ever to make sense of the world around them.

"There's a common myth that childhood is stress-free," says Johannesburg psychologist Sheryl Cohen, "However, statistics show that suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among 15 to 19 year olds. Globally, it's estimated that one in seven (14%) of 10 to 19 year olds experience mental-health conditions, yet these remain largely unrecognised and untreated."

Jared's grieving father, Gerald, a Johannesburg podiatrist, said his son's death had "rocked their world".

The divorced couple have a good co-parenting relationship, maintaining a close family unit.

They have chosen to share their son's story in the hope that Jared's life will be celebrated and that his death will create awareness of mental health. They also hope to remind people that "kindness and acceptance" of those who may be seen to be different is paramount.

"Mental health is real. Children need to know that they're not alone, that whatever they're going through can be fixed, nothing is too big, and that there's help out there," said Debbie.

Those who knew Jared say he was a kind, caring, sensitive boy, with a "big heart", but was often misunderstood.

He came into this world seven weeks early, and spent the first few weeks fighting for his life in intensive care with pneumonia. An energetic little boy, he was like a "Duracell battery", said his family this week. Early on, he was diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which may have contributed to growing low self-esteem, troubled relationships, and difficulty at school. He attended several schools, each time having to prove himself and make new friends. It was never easy, said his family, alluding to incidents of schoolyard and online bullying and feelings of isolation. "He struggled socially," they said, "because he didn't fit the mould."

Throughout it all, he "put on a brave face" and

never lost his sense of humour and forgiving nature, preferring to forgive those who hurt his feelings rather than be alone.

"Jared was different," said his sister Gabriella, 19, who was his confidant, "He didn't see the world like everyone else, but he had the biggest heart, and you could feel the love in his hugs."

Things seemed to be going better for the teenager, who had lost weight and took great pride in his appearance.

"We spent two great weeks in Umhlanga over the



Jared Rubin

holidays. He seemed happy," said Debbie, pointing out that he was enrolled at a new school to start Grade 10, and was preparing himself for a new start.

The family believe something may have triggered him, and they are left with more questions than answers, desperate to understand the reasons behind his sudden and unexpected spiral into hopelessness. With the help of the police, they are trying to piece together the timeline of the last few days and moments of his life.

"I never saw this coming, even though he was extra sensitive and took everything to heart," said Debbie. The traumatised family are receiving counselling.

Whatever the reason, this is every parent's worst nightmare, say experts in the field of mental health.

Sheri Hanson, a mental-health co-ordinator at Hatzolah said, "For adults, the teenage years may seem far away and most of us have idealised it as 'the best years of our lives'. However, a lot of teens today are faced not only with the regular challenges of being caught between childhood and adulthood, they have the extreme stresses that our success-driven society places on them."

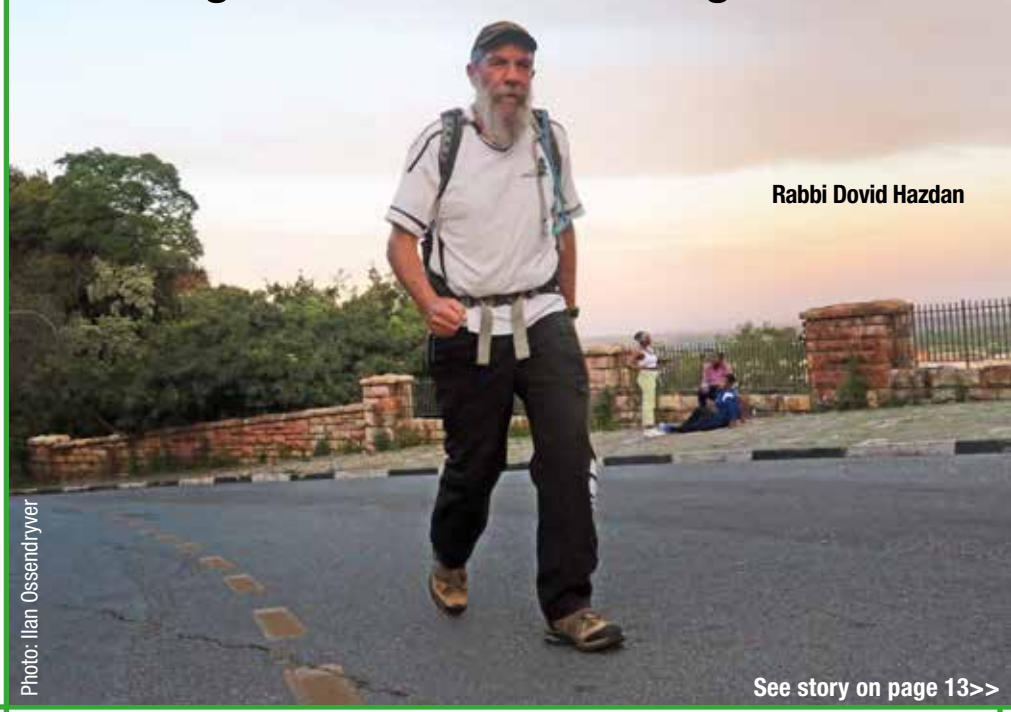
On the evening of 5 January, Jared arrived home at about 22:00 after attending an overs at one of his friend's homes. He greeted his mother who had waited up for him, wishing her a good night and went to play Fortnite on PlayStation in his room.

"He seemed fine, there was nothing unusual," she said.

According to her, his cellphone went offline at 02:30 and he was heard walking around the house at about 04:00. It's not known what transpired in the wee hours, causing him to text a friend threatening to take his life and googling ways to do it.

The family say that while he struggled emotionally, he still had "big dreams and aspirations".

## Reaching the roof of Africa for good



Rabbi Dovid Hazdan

Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

See story on page 13>>

Continued on page 6>>

  
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## Banker's heirs sue for restitution of famed Van Gogh painting

JORDYN HAIME – JTA

Heirs of a German-Jewish banker are suing a Japanese insurance company for the return of one of Vincent van Gogh's famed *Sunflowers* or at least \$750 million (R12.8 trillion) in punitive damages.

In December, Julius H Schoeps, Britt-Marie Enhoerning, and Florence Von Kesselstatt, the heirs of Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, filed a 98-page complaint with an Illinois federal court alleging that Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was forced to sell the painting in 1934 as the result of "racially exclusionary Nazi policies and concomitant coercion calculated to evict Jews from the economy and society of Germany".

A Somp Holdings representative told Courthouse News Service that the company "categorically rejects any allegation of wrongdoing and intends to defend its ownership rights of *Sunflowers* vigorously". The company displays the painting in a museum in its Tokyo headquarters.

"It's a matter of public record that Yasuda Fire & Marine Insurance Company [Somp's predecessor] purchased the Vincent van Gogh *Sunflowers* at public auction from Christie's in London in 1987. For more than 35 years, the Somp Museum of Fine Art in Tokyo, Japan, has proudly displayed *Sunflowers*," the statement reads.

The complaint alleges that Yasuo Goto, the president of the Yasuda Fire & Marine Insurance Company, which was incorporated into Somp Holdings in 2002, was aware of the painting's previous owner when he purchased it at the Christie's auction in 1987. It was sold for \$39.9 million (R680.8 million).

In 2001, a Yasuda representative wrote to the Art Institute of Chicago ahead of an exhibition including the painting that the

company was "deeply concerned", and that its provenance hadn't been further investigated. The company displayed *Sunflowers* at the institute anyway, and, according to the complaint, concealed the story behind its original sale from United States authorities in violation of the National Stolen Property Act of 1934.

Some experts have argued that the painting, the most famous in Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* series, is a forgery.

Paul von Mendelssohn-Bartholdy was a member of the prolific German-Jewish Mendelssohn family, whose members include composer Felix Mendelssohn and Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. In the late 1700s, family members founded the Mendelssohn & Co banking house, which became the largest private bank in Berlin. Facing Nazi persecution, they were forced to close Mendelssohn & Co in 1938.

According to the complaint, Nazi laws that targeted Jewish banks crippled Mendelssohn-Bartholdy financially, forcing him to sell some works in his collection, which included pieces by Pablo Picasso, Vincent van Gogh, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and Georges Braque. He died in Germany in 1935 of a heart attack.

The complaint is the latest in an ongoing saga as Mendelssohn-Bartholdy's heirs seek restitution of his collection. Thus far, they have filed lawsuits against the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Andrew Lloyd Webber Foundation, the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and the German state of Bavaria for the restitution of five paintings by Pablo Picasso.

Settlements were reached in three of the cases while one, against the National Gallery of Art, resulted in the return of Picasso's *Head of a Woman* to the family.



*Sunflowers* by Vincent van Gogh

Photo: Universal History Archive Universal Images Group via Getty Images

## Redeeming qualities



Rabbi Rodney Richard – Emmarentia Shul

In this week's Parsha, we read the four expressions of redemption.

The third expression is G-d's promise, "And I will redeem you." The Hebrew word used by G-d in this context is "*vega'alti*".

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch alludes to the use of this word (or, at any rate, its root) elsewhere in the Torah (in the portion of Behar), where it deals with a family member who is expected to assist a relative in financial distress. There, the Torah teaches that if your impoverished relative sells his land to sustain himself, you, as *go'el* (redeemer), shall help him recover such land. Similarly, if an impoverished relative is forced to sell himself into slavery, you, as *go'el*, are required to free him by satisfying the debt owed.

A *go'el* was someone, who more than merely sympathising with the other, took decisive action to alleviate the other's suffering.

When Hashem says, "And I will redeem you [*vega'alti*]", he's assuming the role of the *go'el* for the entire nation of Israel (then and into the future). At that very moment, G-d, in the most tangible sense, becomes our relative, our family, *avinu malkeinu* (our father our king), the Divine Being responsible for and committed to our well-being.

In the words of Rabbi Hirsch, "You don't have one kindred soul in Egypt who would feel personally hurt by the abuses to which you are being subjected. Therefore, I will stand up as your kinsman. I'm hurt," affirms G-d, "whenever one of my children is hurt."

It's not by chance that it's just prior to the

emancipation of the Israelites and the formation of our nation that G-d utters the enduring words of "*vega'alti*". G-d is modelling what's expected of us in relation to our fellow within this new nation.

All around us, there are vulnerable and maligned people, people who have no one else to turn to in their moment of distress and suffering. These are people with no *go'el*!

We need to echo the words of Hashem to such people: "You do not have one kindred soul in your

environment who feels your pain and is prepared to redeem you from your plight. Therefore, we will stand up as your kinsmen." But, it cannot end there. To emulate G-d fully and properly, we mustn't merely speak the words of promises but must act swiftly, compassionately, and purposefully in fulfilling them.

In last week's Torah reading, Hashem proclaimed, "My child, My firstborn, Israel." Our proclamation to each other ought to be, "My brother, my sister, my kindred soul, Israel."

Torah Thought

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G-d sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians.  
The Nile turns to blood; swarms of frogs overrun the land; lice infests all men and beasts; wild animals invade the cities; a pestilence kills the domestic animals; painful boils afflict the Egyptians; and fire and ice combine as hail. The heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the children of Israel go.







# “Miss Auschwitz” post shows antisemitic side of social media

TALI FEINBERG

A grotesque image of a skeletal woman wearing a banner saying, “Miss Auschwitz 1943” looks like something out of a Neo-Nazi handbook, but it was shared by an ordinary South African on Facebook in January 2023. Commenting on the post, his Facebook friends mocked the image with crude allusions to starvation and the gassing of Jews in Auschwitz, as well as denying the Holocaust. The South African in question, Riaan Eksteen, lives in the Eastern Cape. Responding to questions from the *SA Jewish Report*, he said, “I post controversial topics to get dialogue going. It was posted as dark humour that got a bit out of hand.” After the *SA Jewish Report* pointed out the antisemitic and offensive nature of the image, he deleted it. “The meme was created in 2017. It’s not a new one. I didn’t create it, I just shared it,” Eksteen told the *SA Jewish Report*. “I took it down because I realised it was taken in the

wrong context. It was posted as dark humour and not to disrespect anyone. It wasn’t intended to be degrading.” He says he knows about the Holocaust. On the comments other people made on the post, he says, “What others post is on them, not me. I can in no way control what others do, especially on social media.” Eksteen’s profile says, “I post what I like. Don’t like it? Unfriend me.” Yet community member Leanne Kupritz saw what he posted, expressed her disapproval, and then alerted Jewish community leadership and the *SA Jewish Report*. She also laid a complaint with Facebook but no action was taken by the social media corporation. “I hope there will be repercussions for his actions. The comments that followed are just as disgusting. How despicable it is that this kind of content would be allowed on social platforms. It sickens me that any racial comment would be dealt with in seconds, but antisemitism of that nature goes unseen. As you can see in the comments, there are people laughing and



Holocaust deniers freely voicing their views. “It hits me to the core – the ignorance and hate towards us,” Kupritz says. “Comments like that should never be allowed to be voiced. It’s

the same principle as racism. No one should ever post an image like that and feel it’s okay and that it’s just a bit of ‘dark humour’. He posts for his followers because he enjoys the response. We’re the last voices of a dying generation. There are hardly any survivors left. I feel it’s our duty [to call this out]. Let comments and posts like that never go unnoticed. Unfortunately, we’ll be defending ourselves as a Jewish nation forever.” South African Jewish Board of Deputies National Chairperson Professor Karen Milner says “The level of depravity and offensiveness of this post is appalling. The dehumanisation represented in the picture is exactly what the Nazis were trying to achieve. Reducing a starved human being to a trigger for humour or conversation is shocking, upsetting, and shameful. “The sheer gratuitousness of posting such harrowing imagery displays a casual, flippant attitude towards the subject, making light of it in people’s minds and degrading the victims, almost turning them into objects of repulsion rather than the sheer evil of those who perpetrated such crimes. The SAJBD condemns in the strongest terms this vile, hateful post and understands that it has now been taken down.” Antisemitism expert and emeritus professor of history at the University of Cape Town, Milton Shain, says, “This is more than antisemitism. It’s the product of crass insensitivity – something one could never countenance, not even from a child. It’s crude, idiotic, and beyond stupid. The person responsible is in serious need of education.” Eksteen says he would be open to visiting the Holocaust & Genocide Centre in Johannesburg, Durban, or Cape Town if he visits any of these cities. Speaking on behalf of all three centres, Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre Director Tali Nates says the centre would welcome such a visit, which is a crucial part of the education process. “I’ll definitely think twice before posting anything [like this again],” Eksteen says. The Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies at the University of Cape Town recently conducted a study on antisemitism, racism, and xenophobia on social media in South Africa. The centre’s director, Professor Adam Mendelsohn says, “Given the architecture of Facebook – many Facebook groups are private and therefore not readily accessible to researchers – it’s more difficult to assess how pervasive antisemitism is on the platform relative to Twitter. “Our research, however, did reveal that Facebook groups can produce particularly troublesome dynamics. When like-minded individuals band together to discuss contentious topics on closed groups, users can egg each other on and adopt overheated language unconstrained by the guardrails that typically contain discourse in the real world. Empathy is often an early victim in the frenzy.”

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# ANC welcomes Fatah to conference and anniversary bash

TALI FEINBERG

Fatah (the political party behind the Palestinian Authority) leaders embraced South African President Cyril Ramaphosa when they attended the African National Congress’ (ANC’s) 55th national elective conference in December. They also attended the ANC’s 111th anniversary celebration, as guests of the ruling party, on 8 January.

There they met with the chairperson of the ANC subcommittee on international relations, Lindiwe Zulu, and the director general of the department of international relations and cooperation (Dirco), Zane Dangor, as well as office bearers of the South African Communist Party.

According to the embassy of “the state of Palestine” in South Africa, “they discussed the political situation in occupied Palestine under the new Israeli government, joint struggle relations, and co-ordinating positions within the framework of African and international mobilisation in favour of the Palestinian cause and its justice. The delegation also conveyed

greetings and well wishes from the president of the state of Palestine, HE Mahmoud Abbas.” There were no Israeli delegates at these events.

Glen Segell, visiting professor and research fellow in the department of political studies and governance at the University of the Free State, says Fatah and the Palestinian Authority,



President Cyril Ramaphosa with Fatah leaders at the ANC national elective conference in December 2022

also known as the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), are essentially the same thing.

However, Fatah has its roots in terrorism and the obliteration of Israel. The Fatah flag features a grenade with crossed rifles

superimposed on the map of Israel. It was established by Yasser Arafat in the late 1950s. The party is led by Mahmoud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen.

“The ANC has again rolled out the red carpet to host its Palestinian comrades, but has repeatedly refused to meet any Israeli officials,”

says South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) National Chairperson Rowan Polovin. “We don’t expect more from it. However, we do expect more from the department of international relations and cooperation, which is a government department.

“South Africa has diplomatic relations with both the Palestinians and Israel,” he says. “Dirco, however, refuses to carry out its mandate to engage with representatives of Israel. This discriminatory treatment by our government is reserved solely for the Jewish state. It prevents South Africa from participating in the changing landscape of the Middle East and Africa, which is moving ever closer to

Israel and benefitting from Israeli innovations in water, electricity, and other technologies.

“The SAZF calls on the South African government to join the Abraham Accords initiative and de-hyphenate its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. This means

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maintaining an open and productive approach to relations with Israel while at the same time continuing relations with the Palestinian Authority,” Polovin says.

Segell notes that “The Palestine Liberation Organisation is 59 years old this June, while the African National Congress celebrated its 111th birthday in January. They are two of the oldest liberation movements so far.

“Unfortunately, both the PLO and ANC today are far removed from what they once stood for as freedom seeking organisations. The Fatah delegation to the ANC anniversary celebrations shows that they are brothers in arms, but not for their own people. The PLO, after signing the Oslo Accords in 1993 to become the elected Palestinian Authority, became the oppressor of the very people – the Palestinians – whom it wanted to liberate.

“The ANC, once in power in South Africa, morphed into a corrupt entity accused of economic mismanagement affecting, principally, most of the black people it once defended. It’s time for the PLO and ANC to reform themselves and try to set their house in order for the sake of their own history, before it’s too late.”

# Don’t stress about the super-infectious COVID-19 variant

JEANNINE DAVIDOFF

Just when we hoped COVID-19 was behind us, another new virulent variant has raised its head. This time, it’s the aggressively transmissible Kraken variant of Omicron, known as Omicron XBB.1.5.

However, experts are adamant there’s no reason to panic as South Africans have high immunity to COVID-19.

The high level of immunity is due to high levels of exposure and cross protection, says University of the Witwatersrand professor emeritus of virology, Professor Barry Schoub. Lots of people have been infected and exposed to COVID-19, and this was

stage that the new sub-variant causes more severe illness, except in the most vulnerable people, as Omicron is generally a milder variant.

China and the United States (US) have been affected by the latest outbreak of the Kraken variant. Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, the director general of the World Health Organization (WHO) in his address on 11 January 2023 said, “Last week, almost 11 500 deaths were reported to WHO – about 40% from the Americas, 30% from Europe, and 30% from the Western Pacific region.”

Kraken, named after the mythical undefeatable sea creature of Scandinavia, is aggressively transmissible and first appeared towards the end of 2021. Unlike most of

of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD), says Omicron is a particularly changeable variant with more than 650 sub-variants worldwide and more than 200 sub-variants identified so far in South Africa. The XBB.1.5 sub-variant has a mutation in the part of the virus that attaches to the receptor site which makes the virus more “sticky”. This sub-variant spreads more rapidly than all the other variants and sub-variants.

People must ensure that they are up to date with vaccinations, especially the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions like chronic lung disease, asthma, diabetes, and cancer patients. It’s important to have all boosters, Schoub advises. And people shouldn’t be embarrassed to wear masks for protection, especially those at high risk. “Shyness about wearing masks is foolhardy,” he says.

China had a severe lockdown, which was suddenly lifted. Exposure was thus limited and restricted, and, in addition, the country didn’t vaccinate enough, especially amongst



the elderly.

In the US, the COVID-19 epidemic is variable, and infection is mild in some parts. The northeast of the country was the first to have XBB.1.5 and the winter season helps spread it more readily. In winter, there’s much less outdoor activity and the virus spreads easily indoors, especially if there’s poor ventilation.

Professor Cheryl Cohen, the head of respiratory diseases at the NICD, agrees that we have a high level of immunity in South Africa. Many people had COVID-19 and/or

immunisation, which reduces the risk of the disease spreading, she says. COVID-19 is here to stay, and we must get back to normal.

The health department has announced that additional booster shots will become available for people over 18 soon, Cohen says. “We must learn to live with COVID-19. It will probably start to behave like cold and flu viruses, and we shouldn’t panic about new COVID-19 variants with our high levels of immunity. There have been low levels of cases for several months. Just remember to take regular precautions,” she says.

COVID-19 is here to stay, and we must get back to normal.

supplemented with vaccinations. Immunity levels are about 95%. Immunity doesn’t last forever however, perhaps lasting about six to nine months.

Schoub says there’s no evidence at this

the variants, it wasn’t assigned a letter of the Greek alphabet as it’s a sub-variant of the Omicron variant and not different enough to deserve its own Greek letter.

Schoub, who was the founding director

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## Time to put on your takkies and protest

We’re certainly living in interesting times, but for some, it could be a curse. What I find fascinating, other than just trying to make sense of all the chaos, is that there are clear parallels between what’s happening here and in Israel.

Many Israelis have taken to the streets to protest against their new government riding roughshod over their rights to an independent judiciary.

Meanwhile, here on the southern tip of Africa, we are about to take to the streets over the fact that not only are we battling to cope with 10 hours of load shedding a day, we’ll soon be paying a great deal more for the few hours that we do have electricity.

In both countries, there’s a sense of desperation and a sense that if the public doesn’t do something, it could be too late.

The question is: do protests help? And if they don’t, what will make a difference?

In both cases, the authorities we are trying to wake up in our protests are the same leadership that was democratically voted into power. So, I guess, even if you voted against them, they are there because somehow, the majority of civilians put them there.

That majority gave them power and, with that power, they’ll apparently do what they want, or in the case of South Africa, not bother to fix what’s broken even if it means destroying our economy.

It does seem, though, that in Israel, there’s been some back peddling regarding changing laws around the judiciary, but that will be seen in time.

Here, the situation is less about changing laws, rather sheer neglect and lack of leadership.

When President Cyril Ramaphosa was once again re-elected to lead the African National Congress (and hence the country) at the ANC national elective conference in December, I was somewhat relieved. I believed he was the only man in the party to take us forward and now he would feel confident to do it – if he hadn’t – because he had won comfortably.

The thing is, when is he going to do something about Eskom? When is he actually going to take on his leadership, and actively do something worthwhile to stop this downward spiral that’s load shedding. I keep thinking he’s going to, but then he doesn’t.

Where is the man who held us through the pandemic? Whether our government made the right or wrong decisions during lockdown and the pandemic, I wasn’t alone in believing that we had a president who was looking after us and doing what he – and the strong group of experts he chose to support him – thought was best.

What’s happened since then? Why haven’t we heard from him?

He chose not to fly out to Davos in Switzerland to the World Economic Forum (WEF) apparently because of our energy crisis. He is said to have held an emergency crisis meeting with his national energy crisis committee and it has an emergency plan. What took him so long? Why only now? Why wait for WEF? This isn’t a new crisis, Mr President!

There go my lights again, and still no sign of the president stepping forward to address the nation.

Haven’t we heard his lofty plans to stop this crisis before? What happened to them?

In fact, at WEF in Davos in 2017, Ramaphosa proudly told the world how he and his government had overcome the country’s energy crisis, making load shedding and outages a thing of the past. Fast track to last year, when we had 208 days of load shedding and now, in January 2023, we have had load shedding every day, now up to 10 hours a day of darkness. So, what happened, Mr President?

How I wish I felt confident in this new emergency plan that I read about. The proof will be in the proverbial pudding. And may it be damn tasty, at that!

The cynic in me can’t help but wonder if he chose not to go to Davos because he would be put on the spot after his 2017 speech about our energy crisis. After 2017, would other countries and potential investors believe him?

If they asked what he was doing to rescue his country, what would he say?

He chose not to go at the last minute because of the crisis, so where’s he now? Why isn’t he addressing the nation? Perhaps he’s going to make us wait until February for his State of the Nation Address. That would really inspire confidence – not!

I read today that he’s apparently unhappy with the 18% Eskom price hike. The story didn’t say what he plans to do about it though. Surely this is also something he should be addressing the nation about, but at the time of going to press, it certainly wasn’t on the cards.

The people of this country can hardly afford to pay more for electricity we aren’t even getting. Besides, why should we? It’s not because we haven’t paid our taxes that we are in this situation!

I totally accept that moaning about the president and his lack of leadership gets us nowhere, but what do we do to fix the situation?

In a group I joined on Facebook called “March on Eskom”, many suggest that we simply don’t pay for electricity. Forgive me, but I cannot see how that will help. I appreciate that Eskom won’t get money from me, but it will simply cut off my electricity, and that feels a lot like cutting off my nose to spite my face. I’m battling with 10 hours less electricity, how will I manage with none?

When I posed this question in the group, I was quickly shot down, and told that we need to suck it up to make change. I’m not sure that I agree with that tactic, nor the aggression in the response. It’s hardly a great way to have a debate or conversation.

As for protests, I’m all for them if there are enough of us to make a difference and if we believe it might get through to our leaders. Am I being cynical in asking what’s in it for the government to listen to its citizens and act accordingly? Why should it? Will a protest nudge it into fixing the 15-year-old problem that is Eskom? I don’t know. Remember, it has the power, we certainly don’t. Or do we?

As I don’t see many other solutions, I’ll see you with my takkies on, holding my placard in the protest march.

As for next week, stand by for a bumper Matric Results edition. Don’t miss it.

**Shabbat Shalom!**

**Peta Krost**  
**Editor**



## Israelis rally to retain democracy



OPINION

ROLENE MARKS

Israel doesn’t have a Constitution. Israel’s democratic values are enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, which clearly states, “The state of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the ingathering of the exiles. It will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants. It will be based on freedom, justice, and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel. It will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race, or sex. It will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education, and culture. It will safeguard the holy places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the charter of the United Nations.”

These rights are protected by the Supreme Court, which acts as an important system of checks and balances to ensure that these values remain sacrosanct. Israel’s Supreme Court remains one of the most respected in the world; but this venerated institution is under threat.

Israel’s minister of justice, Yariv Levin, has unveiled his plan to reform the Supreme Court, a move supported by the coalition government, but it’s creating deep chasms in Israeli society.

Warning bells have been sounded from many, including members of the opposition and many concerned citizens. More than 1 000 former airforce officers wrote to Supreme Court President Esther Hayut asking that jurists stop the new government from razing democracy.

An unprecedented letter from former attorney generals and states attorneys, who have served since 1975, read, “We, who served as attorneys general or state attorneys from 1975 until recently, were shocked to hear Levin’s plan for changes to the judicial system. We’re convinced that this plan doesn’t herald the improvement of the system, but threatens to destroy it.

“The plan proposes change to the method for appointing judges, thus turning the Supreme Court from an independent institution that rules without fear and bias into a quasi-political body that will be suspected of using the law in a biased manner in favour of government. It significantly limits the authority of the court to exercise effective criticism of the government so that it doesn’t abuse its power. It allows a coalition majority to legalise any act of government, no matter how wrong and harmful it may be, by means of an override clause. It may impede the function of the ministries’ legal advisers as gatekeepers whose job it is to warn against illegal decisions,” the letter charged.

“The achievements of the Supreme Court, which advanced society and benefited every person, are now in serious peril,” the letter concluded. “That’s why we call on the

government to withdraw from the published plan and prevent serious damage to the judicial system and the rule of law in order to preserve Israel as a Jewish and democratic state in accordance with the values expressed in the Declaration of Independence.”

Addressing the Israeli Association of Public Law on 13 January, Hayut said, “This is a plan to crush the justice system. It’s designed to deal a fatal blow to the independence of the judiciary and silence it. If it’s implemented, the 75th anniversary of Israel’s independence will be remembered as the year in which the country’s democratic identity was dealt a fatal blow.”

Two people are likely to gain from proposed reforms that could protect or give immunity to elected politicians who have incurred or are facing legal issues, namely the new vice-prime minister and minister of health, Aryeh Deri, a convicted fraudster; and/or the

newly re-elected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is facing criminal prosecution.

On Saturday night, an estimated 100 000

Israelis rallied peacefully in

Tel Aviv, braving the

inclement weather. It wasn’t about election results, but rather a cross-section of Israeli society, including many from the centre right, expressing concern about what they see as a battle for Israel’s democracy.

This is a concern expressed by many diaspora communities as well. There’s genuine concern that the reforms could lead to a chasm between the diaspora and Israel. However, it must be noted that support for Israel shouldn’t be contingent on the government in power. That shouldn’t be the litmus test for support.

Does the Supreme Court need reforming? There are many who believe that it does and that any attempts to discuss proposed reforms should include members of the opposition party to reach a broad-based consensus.

Sweeping reforms that ignore the concerns of half the Israeli population are dangerous and irresponsible and don’t bode well for our democracy. Former Defence Minister Benny Gantz as well as other opposition leaders have warned the government that an across-the-board overhaul could potentially lead to civil war.

Israel is at a critical moment in its history. The following weeks will prove crucial for its diverse and robust democracy. We have to have a necessary conversation with ourselves as a country and a people about what kind of democracy we hope to have. A democratic dictatorship isn’t the answer.

• Rolene Marks is a Middle East commentator often heard on radio and TV, and is the co-founder of *Lay of the Land* and the SA-Israel Policy Forum.



## Teen suicide puts spotlight on mental-health crisis

>>>Continued from page 1

“He was saving for a trip to Miami, Florida, after matric and dreamed of buying me a beach house one day,” said Debbie, adding that he was entrepreneurial by nature and enjoyed helping his father in his laboratory at home.

“A part of us has died. We have lost a piece of our heart. By sharing this, we hope people will take mental health seriously, tell their children every day how much they are loved, and look out for any signs and warnings. Take them seriously, they are real.”

The family believe that if one life can be saved due

to awareness of suicide prevention, then their boy won’t have died in vain.

Hatzolah Connect was established to provide a safe space for teens to connect who are going through a crisis or experiencing any sort of emotional distress. It offers them a completely anonymous, confidential platform to chat to a trained counsellor via text, and is open 24/7. Teens can SMS TALK to 44918 (the SMS is free) or connect to <http://tawk.to/HatzolahConnect> or follow it on Instagram @hatzolah\_connect



# The last straw – community reels at Stage 6 load shedding

HEATHER DJUNGA

Load shedding has thrust South Africans into unwanted darkness for up to 10 hours a day, making it the “new normal” much like the horrific COVID-19 pandemic became three years ago.

The Chevrah Kadisha has been particularly hard hit. “The impact on the Chev has been extreme, expensive, and far-reaching,” says Chev Chief Executive Saul Tomson. “We house nearly 1 000 aged and vulnerable residents on our campuses, and when the power is out for up to 10 hours a day, the Chev must continue to provide services.”

It’s important to keep residents safe, Tomson says. “Many are frail. They need light and warmth, and cannot afford to fall and hurt themselves in the dark or be deprived of the oxygen several need to survive. These facilities operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, and most residents don’t leave the premises at all, which is why generators have to be used to provide the services they need. However, the cost of running generators is enormous, as are the knock-on effects of those expenses.”

Says Colin Kinnear, the Chev’s group catering and facilities manager, “Running our generators is projected to cost us an additional R2 million this year – an increase of 600% over 2022 figures. This R2 million accounts for diesel only, not for maintenance, extra standby staff, and additional electrical support.” At the same time, as a result of the on/off nature of the load shedding, many generators have broken down.

Kinnear is also concerned about the price of supplies. “For example, we use 4 000kg of chicken each month and have just received notice of an immediate 7.5% increase, which will translate into an additional R250 000 this year for chicken alone. It’s estimated that oxygen will cost an additional 143% in 2023, and vehicle fuel an additional 30%.”

Power interruptions also disrupt the provision of water. “We have no option but to seek costly standby water and energy solutions to protect our residents and support our community,” Tomson says.

The management and staff of the Chev are doing what they can to conserve energy. They have already replaced inefficient lighting throughout the facilities on the Sandringham Gardens and Selwyn Segal campuses with energy-efficient LED lights. “This has contributed to an annual saving of R1.23 million. We’re also exploring alternative energy solutions, but this comes at significant cost,” says Tomson.

“On every front: financial, psycho-social, healthcare, catering, and transportation, load shedding presents enormous challenges for the Chev. Each of us knows how upset we get in our homes when the power is out. I’m always cognisant of how our vulnerable residents must feel.”

The impact on the Chev has been extreme, but the community at large faces discomfort and security risks. For some, it’s about managing time consciously, and seeking new and inventive ways of doing everyday things – only without power.

Eitan Fine, the chairperson of the Community Policing Forum serving Sector 1 Sandringham and a volunteer for City Power, is concerned about security.

An electrician by profession, he says batteries for security systems such as alarms, electric fences, and security gates require a sufficient number of hours to charge correctly, and that the four-hour slots between Stage 6 load shedding shifts are often insufficient.

“Load shedding means that street lights don’t work, and darkness is a further concern,” he says. “At the same time, there’s now a need to upgrade security systems to lithium batteries and buy inverters as a back-up.”

Even those with generators have battled with the unpredictable, unsettling impact of load shedding. Actress Vicky Friedman, who founded Noah’s Art, a non-profit organisation assisting artists struggling during the pandemic, says many productions have experienced power failure while the cast is mid-way through a sentence. “While there might be generators to assist, they can take some moments to switch everything back on, and for an actor immersed in a role or an audience watching, this can be unsettling and detract from the effectiveness of the production.”

Other workplaces have experienced an abrupt turnaround from hybrid and remote models of working to a need to go into the office where there is a generator. Searle Silverman, who works for the Markets Valuations Control Group for Rand Merchant Bank, has had to go

into work more often.

His corporation hasn’t been much swayed by load shedding. But, he points out that power outages have a widespread impact as ripple effects dampen the economy and cause feelings of uncertainty and instability.

Silverman is concerned about communal life. “For the Jewish, observant community, traditional Friday night and Saturday meals have become much trickier,” he says. “Somehow, though, we find ways to do things. For example, we recently bought ourselves a gas stove.”

Ward 81 councillor Joanne Horwitz says that she often receives messages of concern that the power is going to be off at the start of Shabbos or during the Friday night meal. With these concerns come pleas to have this changed. “Unfortunately, City Power is at the mercy of Eskom,” she says. “Then, of course, there are those times when load shedding has caused a further localised outage – maybe a fuse has blown when the power came back on or, just as likely, vandals lurking in the area have waited for the power cut to steal valuable cables and fuses, exacerbating the problem.”

At home, “board games, and family conversation” have come back into focus, and many in the community say power outages have made them realise how much they need each other and how much they took for granted.

“It has made us get out the candles and become more romantic,” community

member Tammy Asseraf says. “People are engaging with one another in more meaningful ways even though the power cuts are driving everyone mad!”

Though most shuls have generators, the lack of lights on the streets creates a security threat, not least for those walking at night on Shabbos. “We have put out a request for cameras to be installed in the roads around us for heightened security,” says Asseraf, who is involved with a shul in Sandringham.

Having seen first-hand the devastation caused by the pandemic, South African Board of Deputies National Director Wendy Kahn wonders what load shedding’s economic impact will be. “In a country where we should be doing whatever we can to build up small business, it’s this sector that has been hardest hit by the outages,” Kahn says “South Africans have had to deal with so much. Load shedding is the last straw.”



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# Take suicide warnings seriously, experts say

NICOLA MILTZ

Mental-health practitioners and experts in the field have put their heads together as concern about rising teenage depression and anxiety are heightened in the wake of a recent teen suicide in the community.

Jared Rubin, 15, died by suicide on 6 January alone in his bedroom after years of struggling to fit in socially and find his place in the world.

His tragic death (see story on page 1) once again highlights the problem of teenage depression and anxiety, which psychologists say is worryingly on the rise here and abroad.

“Though there are many psycho-social issues associated with suicide, one must remember that this is a disease. It’s an illness. Just like some physical illnesses are hard to treat, so are some psychiatric/psychological illnesses,” said Johannesburg psychologist Sheryl Cohen.

Rabbi Levi Avtzon of Linksfield Shul, who has been at the forefront of this discussion since the tragic passing of teenager Adam Seef in 2019, said “our community narratives are killing people”.

“Sadly today, we worship exceptionalism. This is a fundamental flaw, and needs to be urgently addressed.

“Life is so hard. The pressure to live an exceptional life – to be a chess champion at the age of eight; to be popular; to attain eight distinctions; become a chief executive, is terrifying. We’re scaring kids away from life. The narrative that unless you’re exceptional the world will swallow you up, needs to change.

“We’re not all born to be Albert Einstein or Lionel Messi and do something earth shattering. We need to stop using the word ‘success’ in every sentence. We’ve created such a high bar of what a good life is, and most people can’t match up. It’s unsustainable for most of us, and can lead only to disappointment. In the past, having an average life was good enough. Today, we’re seeking exceptionalism and it starts with fear. If my kid isn’t a champion, then I’m failing my kid. No, your kid just needs to be loved, live a life of integrity, be a mensch, and do the best they can based on their individual capabilities.”

Sheri Hanson, mental-health co-ordinator at Hatzolah, said that though there are many exciting aspects to being a teen, there’s also pressure to fit in socially, to perform academically, and to act responsibly.

“Adolescents have their life on public display thanks to social media and are looking at the social-media version of others’ lives. This increases feelings of anxiety and depression. New apps that show the location of friends may also increase feelings of social isolation as children watch online as their friends get together without them,” she said.

“Adolescence is also a time where children explore and think about their sexual identity and relationships, coupled with a need for independence that often conflicts with the rules and expectations set by others.”

Adolescents who suffer from mental-health problems – such as anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, or insomnia – are at higher risk of suicidal thoughts. Teens going through major life changes (divorce, moving, immigration, parental separation, and financial changes) and those who are bullied are also at greater risk of suicidal thoughts.

Hanson said there were certain things that may increase the risk of suicide amongst adolescents, namely a

psychological disorder such as depression, bipolar disorder, and drug and alcohol use; feelings of distress, irritability, or agitation; feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness; a previous suicide attempt; a family history of depression or suicide; physical, emotional or sexual abuse; lack of a support network; poor relationships with parents or peers and feelings of social isolation; struggling with their gender identity and/or sexuality in an unsupportive family or community; and bullying.

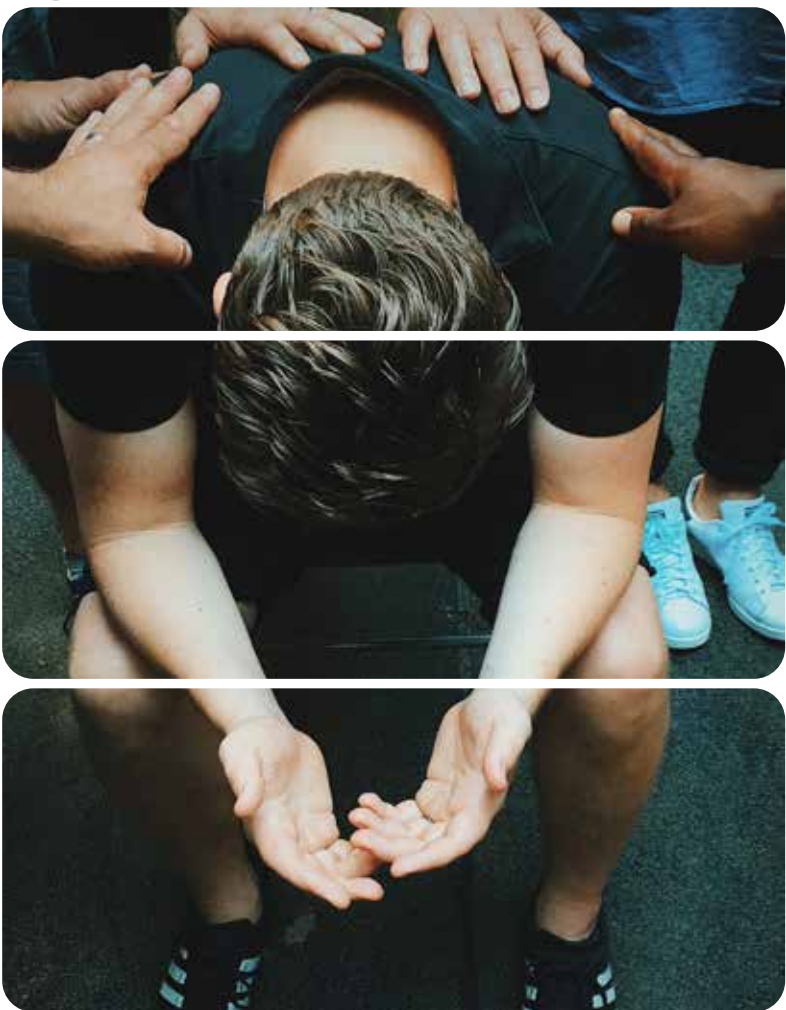
Experts stress the need for parents to keep the lines of communication open.

“Express your concern, support, and love. If your teen confides in you, show that you take those concerns seriously,” said Hanson.

“A fight with a friend might not seem like a big deal to you, but for a teen, it can feel immense and consuming. Don’t minimise or ignore what your teen is going through as this can increase their sense of hopelessness. If your teen doesn’t feel comfortable talking to you, suggest a more neutral person such as a relative, therapist, or school counsellor,” she said.

Johannesburg psychologist David Abrahamsohn said, “Tragically, more and more teens are acting out on suicidal feelings. Our community certainly isn’t immune from this trend.”

“What leads a teen to feel suicidal is often a complex interaction of individual experiences and feelings. COVID-19 has exacerbated an already difficult time in human development for teens. They are still dealing with the negative after effects of isolation and loss they experienced during the pandemic. Their parents and



caregivers are under increasing financial and emotional stress themselves, which has created emotional instability in many households,” Abrahamsohn said.

So, what can parents do to help?

“It all comes down to offering connection and communicating with their teens, even if it’s rejected at times. Teenagers need to feel that their parents are available even while they’re

developing a sense of independence,” said Abrahamsohn.

“I often find that parents of teens are reluctant to talk to them about suicide due to the misconception that this could somehow encourage self-harming behaviour,” he said.

Hanson advises parents not to shy away from the discussion.

“Don’t be afraid to use the word

‘suicide,’” she said. “Never shrug off the threats of suicide as teen melodrama. If your teen is talking about suicide, it needs to be taken seriously. Ask your teen about their feelings, and listen without being dismissive or judgemental. Reassure them of your unconditional love, and remind them that whatever they are going through, you’re there to help. Seek help from a professional for both you and your teen. Discourage isolation, and encourage your teen to spend less time on social media and more time with supportive friends and family,” she said.

“Understanding depression in teens is important because it can look different to commonly held beliefs about depression,” Abrahamsohn said. “It may take the form of irritability rather than sadness.”

While it’s important to respect teens’ privacy, Hanson points out that equally important is to monitor social-media use. “Social media is the teen platform for communication, so it certainly cannot be banned, however it can also expose teens to bullying, rumour spreading, unrealistic views of people’s loves, and peer pressure. If your teen is feeling hurt or upset because of messages or posts, encourage them to speak to a trusted teacher or school counsellor.”

Abrahamsohn said there should be more programmes to train and empower people outside of the healthcare system to identify teens at risk. “This includes teachers, coaches, and teens themselves. Teens need to be trained how to identify and respond to a friend in crisis. Not all of our suicide-prevention efforts should be done at the point of crisis. Prevention is really a team effort.”

## Jewish roots lost and found in South Africa

TALI FEINBERG

Edith Henderson (née Phillips) grew up in the southern suburbs of Cape Town never knowing that her great-grandparents were Jewish. Now living in London, she has finally uncovered the fact that her Jewish grandfather came to South Africa from England, where somewhere along the way, the link to Judaism was lost, until she uncovered her grandfather’s name and past in January 2023.

Her own father died when she was 16, and with him, any link to his Jewish past. Henderson herself wasn’t raised Jewish, and it was never mentioned that her father’s father and grandparents had been Jewish. All that remained was family lore that her grandfather used to joke that he was “a London Jew”.

Writing on the Facebook group Jewish Genealogy Portal on 10 January 2023, Henderson said, “I’m 69 and living in the UK. I was born and schooled in Cape Town. I recently established that my grandfather had a Jewish burial in Durban, South Africa. I wasn’t raised in the Jewish faith, so this was news to me when researching the paternal side of my family.

“I have limited knowledge of the Jewish faith and practices, and I’m struggling to establish what his name would have been on his birth certificate,” she wrote.

“According to his death notice, his Hebrew name was Hirsch ben Avraham. Is there anyone that could guide me as to where and how I may find his birth certificate and Jewish name as I presume he may well not be Harry Phillips, as I knew him?”

Just four days later, Henderson shared an update, thanking people for their help, saying, “I’m overwhelmed. I received a copy of my grandfather’s birth certificate on Friday, and admit to shedding a few tears.” In particular, Patricia Wilson from Israel helped her to track down documents in record time.

Henderson found out that her grandfather was born Henry (called Harry) Philips on 18 May 1891 to Arthur Philips and Henrietta Fulda. “They had a Jewish marriage

in Islington, London, in 1889. Arthur died in 1895 aged 33. My grandfather was four years old, and an only child. At some stage after 1911, he and his mother arrived in South Africa. Henrietta died in Johannesburg in 1936.”

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* from London, Henderson says she’s amazed at the assistance she received from all over the world. She has a big family on her maternal side, and has researched that family tree, but only recently decided to delve into her paternal side. Both her own father and his father died young, and the family was small, so information was difficult to come by.

When Henderson battled to find birth and death certificates, she decided to take the “London Jew” joke to heart and look at Jewish genealogy website JewishGen. It was there that she discovered his death notice, saying he lived in Durban, died at Addington Hospital, and was buried at Stellawood cemetery in Durban. His birth certificate showed that he was born Jewish. She also discovered his parents’ marriage authorisation, possibly their ketubah, which was “a revelation”.

She has now pieced more of her grandfather’s life together. He grew up in a 10-bedroom house in North



Raymond Phillips (front) and family members



Edith Henderson (née Phillips)

London which his mother turned into a boarding house after his father died. He came to South Africa at the age of 19, possibly to “seek his fortune” or escape anti-Jewish sentiment. His mother remarried Herbert Marks, who was a mining engineer. They travelled together, and both later died in Johannesburg. “My grandfather was there as he signed the death notice for his mother,” she says.

Her grandfather was an insurance salesman. He had four children. Henderson’s father, Raymond David Phillips, was the eldest, born in East London in 1918. At some point, Raymond added an extra L to his name, which Henderson inherited. Another child, Herbert Terence Philips, was born in East London, where he lived and died. Henderson’s grandfather had two more children, possibly with another woman named Catherina Maas – Daphne Philips and Harry Lionel Philips, who have both since died. Henderson has since connected with Daphne’s family.

Henderson, meanwhile, grew up in Cape Town and attended Westerford School, where she had many Jewish friends. In fact, some of her closest friends are Jewish. Yet, she never suspected that she had Jewish roots. She later married a British man, returning to England where the story began. Both her siblings remain in South Africa, and she visits the country regularly.

But one mystery remains: the identity of her father’s mother – her grandmother. She doesn’t have a name or any information about this woman, who has been lost to history, and she hopes the Jewish community around the world can help her search for her.

• To contact Edith Henderson, email [edithhend@aol.com](mailto:edithhend@aol.com)



# KZN’s last Holocaust survivor leaves legacy of love and inspiration

SAUL KAMIONSKY

The last remaining Holocaust survivor in KwaZulu-Natal, anti-apartheid activist Carmela Heilbron, passed away on the night of 12 January in Durban.

Heilbron and her mother were the only Holocaust survivors in their immediate family. Her grandparents, father, and two brothers were murdered.

After World War II, Heilbron settled in South Africa, where she became politically active in the anti-apartheid movement and was jailed several times for her activism. She was also professionally involved in early childhood education outreach projects.

Steven, her son, speaking at her funeral on 15 January, said, “She could love like nobody could love. She will always be in our hearts, and her hugs will last much longer than from the moment that she let go.

“Take a good look at what’s happening around you. Don’t ever turn around and say it’s not there because it’s not affecting you,” Heilbron once said, according to a testimony from the Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centre (DHGC), prepared for a publication in *Survivor Stories* volume one.

Heilbron (née Hayman) couldn’t be sure of her exact birthdate. It could have been anywhere from 1938 to 1940. She was probably born in Lithuania. Her first clear memories began around the age of seven. “I didn’t remember. I elected not to remember. This is the story as it was told to me.”

As a child, Heilbron grew up in the Kovno ghetto, established by Nazi Germany to hold the Lithuanian Jews of Kaunas during the Holocaust. At its peak, the ghetto held 29 000 people, most of whom were later sent to concentration and extermination camps or were shot at the Ninth Fort stronghold in Kaunas.

Heilbron remembered very little except sleeping with her sister and grandmother like sardines on the floor. She knew her mother was with them at that time, but couldn’t recall her face.

Dr Elchanan Elkes, the head of the *Âltestenrat* (council of elders)

in the Kovno ghetto, helped to create a scheme to smuggle out young children from the ghetto with the help of the Catholic Church. Heilbron’s mother managed to smuggle her daughter out of the ghetto in this way.

“The smallest children [got] an injection. Then they arranged to drop these children into a sack and into a cart as if it was waste,” Heilbron recalled. “I was the first child put over the wall [in this way] and taken to a Catholic safe house.”



Heilbron spent the following years protected by a group of Catholic nuns and priests. They were constantly on the move to avoid detection by the Nazis. She remembered once being hidden inside a pit toilet during a Nazi raid of the convent. As a result, she was left with “a whole lot of fanatical hang-ups” about being clean. For example, for years she was unable to use a public toilet without wearing a mask. “Growing up, I had some very strange habits,” she said.

The nuns handed Heilbron over to the Red Cross at the end of the war. She was adopted by her father’s friend and colleague, Dr Max Levin. Eventually, her mother, who had survived the Auschwitz concentration camp, regained her strength, and began searching for her child. However, when she finally located Heilbron, Levin wouldn’t give her up. Heilbron’s mother arranged with a Jewish underground group to kidnap her from the Levin family.

“Although I hadn’t seen her probably since I was two, I just knew it was my mother and I was related

to her.” Once Heilbron was reunited with her mother and sister, they made their way to Tanzania to start a new life as the only survivors of their immediate family. “Nobody talks about [my grandparents, father, and two brothers who were murdered in the Holocaust]. My aunt told me about them, but my sister refuses to talk about them,” she said.

Heilbron said she felt she never really knew her mother. Once living in the safety of Tanzania, she believed her mother returned mentally to Auschwitz. She lived with dementia for seven years until her death. She thought her daughter was a *kapo*, an inmate of a Nazi camp appointed as a guard. “If I walked into the room, she would get up and huddle under the bed,” Heilbron said.

Heilbron eventually settled in Durban, where she met and married her husband, Lew. The couple had two children, Steven and Mandy. Although she opened up to members of the local community about her story, she gave her testimony on camera only in 2008 because “I didn’t regard myself as a survivor,” she said.

Through a connection in the Durban community, she was reunited with the other girls the nuns had protected. They had been searching for her for 40 years, and Heilbron met them in London. “They knew more about me than I knew about myself.” This group of survivors succeeded in having the priest and the nuns who had rescued them recognised at Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

In 2008, Heilbron became a guide at the emerging DHGC. She went on to become a stalwart volunteer at the centre, working there until 2014. She was central to the team and integral in all the centre’s programmes. She made a profound impact on visitors, particularly high school students, when sharing her testimony.

“Today I learnt a lot of things, but what moved me the most was a survivor story of Carmela Heilbron and how courageous she was,” said one of the hundreds of students who

had the privilege of spending time with Heilbron. “After trauma, she dedicated her life to helping others.”

Heilbron constantly reminded visitors to the centre what her mother had told her. “No matter what people take from you, they cannot take away your education.”

“The important message is to take action. Speak up, because when you don’t speak up, it just compounds itself into a hideous situation,” Heilbron said.

Heilbron suffered another tragedy when her daughter, Mandy, passed away at the age of 36.

Speaking at his mother’s funeral,

Steven said, “When I reflect on my mom, I think of three things. She used to say to me, ‘Climb the mountain to see the world, but not so the world can see you.’ That was reflective of her selflessness. My mom was incredibly dedicated to her children, husband, faith, the Jewish people, and Jewish identity.

“The other thing she used to tell me is, ‘There’s no great gain without great sacrifice.’ This is something I’ve probably taken too seriously in my own life, but it was a guiding light for us as kids. Lastly, she used to say, ‘You live and die through your Jewish identity.’”

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# The art of living after children leave home

GILLIAN KLAWSKY

Now what? It's a question many parent asks when their children fly the nest. Empty nesters often have to navigate loss, loneliness, and relationship transitions before building renewed hope for what comes next.

For Michele Benatar, having her two children move out in the space of a year and a half was initially a shock to the system. "I felt bereft and empty," she says. "I lost my mom when I was very young, so for me, it also triggered feelings of abandonment." Though she works full-time and has diverse interests and hobbies, Benatar knew she had to find new meaning.

Running her business alone at home all day, when her daughter had previously worked alongside her completing her online studies, was particularly jarring. With her husband having always worked long hours, getting through the day became a battle. "There were times I thought, what's the point?" she says. "I wanted to walk into the ocean and drown myself. And I had to fight it every day."

Suddenly having an empty nest also means you start questioning the state of your marriage, Benatar says. "When you're married with children, they become your focus and meaning while you're trying to make a living and pay the bills. The relationship with your spouse takes a backseat to these priorities."

Registered counsellor Dorit Israelsohn stresses the need to build a marriage that goes beyond your kids. Though some couples may become closer when the kids leave, the converse can also be true. "Many couples feel that they are almost strangers once the kids leave home, especially those who have made them the entire focus of their relationship. To prepare for this, couples should nurture their marriage all the time, even when the kids are at home."

Your relationship with the kids also changes when they leave, says Benatar. "You've got to respect their space and the fact that they don't need you so much anymore. It's also about how you renegotiate that relationship amidst changing expectations about how often they'll call you, when they're going to pop in, and so on."

Benatar decided to be proactive about dealing with her feelings of emptiness. "I do gym, ballet, flamenco dancing, and singing so after work, I'd throw myself into these hobbies." Benatar also drew strength from giving back and working on her relationship with G-d, both of which have always been important to her.

After a wonderful holiday with her husband, Benatar sees this year as a fresh start. "It's about focusing on gratitude for what you've got," she says. "There are things you have limited control over, but you can control how you cope with change and decide to be solution oriented. Ultimately, the fact that your kids leave home and are functional, contributing people in the world is positive. It means you've done your job."

David Levin\* agrees, but admits that handling the transition after the last of his four children recently left home was challenging. "There's a finality to it which is difficult, they won't be coming back, especially my children who have made aliya. I find it particularly hard on Friday nights as it's special having the family together. There's also a certain vibe when your kids live at home, they're laughing and rushing down the stairs, and that's gone. But you have to put your children before yourself."

As a father, he says he found his only



daughter's move to Israel after matric particularly hard. "I think it's about fathers and daughters," he says. "You feel like you want to protect your daughter for the rest of your life." Though you know and support the fact that your kids will leave one day, it comes suddenly, and you and your spouse need to adapt as the reality hits and you realise it's just the two of you.

"You can't live for your children. You're not meant to. We need to instil independence in our kids from a young age and teach them to make informed decisions. Parents aren't here to make their

kids feel guilty for leaving. It's their life, although you're always there for support and guidance."

"While parenting is a lifelong commitment, we need to be aware that there are different phases within this role and be mindful of how we can adjust to each of these," says Roxane Slom, a clinical psychologist in private practice. "It's important to have a holistic sense of self that extends beyond the role of parent."

We must acknowledge, normalise, and process the pain, loss, and sadness as well as the potential conflicting emotions that come with empty nest syndrome, says Slom. Often parents must navigate and process the five stages of grief, she says. "Practical ways to deal with empty nest syndrome include finding ways to keep busy, creating new routines, staying connected, and finding a new purpose."

Emma Kahn\*, a single mom of two boys, will become an empty nester this year. Though she didn't miss the mess and chaos

when her sociable younger son moved out in September, confronting her new reality and quiet house was strange. Yet, there are some perks, she laughs. "When I visit him, I get served and spoilt, not the other way around."

Her immediate concern is finding new accommodation as her older son – who shares rental costs – moves out. "My long term worry is loneliness," she says. "I'm not afraid of being on my own, as I've always managed. I'm just unsure how I'll feel coming home to silence as my son and I usually offload our days to one another."

Kahn says she's not sure if, as a single parent, she'll feel the transition more acutely. "Some couples are in the same house but are unhappy and noncommunicative. I know I'll feel a great deal of pride that I did it singlehandedly with no support from my ex, and have two awesome, well-adjusted boys."

*\*Names have been changed*

## Game for kosher: entrepreneurs give travellers a big-five experience

GILLIAN KLAWSKY

Armed with the belief that keeping kosher need not limit one's travels, a small but flourishing safari industry is dedicated to offering kosher dining to tourists exploring Africa and beyond.

From interacting with gorillas in Rwanda to witnessing the great migrations through the Serengeti, these kosher safari tour operators not only provide gourmet kosher cuisine, they also design unforgettable travel experiences.

Doron Gavronsky, Rabbi Yoni Isaacson, and Chanan Green are part of this burgeoning industry.

By 2024, chef and entrepreneur Gavronsky aims to open at least 50 Beth Din certified kitchens in safari lodges across the continent. Gavronsky started what he believed to be the first in-house private-chef hiring service in the Jewish community in 2015 after training as a chef and working in hotels.

His chef hiring business grew from offering meal preparations in private homes to catering for small *simchas* and then started offering kosher safaris within Africa. "Two operators began contacting us to cater privately for their Beth Din certified tours," Gavronsky says. Soon, he and his chefs were spending most of the month catering safaris across the continent, allowing for once-in-a-lifetime travel experiences.

"In 2021, we launched a kosher safari company," says Gavronsky. This is now also a travel agency which creates bespoke kosher safari experiences in Africa, providing a full service offering for local and international holidaymakers. In addition to a private chef, optional extras include a medic and security team who travel with clients throughout their stay.

**MY DREAM ONE DAY IS TO OPEN A FULLY KOSHER LODGE UNDER THE BETH DIN.**

Over the past two years, his agency, Kosher Africa, has certified four permanent Beth Din kosher kitchens in luxury lodges throughout South Africa including Ivory Tree Lodge in the Pilanesberg and Tintswalo

Family Camp at Welgevonden in Limpopo. They also negotiate directly with any lodge that clients wish to visit, working to organise pop-up kosher certified kitchens.

Gavronsky works with an increasing number of lodges, offering them the chance to attract more international clientele by appealing to the largely untapped kosher market. "The lodges will do whatever it takes to have kosher guests come into their properties," he says. "Some have even paid for brand new equipment just so guests can have kosher catering at their properties."

Gavronsky, 30, encourages other young entrepreneurs to find a niche, regardless of how

Kosher Safaris, Rabbi Yoni Isaacson, spent many a school holiday driving around the great national parks of Zimbabwe with his father, the late anti-apartheid activist Rabbi Ben Isaacson, who at the time served as a rabbi in that country. It was then, at the age of 12, that Isaacson was first overwhelmed by the Victoria Falls and the great wildlife of the African bush.

safari and other travel experiences, Isaacson says high-end kosher travellers are no longer prepared to take, "whatever kosher pre-prepared food a hotel can come up with".

"They can and do expect equal treatment to non-kosher five-star guests, and with us, they get it." At the top end of the market for global kosher travel and within the safari space, his company draws on 21 years of experience in catering primarily to the international market, he says.

He believes there's nothing more one could ask for in a job. "I get to see Hashem's incredible wildlife and nature, and meet some of his wonderful people as our guests and staff."

Israeli-South African Chanan Green launched a business in 2013 to cater for the Torah-observant tourist, arranging their entire trip and providing three gourmet kosher *le'mehadrin* meals a day.

Offering both public and private safari tours in South Africa and in Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, his company, Glatt Safaris, also offers an immersive religious experience, arranging *minyans* and unique Shabbat experiences.

Passionate about travel and Torah, Green found his calling when he organised a safari trip for Israeli relatives and experienced the limitations of providing glatt kosher meals. Mindful of meeting this need and catering to budgetary constraints while maintaining high standards, Green started Glatt Safaris.

"People have already gone to a lot of countries, especially places in Europe," he says speaking of the appeal of bush holidays. "Now they want to go to more unique places that they've never been to like Africa, where they can be in nature." Providing gourmet kosher food makes such trips even more appealing to observant Jewish tourists who enjoy luxury travel, especially Americans and those with strong currencies.

"All of our clients are happy," says Green. "Seeing them enjoy the food and holiday experience is why I love what I do." He's also grateful to be able to work with his wife, who joins him for part of the tours.

Green says that to make a living in the kosher safari industry, you need to be dedicated to it. "If you're not doing only that, it's not going to work," he cautions.



Doron Gavronsky

small they think it may be. "There's massive demand for kosher travel in Africa," he says. "You can't always look at how small the kosher market here may be, you need to target areas around the world – the market is much bigger than you think." He's driven by a desire to ensure that people eat kosher, no matter where they may be.

"I fly with clients and do the catering for them – we do fine dining with three-course plated dinners, ensuring that our clients get good value for money," Gavronsky says. In spite of their best efforts, flying kosher meat from South Africa into certain African countries is sometimes too challenging, in which case guests are served fish or vegetarian meals.

"Seeing different African cultures and how they live sustainably off the land has been amazing," says Gavronsky, speaking of how travel has enriched his life. "The founder and chief executive of Gourmet

Years later, in 2001, he began delving into the kosher safari space. His company, initially named Africa Kosher Safaris, soon made its name as a leader in luxury kosher eco-tourism. "Love of the bush, nature, and sharing it with people was my initial inspiration," says the Johannesburg-born Isaacson. "I was a young, passionate teaching rabbi at the time and had already done many non-commercial trips for my own students."

Later expanding into East Africa and then beyond the continent, the company began its international journey and so, Gourmet Kosher Safaris was born. Today, it offers packages and customised tours in southern and East Africa as well as globally from South America to Australia and New Zealand, Europe to India.

To manage global operations, Isaacson oversees a unique team of logistics experts, guides, kosher chefs, and *mashgichim*. African safaris and tours are supervised by the Johannesburg Beth Din. "A few lodges have existing kosher kitchens, but usually we need to *kasher* the kitchen or part of it – we store equipment all over the world," he says.

Discussing the growing appeal of kosher



# The artist who paints walls and breaks boundaries

TALI FEINBERG

South African-born Ricky Lee Gordon may have started painting murals at Habonim machaneh in Onrus many years ago, but in December 2022, at the invitation of the United Nations (UN), he painted a giant mural on a building in Houston, Texas.

This self-taught artist, who also painted the 10-storey mural of Nelson Mandela shadow boxing on a building in downtown Johannesburg, has travelled a long journey from being a child who battled at school.

He has painted buildings around the world, given lectures and taught classes, revolutionised spaces and brands, and worked with underprivileged communities.

His work graces walls in Ukraine, the United States, Belgium, Croatia, Sicily, Greece, Russia, Germany, Finland, Italy, Bali, Istanbul, Malaysia, Kathmandu, Norway, India, and Johannesburg. He has been featured on the BBC and *National Geographic* alongside world-famous graffiti artist Banksy.

Yet, when he was at school, he was made to stay back a year and was seen as a “bad student”. Now, he understands that “everyone learns differently” and that “kids need space to step up to their potential. Every kid has potential.”

He found his calling in “painting nature with nature”, using paint and charcoal that he makes himself with natural materials like from the trees hanging over his houses in Sri Lanka and Bali.

Titled *Save our Oceans*, the UN mural was created by Gordon and curated by Street Art for Mankind.

“I’m passionate about the sea,” Gordon says. “I scuba-dived around the world for 15 years and I’m a surfer. I conceptualised the idea of the ocean as ‘our teacher, our healer, our life’ [which is inscribed alongside the image]. I hope it makes a difference.

“The mural is for and inspired by UN Sustainable Development Goal 14 and the UN Decade of Ocean Sciences to reverse the decline in ocean health and catalyse transformative ocean-science solutions for sustainable development, connecting people and our ocean,” he says. “It highlights the beauty and fragility of life below [the surface of the] water, bringing together the ocean, majestic whales, and humans. It’s an inspired collaboration with underwater photography from Natalie Karpushenko.”

The mural, depicting whales and people echoing each other in form and colour, required artists to go up on cranes to paint. It covers a 6m x 10m storey wall, and took “nine solid days” to paint.

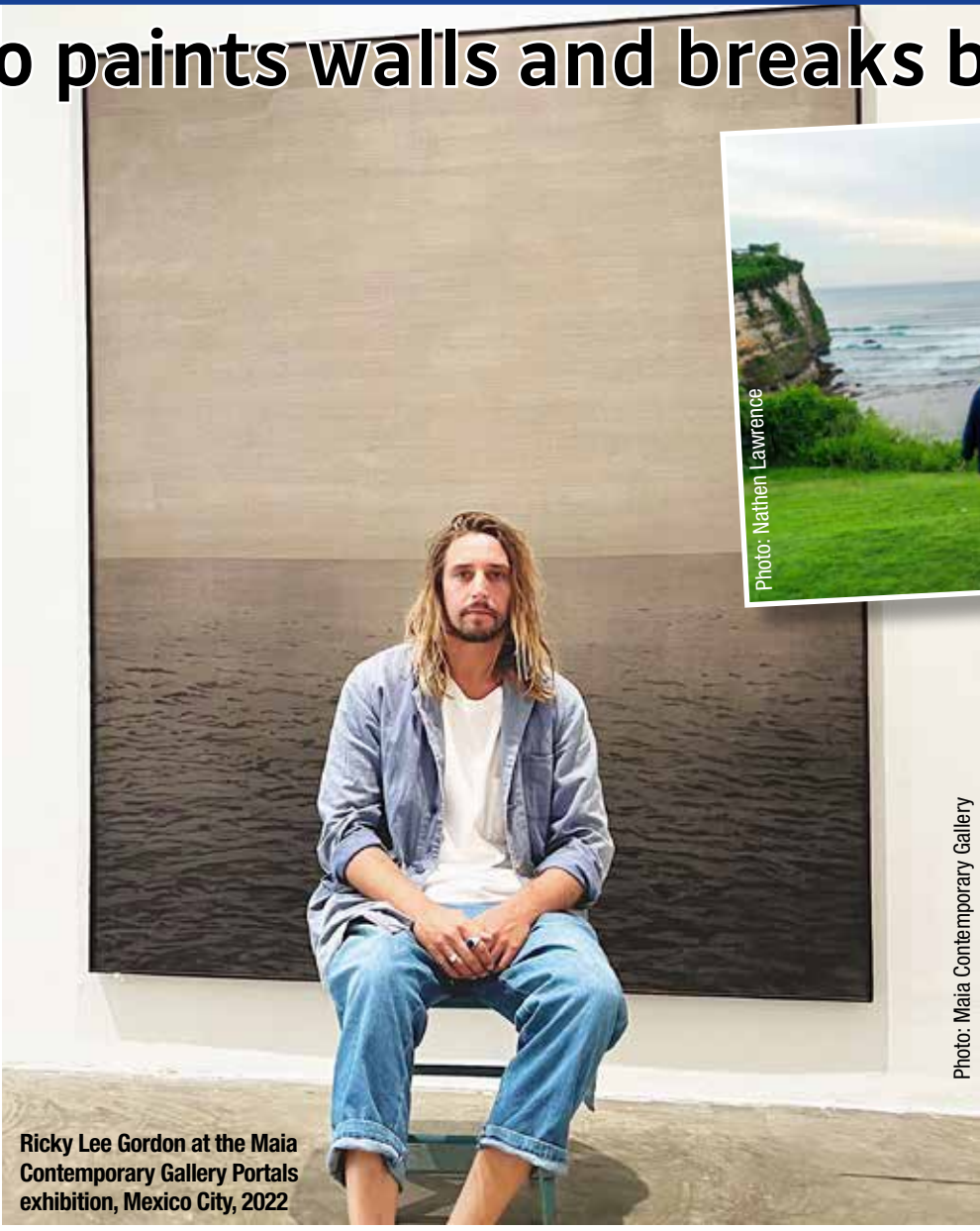
“The choice of the humpback whale is also a vivid reminder of the role of humans as a primary source of mortality for these endangered giants. By 1985, 95% of their population had disappeared due to commercial whaling. Today they are still threatened,” says Gordon.

“Art isn’t a luxury like we’ve been taught,” he says. “It’s a language, an emotion, a way to communicate, and more than that, a way to feel. Art is meant to be seen and felt.”

In fact, Gordon almost never became an artist. After excelling at rugby at school, he could have gone into that world. “It was actually at Habonim machaneh that I realised I would rather put my passion and creativity into art than into a 45-minute rugby game. Habonim allowed me to be creative. It was the education I needed as I’m an experiential learner. I drew a line in the sand, then and there, and decided to focus my energy on creative pursuits.”

He also got his education on the streets of Johannesburg, in street culture and graffiti. His creative alter ego, Freddy Sam – his two grandfathers’ names combined – is a forever-young idealist.

But looking back, Gordon realised it was at home where it all started. “My mother taught art classes to



Ricky Lee Gordon at the Maia Contemporary Gallery Portals exhibition, Mexico City, 2022

kids in our garage. She would say that everyone is an artist, it depends how much you want to bring it out. I never attended those classes – I thought I was too cool. But I now use that philosophy, teach it, and share that idea. Only later in life did it make sense to me.”

Born in Wendywood in 1984, Gordon remembers “playing on the streets on my bike and skateboard, interacting with people commuting from Alexandra to Sandton. I remember the hustle and bustle, engaging with everyday people. But then the area was gated and the interactions stopped.” Experiences like that had a profound impact on him, and in many ways, he’s never stopped searching for that sense of community and connecting with people from all walks of life.

This longing has led him to travel to more than 50 countries, and he has called many places home. Though he has studied at formal education institutions, including winning a scholarship to study classical painting at the Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art, his university has always been the world, its people, and nature.

Gordon started his career by founding his “Muthaland” clothing label on a gap year in London. Realising that the world had “no idea of South African culture”, he sought to use clothing to promote South African art, music, and street life to the international market. The brand was bought by Soviet, backing Gordon at just 18 years of age. But eventually, Gordon bought the brand back, as he felt it was no longer promoting his vision.

Returning to South Africa, he assisted companies with murals to promote their brands and organised the first legal mural in the country. He then created the /A WORD OF ART gallery and artist residency in Woodstock, and the Colour Ikamva school rejuvenation project, allowing youth in underprivileged communities to design their own spaces, take ownership of them, and paint them.

Hosting events for the FIFA World Cup and Adidas followed, as did awards, recognition, and corporate work. But Gordon felt the commercial space never aligned with his goals, and decided to return to focusing on his own art and uplifting others.

It was at this time that he started travelling and painting around the globe. He discovered Buddhism and meditation, which had a profound effect on him, and he even spent two months in a Sri Lankan monastery, living with monks. He eventually made

homes in Bali and Sri Lanka.

“While in Sri Lanka, I got fed up with oil paint, because it would get mouldy, and it was a three-hour drive to the art store. So I made my own charcoal



Ricky Lee Gordon with his work at an art residency at Ulluwatu Surf Villas in Bali

Photo: Nathan Lawrence

Photo: Maia Contemporary Gallery

from the tree hanging over my house. It became more about the matter and material rather than the outcome of the painting, which changed everything for me.” He began to work with other natural materials and on one subject: the ocean.

He’s now working with other local artists in Bali to build an artists’ village, which will include a natural dye house, a ceramics studio, a wood carving shed, a gallery, a space for events, a community garden for locals, and art classes for local kids. It will be about “adding to the Indonesian cultural landscape instead of taking from it”, Gordon says.

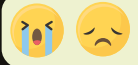
This year, he has exhibitions in Mexico, Singapore, Tokyo, Lisbon, France, and Bali. These will be interactive experiences with music, food, and discussion. His advice to aspiring artists is to “work really hard, practice discipline, and master techniques. Someone who has mastered something has failed more times than an amateur. Find meaning in your work.”

He’s grateful to have grown up in South Africa, especially at a time of transition. “It made me more sensitive, and to want to make a difference. Let your children explore past the walls.”

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# As Holocaust survivors dwindle, grandchildren keep stories alive

STEVEN GRUZZ

There are just 12 known Holocaust survivors still alive in Johannesburg, a handful in Cape Town, and none left in Durban. Almost all were children during World War II, and the youngest living survivor in Johannesburg is now 85. In just a few years, there will be no-one left to bear direct witness to the horrors of the period of Nazi rule in Europe from 1933 to 1945. Now, the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC) is launching an initiative to convene the grandchildren of survivors to help keep their grandparents’ stories alive.

Many Holocaust survivors found it too difficult to talk about their experiences to their children, wanting to shield them from trauma and devastation. Others, however, constantly talked about what happened to them – perhaps to excess – with their children.

“We’ve tried to get second-generation descendants together, but it has been challenging,” said Shirley Sapire, the JHGC’s office manager. “They are *gatvol* of the Holocaust from their parents. It was very heavy. But the third and fourth generations are asking questions, recognising that their grandparents have limited time. And the grandparents seem to find it easier to talk to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren – it’s a bit removed.”

Sapire explained that a survivor is considered to be anyone affected by the Holocaust from 1933 to 1945, not exclusively people who were imprisoned in concentration camps or death camps.

She said the work of filmmaker Steven Spielberg to document survivors’ testimony on video worldwide is invaluable. Technology has been harnessed to develop holograms of

Photo: JHGC



Holocaust survivor Israel Gurwicz with his granddaughter Courtneigh Bernstein

survivors, who can interact with people in real-time, using algorithms to answer almost any question asked. In Auschwitz, visitors can wear headgear that allows a virtual reality “survivor” to walk around the camp with them.

But technology cannot substitute for interaction with real people, Sapire said. “First-hand testimony has by far the most impact. That won’t be possible soon; most survivors are already gone. So we’re hoping the younger generations will get more involved in the JHGC and keep telling their grandparents’ stories. Ideally, we’d like them to volunteer at the centre and be able to guide visitors.”

Like its sister centres in Cape Town and Durban, the JHGC’s permanent exhibition is built around the stories of those who lived in the city after the war. This group will hopefully

bring together young people with similar backgrounds, many with relatives featured in the museum.

“We want this group to be run by young people”, Sapire said, while the JHGC will provide any support needed in terms of venues, contacts, and speakers. “We have to find ways to get through to younger generations – young people relate to other young people well, including through memes and social media platforms like TikTok.”

Similar groups have been launched in London and Cape Town (the latter by Leora Hessen and Stacy Closenbergy).

“We need someone passionate to drive this. We’re hoping to have a small, committed support group, just like the group we run for survivors themselves,” Sapire said.

## Band plays on for music legend Benny Michel

SAUL KAMIONSKY

Former musical director Benny Michel, who will turn 100 this year, is a legend in his own lifetime.

Although he’s now battling health issues, his name will go down in history as synonymous with Jewish entertainment in the South African Jewish community.

“Benny lived for music, the functions, the people, and the buzz,” says Estelle Ash of her Johannesburg-based dad whose musical career spanned more than 50 years.

“Very few musicians alive of Benny’s era didn’t play in one of his bands. He was a legend,” says Les Markowitz, who played as a drummer in Michel’s band for three years, starting in 1969.

Performer and studio owner Jonathan Birin says, “He was like the front runner, the leader of our industry. If you could get Benny Michel to perform at your wedding, you were guaranteed to have a great wedding.”

Caterer Stan Smookler (aka “Stan the Good Shabbos Man”) says he worked with Michel at close to 100 functions. “He was a lovely guy. He had it hard,” Smookler says.

Michel, a self-taught musician, was born in a small shtetl in Lithuania on 1 October 1923. The eldest of his parent’s three children, he was stricken with polio when he was 11 weeks old.

“He firmly believes it was the socio-economic conditions in which he lived which contributed to him contracting poliomyelitis,” says Ash, who lives in Australia. Michel’s extended family of 17 occupied a mud-floored house which they shared with their cattle and goats. “But right until her death, Benny’s mother believed that he was the victim of the evil eye.”

In a desperate move to escape the Bolshevik uprising in 1927, the Michel family decided to emigrate to South Africa.

“They decided to come to ‘the land of gold’, and the family believed that the medical care in South Africa would be far better than in Lithuania,” Ash says. “The family arrived, and Benny spent the next 14 years in and out of hospital.”

To date, Michel has undergone more than 50 operations. “His whole life he was at war with his disability,” Ash says. “Due to his disability, he achieved so much and strived for perfection. He once said that perhaps in a bizarre way his affliction was a good thing because it often lifted him beyond himself.”

Michel was a Transvaal swimming champion during his school days. He was educated at Observatory East, Yeoville Boys, and Observatory Junior

High. He says he wasn’t a particularly good student but excelled in English and carpentry.

After leaving school, he trained as a manufacturing jeweller, and served his five-year apprenticeship, although he never worked in the profession, finding it too quiet and conservative. Music was always going to be his passion.

To while away the time during his hospital stays, Michel taught himself to play the harmonica.

Larry Adler, a global virtuoso at the harmonica, was visiting the Children’s Hospital when he heard Michel playing. Hearing Adler say, “You’re good enough to get even better” was encouraging for Michel.

“Joe Slovo’s dad gave him a mouth organ to practice on, and the rest is history,” Ash says. “Benny entered hundreds of talent contests which were held at various bioscopes on a Saturday. He won the lot. “Top dance band leaders took an interest in this youngster, and there was no good band at any time for whom Benny did not work at some time or other.” Michel’s dream was to form his own band. He did so at the age of 17, when he assembled a group of youngsters whose average age

called *Rozinkes mit Mandlen*, a collection of Jewish songs and lullabies. He recorded another seven LPs, two of which had international acclaim.

Markowitz joined Michel’s band in 1969, at a time when the latter would have around 16 bands performing on a Saturday night at different functions. “Benny comes from the old school. A total *menschl*! He ran his business on strict lines. It was difficult to employ anything up to 50 or 60 different musicians on a Saturday night at different venues. It was like a normal eight-to-five day job for him.

“Benny is a sensitive, compassionate man with an engaging sense of humour,” Ash says. “He landed a magnificent six-and-a-half-year broadcasting contract with the South African Broadcasting Corporation to do a live big band show called the *Sparletta Swing Shift*, which aired on Saturday nights.”

Michel basically performed at all the major functions in his day, Birin says. “I heard him play once. They were brilliant. Just watching the energy and the enjoyment of his bands, I wanted to do what he did.

“From him, I learnt that a good function comes first, money second. For him, the most important thing was ensuring that the bride and groom had their best day ever.”

In addition to weddings, Michel played at banquets, balls, cabarets, nightclubs, Barmitzvahs, birthdays, anniversaries, conventions, rallies, jazz recitals, and fundraising functions. He performed before royalty – including the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret when they toured South Africa in 1947.

In 2002, Michel released his autobiography, *Footnote to a Dream*, “a revealing, nostalgic story about a bittersweet life, one that he still lives today,” Ash says. “Benny was married to Becky for more than 60 years. Sadly, she passed away 11 years ago after a life dogged by ill health. He has three grandchildren and a great-grandson.”

Ash describes Michel as her hero and “the perfect dad”. “Being an only child, all that he ever wanted was for me to be happy. He taught me so many skills, as well as love and compassion. He always told me to not underestimate people because they looked different.”

“At the age of 87, Benny was diagnosed with breast cancer and needed a mastectomy. Today, he lives in an apartment in Killarney. His mind is superb. His keen sense of humour remains unchanged. It’s believed that Benny is one of the oldest surviving victims of poliomyelitis in the world.”



Benny Michel



Les Markowitz (centre) with Benny and Ritva Michel

was 16.

When World War II began, Michel landed a broadcasting contract and won a national contest almost simultaneously.

During the war, Benny formed a civilian “concert party” under the auspices of the YMCA, which entertained troops and did 450 concerts for six years, efforts for which he was awarded a medal by General Jan Smuts for “meritorious service to the war” by a civilian.

By 1957, Michal had recorded the first vinyl LP record in South Africa,



# Becoming Giti in a global hit series “no-one would watch”

PETA KROST

Award-winning Israeli actress Neta Riskin repeatedly turned down the chance to take on the role of Giti in *Shtisel* because she was no fan of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel. However, it took just one night reading the script for her to fall in love with this Israeli series, particularly the part of Giti.

So much so, she took it on believing that the show wouldn't attract much of an audience. She and the cast and crew were astonished that it became an international hit after being told, time and again, that few would watch it.

"I'm always shocked to hear people talking about *Shtisel*," she told an audience of Jewish journalists from around the world at the Jewish Media Summit in Jerusalem in December.

But, had the casting director not persisted, she would never have taken part in the show.

"Israel is a polarised society," Riskin said. "There's an eternal clash between religious and secular communities, and I belong to one side of the map, which is why I was so reluctant to take on this role."

Besides, she said, the idea of wearing "those wigs, those thick stockings, and full attire" to film through summer seemed like sheer madness. But she took it on because "it was the best script I had ever read".

"It may be about an ultra-Orthodox family in Mea Shearim in Jerusalem, but it's about human beings, not religion. The main themes are longing, greed, and restraining one's desires. The cultural restraints of the show make it artistically more interesting."

But learning to be Giti wasn't easy. She had a coach help her, and one of the first things Riskin asked was, "What should I believe in?" She was told it wasn't about belief, but how you live and behave.

The coach made Riskin demonstrate how she walked, only to be told that she "exists too much" in her walking, and needed to "minimise" herself.

Riskin asked questions about playing this mother of five whose husband leaves to work in Argentina to make some money and vanishes. She lives with rumours about him having an affair with a "goya" (non-Jewish woman), and fears he's lost his faith.

"[The coach] crushed me and my questions, telling me it was none of my business," recalled Riskin. "She told me anything that you will be asked from this day on, you will answer with only two words:



Neta Riskin talking at the International Jewish Media Summit in December 2022

"Baruch Hashem". This is your answer to any questions."

For Riskin, this wasn't easy, coming from a society in which she says, "We talk about everything. And if we aren't able to talk about it, we seek professional help from someone who will make us get those words out of our

you learn that she has a deep strength and mettle. "Giti won't be pitied by anyone, knowing well how to make the most of what she has, and can be threatening when things don't align with her will."

Riskin says that for thousands of years, stories were mostly about men who travelled the world on their adventures, fought wars, had love affairs, and came back to big home comings. The women in these stories waited at home for their return, and were passive, uninteresting characters. Lately, she says, we see more stories of women on adventures, but in *Shtisel*, this is flipped around. "Giti plays the woman waiting at home while the man is on his great adventure, but the focus is on her not him.

"So, Lippe (Giti's husband) goes on his adventures, having affairs, experiencing internal conflicts, and losing his religion," she says. "We just know shreds of information about it. We never know his real story because it was a script decision that his story wasn't the important one."

mouths. If that doesn't work, we either split or get divorced because we're unable to solve our problems with words.

"*Shtisel* is a show based on two people talking to each other and doing their best to say nothing. They hold everything deep inside. So *Shtisel* is based entirely on subtext."

What's also rare, she says, is that it is a series that became an international hit without any dead bodies, sex, or violence.

"Most people in this industry believed that it had nothing to draw an audience. We were told upfront by the channel's public-relations officer that she couldn't promote *Shtisel* because she had nothing to work with. So, *Shtisel's* entire success was through word of mouth and some good reviews. Even the fact that it was half in Yiddish was believed to be off-putting."

Riskin says that when you meet Giti, you see a woman who appears to be discarded and weak in having lost her husband, but



Neta Riskin as Giti Weiss (right), with *Shtisel* co-star Doval'e Glickman as Shulem Shtisel

So much so, that after not knowing his whereabouts for 11 episodes, Lippe comes back and wants to tell Giti what happened, but she refuses to listen to him.

When Riskin asked one of the writers why Giti does this, "He quoted Rabbi Nachman who apparently said, 'Searching for the truth is like peeling an onion. You take off layer after layer to find another layer and, in the end, all you are left with are tears. So what's it good for?'

"So, while not asking wasn't natural for me, I realised that by doing this, he doesn't get to own the narrative and there's only one version – Giti's – ensuring that she holds the power," says Riskin.

Not communicating verbally is just one of the restraints in *Shtisel*. There were more. "We can't touch each other. We can't sit in certain ways. We can't say certain things. These things charge the simplest story with conflict. The truth is that if it wasn't an Orthodox family, there would be no problem getting

and, while she's in an agonising labour, she listens to his voice.

With all their creativity, the belief persisted that *Shtisel* had no audience appeal. "It became a standing joke whenever one of us didn't like a scene we did because we had little budget or time to redo it. We even had T-shirts made about it."

Once the show aired, word got out, and people started watching and enjoying it. *Shtisel* went on to win every category at the Israeli Academy Awards. Even after that, the producer told the cast and crew not to expect too much because, she said, "It was a piece of art we did for ourselves." But its popularity grew and grew among young, old, secular, and ultra-Orthodox. "This is a phenomenon, because the ultra-Orthodox don't watch television, but they started to watch on their cell phones. It's unheard of that we consume the same cultural products, but it happened," says Riskin.

"In a very modest way, we managed to cross some kind of uncrossable bridge and engage each side in dialogue without words. This is *Shtisel's* biggest achievement in Israel."

As for attracting an international audience, Riskin says, "The more targeted you are in aiming the arrow to the heart, the more it reaches every heart in the room. *Shtisel* is authentic



The cast of *Shtisel*

divorced. No-one would have a problem studying what they wanted to or choosing to be an artist, or marrying the woman they love. The surrounding is what gives the story built-in conflict," Riskin says.

"But it's difficult not having physical contact, with very strict rules about showing affection and empathy."

She recalls the scene when she's giving birth, and how they had to be creative in showing Lippe's love for her when he couldn't be in the same room. So, she asks him to sing a song that will soothe her over the phone

in being about something specific. We didn't try and look or sound like anything else.

"People clearly want to see something they haven't seen before. Also, every character in *Shtisel* is flawed and, although they have the best intentions, what they do usually turns out badly. People identify with their intention, compassion, and goodwill on the way to disasters," Riskin says.

Even knowing about *Shtisel's* international success, Riskin was clearly astonished to find that everyone in the room of international journalists were fans of the series.

## Reaching the roof of Africa for good

STAFF REPORTER

Great Park Synagogue Rabbi Dovid Hazdan put reaching the Roof of Africa, Mount Kilimanjaro, on his bucket list many years ago. But it took finding a broader mission to help children with special needs to spur him on.

He's now in full training to master Kilimanjaro along with a local Friendship Circle group that he was invited to join recently. Friendship Circle is an international Chabad project in South Africa under the leadership of Rabbi Levi and Leah Lipskar.

"We all have mountains to climb and goals to reach – some have unique and extreme challenges," says Hazdan. "By embracing differences and volunteering our love, we can make a powerful

difference."

This *minyan* of climbers will begin hiking in the last week of February, taking a Torah with them. "We will read from it and please G-d, conclude a tractate of Talmud on the mountain to commemorate the *yahrzeit* of my beloved father – Rabbi Yisroel Hazdan."

Training has begun and Hazdan can be seen hiking with a loaded backpack up Munro Drive in Johannesburg at sunrise, and taking on the arduous Westcliff stairs.

• See how you can help by visiting: <https://www.teamfriendship.org/kilimanjaro/DovidHazdan>



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A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

## A helping hand in tragic times

As part of our ongoing efforts to assist the victims of the Boksburg explosion, last week, South African Jewish Board of Deputies National Director Wendy Kahn, and South African Union of Jewish Students (SAUJS) Chairperson Bethia Milner joined the Clive Mashishi Foundation and Fingertips of Africa at another funeral for those who lost their lives in the tragedy. This time, a grandmother and her 14-year-old granddaughter were buried, following a truly heart-breaking funeral service outside the home they had lived in. The granny, who had taken her two grandchildren to work as she felt it wasn't safe to leave them at home, was immediately killed in the explosion while the older granddaughter died rescuing her younger sibling. Our team assisted with the logistics around the funeral, and catered a lunch for the family and other mourners. I thank The Angel Network SA and all our other partners for enabling us to alleviate, if only in a small way, the grief and hardship caused by this terrible incident.

### Global recognition for SAUJS

SAUJS is one of the affiliate organisations with which we work especially closely. Over many years, we have partnered with it in numerous important areas, including combating antisemitism on campus, social-outreach projects, and democracy-building initiatives such as our pre-election #MakeUsCount campaigns. We were therefore especially delighted when SAUJS was presented late last year with the World Union of Jewish Students Israel Engagement Award for its “Heal over Hate” campaign, run in response to that year’s Israeli Apartheid Week. Through these

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

### ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner

campaigns, focused on fostering education, debate, and solutions, SAUJS has been able to counteract effectively the wholly one-sided, essentially negative vitriol of the radical anti-Israel lobby while at the same time ensuring that our university campuses continue to be spaces for diversity of opinion and civil debate. As the Board has regularly conveyed to its international counterparts, this strategy is something that Jewish students confronting similar such challenges everywhere could well benefit from. Hopefully, recognition of SAUJS by the leading global Jewish student body will help bring the lessons it has to teach student activists to a wider audience.

Last week, the Board participated in a planning meeting for the upcoming special preview of *I am Here*, an acclaimed documentary by local filmmaker Jordy Sank on the story of Cape Town Holocaust survivor Ella Blumenthal. The screening, which will take place at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre on 25 January, will include remarks by Holocaust education expert Paul Salmons, followed by a Q&A with the producer and director. Ella Blumenthal is an inspirational figure in our community. *I am Here* is a memorable record of her remarkable story of survival and resilience, and it has attracted large and enthusiastic audiences since its recent launch in Cape Town. To book your tickets directly with Ster-Kinekor, go to Special Film Preview: *I Am Here*.

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



## Just another day in the theatre of the absurd

And now for something completely different. Monty Python couldn't have scripted a week in the life of a South African any better. If the unrelenting heat wave wasn't bad enough and if Eskom's implementation of Stage 6 power cuts didn't already have half the country suffering increased stressed from load shedding anxiety disorder (LAD), news of a tiger being absent without leave (AWOL) on the streets of Johannesburg pushed us to the brink of insanity.

For a short while, the demand for Xanor (a common treatment for anxiety and panic disorders) at Dis-Chem outstripped that of Ozempic (a diabetic treatment that's in high demand after it was found to work wonders on weight loss) – no small matter.

Honestly, we live in a real-life *Holy Flying Circus*.

Sheba, the Walkerville tiger escaped on Saturday evening in search of her holy grail, after the fence to her enclosure was cut. At the time of writing, she hadn't been apprehended, but had apparently returned home for a brief visit in the early hours of Tuesday morning before heading out once again. No-one, it turns out, had thought to mend the enclosure, which adds more questions to an already long list.

Surely it would be prudent to mend the fence for when they recapture her? And why would anyone in Walkerville have thought it a good idea to keep a tiger as a pet?

Sheba had already attacked a dog (no, it's not my dog), and a person, who instead of being grateful for being shown the meaning of life, has already launched a court action against Sheba's owner. Apparently, it wasn't just a flesh wound.

It's in weeks like this that I pity the people of New Zealand. Not because

### INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



they're able to use all that electricity to their New Zealand hearts' desires or because they have a functioning and responsible government, but because of the sheer boredom of living in a place where nothing happens. Where everything works. And where day after mind-numbing day, month after month, season on season, and year on year, it remains the same.

As a news hound, I find it hard to imagine what they talk about on the media streets of Christchurch. What memes do they share with each other and what bonds them? Certainly, they don't speak of Sheba, mark themselves safe from the “Joburg lion”, or suffer from the crippling anxiety exacerbated by the lights remaining on when Eskom se Push says they should be off.

They don't have seals attacking bathers (they might), nor past presidents prosecuting current ones, or state capture, or potholes. They did have a prime minister who cycled to hospital to give birth, which she would be unlikely to have done if Sheba was around.

The past week in South Africa wasn't for sissies. It was as surreal as it was maddening. It was hot and dark. And there was danger on the street.

We don't know when load shedding will ease, and we don't know how the tiger story will end. What we do know is that there's unlikely ever to be a dull, ordinary, usual, boring day in this theatre of the absurd.

• Sheba the tiger has since been found and euthanised.

## ...back to reality



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SA teachers learn about Israeli environmentalism

"I've always heard about the land of milk and honey and finally, I got to taste it," said Ronnie Swanson, a play group teacher from Herzlia school in Cape Town during the JNF (Jewish National Fund) educators trip in December.

Twenty educators from across Jewish schools in South Africa joined a delegation to Israel run by Keren Kayemeth LeYisrael in partnership with JNF South Africa. The tour aims to give educators first-hand experience of Israel and greater understanding of the scope and cutting edge nature of the country's environmental initiatives. This exposure, which included many educational workshops, has a positive impact on South African schools and the country at large. This was the second group of educators sponsored on the trip in 2022.

The group travelled from north to south, and was astounded at the projects that it saw and experiences it had along the way. Highlights included a visit to the Iron Dome display and meeting the 19-year-old soldier who heads up that army base, as well as a visit to a Druze village to understand that Israeli Arabs fight



The South African delegation at Netiv Haasara – Wall of Peace (Gaza border)

in the Israel Defense Forces, as well as to experience their culture and cuisine. There was also a visit to the north to see the Hula Valley bird migration and to the south to see the desert blooming thanks to recycled, purified water from Israel's cities. The group visited many of the projects that have been sponsored by the South African Jewish

community through JNF SA like the Besor Reservoir and South African Memorial Forest. As there were many Christians in the delegation, the trip included a tour of the Christian quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. Educators had the opportunity to visit different educational institutions and to see creative and inspiring models of education ranging from educating children from troubled backgrounds, with special needs, and those close to the Gaza border, where the entire school is bomb-proof. Although they got very little sleep and walked more than they ever had before, the energy on the trip was electric and the bus rides were filled with excitement as teachers shared what moved them and how they planned to bring the excitement back into their classrooms in South Africa.

Yeshiva shines brightly on first day of 2023



Simone and Ariella Kahn

Yeshiva College was blessed with a magical first day of 2023 on Wednesday, 11 January. The sun was shining and the smiles of pupils and parents matched the day's brightness. Balloon arches and music provided the backdrop to what promises to be an exciting, fulfilling, and successful school year ahead.

Videtzky celebrates a nice 100



Robert Videtzky (front) with his family on his 100th birthday

Johannesburg resident Robert Videtzky celebrated his 100th birthday last month with his closest family and friends. Born during Chanukah in Malat, Lithuania, on 19 December 1922, Videtzky came to South Africa in 1936, and still speaks fluent Yiddish. He keeps himself up to date with the latest news and world events using Facebook. When asked the secret to his longevity, he says, "Be nice to everybody, and everybody will be nice to you."

Thursday 19 January

• The SA Jewish Report hosts webinar, "J'Accuse! – Lithuanian complicity in the Holocaust and its coverup." Time: 20:00. Register: bit.ly/jrlive144 or email editorial@sajewishreport.co.za

Sunday 22 January

• The Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre hosts a talk by Paul Salmons on *Remembering the Holocaust Through Personal Objects*. Time: 18:00. Contact: 021 462 5553 or admin@holocaust.org.za  
• Hatzolah will be running a blood drive. Time: 09:00 to 17:00. Venue: 29 Durham Street, Raedene. Register at www.linktr.ee/Hatzolah  
• The Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre hosts screening of *The Human Factor*. Time: 18:00. Donation: R100 (R80 for members). Contact: 087 188 1815 or hazel@rchcc.org.za

Thursday 26 January

• The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre hosts a talk by Paul Salmons on *Remembering the Holocaust Through Personal Objects*. Time: 18:30. Venue: 1 Duncombe Road, Forest Town. Contact: dowi@jhbholocaust.co.za



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