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Biden's new right-hand man has SA Jewish links

TALI FEINBERG

Just more than 30 years ago, a Jewish couple got married in Cape Town. The bride was Mary Menell and the groom, Jeffrey (Jeff) Zients. Nelson Mandela, a friend of the bride's South African Jewish family, was a guest. Now, Zients has been appointed United States President Joe Biden's new White House chief of staff, and Menell Zients is a force in her own right.

Mary Menell Zients grew up in Johannesburg, and maintains strong ties to South Africa through her extensive philanthropic work and community development projects. Her mother, Irene (Manderstam) Menell was deeply involved in liberal politics and outreach work during and after apartheid, and was awarded the National Order of the Baobab in Silver in 2009. Mandela spoke at her father Clive's funeral in 1996.

An old picture shows Mandela with the Zients couple, holding their baby daughter. Mandela also stayed with the Menells after he came out of prison.

Zients (56) will replace Ronald Klain, and will be the second consecutive and sixth Jewish person in this position. Biden's daughter-in-law, Melissa Cohen, is also Jewish and South African. Biden formally announced Zients' appointment on 27 January.

"I've watched Jeff Zients tackle our toughest challenges, from economic recovery to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I look forward to welcoming him back to the White House," said Biden. "When I ran for office, I promised to make government work for the American people. That's what Jeff does."

"Jeff will provide a depth of human understanding that comes from being aware of South Africa before and after apartheid," says Afrika Tikkun Group Chief Executive Marc Lubner, who knows the family. "Mary is a 'get-the-job-done' person, and her influence will blend well."

Zients is an entrepreneur and management consultant who organised the largest vaccination campaign in American history when he was co-ordinator of the COVID-19 response in the Biden administration.

"Jeff is one of the most able managers I've ever worked with," says communications strategist Kenneth Baer, who

served in the Obama administration alongside Zients, and whose wife's family comes from Johannesburg. "He knows how to inspire and lead a team in the most high-pressure situations – and he does it with good humour and a smile."

Menell Zients remains dedicated to the land of her birth. She's a founding board member of City Year South Africa, a youth-service community programme in Johannesburg, serves on the US Advisory Council of the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, and chairs the committee of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund (NMCF) USA.

"Mary Menell Zients' association with the NMCF dates back to her father, Clive Menell, serving as NMCF deputy chairperson alongside President Nelson Mandela as the founder and chairperson," says NMCF Chief Executive Dr Linda Ncube-Nkomo.

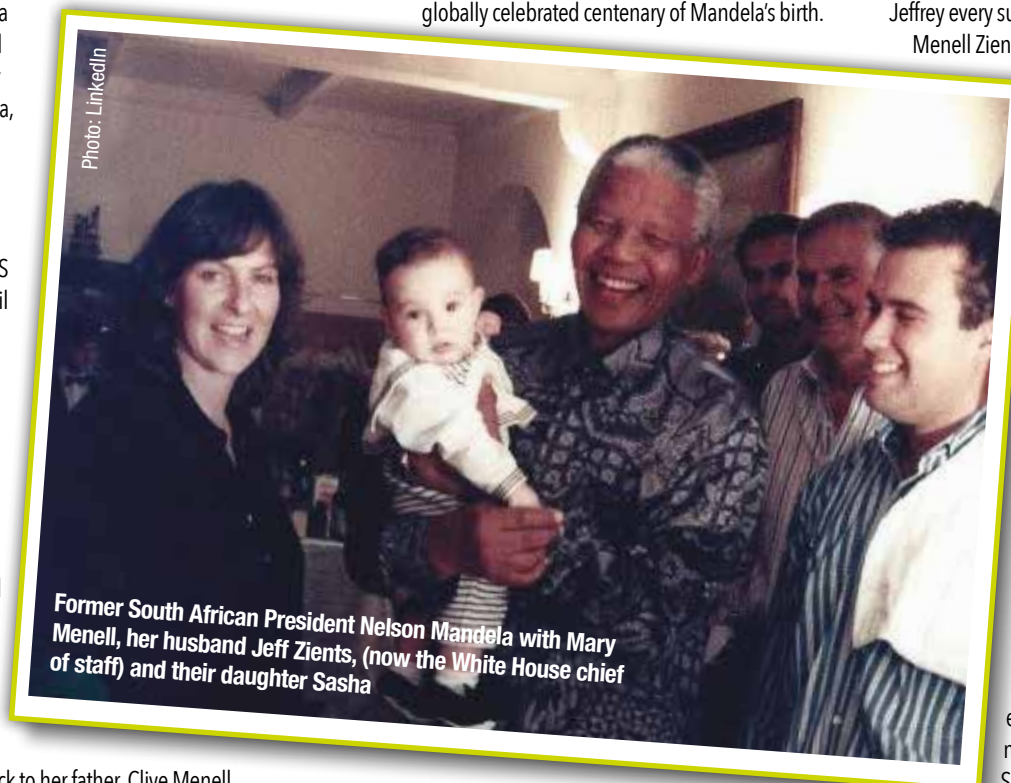
"The idea of establishing the NMCF, as President Mandela's personal response to addressing the vulnerability of children as the first democratically elected president of South Africa, was born in the living room of the Menell residence in Johannesburg," she says.

"He pledged one-third of his presidential salary to found and perpetuate the NMCF, and formed the NMCF President's Club, inviting others to match his pledge. The Menell family was one of the first to do so," says Ncube-

Nkomo.

"Irene Menell, Mary's mother, served as a management trustee and board member of the NMCF since its inception in 1995, and her leadership and guidance was invaluable until her retirement in 2018.

"Mary took up the baton in 2018, which was the globally celebrated centenary of Mandela's birth.



Former South African President Nelson Mandela with Mary Menell, her husband Jeff Zients, (now the White House chief of staff) and their daughter Sasha

One of his dreams was the creation of a specialist paediatric hospital for the African continent where no child would be turned away.

"This led to the flagship project of the NMCF – the philanthropic Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital [NMCH]," says Ncube-Nkomo. "As a board member and the managing director of NMCF USA, Mary focuses on fundraising efforts and uses her vast knowledge and expertise to increase the resources and clinical offerings of the NMCH.

"Mary also led the Nelson Mandela centenary celebrations in Washington, D.C. for the benefit of the

Mandela legacy organisations – the NMCF, NMCH, the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and the Mandela Rhodes Foundation.

"The board of trustees, management, and staff of the NMCF and NMCH are truly indebted to Mary Menell Zients for her leadership and wisdom and wish her and Jeffrey every success."

Menell Zients' outreach work extends to the US, where she and her husband founded the Urban Alliance Foundation, a non-profit organisation that provides paid internships, adult mentorship, and job training opportunities to economically disadvantaged youth.

She was nominated by President Barack Obama to chair the Commission on White House Fellows in December in 2013, which operates as a federal commission to recommend fellows.

Menell Zients' parents spearheaded a legacy of public service. A mother of five, Irene Menell was a founding member of the Liberal Party. Following the party's closure, she joined the Progressive Party, and held numerous elected positions at national, regional, and constituency levels within the party and its successors.

Her community service ranged from establishing the READ Educational Trust to more than 25 years as a manager in Helen Suzman's Houghton constituency. She held many roles in various upliftment and cultural organisations.

"Irene was on the board of the South African Friends of Beit Issie Shapiro with me when I ran it years ago, and she showed board-governance prowess and a deep sense of compassion," says Lubner. "The Menell family have an extraordinary legacy of taking responsibility for community programmes and giving of themselves. They have led initiatives that date back to the fight against apartheid through to driving Solidarity Fund relief efforts. Responsible philanthropy is their benchmark."

Continued on page 5>>



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Clergyman barred from Church of England for antisemitism

Stephen Sizer, a retired British vicar who claimed that Jews and Israel were behind 9/11, was banned from the Anglican ministry for 12 years on 30 January.

Over the course of more than two decades as priest and academic in southern England, Sizer made a name for himself as an outspoken opponent of Christian Zionism.



"Given that he indulged in 'antisemitic activity' and caused grievous offence to the Jewish community over a number of years, this is the correct decision," said Marie



van der Zyl, the president of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, which lodged the initial complaint against Sizer.

France's antisemitism fight takes students to attack sites

The French government's updated plan for fighting antisemitism and racism will require teachers to receive training on the topic and all French schoolchildren to visit the site of an antisemitic or racist incident.

Those visits could include Holocaust sites, and roving exhibitions about antisemitism and racism will be set up in schools, France's prime minister, Elisabeth Borne, announced on 30 January.

In addition to this, French law will also be adapted to make charges of serious antisemitic or racist offenses enough to stop the accused from fleeing the country.

The plan was put together by the Interministerial Delegation for the Fight Against Racism and Antisemitism, or DILCRAH, with advisory input from the American Jewish Committee (AJC).

"DILCRAH has long recognised that antisemitism endangers all of French society, not only Jews. It's essential for the government to have a robust strategy dedicated to confronting antisemitism in all its forms," said Anne Sophie-Sebban, the director of AJC Paris.

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Change your attitude, change your life **Torah Thought**



Rabbi Motti Hadar,
Pine Street Shul

If you don't like something, change it. If you're unable to change it, change the way you think about it.

Immediately following the epic splitting of the sea in this week's portion of *Beshalach*, the Torah recounts how our ancestors came to a place they would ultimately call Marah, which means "bitter". It was an appropriate name, considering that they had been travelling in the desert for three days without water, and when they eventually did find water, "they couldn't drink water from Marah, because it was bitter".

The Jews complained to Moshe, who turned to G-d, at which point G-d instructed him to cast a piece of wood into the water, and the water became sweet.

The Maggid of Mezeritch teaches us a powerful lesson from this story. If we look at the literal translation of the Hebrew words for "because it was bitter", (*ki marim heim*), it actually means: "because they were bitter".

The Maggid explains that the reason the water was undrinkable wasn't because the water was bitter, but rather they were bitter. The Jewish people were in a negative headspace, in a bitter frame of mind, and therefore everything tasted bitter to them.

Indeed, they had been travelling for three days without water and were frustrated and perhaps even angry. The challenges were real.

The Torah describes how they complained in opposition to Moshe that they needed water. They didn't consult him or ask respectfully for him to pray for water. Instead, they complained, indicative of their bad mood. Thus, the water they found tasted much like their mood.

This is such a powerful lesson for us. We all face challenges in our lives, some more than others. Load shedding, inflation, and the high cost of living, just to name a few. These challenges are real. They make us

anxious and are often overwhelming. But so much depends on our perspective.

As Rabbi Isaac of Homil said, "We all look at the same world, but what we see depends on who we are."

What are we looking for? What are we focusing on? Are we grateful for the challenges we left behind, and encouraged to find solutions to the problems which lie ahead? Or are we stuck in the difficulties of the moment?

The Jews had experienced the most wondrous of miracles, but three days without water had completely dampened their spirits. As a result, they could see only problems and negativity, leading them to complain bitterly.

It's true that focusing on the bright

side and always being solution oriented is easier said than done. What was the cure to the bitter waters? What's the antidote to constantly focusing on the negative? Throw a stick of wood into the water.

The Torah is referred to as Eitz Chayim, a Tree of Life. The next time you're feeling down or overwhelmed by the difficulties on your plate, consider studying some Torah, find a piece of inspiration in G-d's wisdom, apply it to your life, and realign yourself with the goodness, blessings, and G-dly energy which is ultimately found all around us.

You'll be amazed at the positive difference it will make to your attitude, and the difference your positive attitude will make to your life.

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Moses raises his staff, the sea splits, and the Israelites pass through. The sea closes over the pursuing Egyptians. Moses and the children of Israel sing a song of praise and gratitude to G-d. Monday is Tu B'Shvat - Rosh Hashanah of the Trees. In Israel, the day is celebrated as an ecological awareness day, and trees are planted in celebration.

Metres from the worst terror attack in Israel since 2008

TALI FEINBERG

The granddaughter of South African *olim* was stationed at an army base just 5m away from the senseless terror attack in Jerusalem on 27 January, International Holocaust Memorial Day. Seven Jews were killed and five were injured at the site, just outside the Ateret Avraham Shul in Neve Yaakov after the start of Shabbat.

“I had just got off guard duty when I heard shots, screams, and sirens,” says Sara Cohen* who asked not to be named. “I knew that something had happened, and straight away, got dressed in my uniform and bullet-proof vest, picked up my gun, and waited a few more seconds until I heard the base alert that I needed to run to the situation room and report for duty as part of the emergency unit on duty over Shabbat.

“From the situation room, I got orders to join the soldier that was at the guard gate, and then to go on to the roof of the base to join the search to make sure that a terrorist hadn’t infiltrated the base.”

Nine days before the attack, WIZO (Women’s International Zionist Organization) South Africa delegate Harry Rosmarin visited a WIZO day care centre where two twin sisters played. Now, they have lost their older brother, 14-year-old Asher Natan, in the terror attack, the day care centre being a three-minute walk from where the attack occurred.

“It’s frightening to think that we were only about 300m from where the attack took place,” says Rosmarin. “We found it extremely disturbing to think that these helpless little girls could have been exposed to the attack, and in fact, now with the loss of a brother, are going to suffer the aftermath for the rest of their lives, as will the rest of the family.

“Our hearts break for the two little girls and their family,” says WIZO South Africa President Shelley Trope-Friedman.

“When it comes to our national security, Israel has always lived in the shadow of a volcano that can become active at any moment,” says Anita Friedman, the chairperson of World WIZO. “This past weekend, the volcano erupted,

with two terror attacks in Jerusalem, in which seven Israeli citizens were murdered, and five wounded.” Victims included a 68-year-old Ukrainian woman and a married couple in their 40s who rushed to help.

A second terror attack occurred near the City of David archaeological site in Jerusalem, in which a father and son were injured. The first attack was the worst committed by a Palestinian against Israelis since 2008, and came in the midst of an escalating week of bloodshed.

“Asher’s sisters are enrolled in WIZO’s M. Helene and Nadine de Rothschild Day Care Center, sponsored by WIZO Germany,” says Friedman. “Over the years, other children in this large family have been cared for and educated in our day care centre. Of course, we came to the aid of the family, and are helping it in every possible way during these difficult times.”

Cohen isn’t a combat soldier but an army social worker, ensuring support for soldiers who come from complicated backgrounds and lone soldiers. However, she was trained to use a gun in basic training, and does guard duty on bases. “I’ve been preparing for situations like these, so

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doctors and nurses had been called in to the hospital.”

According to Channel 12 news, the terrorist first shot an elderly woman in the street, then encountered a motorbike rider and shot him, before opening fire on people outside shul.

The first Magen David Adom medic to arrive at the scene, Fadi Dekidek, said, “We saw a woman and four men lying on the street. All had gunshot wounds and no signs of life.”

Police Commissioner Kobi Shabtai said, “The terrorist shot at everyone he encountered. He got out of the car, and began a murderous rampage with a handgun.”

Shabbat with my family and friends in Jerusalem to hearing that some people in Jerusalem had lost their family and friends over Shabbat,” says Poyurs. “Tragic events such as this one are an unfortunate reminder of how precious life is, and so I feel that even though the situation can be really scary, it’s important not to let that fear stop you from living.”

Neve Yaakov residents include *olim* from many different backgrounds such as Russia, Ethiopia, Iran, and English-speaking countries. It’s also popular among young haredi families. The neighbourhood is in East Jerusalem.

South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) spokesperson Rolene Marks says the SAZF “mourns the tragic and senseless loss of life [in the terror attack]. The Palestinian gunman opened fire on Jews leaving the synagogue after Friday night prayers. He was reportedly a member of Hamas, living in Shuafat.

“The injured range from 14 to 75 in age. Celebrations, including fireworks and guns being shot in the air, were witnessed in Jenin and other Arab towns throughout Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza in reaction to the incident,” she says.

“The SAZF calls on the South African government and department of international relations and cooperation to condemn these heinous attacks unequivocally. The SAZF sends its sincere condolences to the families of all the victims for the loss of their loved ones on such an important day for our people and community.”

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies condemned the “vile and inhumane terror attack in Jerusalem”.

“Targeting Jewish people at prayer in a synagogue on Shabbat is beyond horrifying,” it said. “Such acts are the inevitable end product when unadulterated hatred is allowed to run wild. Our thoughts are with the victims’ families, and we wish a quick recovery to those injured.”

South African Jewish community organisations across the spectrum condemned the attacks.



when it actually happened, I was ready to react,” she says.

Her mother, also a South African *olah*, says, “On Friday night, we were waiting for my husband to come back from shul, and my phone rang. We keep Shabbat, but I’ve told my children that if there’s an emergency, I’ll answer the phone. I saw that it was my daughter.

“She told me there had been a *pigua* [terror attack] just 5m from the base, and she was okay but was on alert in the base. We didn’t hear more from her on Shabbat. However, in shul in the morning, many in our community were aware of what happened and some of the

South African *olah* Dinah Poyurs, who lives in Jerusalem, says, “I wasn’t anywhere near where the attack happened, but I was at a wedding in that neighbourhood a month ago. It’s always a huge shock when an attack happens in a place where you’ve been before.

“There’s definitely underlying fear that exists within all of us, especially when these attacks are more frequent,” she says. Just two months ago, two bombs rocked bus stops at crowded entrances to Jerusalem, killing a teenager and sending about 20 people to hospital, some in serious condition.

“It was difficult to go from a wonderful

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STEVEN GRUZD

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, this month. This follows a year-long battle that resulted in Israel being granted observer status in 2021. But countries like South Africa and Algeria stridently opposed both the procedure and principle behind this

So, whether Israel is welcome there or not is complicated. When Israel's new ambassador to Ethiopia, Aaleigne Admasu, presented his credentials in July 2021, he was also accredited to the AU by Faki. Israel had observer status at the predecessor of the AU, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), rescinded when the OAU transformed into the AU in 2002, driven by the late Muammar Gaddafi of Libya.

South Africa contended that Faki had no power to confer observer status. In a July 2021 press statement, the department of international relations and cooperation (Dirco) called the decision “unjust”, “unwarranted”, and “inexplicable”.

In July 2022, addressing Palestinian ambassadors in Pretoria, Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Dr Naledi Pandor said that the decision “was taken unilaterally and without adequate consultation with all AU members” and “it’s ... incomprehensible that the AU Commission chooses to reward Israel at a time when its oppression of Palestinians has been demonstrably more brutal.”

The divisive issue was hotly debated at the last summit, and when the Assembly of Heads of State and Government couldn't agree, the committee was formed to examine the issue and report back this year. It had three countries opposed to Israel: Algeria, Nigeria, and South Africa, and three states close to Israel: Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda, plus Senegal as the chair.

The committee has never convened. In the interim, Israel has technically been an observer during 2022, but it hasn't been present to observe much.

Professor Hussein Solomon of the department of political studies and governance at the University of the Free State said, "Because it divided the AU, they just kicked the can down the road, and will continue to do so."

Israel's supporters contend that Israel maintains its observer status until it's officially expelled. Its detractors – including South Africa – contend that it doesn't have the



status, and therefore isn't welcome to attend public AU meetings.

“The decision to grant Israel observer status was unanimously suspended” in February 2022, Pandor claims. South Africa rallied the Southern African Development Community and other states to its position. It has reportedly placed heavy pressure on Faki not to invite Israel to the 2023 summit.

The question remains as to whether Israel is meant to wait for an explicit invitation to attend the summit.

Sources at the Israeli foreign affairs ministry recall that such invitations weren't issued nor needed in the days of the OAU.

To date, Israel hasn't received an invitation and thus won't attend.

The ministry is understood to be pushing for an invitation, however.

IT'S ALMOST UNNECESSARY
TO POINT OUT HOW GLARINGLY
INCONSISTENT THIS IS WITH
GOVERNMENT'S DECLARED
APPROACH TO OTHER
GLOBAL DISPUTES.

“Israel remains an observer member of the AU in spite of the continued hostile reaction of the South African government,” said Benji Shulman, the director of public policy at the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF).

“The SAZFC calls on the African National Congress government to end its campaign against Israel’s observer status in the AU as its participation continues to benefit the continent in a number of innovative ways.”

Shulman cited several recent projects to help communities across South Africa and Africa with solar energy, water, and technology, and noted that 46 of the 55 states in Africa have diplomatic relations with Israel. "Logically, Israel's entry into the organisation is simply an extension of what's happening at bilateral level," Shulman said.

“South Africa’s single-minded pursuit of Israel’s expulsion from the

AU underlines the inflexible – almost
obsessional – antagonism towards
the Jewish state that dominates our
foreign policy,” said Professor Karen
Milner, the national chairperson of
the South African Jewish Board of
Deputies. “It’s almost unnecessary to
point out how glaringly inconsistent
this is with government’s declared
approach to other global disputes.
In addition to being palpably
discriminatory, South Africa’s stance
is also hopelessly out of step with
contemporary trends.”

Terence Corrigan, the project manager at the Institute of Race Relations said, “The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an area into which South Africa sinks a great deal of its political capital – quite wastefully in relation to any reasonable consideration of its interests. Be that as it may, it will put up a massive fight over Israel’s attendance. Will it be successful? Perhaps, but in the broader sense, it’s fighting a losing battle. Israel’s advances on the continent have been remarkable, and the doubtful value of anchoring a Middle East policy on this intractable conflict hasn’t been lost on many African states. South Africa has no influence over the conflict but only stands to deprive itself of whatever benefits engagement might bring.”

A Dirco official confirmed to the *SA Jewish Report* that South Africa's position on the matter hasn't changed.

For now, it looks like the issue is in limbo – Israel is neither officially banned, nor officially welcome. It's similar to the downgrading of the South African embassy in Tel Aviv – the embassy hasn't been officially downgraded, but there hasn't been an ambassador present since mid-2018, effectively a downgrade in practice.

But the going may get tougher for Israel as the more sympathetic Macky Sall of Senegal is succeeded as AU chairperson by either Comoros or Kenya in 2023, a north African state in 2024 (mostly hostile to Israel, besides Morocco and Egypt), and then likely Namibia in 2025.

The Israeli ambassador to South Africa, Eli Belotserkovsky, declined to comment for this story.

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New Joburg mayor a “useful pawn” for ANC, leaders say

NICOLA MILTZ

In a week, the city of Johannesburg has gone from being led by an educated, eloquent friend of the Jewish community to one that believes in Sharia values and “loves load shedding”, according to his Twitter account. Not to mention the fact that he harbours vehemently anti-Israel sentiments.

Al Jama-ah’s Thapelo Amad was sworn in as the new mayor of Johannesburg earlier this week. This follows epic political shenanigans by opposition parties, which resulted in the shock ousting of the Democratic Alliance’s (DA’s) Dr Mpho Phalatse via a vote of no confidence.

It also shattered the flimsy DA-led coalition, and potentially further hamstrung much needed service delivery, impacting the economic heartbeat of the country.

Amad was voted in last Friday in spite of his tiny party having only three seats on the Johannesburg metro council.

In one of his first television appearances, many claimed he came across as an inarticulate student activist wearing a t-shirt, with his arms folded defensively, admitting that he felt “overwhelmed”. In another, he was seen proudly wearing a Palestinian scarf.

Some political insiders say it’s hard to believe that only a few days ago, Amad was virtually unknown outside council chambers. His claim to fame was persistently calling for a motion to rename Sandton Drive (where the United States Consulate is situated) to Leila Khaled Drive after a notorious terrorist. Today, Amad holds the ceremonial keys to the highest office in the city.

However, it’s unknown how long he’ll hold this seat.

Independent election analyst Wayne Sussman said it will be hard for the mayor to establish himself.

“It’s a great day for him. It must a big honour to don the mayoral chain, to have the city and the nation’s attention on him, but the honeymoon period won’t last long,” he said.

Al Jama-ah has only three out of 139 seats in the coalition, Sussman said, making the mayor and his party “expendable”.

“I don’t see him being able to lead the mayoral committee well. His work is cut out. He has a great opportunity to establish himself as a major player, to lead the country’s most economically important city with the largest number of residents, but it’s going to be very difficult,” he said.

“If the African National Congress [ANC] and Economic Freedom Fighters are able to find each other, Amad may revert to being a mayoral committee member, and it will be a short-lived sojourn,” he said.

There’s also concern about Amad’s party’s attitude towards the Jewish community.

Professor Karen Milner, the national chairperson of the South African Jewish Board

of Deputies said, “Given past hostility of Al Jama-ah against both South African Jews and Israel, we’re concerned about its new prominence in the City of Johannesburg. We expect, though, that the mayor will focus on the needs of the City, and that he’ll respect the rights and dignity of all its residents, including the Jewish community.”

Benji Shulman, the director of public policy at the South African Zionist Federation, said, “We’re well aware of Mayor Thapelo Amad’s anti-Israel posture when he was Al Jama-ah councillor for the City of Johannesburg. We’re hoping that as mayor, he realises that

further destabilisation of broad services in the city, which was worrying.

“He has a prestigious position. It’s not clear how long he’s going to last, given the extent of game playing that could still occur within local politics. Clearly, his views on the broader Middle East context are known, and while the mayoral position doesn’t have broad foreign policy implications, it’s true that he holds a particular view.”

DA Councillor Daniel Schay said Amad “clearly carries disdain” for the Jewish community. “As far as the general population is concerned, his appointment is a massive loss.

“Mpho Phalatse was a dedicated mayor who really had a plan for the city. To be replaced by somebody whose education is in Islamic studies and whose only interest is his own honour and what he can get from the city, is troubling. It comes down to what each of these parties can get from the coffers of the City of Johannesburg, and it means that the residents are losing out. The pathway to a better city has been set back many years if this guy remains in office.

“For the smaller parties, it’s about positions and better salaries, but for the bigger players, it’s about access to contracts and tenders and what money they can get from the coffers of the city. That’s what it comes down to,” said Schay.

Silke said the Jewish community should attempt to engage with the mayor.

“Just how receptive he is to meeting different members of the community and fulfilling his mayoral obligations is an important test of his mayoral chain,” he said.

“This is a time to put him on test to see if he can react favourably, therefore engagement and dialogue with him is important.”



Aside from the implications for the community, Silke said the change in administration could potentially lead to the

Biden’s new right-hand man has SA Jewish links

>>Continued from page 1

The Menells also played a significant role in the production of South Africa’s first all-Black musical, *King Kong*, which was performed in 1959 and is widely recognised as a key event in African jazz history. It was during this time that they first met Mandela, who loved the show.

The Zients couple met while working together at Bain Consulting. They are parents to four children, live in Washington, D.C., and have a home in Cape Town.

In an interview soon after Mandela passed away in 2013, Zients’ daughter, Sasha, said, “When he [Mandela] got out of prison, he needed a place to hide from the press. His chief of staff, Barbara Masekela, who later became ambassador to the US, suggested that he stay with the Menell family. So, he stayed with us for about two months.

“My interactions with Madiba occurred when I was very young,” she says. “At that time, my grandfather was dying of cancer. My memories and the stories my family

tells are of him showing up to my grandfather’s bedside regularly. He was president then, and he came to sit with my grandfather and tell jokes. He would also play with the grandchildren. He was like a grandfather to us.”

Writing on Facebook, Laurie Bley says, “I had the privilege of working with the incomparable Mary Menell Zients for nearly two decades as she was the sponsor and visionary of the Menell Media Exchange [an annual conference for journalists, non-profit organisations, tech developers, and students in South Africa], which so many of us worked to build.

“During this time, we all benefited from the extra insights, perspective, generosity of spirit, and fierce demanding focus on process and execution that Jeff Zients brought to the table,” says Bley. “I’m so heartened to see our leadership tapping in to the strengths of such a principled, diligent, focused, disciplined, innovative, humane, generous, kind, but can-do maker and shaker as Jeff Zients.”

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Heroic community rallies to contain Fairmount house fire

NICOLA MILTZ

A raging home fire last Shabbos in the heart of the *frum* community brought together neighbours and communal emergency workers in an heroic effort.

What was meant to be a quiet Friday night supper with her daughter and a good friend turned out to be “beyond the wildest nightmare” for mother of three, Penny Swisa, of Fairmount in Johannesburg.

While she and her daughter, Tammy, 22, were getting dressed for dinner, they heard what sounded like a “popping” sound coming from outside, like fireworks in the garden.

“I looked out my bedroom window, and what I saw has replayed in my mind repeatedly since then – my cottage was on fire, flames high in the sky, like a tornado,” said Penny, who screamed, “Fire!” and pressed her Community Active Protection (CAP) panic button repeatedly.

Tammy screamed, “There’s a fire!” out her bedroom window to alert the nearest neighbours.

Penny’s immediate thought was what to take with her as they bolted out the door.

“What does one take in a fire? I grabbed my bag that contains my life – identity and bank cards, and driver’s license – and ran outside,” she said.

Her mind immediately raced to her tenant, Corine de Jonge, who lives in the cottage.

“She usually goes to shul and to friends on a Friday night, so I hoped she was there,” she said.

Seeing the flames and hearing the shouts for help, the neighbours alerted emergency personnel.

“Within minutes, there must have been 20-plus emergency service vehicles at my house,” she said.

Corine, who was eating dinner at a nearby home, arrived later when the fire was already under control to see that the entire cottage with all her belongings had been gutted.

“I’m still in shock, my brain doesn’t work, I’ve lost everything,” she told the *SA Jewish Report*.

Her first thought when she arrived was the safety of her dog, Bibaloo.

“I hadn’t seen Bibaloo in the pool area by the cottage,” said Penny, “nor heard her bark, and was worried. But I couldn’t go in the area where the fire was to try to get her.”

Fortunately, she was hiding in the empty swimming pool.

Corine, who wasn’t allowed inside, felt lost.

“I didn’t know what to do, so I took my dog and went to a friend’s house. It was the weirdest, strangest feeling. There were so many people. I felt like I was a stranger walking through the crowds,” she said.

In the meantime, Penny managed to leash two of her three dogs, who went to a neighbour’s home. “I shoved the cats into their carrier and another neighbour took them. I couldn’t find our little dog. Someone said she was safe, and at the end of the ordeal, I found her hiding in my front garden,” she said.

A few brave neighbours “saved the

day”, Penny said.

One of them, Wayne Superfain, said, “It was scary and felt quite dangerous. There were sparks flying everywhere. My avocado tree caught alight.” He and another neighbour in an adjoining property, Steve Nahman, stood on step ladders with water hoses to help douse the flames which were dangerously close to spreading.

“We did what we had to do. There was no choice. Thankfully, whatever we did in the moment worked out,” said Superfain.

Firefighters used water from a neighbour’s swimming pool to douse the fire, and people arrived with bottles of water and offered support and assistance.

“The road was cordoned off. There were dozens of neighbours and members of the community standing

around. I was with a good friend who was a rock throughout and attended to practicalities such as turning off the electricity mains to my house and cottage,” said Penny.



The inferno in Fairmount on 27 January

Said Tammy, “I felt like we were going to lose everything. Everything was all over the place. I was in such a panic, I couldn’t comprehend

what was going on. My immediate instincts were to survive, and that involved yelling emergency, running, and calling out for help.”

Corine has been humbled by donations from the community of clothes and goods “from people I don’t even know, it’s amazing”, she said.

Said Tammy, “So many were there to help us before we even asked – our community is incredible. Although we lost the cottage, I’m grateful that my home I’ve lived in my entire life was saved.”

“The community rallied forth as a united force,” said Penny. “We’re filled with immense awe and gratitude towards Zaka along with other community emergency services including CAP, the Community Security Organisation, Fire Ops SA, Hatzolah, and Medi Response for their assistance and support,

along with selfless, wonderful Fairmount residents who rallied together to fight the fire at my house. Due to everyone’s efforts, a major catastrophe was prevented. My cottage burnt down, but the houses were untouched. There were no injuries, and the pets are all safe. You’re all heroes. I salute you.”

Penny said looking back, she had felt calm during the ordeal.

“It felt surreal, like a movie. I’m now facing the practicalities and beginning to feel overwhelmed. I’m seeing miracles too – all the mezuzas in my house were checked and attended to last year, and I believe this saved my house. The cottage didn’t have a mezuzah on the door.”

Said Zaka, “Emergency services on scene did all they could do to save the property. Significant parts of the property were destroyed, but due to the fast response by the teams on scene, they managed to contain the blaze and no serious injuries were sustained.

“The work we do takes a team and we’re proud to work alongside incredible first responders who all have the same aim of protecting our community around the clock.”

Netanyahu ‘the moderate in extremist coalition ruling Israel’

SAUL KAMIONSKY

The new Israeli government headed by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has committed itself to judicial reform, which has become a populist cause in the country, said Lahav Harkov, senior contributing editor and diplomatic correspondent at *The Jerusalem Post*.

“The far right has taken it on, and some believe this is going to affect Netanyahu’s corruption case,” she said. “They support it because they love Netanyahu.”

Harkov was speaking to broadcaster and writer Howard Feldman during a South African Zionist Federation webinar titled, “What’s next for Israel?”

One of the judicial reforms being called for is that the Judicial Selection Committee, which chooses Supreme Court justices in Israel, should include representatives of the public instead of those from the Bar Association, Harkov said. “The other reform is to get rid of the test of ‘reasonableness’ in regard to legislation and government decisions, and to introduce an override clause.”

The latter was introduced in Canada in the 1970s, Harkov said, and provides for a vote to temporarily override a Supreme Court ruling.

Harkov said there was a broad consensus amongst the Israeli public that some reform was required.

“Some people think that the reform proposals go too far. For example, the Judicial Selection Committee would be too political. Some people say that there needs to be a course correction, but you can’t replace one injustice with another injustice. There’s also the argument that judges have too much influence.”

What’s causing the incredible anger and fear which motivated 110 000 people to protest in Tel Aviv on the evening of 21 January? Feldman asked.

“A lot of people have forgotten that a year and a half ago, there were thousands of people – even sometimes tens of thousands – protesting outside Netanyahu’s residence every single Saturday night,” Harkov said. “In some ways, this is a new version of that. However, they have found something to latch on to because there are real concerns with judicial reform.”

Harkov said there were two schools of thought when it came to the role of the judiciary in Israel – one for judicial activism, the other against judicial activism.

“To rewind, so people understand what these schools of thought mean, Israel doesn’t have a Constitution. To a certain extent, the country is based on the British system, which doesn’t have a Constitution either, but rather a legal tradition that goes back centuries. Israel also has a legal system that goes back millennia.”

When Israel was established, the country introduced basic laws, supposed to be the building blocks of the Constitution, Harkov said. “In the beginning, they consisted of things like what the Knesset did, what the president did, and how elections work. In the early 1990s, the Knesset passed two laws which pertain to civil and individual rights in Israel. The court decided to use those.”

Harkov said the basis of ‘reasonableness’ isn’t based on what’s written in the law, but rather on what a group of judges have decided is reasonable.

“This is something that people who oppose judicial activism really oppose. Then, you have people who support judicial activism. They say that maybe there aren’t strong enough legal protections for minorities in Israel. In Israel, the coalition, as opposed to the opposition, is very powerful. The opposition has very little power to change things. Some who support judicial activism say that a very strong system of checks and balances on politicians is important.”



Lahav Harkov

Photo: Facebook

Harkov said the companies pulling operations out of Israel are run by Israelis. “Microsoft, Google, and Facebook are still in Israel. It’s entirely about politics. Some owners of high-tech companies or venture-capital funds are left-wing politicians who see this as a form of leverage and a way to pressure the government. But Israel ranks really low right now in certainty of business contracts, partly because the court doesn’t just have to read the text of your contract, it can come in and say something is unreasonable, which isn’t common in other countries. I don’t think judicial reform would affect business in any way other than this.”

Harkov said Netanyahu put forward a fair argument when he said judicial reform would make it better to do business in Israel.

“Netanyahu has to keep a coalition of different parties together, and he’s going to have to say yes to something. He’s the moderate in this coalition. He’s the person who has to withstand the wave of whatever the more extreme balance of the coalition wants to do.”

People in Israel really want public transportation on Shabbat, Harkov said. “A lot of people can’t afford cars or don’t want to drive, so the last government tried to push it forward and it didn’t happen. The haredim really oppose it, so it’s not going to happen. There’s an attempt by the haredim and some elements of Likud to stop more things from happening on Shabbat. Mostly, Likud voters don’t want more things to be closed on Shabbat, they still want to have soccer games on Shabbat, for example.

“In the last government, the culture minister decided to start having all kinds of cultural events on Shabbat. He said that Israel symbolically never sponsored events on Shabbat in the past, and he thought Israel should do that. Instead, there was this huge media blow up.

“In the United States specifically, Jews are much more to the left than in Israel. In Israel, the right-wing is growing. Israel is one of the few countries in the Western world where young people are more right-wing than older people.

“Netanyahu is accused of corruption and the accusations vary in their severity. But in this case, law enforcement and officials have messed up in a lot of ways.”

Feldman said, “I often come under fire for making comments about Israel or criticising Israel generally. Often when Jews in the diaspora criticise, we are told to know our place. What are your thoughts on this?”

“It’s not fair,” Harkov said. “That being said, it’s always important to put criticism in the right context. Sometimes people care so much about Israel, they suddenly become hypercritical. Israel is a country, not a magical place. People often forget that.”

ChatGPT – have you heard the one about Jewish artificial intelligence?

OPINION

I wanted to tell you an AI (artificial intelligence)-generated Jewish joke about AI. Written in the style of Winston Churchill, or even better, Spinoza or Freud, because, well, they were Jewish. ChatGPT was going to make up this joke for me, because this is exactly the sort of parlour trick it loves.

But here's the funny punchline. ChatGPT servers have become so overloaded with eager-beavers like me who are eager to find out its limits that it denied me access, complaining about user overload.

Ha! ChatGPT is impressive (and perhaps even funny) only when it feels like it. Some AI!

But seriously folks, what is this thing?

AI has been around for a long time, but it really got serious with the birth of computers about 70 years ago when some researchers found themselves beguiled by the prospect of making a computer mimic human brains. Some of the best minds on the planet tried to figure out a way to recreate intelligence. Alan Turing, the famed British mathematician, was one, devising the "Turing test" in which it's stated that if a human doesn't know whether they are communicating with a computer or a human, then AI has been achieved.

Well, no. We passed that point many years ago. AI needs to do more than trick a human into thinking it's human. It must innovate. Learn. Invent. Create. Surprise. So, work has been determinedly underway for decades, including by me, who once wrote a piece of software to compose music and managed to get an academic paper published about it. It never made the hit parade, but still, I knew that this day would come.

Which day? Well, to put a pin in it, it was 29 November 2022 when the AI application called ChatGPT was released by a company called OpenAI on a largely unsuspecting public. And nothing will ever be the same again – at least for AI. Look up ChatGPT on Google. It's as though the second coming has, er, come. Or the end of the world has arrived, depending on who's hyperventilating.

ChatGPT is, indeed, surprising. You simply type a question into a dialogue box. Really. Any question. In plain, even error-riddled English. Long question, short question, impossible question, trick question. Ask it to write an exam (and give it the exam). It passed both the United States Medical Board License and the US Bar Exam, and a number of graduate-level Masters in Business Administration courses. It didn't get an A, it got Bs and B-minuses. But hey, it's about eight weeks old. Could you pass the Bar exam when you were eight weeks old?

Oh, and one of the professors asked GPT to grade an essay it had written. Apparently, it graded it as well as the professor would have. That's pretty meta.

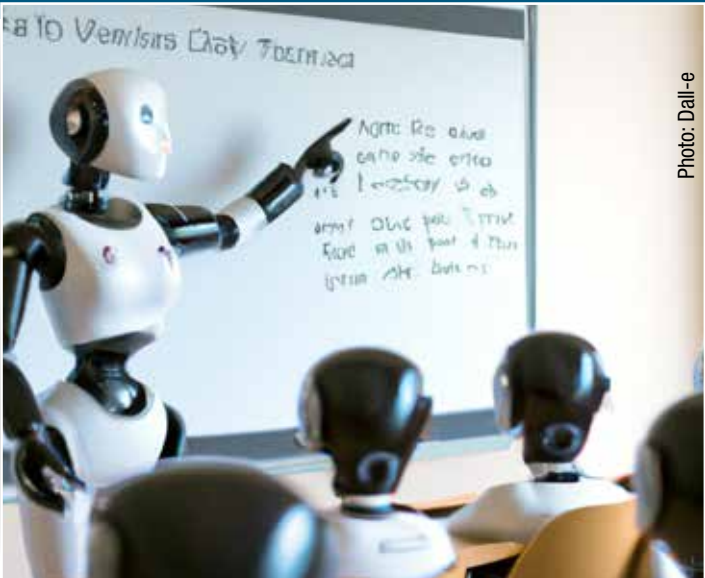
Not to get too deep into the weeds here, but here's how it works. ChatGPT was fed billions of text modules (including the entire works of Wikipedia) from another conversational and text-based research effort called GPT-3. It then set to work looking for relationships, connections, entanglements between all of these text-based blobs, using fancy maths and stats. Some of these relationships have never before been spotted by humans because ChatGPT calculates faster than we can, can remember more stuff, and will soon have more connections than we have synapses in our brains.

And, most impressively, ChatGPT can write in perfectly structured, conversational English. Better than most people can. Not just sentences, but even longer texts, like essays and articles. It can write near perfect computer code in any language. And if you have quibbles with its answer, you can ask it to try again.

How much of a sea-change is this programme? Jerome Kahn from *Fortune* says it sharply:

"A few times in a generation, a product comes along that catapults a technology from the fluorescent gloom of engineering department basements, the fetid teenage bedrooms of nerds, and the lonely man caves of hobbyists, into something that your great-aunt Edna knows how to use."

You can see the problem here. Many people are going to use this stuff to make their lives better, easier, more productive. A call-in listener for a recent



OpenAI (the company behind ChatGPT) was asked to generate an AI image with the brief of 'a futuristic image of a robot teaching a university class'. This is the image that was created.

Photo: Dall-e

radio show I was on said, "English isn't my native tongue. But at work I have to write emails all the time. ChatGPT writes the email in perfect professional English." A simple use case, incredibly powerful.

But, of course, there's the other side. Education, for one thing, with its essays and assignments is going to break very quickly as students find this AI crutch. There are already American universities and schools which are moving to oral-only exams. The art of software development will get battered. In programming, practice makes perfect. Why spend three weeks coding when ChatGPT does it in five seconds. And obviously, journalists and writers are going to lose their jobs. That's already happening as some major publications move to AI-produced content and don't hide it

Yes, ChatGPT sometimes gives dumb

answers – there are social media sites dedicated to its bloopers. But as I say, this baby is just out of the womb. The next version reportedly upgrades the system from 175 billion parameters to one trillion parameters.

Not to mention the furious competition to ChatGPT now sprouting up everywhere, like at Google.

This is going to be the year of AI. Perhaps the decade. Perhaps forever.

Sorry about not being able to give you a ChatGPT joke. The system is still overloaded. Ha!

• Steven Boykey Sidley is a professor of practice at the Johannesburg Business School, University of Johannesburg. He has written seven books, and is a columnist at Daily Maverick.



STEVEN BOYKEY SIDLEY

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Long hidden topic of sexual violation in Holocaust sees the light

STEVEN GRUZZD

The Holocaust evokes nightmarish imagery: deprived medical experiments, asphyxiation in gas chambers, emaciated walking skeletons. One subject that has been consistently difficult to discuss, however, is the sexual degradation and exploitation that women faced in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe during the Holocaust (1933-1945). A ground-breaking book has brought these experiences to light and emboldened some women to speak of their trauma.

As horrific as the Holocaust was for men, women faced additional stress and violation from their Nazi tormentors and their collaborators.

In spite of the Nazi concept of “*rassenschande*”, German for “racial shame”, referring to sex with non-Aryans, a pioneering book has showed that sex across the race line was common. “The contention that Germans wouldn’t rape a Jewish woman was absolutely false,” said one of the editors, Dr Rochelle Saidel. Many Germans had no scruples about having forced sex with supposed “*untermenschen*” (those of an inferior race).

Saidel was speaking at a webinar titled “Sexual violence against Jewish women during the Holocaust: challenges and reflections” on 28 January.

Intense research has revealed a variety of depraved sexual practices in the Holocaust, including the humiliation of Jewish women having to stand naked before male soldiers, having their hair shaven, and sometimes their genitals groped in public. Like many conflicts before and since, rape was used as a weapon of war in World War II.

The concentration camps ran brothels for officers, guards, and non-Jewish inmates. Some officers kept women – including Jewish women – as personal sex slaves. Saidel noted that some women had to endure slave labour as prostitutes. The opportunity to visit a brothel was an incentive for male inmates to work harder. Attractive Jewish women fell prey to this practice.

Co-editor Dr Sonja Hedgepeth said that in the camps, German men and their henchmen had “complete control, and Jewish women were completely vulnerable”. Women who became pregnant were forced to undergo abortions and many were sterilised. A member of a Sonderkommando – the work units in the camps made up of Jewish inmates – said that in 1943, SS men of all ranks touched the sexual organs of every woman entering the gas chambers.

As horrific as the Holocaust was for men, women faced additional stress and violation from their Nazi tormentors and their collaborators. Holocaust historian Miram Novitch said shortly before she died in 1990, “We must collect the tears of the Jewish people.” This webinar sought to gather the tears of Jewish women.



Screenshot from the webinar

“The Germans had a huge number of descriptive words for different types of violence against women,” said Madene Shachar, from the Ghetto Fighters’ House Museum (Beit Lohamei Hagheatot) in Israel. “It’s like the Eskimos, who have a

“Researching this subject was like encountering a brick wall,” Hedgepeth said. “But we found some cracks by 2006 and felt a book was in order, or long overdue. We sought scholars to collect those who were silenced, those who had spoken out, and those who had chosen to remain silent.”

Hedgepeth said these events have been shrouded in shame and secrecy for decades. “Rape is part of wartime violence. We see it now in Ukraine, and this was no less true in the Shoah [Holocaust]. Silence has given the perpetrators impunity.”

The editors also talked about sexual violence in literature and cinema related to the Holocaust, including the novel by Nava Semel, *And the Rat Laughed*, published in Hebrew in 2001, German in 2007, and English in 2008. It tells the fictional story of a young woman hidden in a potato pit on a Polish farm in World War II and her subsequent rape in the

pit. “There was the shame of the survivors, but also the embarrassment of the interviewers who didn’t want to think about or ask about such things,” Saidel said. “But times have changed, and there’s more openness now. It’s sad that so many of the people we would have wanted to interview are gone now.”

Saidel mentioned two events that stemmed from their book. In 2012, with the Shoah Foundation, the first ever gathering of academics researching sexual violence in the Holocaust was convened.

In 2018, an exhibition of art on this subject, titled “Violated: Women in the Holocaust and Genocide” was held in New York’s Ronald Feldman Gallery. Exhibits included the works of 30 artists from six countries, and also featured later genocides including Rwanda, Guatemala, and the Yazidis in Iraq.

“We need the courage to imagine and accept these truths,” said Hedgepeth. “Whatever I couldn’t imagine happened during the Holocaust. We faced resistance at every turn in 2006. The lay of the land is different now. There are many researchers working on this subject, including new revelations from the Soviet archives in Russia and across Eastern Europe.”

Although this isn’t their focus, the researchers commented that male rape and abuse also occurred in the camps. There was also evidence of sexual abuse of women by female guards.

The webinar was a partnership between the Ghetto Fighters’ House, the Remember the Women Institute, Women in the Holocaust – International Study Center (Moreshet), Wagner College Holocaust Center, Classrooms Without Borders, Rabin Chair Forum Washington University, and the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre.

Speak out and combat lies, UN urges on Holocaust anniversary

SAUL KAMIONSKY

Human rights across the globe have been threatened by people with ill intentions. We must recognise this, and counteract it appropriately, António Guterres, the United Nations (UN) secretary-general, and Masimba Tafarienyika, the director of the UN information centre in Pretoria, told the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre’s (JHGC’s) International Holocaust Remembrance Day commemoration last week.

The memorial day, held on 27 January, was the 78th anniversary of the liberation of the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp, Auschwitz, by Soviet soldiers of the 60th Army of the First Ukrainian Front in 1945.

It’s vital that we’re more outspoken than ever, Guterres said, in the face of “growing economic contempt, political instability, escalating white supremacy, terrorism, surging hate, and religious bigotry”.

“We must never forget and not allow others to forget, distort, or deny the Holocaust,” he said.

Tafarienyika said the outreach programme of the UN’s commemoratives activities this year was “framed around what home and belonging meant to the Holocaust

survivors in the immediate post-war years, and how the meaning of home and belonging has been challenged by the perpetrators of the Holocaust”.

“The theme this year is ‘Home and Belong’. It’s a fitting recognition of one of the communication priorities of the UN – its fight against misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech,” Tafarienyika said.

“This year, we’ll zoom in on hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation, and the UN will advocate for right of access to reliable information sources. We will urge technology platforms, especially social media, to review business practices that allow them to profit from misinformation and disinformation as well as hateful content.”

Tali Nates, the founder and director of the JHGC, said that though memorial days are vitally important, “for us at the centre, our activities go beyond one day of commemoration.

We’re involved in commemoration activities 365 days of the year as hate speech, antisemitism, Holocaust distortion and denial, racism, and xenophobia are sadly still with us”.

Paul Salmons, lead curator of the *Seeing Auschwitz* exhibition on show at the JHGC and one of the world’s leading experts on the Holocaust, said, “Our memory work is an attempt to restore [the victims of the Holocaust] to us in some way, to give them some dignity, to resist the efforts of the murderers to erase them completely from this earth. One of the ways we can do that is through historical research and commemoration events such as today.”

“Today, the whole world marks the memory of the Jewish people who perished during the Holocaust,” said Eli Belotserkovsky, the Israeli ambassador to South Africa. “This day is a memorial for the great loss of those terrible times, but it’s also a memorial for those who risked their lives by saving Jewish families, and for the Jewish fighters who displayed a tremendous degree of heroism by fighting the Nazi extermination machine.

“The Holocaust was a massive murder machine on an unprecedented scale, but also beforehand, and perhaps surprisingly afterwards, we saw more cases of genocide. Of course, Rwanda is a vivid and clear example, but unfortunately not the only one. The lesson we learn



Shirley Sapire from the JHGC and Holocaust survivor Irene Klass lighting candles at the commemoration

from this sad history is that humanity, unfortunately, doesn’t learn anything from history. The atrocities of the Holocaust should have prevented us from repeating it, but this hasn’t happened and the murder of human beings solely because of their ethnic origins unfortunately occurs time and time again. As the Jewish people, as Israelis, we can learn one very disturbing lesson from history: we’re on our own.”

Andreas Peschke, the German ambassador to South Africa, said we see many people, but often don’t recognise them or take time to appreciate their human side and personal backgrounds. “January 27 is the day on which we are all called to do just that. We’re called to let the survivors of the Shoah tell us what terrible traces the national and socialist racial madness left behind. We’re called to listen to them, hear them, and see them.”

The German embassy in South Africa is proud to have a good relationship with the JHGC, Peschke said. “We’re committed to supporting the centre with further projects and plans in the future because truthfulness and standing up against denial, trivialisation, and/or falsification of the Holocaust is a central concern of the federal government of Germany and should be a central concern for all of us.

“In Germany today, there’s broad political consensus that remembering the Holocaust and dealing with it remains an ongoing task for politics as well as for society in all its facets. The federal government is therefore promoting memorial sites that often exist in the authentic locations of the crimes.”

During the commemoration, seven candles were lit by Holocaust survivors who came to live in South Africa and build a family here.

Dutch-born Irene Fainman was one of them. Fainman survived two concentration camps before being taken by the white bus rescue mission to Sweden in April 1945.

Another was Polish-born Irene Klass, who survived the Warsaw Ghetto before living under a Christian identity in Warsaw and suffering short imprisonments in an internment camp.

Lia Stermer, born in the Soviet Union (in an area that’s Ukraine today), survived labour camps.

Born in what was then Ukraine, Adi Wander, who didn’t speak about his experience of the Holocaust until recently, was incarcerated in two ghettos and a camp with his parents. They were liberated from Chernivtsi in Ukraine at the end of the war.

Belgium-born Helene Sieff survived in hiding, moving from place to place as a little girl until March 1943, when she moved to the home of a widow who treated her as one of her children.

Polish-born Helen Lieman survived by escaping German-occupied Poland before being deported by the Soviets to Siberia and then moving to Kazakhstan.

French-born Reverend Joseph Matzner survived by being hidden in different convents as a baby.

Fauda packs a punch, but audiences love it

PETA KROST

The fourth season of the Israeli drama *Fauda* has taken Netflix by storm, and is top of the streaming charts in Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Jordan, among many other countries in the world.

Few are as amazed by this as the co-writers, Avi Issacharoff and Lior Raz (who also stars in the series). “It’s kinda crazy that it’s so popular in Arab countries, and it has become even more so this season,” Issacharoff told the *SA Jewish Report* this week. “Though I’m trying to get used to the idea, it still shocks me. It’s the thing you don’t plan or see coming, but it’s fantastic.”

Issacharoff is an award-winning Israeli journalist who for decades covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and drew on his experience a great deal in writing this screenplay.

He believes the show’s popularity in Arab countries is partly due to it being half in Hebrew, half in Arabic, and partly because in showing the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, they “don’t just portray the other side as the enemy, but as real people with families”.

However, Hamas apparently didn’t approve of *Fauda*’s portrayal of the conflict, so the terrorist organisation countered the Israeli series with its own television drama, *Fist of the Free*.

Issacharoff shrugs this off, saying, “I heard. I haven’t seen it, but it is

interesting that they feel the need to do this.”

Raz and Issacharoff’s journey to *Fauda* began one night in about 2010, when they were on *miluim* (reserve military duty) together. They were both part of the *Duvdevan* unit, an anti-terrorism unit known for its undercover operations in urban areas.

“We were watching a group of young soldiers who had just finished their course in our unit,” Issacharoff said. “We were amused as they were dancing and singing in Arabic. We got to talking about writing about our experiences. Lior wanted to write a movie, and I wanted to write a book.”

Two weeks later, the two met in Tel Aviv and started working on their ideas, not then quite clear that it would be a television series or what the end product would look like.

“We wanted to portray on the one hand what it’s like working in an undercover unit, and on the other, to show the Palestinian side, meaning the wanted terrorists I had come to understand as a journalist,” he said.

With some research and their experiences, having both done undercover work, and Issacharoff having covered conflict in the West Bank and Gaza since 2000, they began creating *Fauda* (which

means “chaos” in Arabic and is the emergency word the undercover soldiers used when they are exposed).

“Our aim is to make it so realistic, the audience feels like they can almost smell the surroundings they are watching,” he says. To ensure authenticity, they made sure to have Arabs playing Arabs and Jews playing Jews, and those who didn’t speak Arabic had to learn and make sure to get the accents correct to the Ramallah dialect.

Taking the script to networks, they got a lot of “nos”, until Yes Studios agreed to take them on. After the first series aired in Israel, Netflix also wanted the series.

While it’s hugely popular in Israel, having won numerous Israeli Academy Awards, the show is controversial, with some saying it’s too honest and shows Israel in a bad light.

“We’re not in the business of *hasbara* [public diplomacy], we’re trying to create a great, authentic story. Some say we aren’t left enough,

others claim we’re not right-wing enough. I’ve been accused of being a left-wing traitor and a right-wing radical who doesn’t care about Palestinians.

“So, as long as we get flak from both sides, I think we can relax on our couches, drink a beer, and say, ‘*Baruch Hashem*, we’re probably doing a great job!’”

In trying to ensure authenticity, the duo show the deep psychological scars attained by working for years in such units. “So many people serving in these units suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] and carry with them deep scars for years, even decades. We didn’t want to shove this under the carpet,” Issacharoff said.

“We all carry our memories – some are tough and others funny. As for Lior and I, we don’t suffer from PTSD that prevents us from functioning on all levels, but we have friends who have paid a heavy price and still suffer.”

Raz and Issacharoff specifically

chose not to focus on young recruits in Duvdevan, but the “seasoned soldiers in order to deal with their sensitive and raw issues relating to their choices and families, children, and ex-wives”. Also, he strongly believes that older soldiers are better equipped for these units as they have more experience in tackling difficult situations and are more able to cope with the trauma they face on the job.

In a recent interview in *Hollywood Reporter*, Raz said that while their (his and Issacharoff’s) instinct is to steer clear of their own wounds, they needed to open them for the sake of the authenticity of *Fauda*. “So, painfully, we’re opening our wounds slowly and having to go deep, deep inside to understand our own emotional needs. It’s tough, but ultimately the best thing for the show.”

Said Issacharoff, “Bottom line, we set out to show the complexities of the situation so that people might be able to understand that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict isn’t simple. It’s not about good or bad, black or white, David and Goliath. It’s complicated and has so many nuances that are extraordinarily difficult to deal with and sort out.”

As for how this plays out in politics right now, Issacharoff said it was “sad, but true” that there was no peace deal or solution on the Israeli government’s table. “Let’s face it, the Israeli political reality looks like hell. What can I say?”



Photo: Ohad Romano

Lior Raz and Lucy Ayoub

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Still sailing the high seas at the age of 81

TALI FEINBERG

John Levin learnt to sail as a child growing up in Saldanha Bay in the Western Cape, and he hasn't stopped since. This 81-year-old has just completed a three-month voyage from Cape Town to Rio de Janeiro (Rio), including a stop at the island of St Helena, with three inexperienced youngsters as his crew. He took a chance in taking them on, giving them the opportunity of a lifetime.

"I retired last year after 57 years in legal practice," says Levin. "I have a small boat, a 34-footer (10m). I was at a bit of a loose end, and I decided it was time for another trip." He left in September 2022, arriving in Brazil towards the end of October, where he spent the next month and a half cruising around Rio and the vicinity.

This isn't Levin's first sail along this well-known route. He has completed "pretty much all the sailing races along the South African coast", including seven Cape to Rio races, a Cape Town to Lisbon race, two Durban to Mauritius events, and two Cape to St Helena races, winning the coveted Governor's Cup in 2018, and the race in 2019. In 2003, he and a friend sailed around Africa. He has served as commodore of the Royal Cape Yacht Club of which he is president, as president of South African Sailing, and as chairperson of the Cape to Rio yacht race. He was chairperson of the organising committee of the 1993, 1996, and 2000 Cape to Rio races, and chairperson of the organising committee of the 2012/2013 St Helena race.

"I've been in situations with bad weather, and there have been times when I've been concerned," he says, looking back on a lifetime on the ocean. "You can take steps to minimise risks, such as ensuring that the boat is totally seaworthy."

Though Levin has sailed long distances alone, at this stage of his life, he wanted a team on board. Having a strong crew is vital, but on this front, Levin took a chance, and it paid off. "None of my usual crew could come, so I advertised for one." He landed up recruiting two 19-year-olds and a 27-year-old diver and fisherman. He ensured they did the required courses, then trained them intensively for three weeks.

"Our route from Cape Town via St Helena Island to Rio followed the traditional trade-wind routes of old. The wind blows in certain fixed patterns. Going down wind is like riding a bicycle downhill – you don't have to pedal," he says.

"Being with others in a confined space has its moments, but I've never had major problems. I've seen boats at the end of a Cape to Rio race with one man chasing another looking like he wants to kill him. I've seen a race to St Helena with every crew member walking off and leaving the captain. A boat has to be disciplined to work properly, but you can't have tyranny."

On this recent trip, all went well. "We were cruising, not racing. The guys did a lot of fishing, so we ate a lot of fresh fish. If the fish was bigger than we could eat in one meal, we would let it go to live another day. We had no refrigeration besides a small cool box, so we had to be strict.

"My 27-year-old crewmate was a superb chef, and we ate some of the best meals I've had at sea. Cooking

facilities are very primitive – just a two-burner gas stove, no oven. But you get by. I lived like that for year on a boat when we sailed around Africa.

"I was asked early on in my sailing career not to cook," he quips. "We eat a lot of tinned food and pasta. Amazingly on this trip, our eggs lasted right across the ocean."

They carry their water in five litre containers. "We calculate it on the basis of one litre per person per day. So we carried a lot of water. When I got this boat 34 years ago, I originally took out the tanks (used to store water) as you hear stories of things that can go wrong and people running out of water because it gets contaminated. In addition, you don't see how much water you're using. With five litre containers, you can monitor it carefully."

He used to see a lot of sea life, but in the past 10 years or so, he has seen very little. Ironically, he's "frightened of being in water", so he doesn't swim in the sea, but on this trip, his crewmates swam in the mid-Atlantic, in 5km of depth.

After setting out from Cape Town, they arrived 12 days later on St Helena Island and spent five days there. "It's isolated, has about 4 000 people, and is one of the last British colonies. It's the place where Napoleon was imprisoned and died, and where lots of Boer War prisoners died. It's also a volcanic outcrop and has lots of sea life. It's expensive, but well worth a visit."

They stopped at a few other places, and the whole journey took 43 days, of which 27 were sailing days. "That means we travelled 4 332 nautical miles and averaged 160 miles [257km] a day. That's faster than half the fleet in the recent Cape to Rio race. The winds were favourable, and everything went right.

"The trip was everything I hoped it would be and more," says Levin. "The crew bonded, and it was a life-changing experience for my crewmates. A week later after landing in Rio, one crew member was invited to join a yacht heading to Antarctica. So it was a great opportunity."

As his experience shows, "sailing is a sport you can do from the age of five to 81, and I hope to be able to sail longer. It teaches you skills like self-sufficiency. When you go to sea you have to have a mindset that you can rely on no-one else except your crew. No matter what, you must be able to cope. It also teaches you co-operation, teamwork, and to live with people in tight situations."

Levin says the sea economy offers great careers, from working on super yachts to boat building and more. The Royal Cape Yacht Club's sailing academy trains youngsters from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Young people from this programme took part in the recent Cape to Rio race, and came third.

In 2014, Levin was very ill and thought he wouldn't go to sea again, but he was back to sailing in a race in 2019. After his most recent trip, he hopes to be strong enough to do another one in two years' time. "I go to sea to commune with my maker, and find inner peace."



John Levin

Chabad emissaries continue half century of Judaism in central Africa

TALI FEINBERG

Fifty-five years ago, the Lubavitcher Rebbe sent a *shaliach* to Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia), long before emissaries were sent to most other countries. At the time, in 1968, the once thriving community was dwindling, but the Rebbe still saw it as an important centre of Jewish life. Now, the Jewish presence in Zambia might be smaller, but it's about to be boosted by a new Chabad House established by Chabad *shluchim* Rabbi Mendy and Rivky Hertzel.

Rabbi Mendy, as he prefers to be called, hails from the Golan Heights, and his wife comes from Alaska. Both were raised in Chabad families, establishing centres of Judaism in these places. Now, they plan to continue this legacy in Africa.

And although it's a long way from the wilderness of Alaska and the majesty of the Golan Heights, they feel totally at home thanks to the warm welcome they have received from locals, travellers, and the nearby South African Jewish community. What's more, they feel blessed to be close to one of the seven wonders of the world, Victoria Falls.

"Becoming representatives of the Rebbe has been a lifelong dream for both of us. As we looked to put down roots and establish our home, we searched for a place where we could use our skills and talents to contribute to those around us," says Rabbi Mendy. "Staying in our own corners would be too boring, so we've spread our wings farther out. After visiting for a couple of months in Zambia and celebrating the holidays with the most incredibly warm and inviting community, we decided to make Lusaka our home, extending the warm embrace of the Rebbe's love and care for all of humanity in yet another country. We're thrilled to be joining the frontline of this unique "Jewish peace corps" to make this world a kinder, gentler, more moral place."

According to the rabbi, the Rebbe sent Rabbi Shlomo Bentolila to the Democratic Republic of the Congo 30 years ago, who in turn has supported Jews in central Africa countries. Once those communities became more established, he often sent a couple to live there. And so, Chabad has a presence in Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and many other central African states. In addition, tourists were pleading for a Chabad House in Zambia. When Rabbi Bentolila's wife, Myriam, passed away in 2021 at the age of 52, he said that the new Chabad in Zambia would be established in her memory.

"So that's how we came to do this," says Rabbi Mendy. "We're the eleventh branch of Chabad of Central Africa. We see this as a great beginning."

Many Jews came to Zambia to seek prosperity. Some of the first Jews in Zambia were prominent in the cattle and copper mining industries. Livingstone already had a permanent Jewish congregation by 1905. Later on, many Zambian Jews achieved success in ranching and in the iron industry. One hundred and ten Jews lived in Zambia (with a majority of them living in Livingstone and Lusaka) in 1921, and this population increased over the next couple of decades.

Some Jewish refugees came to Zambia before and after the Holocaust, with the Jewish population of Zambia peaking at about 1 200 in the mid-1950s. Many Jews immigrated to other countries in the 1960s, with only 600 Jews remaining in Zambia in 1968. It was that year that the Rebbe sent an emissary to the country. Jews were active and prominent in Zambian politics, particularly Simon

Zukas, who played a key role in Zambia's struggle for independence from Britain in the 1950s and went on to be a government minister after independence.

Last year, the Hertzels spent three months living in Zambia and visited the South African Jewish community during that period, where they were amazed to be "welcomed so warmly". They are in the process of moving to Lusaka.

On their visit to Zambia over the high holidays last year, they already got down to work, organising Shabbat services, high holiday services, *minyanim*, meals, and kids programmes. They are working to establish a library and provide reading material for Jews in the country. They will focus on tourists in particular, including many Israelis, providing everything from kosher food to Shabbat services to Jewish culture, to children's programmes. In addition, they hope to open a restaurant for tourists. "We've had a very positive response so far," Rabbi Mendy says.

"Our goal is to be a beacon of light not only for the Jewish community, but through Jewish community, Jewish tradition, and Torah, and spread light through the entire country," he says. They envision humanitarian work supporting locals, and they hope the community will grow."

They are delighted that they have everything they need, from electricity to WiFi to an abundance of kosher food, which comes from South Africa. "We feel blessed that this kosher food comes to us and many other Africa countries. We don't feel a big difference living here [compared to our former homes]."

Rabbi Mendy sees the South African Jewish community as a strong base, not only for the supply of kosher food, but for other aspects of Jewish life. "We'll visit a lot and hope to be part of the Jewish community in South Africa. There has always been a strong connection between the Jewish communities of the two countries, and we hope it will continue."



Rabbi Mendy and Rivky Hertzel

He thanked the South African Jewish community for its "practical and emotional support". "Our mission is important not only for Jewish people in Zambia, but the whole Jewish community of Africa," he says.

Jews have an important and deep connection to Zambia, Rabbi Mendy says, and continue to have "a warm relationship with this place", noting the vital role Jews played in the establishment of the country, its economy, and its independence. Looking back, "we can see how important this Jewish community was to the Rebbe. We're excited to continue his mission in Africa," he says.

Spiritual leader and chief executive of the African Jewish Congress, Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft, says his organisation will continue to support the established Zambian Jewish community, while the new rabbinical couple will focus on the many Israelis flooding into Africa as well as tourists.

"We welcome another Chabad in Africa," says Silberhaft. "The historic Zambian community goes back more than 120 years and continues to fall under the work of the African Jewish Congress. We look forward to a good working relationship with Chabad in the future."

Facing the trauma of *The Handmaid’s Tale* head on

HANNA RESNICK

The prohibition and censorship of novels within school syllabi is a contentious issue. Now, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which is an Independent Examinations Board (IEB) matric setwork, is at the forefront of the controversy.

Many adult readers have a difficult time grappling with the graphic depictions in the novel such as ritually sexually exploiting women in the name of a well-known Bible verse, or religious and political dissidents being hanged publicly, with their corpses displayed on a wall or brutally tortured and murdered.

The novel also deals heavily with religion, making explicit reference both to the Old and New Testament, and the corruption of traditional religious values.

The book features an extremist patriarchal group, The Sons of Jacob, and the so-called Rachel and Leah Centre, where women are trained to become nothing more than reproductive vessels known as handmaids.

These were among the items that rang alarm bells for some teachers and parents at the more religious Jewish high schools, who are opposed to their children having to study this controversial but brilliant book.

Rather than shying away from the sensitive, sometimes borderline offensive content that the novel presents or choosing to study a different novel altogether, Yeshiva College’s English department chose to tackle the issues head on, prompting students to explore the significance of the novel from a Judaic perspective.

Mr Terry Tennant, the head of English at Yeshiva College, said that when *The Handmaid’s Tale* was first set as a prescribed text in 2022, it was “a bit of a minefield”.

“[While] it’s a controversial text, it’s a text that has great value in its controversy,” he said, and “to run away from these [types of] texts, seems to be counterproductive to education”.

Tennant believes that “simply because we’re a religious [school], doesn’t mean that we should put ourselves at a disadvantage in the scheme of education.

“Freedom can be taken away so quickly and so easily, and the results can be so painful,” he said, however this novel, and literature in a more general sense, can “sensitise readers” to these issues. “Once we start attacking the [hard-earned] freedoms of society, we never know where that is going to end. In South Africa, we know this only too well.

“We only have to look back two or three years at what happened in Washington when Donald Trump tried to hijack the election. We only have to look at what’s happening in Eastern Europe” to realise that these dystopian ideas are gravely relevant, Tennant said.

Yeshiva brought in Ilana Stein from The Academy of Jewish Thought & Learning to assist, and the

school hosted in-school talks for students as well as one for concerned parents on Sunday, 29 January. During these sessions, students and parents were encouraged to look further than the initially startling content, and understand how the biblical references played an essential role in evoking a powerful cautionary tale.

Rosh Yeshiva Rabbi Nechemya Taylor explained the importance all forms of literature represent for learning, whether it’s “literature which uplifts” or dystopian literature such as *The Handmaid’s Tale*. “Literature, art, and music have their own special language,” he said. “This [dystopian] literature exists, and we mustn’t be scared of dealing with it.” He also said that “only once we know how men can be so depraved, so wicked”, can we understand how to live in the right way.

Ariella Friedland, last year’s deputy head girl, presented a piece of writing that explained why *The Handmaid’s Tale* shouldn’t be removed from the IEB syllabus. “Shakespeare, Lord Alfred Tennyson, Richard Lovelace, the poets of my IEB literature pieces would be rolling in their graves at the thought of censoring Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*,” she said. “[The book’s] purpose is to shock and to disgust the reader, [and] by adding censorship and taking the book out of the syllabus, you aren’t just implying that as matrices, we’re immature and incapable of reading this novel, but you’re doing a disservice to those who prefer to think beyond Dr Seuss.”

Friedland recalled a quote from the book that stood out to her as a warning against complacency and a reminder to protect even the tiniest of our liberties. “Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub, you’d be boiled to death before you knew it”

Stein explained the text from a Jewish perspective, beginning with an excerpt of the story of Jacob and Rachel having a child through surrogacy that’s used throughout the novel to justify the objectification of women in the role of a “handmaid”.

She emphasised that an important distinction should be made between the laws and stories within the Torah. The verses that Atwood uses within the novel to legitimise

the corruption of the dystopian society are derived from Bereishit (Genesis). This book of the Torah describes a time before the Torah, and depicts the more disturbing aspects of human nature.

The very name of the totalitarian regime, The Republic of Gilead, comes from the eponymous biblical land of Gilead or Gil’ad on the east bank of Jordan, Stein said. The Tanach says “Gil’ad is a city of those who work iniquity; it’s stained with blood.” Just as the Torah includes the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah as a warning, the mention of Gilead within the Tanach seeks for such actions to be avoided rather than emulated.

Stein also discussed the treatment of women in the novel in light of the Torah. While our modern standards may be irked by the treatment of women in the Torah, she noted that the passage from Bereishit gives the “maids” their own names and identities as opposed to the novel, which assigns names to the handmaids that correspond to the “commander” for whom they work. The Torah also implies that the decision was made by Jacob and Leah equally, whereas, in the novel, the decision is made by the wider patriarchal society.

The Handmaid’s Tale doesn’t highlight the positive aspects of the Old Testament, Stein said, but rather the more problematic elements, causing many to dismiss the book as sacrilege.

It’s therefore important to highlight the best but also the worst sides of humanity, Stein said. After all, one of the primary methods of oppression within Gilead was prohibiting women from reading lest they discover knowledge on their own accord.

Tennant pointed out that when the text is discussed within the relevant context, “the reading of the book takes on a [deeper] meaning, and the classroom actually becomes alive”.

He explained that through these lectures and their efforts to widen the students’ scope of education, the school is equipping them with the analytical skills needed to interpret any piece of art or literature while still maintaining a strong sense of their Jewish identity.



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“Chilled” cricket matches draw us out of lockdown mode

SAUL KAMIONSKY

The new SA20 cricket tournament and other live sport has enticed many of us out of “lockdown mode” into the magic of going to the games.

“South African cricket hasn’t had too many positives in the past while,” says cricket enthusiast Josh Margolis. “When I saw the SA20, the way it was marketed, and the support it got around the country, it inspired that little bit of hope in me. It’s the positivity that South African cricket needed, so I had to play my part and support it.”

Margolis and fellow Johannesburg cricket fan, Ilan Carno, were two of the spectators in an almost capacity crowd at the 34 000-seater Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg on 24 January to witness the Faf du Plessis-captained Joburg Super Kings take on the Quinton de Kock-led Durban Super Giants.

Margolis and Carno compare the atmosphere at the game to an international match. “It was electric,” Margolis says. “In domestic cricket, we never really managed to get anything comparable to it probably since the early 1990s.”

“It was fun,” Carno says. “The Joburg team was well supported. A lot of people were actively watching and enjoying the cricket.”

Oren Kalmek and about 64 other Yeshiva College Boys High School students and five rabbis from the school were also in attendance. “There are two things that Yeshiva College boys love – sport and a good vibe,” Kalmek says. “When they come together, it’s an unmissable opportunity. Tuesday’s game was the best atmosphere I’ve ever experienced.”

Du Plessis says in his recently released book that he thrives on big occasions, and he duly scored a brilliant century, the first in the tournament’s history. He took a special liking to his brother-in-law, Hardus Viljoen’s, bowling to guide the Super Kings to an eight-wicket win,

pandemic obviously threw a spanner in the works, and that’s also why people are so excited about the SA20,” he says.

“After two-and-a-half years of no live sporting events, having an opportunity to see some of the world’s best cricketers at an affordable price was an unmissable opportunity,” Kalmek says.

Margolis says fans have also thronged stadiums to witness top international players. Taking part in the tournament are the likes of England limited-overs captain Jos Buttler, top International Cricket Council T20 ranked bowler Rashid Khan, and Sam Curran, who recently became the highest-ever purchase at an Indian Premier League (IPL) auction.

But the SA20’s greatest appeal may lie in the fact that all six participating teams are backed by owners of IPL teams, Carno says. For example, the Joburg Super Kings is owned by India Cements, the owners of

four-time IPL winners, the Chennai Super Kings. “The IPL is an international brand. When it came here in 2009, it was a massive success, so the SA20 is maybe a continuation of it. People have enjoyed it.”

Wanderers became an extravaganza of music, fireworks, “DanceCam”, and “KissCam”, in which random spectators are shown on the big screen and have either to dance or kiss the person they’re sitting next to.

“This league could be the saviour of South African cricket,” Margolis says. “Any cricket fan would want to be involved in it and support it.”

Margolis usually attends all the international games at the Wanderers. “I’ve also travelled around the world watching South Africa play at various grounds. Domestic cricket has never really been attractive to cricket fans, but I think the SA20 has changed that.”

Carno, meanwhile, last went to a cricket match before the pandemic. “In my teenage and young adult years, I went a lot, but I kind of fell out of love with the sport and, I guess, South Africa just consistently underperformed. The only games that were really good to see were the international ones.”

Carno has been a spectator at soccer and rugby games in South Africa, but says attending cricket is “more chilled. You can watch a few overs here and then, chat, and have a laugh with your mates.”



Josh Margolis (in the centre at the back) with other supporters at the cricket on 24 January



Super Kings is owned by India Cements, the owners of

Man U ceremony sparks memory of sports loving Holocaust survivor

SAUL KAMIONSKY

Holocaust survivor Herman Rothenberg, who passed away in South Africa at the age of 101 last year, was a sports fan who would have been touched at hearing that Manchester United had observed a moment of silence in tribute to Holocaust Memorial Day last week, says his daughter, Joan.

Ahead of the first leg of their English Football League Cup semi-final against Nottingham Forest on 25 January, the famous English football club paid their respects to the day on which we remember the millions of people murdered in the Holocaust.

“This would have meant a lot to my dad,” says Joan. After all, Rothenberg attended a 2010 FIFA World Cup match at the age of 90, and enjoyed watching soccer, rugby, and mostly tennis on TV.

In addition, he was well-read on the Holocaust. “Most of his Holocaust books were given to the Holocaust & Genocide Centre because he collected books from all over the world, and some of them had never been seen in South Africa,” Joan says.

Rothenberg passed away a month or two after his 101st birthday, and his wife, Doris, sadly passed away six months later.

“We had a double unveiling this past Sunday,” Joan says.

Rothenberg and his wife both escaped the Holocaust in Germany. In 1934, Rothenberg’s parents sent him out of the country on his own as a part of the Kindertransport rescue effort. He was just 13 when he left his parents in Frankfurt and headed to America.

“He said he saw it as an adventure,” Joan says. “I don’t think he knew what lay ahead. He was rushed out of Germany quite soon after his Barmitzvah, the last one at his shul before they couldn’t do Barmitzvahs anymore.”

She says being away from his parents had its pros and its cons. “Being away from your parents at that age does have an effect. When he got to America, he was put with others in an orphanage. Then a family by the name of Rothenberg saw his name on the list of children and took him into their home in Cincinnati, Ohio. They had two daughters and treated my dad like a son. He attended high school in America.”

After finishing school, he left for South Africa to join his parents, who had relocated there. “His intentions were to go back to America to study, but war broke out and he decided to sign up.” He served in Italy and Egypt.

“I don’t think the army was easy,” Joan says. “He

suffered shell shock when he got back. He saw some horrific scenes, but I suppose as an 18 or 19-year-old, it was also quite adventurous.”

He still intended to return to America, “but when he got back from the war, he wasn’t well, and some time later, he met my mother. She refused to go back to America because she was an only child and didn’t want to leave her parents. They had also escaped Germany and come to South Africa.”

Rothenberg started a radio shop called Radiola, a retail business selling records, in the southern suburbs of Johannesburg. “Then he started his own electronic business on the side before being bought out and becoming a director of a lighting company called Consolidated Lighting. He was with that company until about the age of 70. Then he started a little electronic business and ran that for about 10 years until he stopped working altogether.”

Rothenberg achieved numerous “firsts” in his career, including being the first company to bring microwave ovens to the country (for use in hospitals), and the first to introduce underfloor heating in South Africa. He was also the first public passenger of the Gautrain in 2010, when it opened just before the FIFA World Cup.

Joan describes her dad as a disciplined, intelligent, and caring person who loved his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. He travelled to 68 countries. “In his younger days, he flew his own little aeroplane, which he shared with a friend.

“My most memorable moment with my dad was possibly his 100th birthday. Unfortunately, it was during the COVID-19 pandemic, so we couldn’t have the celebration we would have liked to have had.”

Meanwhile, English Premier League clubs and leading figures continue to observe Holocaust Memorial Day. In 2020, the likes of Frank Lampard and Jürgen Klopp appeared in a video marking the day, urging fans to make sure hatred and antisemitism were never accepted in England.

The following year, as part of Manchester City’s Holocaust Memorial Day remembrance, academy players held a minute’s silence in honour of all those who lost their lives in the Holocaust as well as in subsequent genocides, including Julius Hirsch, the first Jewish player to represent Germany’s national team before being deported to Auschwitz where he was murdered.



Herman Rothenberg

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Joburg’s not so ancient 10 plagues

If you squint your eyes while looking into the sun, you might imagine that the gold reef mine dumps that are dotted around the city are really pyramids. With the right effort, you might further imagine that instead of being in Gauteng, you are in downtown Cairo. Because in some respects, Johannesburg is reminiscent of ancient Egypt.

Once upon a time, when the Israelites were slaves to their Egyptian masters, G-d decided that it was time to rain 10 awful plagues upon them. Not an angel. Not a proxy. But He Himself. Because He could. And because those Egyptians were too darn stubborn for their own good. And they had a leader who just couldn’t make up his mind.

It was a land of plenty back then. They had stores of produce, they had a great infrastructure, and they were respected on the global stage. But then they became arrogant. And lazy.

Johannesburg in January 2023 hasn’t been without its plagues. With wild tigers roaming the streets, with the plague of Eskom’s darkness visited upon the city every few hours, with COVID-19 having passed over many a household, leaving death in its wake, one must consider if, perhaps, history is repeating itself.

Which is more than a little unnerving. The past few years have had a particularly biblical feel to them. Everything felt more dramatic, and the number of times we have repeated the phrase “this is unprecedented” is in itself unprecedented.

The heat this past summer has been more intense, the hailstorms have been more aggressive than normal, even the mosquitos have moved from being mildly annoying to unrelenting and obsessive. It’s like they have been emboldened and weaponised. And they’re on a mission.

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



That’s not to say that the plagues haven’t moved with the times. Whereas the frogs of ancient Egypt might have been infuriating and no doubt harmful, the plague of corruption in modern-day South Africa isn’t to be trifled with. Whereas in ancient Egypt, the source of water, the Nile, might have turned to blood, resulting in scarcity, load shedding has achieved the same result with interrupted water becoming the norm. Livestock might have perished from pestilence back then, today, lack of reliable electricity is achieving the same result. There are plagues of political arrogance, of lack of accountability, and the plague of too much expectation can unquestionably be added to the list of 10 suffered in South Africa today. All of which is leaving South Africans wondering what will come next. It’s no coincidence that the Torah portion this time of the year focuses on the plagues. They are a reminder that as Jews, we believe we live in a world not controlled by us. And even if we think that the African National Congress is master of the county’s destiny, nothing could be further from the truth. Our responsibility is to assist those who are struggling, to remain true to who we are, and to know that even if the water of the sea is churning in front of us, all it takes is the waving of a staff, belief in our purpose, and the determination to take one step at a time, and the way will be cleared for a much calmer future.

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

University exam clashes a taxing issue

From a Jewish point of view, one of the major advantages of living in South Africa is the extent to which the rights and freedoms of all religious communities, large or small, are respected and fully protected. That being said, ensuring that members of our community aren’t unduly disadvantaged due to their religious commitments is nevertheless one of the most complex and time-consuming areas in which the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) involves itself. In terms of the nitty-gritty details of this kind of work, addressing cases of university exams that have been set on *yom tov* or Shabbat is an especially challenging area. Since it’s rarely possible for dates to be changed after the fact, given the challenges the universities themselves face in putting together exam schedules that accommodate the needs of all their students, the focus has been on working with the relevant institutions to make alternative arrangements for the students concerned. In previous years, it was possible to arrange for students to write their papers immediately after Shabbat or *yom tov* under the auspices of the SAJBD. However, now that the University of South Africa (Unisa), where the majority of scheduling problems arise, conducts exams online, new solutions have had to be found. In practice, this has meant arranging for the affected students to be given alternate assessments, both in terms of the original paper and any supplementary assessments that might be required. Last year, we were able to address

ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner



nearly 100 cases, 69 of which concerned Unisa students, but the bare numbers don’t tell the whole story. It entailed working with the relevant university on a case-by-case basis, with circumstances differing from department to department, and each individual case required constant follow-ups. In addition to the universities, our office worked with private tertiary institutions and occasionally, even high schools to resolve exam clashes. As the organisation mandated to uphold Jewish religious rights and freedoms, the SAJBD, with untiring National Director Wendy Kahn leading from the front, will always go the extra mile to assist our Jewish students, and we take pride in our successful track record in this area. That being said, those who find themselves in such a situation need to do their part by carefully checking their exam timetables and notifying the Board of any problems as soon as possible. As has frequently been stressed in this column, it’s critical that students inform us timeously about any scheduling clashes so as to give us sufficient time to come to an acceptable alternative arrangement with the institution concerned. All communications in this regard should be sent to sajbd@sajbd.org.

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

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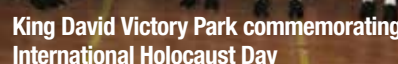
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KDVP commemorates Holocaust with film and memory

"Mr Fliss's story is a case of resilience and faith. It's the duty of every student hearing it to embody these values," said Robert Singer, the chairperson of the Center for Jewish Impact.

King David High School Victory Park commemorated International Holocaust Day the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, with a special assembly on 27 January. Prepared by the Judaica committee and Student Representative Council executive, the assembly stated, "We Remember!" as this date is designated by the United Nations to remember all those murdered during the Holocaust. The documentary film *I am Here*, the life and memories of Holocaust survivor Ella Blumenthal, was also introduced.



Torah Academy empowers parents

was officially donated to the shul on Crouse's first yahrzeit, surrounded by family and friends of the Crouse and Lilian families, members, and lay-leaders of the old Rosettenville Shul, and the broader Chabad community.

Torah Academy launched a campaign at the end of last year to share weekly informative, useful videos with parents. The videos, which feature in-school therapists, are intended to empower parents, a priority of the school. Ranging from sensory integration and the vestibular system to language stimulation, they share tips on how to recognise difficulties and assist children at home, and when to seek professional intervention.

- New Beginnings hosts a talk by Marcia Tanzer, *A significant slice of Jewish Joburg nostalgically uncovered*. Time: 10:00. Venue: UJW House, 77 Sandler Road, Percelia Estate. Contact: lynarch@worldonline.co.za
- The Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre hosts a screening of *Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, A Journey, A Song*. Time: 18:00. Donation: R100 (R70 for members). Contact: 087 188 1815 or hazel@rchcc.org.za
- Jewish National Fund of South Africa hosts a community Tu B'Shvat event in honour of Israel's 75th birthday. Time 14:00. Contact: 011 645 2579 or info@infsa.co.za

- ORT SA hosts a webinar by Alan Blumenfeld, *Marketing Strategies and Tools for e-Commerce Success*. Time: 08:30. Contact 011 728 7154 or admin@ortjet.org.za

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