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# South African Jewish Report

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## Vote to downgrade embassy – a ‘slap in the face’

NICOLA MILTZ

The Israel ministry of foreign affairs has lashed out at the South African government for its vote on Tuesday, 7 March, to downgrade its embassy in Israel, describing the move as “disgraceful”.

The South African Jewish community was dealt an emotional and psychological blow as political parties voted in favour of a parliamentary motion brought by the National Freedom Party (NFP) for the downgrade. The NFP holds just two seats in the National Assembly.

It brings to realisation the African National Congress (ANC) 2017 conference resolution to downgrade the embassy in Tel Aviv to a liaison office, followed by the 2018 decision to recall the South African ambassador, who has never returned.

Since then, the South African mission continued to have full embassy status but it has undergone a gradual stripping of resources, remaining in limbo. A cabinet ratification of this vote down the line will signal the final blow.

The development has been met with a deep sense of disappointment, disquiet, and anger within the community, other religious groups, politicians, and business leaders. They all agree that South Africans “deserve better”.

Sources in the Israeli ministry told the *SA Jewish Report* that the “symbolic resolution didn’t contribute in the least to the promotion of any viable solution in the Middle East”.

“At a time when many African and Muslim countries are strengthening and deepening ties with the state of Israel for the benefit of everyone’s common interests, it’s unfortunate that South Africa continues to adhere to an anachronism and the deterioration of relations, a move that will only harm South Africa itself and its standing,” the source high up in the ministry said.

Political analysts agree that the move won’t hurt Israel in any way, considering that South Africa has made itself an “irrelevant player” in the Middle East peace process and is a minor trade partner.

However, they believe it will have a “profound impact” on members of the Jewish community, who

may question their future in a country so openly hostile to the Jewish state. It may also act as a driving force for Jews to leave, taking with them entrepreneurial expertise and the potential for much needed local job creation.

The irony of the vote falling on the Jewish festival of Purim – when Jews were saved from genocide in Persia – wasn’t lost on communal leaders. They collectively

Rowan Polovin, the national chairperson of the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), said the motion didn’t represent the voice of most South Africans, who held no ill-will towards Israel, and it should be viewed as a purely symbolic and domestic act by “narrow-minded political actors”.

In a statement released by the SAZF, he said, “Its only

or make a pilgrimage to the holy land for religious reasons. “It’s a blatant attempt by parliament to encroach upon the religious rights and freedoms of all South Africans that are enshrined by our Constitution,” he said.

The ANC government had created a foreign policy that aimed to befriend dictatorships and bash democracies, Polovin said. “It obsesses over Israel, which is the size of our Kruger National Park, and at the same time, hosts navy war drills with Russia, responsible for horrific war crimes and the deaths of thousands of innocent Ukrainian civilians over the past year.”

Professor Karen Milner, the chairperson of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), described the vote as a “gratuitous slap in the face” for Israel’s many supporters in South Africa.

“For the Jewish community in particular, it was deeply disquieting to witness the overtly hostile, undiplomatic, and above all blatantly discriminatory treatment to which Israel was subjected in this country’s foremost law-making chamber,” she said.

In a statement, the SAJBD said the passing of the resolution, while framed as a gesture motivated by human rights, was in reality “driven by an obsessive enmity towards the world’s sole Jewish nation state and a desire to undermine and harm South Africa’s own best interests”.

“Over the decades, South African Jewry has been confronted by many attacks on its beliefs and threats to its well-being. Through all of them, the community remained resilient and unbowed. The SAJBD has no doubt that notwithstanding the shameful farce that played out in parliament, our community won’t be swayed from its deep-rooted connections, and will continue to stand up for its deeply-held heritage with resilience and with pride,” said the statement.

Four Jewish DA members of parliament bemoaned the outcome. Glynis Breytenbach described it as “deeply saddening”.

Continued on page 14>>



Photo: YouTube

**African Christian Democratic Party MP Steve Swart responded to the landslide vote to downgrade the SA embassy in Israel by saying he wished for a similar fate today for those who plot the destruction of the Jewish people as befell Haman in the story of Purim.**

exclaimed that parliament “picked this day, of all days” to target and sanction the world’s only Jewish state, whose existence serves to prevent another genocide against the Jewish people.

While the NFP’s motion was met with opposition in parliament by representatives from the Democratic Alliance (DA), African Christian Democratic Party, Inkatha Freedom Party, and Freedom Front Plus, who united to voice their “vociferous” opposition to the move, it didn’t garner enough votes.

achievement is to diminish South Africa’s international standing and ability to play any meaningful role in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Business relations and travel between South Africa and Israel will remain intact, while Israel continues to normalise relations with a number of other countries in the Middle East and Africa.”

Polovin said that though the motion would have no effect on Israel, it sent a worrying message to South African Jews, Christians, and Muslims wishing to travel

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## Pro-Palestinian activist sentenced for attacks on Jews

JACOB HENRY – JTA

A pro-Palestinian activist from Staten Island was sentenced to 18 months in prison on Friday, 3 March, for attacking Jews at rallies in Manhattan.

Saadah Masoud, 29, was sentenced at the Federal District Court in Manhattan to one count of conspiring to commit hate crimes.

The sentence is notable because most hate-crime charges in New York City are dropped before conviction, according to a 2022 report by *The City*. Recent New York Police Department data showed that antisemitic incidents have increased recently in the five boroughs.

In the spring of 2021 – amid a raucous public debate over conflict in Israel and Gaza, as well as a spike in antisemitic attacks – Masoud went to a pro-Israel rally in Manhattan. There, he asked a man wearing a Star of David necklace if he was Jewish, then punched him in the face. The man was walking with his wife, according to court papers.

Two weeks later, Masoud also shouted antisemitic insults at Heshy Tischler, an outspoken Orthodox activist in Brooklyn who had also railed against pandemic restrictions. After Tischler began filming, another associate of Masoud ultimately hit Tischler, who was running for the city council at the time.

Tischler addressed the court on Friday, and called Masoud an “evil man” who showed up to “to see blood”.

And in 2022, Masoud was at a march in Manhattan hosted by pro-Palestinian group Within Our Lifetime, where he assaulted a counter protester, Matt Greenman, who had an Israeli flag draped over his body.

Masoud threw Greenman to the ground, repeatedly punched

him, dragged his face along the sidewalk, then ripped the Israeli flag from his neck, prosecutors said. At that same march, protesters called to “globalise the Intifada” and told the *New York Jewish Week* that they wouldn’t speak to the “Zionist media”.



Prosecutors asked for the 18-month sentence, but Masoud’s lawyers argued for six months, denying that the defendant was antisemitic, and saying that he attacked only those who were supporters of Israel, according to the *New York Times*.

Masoud apologised on Friday in court, and said he regretted his actions.

“I realise that I have anger issues, and I need to work on them,” he said.

Judge Denise Cote, who presided over the hearing on Friday, told Masoud that he was “burdened by enormous anger”. “You’re going to have to confront whatever is in your soul,” Cote said.

## Coin of fire



**Rabbi Pini Hecht – Marais Road Shul**

My grandfather, Rabbi Jacob J. Hecht, had a dear friend, Yossel Hirsch. He and his brother ran a bakery in Brooklyn, New York, and were survivors of World War II. One day, while incarcerated in the Mauthausen Concentration Camp in Austria, Yossel was rounded up together with other prisoners.

The Nazis were always experimenting with different ways to expedite the killing of their prisoners, and that evening, they were trying something new. They forced the group of prisoners into an ammonia-chilled refrigerator in the hope that they would all freeze to death. Next to Yossel in that freezing death trap was a friend of his small stature. As he stood there shivering, he turned to Yossel and said, “Yossele, *ich bin kalt!*” (Yossele, I’m cold!). Yossel, caring for his friend, wrapped his arms around him and started to rub him, his body, his hands, his feet. All that night, he focused on making sure he could feel the warmth of his friend, and pleaded with him not to give up. When morning came, they were greeted with the horrific sight of death all around them. Yossel and his friend were the sole survivors of that ordeal. Having worked to warm his friend, he had raised the temperature of his own body and survived. My grandfather would share this story, and he would conclude, “When you help another person in despair, you’re really helping yourself.”

When Hashem instructed Moshe to take

a census of the Jewish nation by collecting a half shekel from each individual, Moshe was confused. In response, the midrash tells us, Hashem showed him a coin of fire. It’s surprising that Moshe seemed to be unsure what a half shekel was and it remains unclear why a coin of fire cleared this up for him. Perhaps Moshe wasn’t unsure about the coin, but understanding the effort people put in to make a buck and how difficult it can be to then let go of some of it, he was unsure how to motivate the giving. To this, Hashem showed him a coin of fire. Fire is the one physical element that

when shared, isn’t diminished but increases. Share the contents of one cup into another cup and the first will have less than before, but if you share the flame of one candle with another, you increase the light!

By showing Moshe a coin of fire, Hashem was telling him to share the message with the people that when we give of our resources to assist another, we’re not diminished, but enhanced. As my grandfather’s friend, Yossel, learnt on that fateful night in the freezer at the Mauthausen Concentration Camp, when you help another, you’re really helping yourself.

## Torah Thought

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The people make a golden calf and worship it. Moses descends from the mountain. Seeing the people dancing about their idol, he breaks the tablets, destroys the golden calf, and has the primary culprits put to death. He then says to G-d, “If you don’t forgive them, blot me out from the book that you have written.”



# Friends in high places: the politicians who stood behind Israel

TALI FEINBERG

The fact that downgrading of the South African embassy in Israel was even debated in parliament is something that Member of Parliament (MP) Michael Bagraim says he never expected to see in his lifetime.

Yet on 2 March 2023, a draft resolution by National Freedom Party parliamentary leader Ahmed Munzoor Shaik Emam calling for further downgrading of the South African embassy in Israel was debated. A later session resulted in the adoption of the resolution (see page 1).

Amid naked hatred for the Jewish state, a number of politicians named the downgrading for what it was: a cheap political game, a clear and hostile bias, a betrayal of South Africa’s own history, and the moment where South Africa walked away from playing a mediating role in the Middle East.

MPs from the Democratic Alliance (DA); Freedom Front Plus (FF+); Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP); and African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP) all called for the embassy in Israel not to be downgraded.

Thirty-year-old DA MP Luyolo Mphithi was one voice that stood out, providing much-needed wisdom and calm. “What I expected to hear today was practical and pragmatic ways of engagement with this issue,” he said. “People are being killed, yet here we are discussing showy and punitive measures that only add fuel to the fire.”

He noted that although South Africa is failing in almost every other sphere, playing a role in brokering peace is one arena where it can still have influence, and yet it’s failing there too.

Mpithi called on the African National Congress (ANC) to consider its history, which he believes it’s betraying. Referring to democratic South Africa’s founding foreign policy documents, he said, “It was clear than and is clear now that we must stand on the side of diplomacy, on the side of peacekeeping, where it’s not about grandstanding but more about solutions that value every life.”

Bringing the discussion back to the draft resolution at hand, Mpithi said, “This is an argument that prioritises cosmetic changes instead of changes that will have a positive impact on the Palestinian and Israeli people. Like an ostrich in the sand,



the ANC government is intent on acting out ideological and factional motivations.”

“The people who are so quick to throw stones at Israel must first familiarise themselves with what’s really going on there,” said Dr Corné Mulder, FF+ MP and chief spokesperson on international relations and co-operation. “A first-hand visit to the country wouldn’t hurt,” he said. “It’s highly unlikely that all the South African enemies of Israel have paid a visit to the Palestinian city of Ramallah, the West Bank, or Gaza Strip.”

“Today’s attacks on Israel in the South African parliament contained all the same old clichés,” he said. “It confirms the suspicion that those expressing them are totally out of touch with what’s happening in the international community. The debate in parliament is, in fact, a tragic reflection of South Africa’s foreign policy and its attitude towards the country. With it, South Africa is relegating itself to an irrelevant bystander in the entire Israel-Palestine matter.”

“These politicians are obviously ignorant of the international Abraham Accords between various role players seeking common ground for peace. [The Accords] include Middle Eastern Muslim countries that pursue normal diplomatic relations – something that many South Africans reject.

“The following lesson should be taken to heart: Israel doesn’t need anything

from South Africa,” Mulder said. “The tiny country is a giant in the technological arena, and could help South Africa address its many problems. But ideology bites the hand that could feed it.

“Not everyone in Africa is that blind, though,” he said. “Countries like Angola, Cameroon, the Congo, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Zambia, and many others have normal, diplomatic ties with Israel to the benefit of everyone in those countries.

“South Africa must wake up and take note,” said Mulder. “Even Israel and Palestine themselves are moving on in their pursuit of lasting solutions and peace. A true friend would have advised Palestine to help find true solutions and not keep

it was about “sloganeering” instead of genuinely accessing all diplomatic channels to bring together the two sides.

Hlengwa emphasised that such a move would affect South African Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, and that it may also hinder access the Palestinians and Palestinian Authority. “This won’t inspire confidence in South Africa, and will put it in the awkward position of no longer being trusted as an honest broker for peace,” he said. “This moment will see South Africa walk away from the negotiating table.”

DA MP Mergan Chetty said bystanders picking sides only perpetuated divisions, and there were politicians who sought to benefit from these divisions as it had become their “political currency”. Human rights violations on both sides, such as terrorism perpetrated by Palestinians, needed to be called out.

ACDP MP Wayne Maxim Thring said the downgrade could negatively impact South Africa’s Christian pilgrims. “Israel bashing seems to be in vogue”, Thring said, yet the open hypocrisy was clear to see as “these Israel bashers” are quiet about so many human rights violations in the world. “We have a moral obligation to assist in a negotiated solution,” he said. “This resolution undermines any hope for a negotiated process and doesn’t benefit the



playing the victim to get the world’s sympathy. Constantly attacking Israel is a game that has reached its expiry date.”

IFP MP Mkhuleko Hlengwa described the debate as “disingenuous” and “regressive diplomacy”. He noted that “downgrading is a fluid concept”, so passing such a resolution actually carried no weight, and

Palestinian people.”

All four parties said their position on the Middle East remained in favour of a negotiated, two-state solution, based on 1967 borders. Both the South African Zionist Federation and South African Jewish Board of Deputies thanked them for their support in this dark hour for South African Jewry.

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# Oudtshoorn museum honours rescue of Polish WWII orphans

TALI FEINBERG

A little-known Holocaust-era story of rescue, survival, and finding refuge in South Africa will now be remembered in a quiet corner of Africa. On 6 March, the CP Nel Museum in the town of Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape announced that it planned to erect a new monument to commemorate the history of 500 Polish

children who escaped Siberia and came to live in Oudtshoorn in the Western Cape during World War II, exactly 80 years ago. It's estimated that almost one-third of these children were Jewish. One of these children was Irena Schneider's father. At an event at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC), she described how as a child, she hardly ever heard her father, Stanislaw Korzynski, talk about

his experiences during the war. It was only after he died that she discovered a briefcase in his bedroom cupboard. It contained pre-World War II Polish money, school notebooks, a prayer book, photographs, his South African naturalisation card, and letters from her grandmother in Poland. She described it as "a personal time capsule. It helped me understand his past trauma and why it was difficult for him to talk about [it]."

The 500 children, along with 51 adult medical personnel, teachers, and support staff, were first evacuated to Iran, after which they were transported on the SS *Dunera* to Port Elizabeth where they arrived in April 1943. From there, they were moved to the Karoo town of Oudtshoorn on 10 April 1943.

At the time, a British newsreel described how "The Polish flag flies over the sun-drenched South African Karoo in Oudtshoorn, where a camp for Polish refugee children has been set up. The youngsters looked fit, well, and happy in their new surroundings. Plenty of sunshine and the heat of the Karoo have worked wonders with these children, who have already endured the horrors of war.

"But life in the camp isn't just a holiday," the newsreel continued. "The children work to make the camp a self-contained unit. Not many Polish schoolbooks were brought to South Africa, and copies are made to supply the children. Their education will not be neglected. A number of children learned recently that their fathers are safe and serving in the Polish forces. The children can now hold their heads high. They have hope in the future." Children are seen presenting guests with ostrich feathers and eggs, symbolising the ostrich-trade lifeblood of the town.

How did children born in Poland come to find safe haven in the Little Karoo? It all began on 17 September 1939, two weeks after the German invasion of Poland, when Soviet troops swiftly occupied the eastern half of Poland and annexed the area to the Ukraine and Belorussia. Beginning in the winter of 1939 to 1940, Soviet authorities deported more than a million Poles, many of them children, to various provinces in the Soviet Union. Almost one-third of the deportees were Jewish.

The story continued in the summer of 1941. The Polish government in exile in London received permission from the Soviet Union to release several hundred thousand former Polish citizens from labour camps, prisons, and forcible resettlement in the Soviet Union, to organise military units among the Polish deportees, and later to transfer Polish civilians to camps in the British-controlled Middle East and Africa.

In 1942, the London government, acting

through its Consul General Dr M. Stanislaw Lepkowski, secured permission from the Jan Smuts' government of the Union of South Africa to transport 500 of the estimated 220 000 to 250 000 children to that country. In 1943, after they had been evacuated through the southern Soviet republics to Iran, the children were brought to South Africa.

And so, the Polish Children's Home,

at Groot Brak was also made available to them. Cultural activities played a big part in their lives including the establishment of a successful choir and dance groups that enthralled audiences in the area and throughout the country.

The intention was to return the children home to Poland once the war was over. However, at the Yalta Conference of February 1945, the fate of Poland was



A display at the CP Nel Museum commemorating the 500 Polish children who came to live in the small Karoo town during World War II

called Dom Polskich Dzieci, was organised in Oudtshoorn for their temporary accommodation, care, and education. It was located on what is now South Africa's Infantry School Army base, and run under the supervision of the South African department of social welfare, as well as Polish consular and ministry representatives. It remained in operation until 1947. Some of the children were reunited with their extended families, and others sent to schools around the world.

"These children came to form the core of the Polish community in South Africa," said Stefan Szewczuk, the president of the Polish Association of Siberian Deportees in South Africa, who is also the descendant of two of the Polish deportees. He was also speaking at an event at the JHGC in 2019. These second, third, and fourth-generation deportees call themselves "Oudtshoorniaci" in honour of this history.

The CP Nel Museum already houses documentation from the orphans and their families, and exhibits some photographs of the Polish orphanage. In addition, the museum is partnering with the Polish Association of Siberian Deportees to preserve this heritage.

The Ditsong Museum of Military History displays a poster, printed on canvas, titled, "The Polish Children of Oudtshoorn - their story in brief."

The Oudtshoorn community and its Catholic congregation in particular, received the children warmly and donated all manner of equipment, clothing, and money. During holidays, children were invited to stay at the homes of local residents, and a holiday home

sealed when the country came under Soviet influence and was destined for communist rule. Thus, it was decided to assimilate the orphans into South African society by sending them to schools around the country.

The girls were sent to convent schools while the boys to various technical schools. In spite of the painful circumstances of their youth, some of these Polish children rose up to become significant achievers in their fields. For example, two of these orphans, Leonard Ryniewicz and Mark Masojacia, who graduated in engineering, offered valuable support to Project Designer Professor Michal Zekrzewski in the construction of the new Durban Harbour passenger terminal.

In the years following the closure of the Polish Children's Home in Oudtshoorn, some of the orphans formed the Polish Association of Siberian Deportees in South Africa and re-visited the town on special occasions. On the 50th anniversary, they launched a new book, *We have survived*, which is described as "a diary, recollection, and also a historical source for all generations who might be interested in our saga".

"For many years, the CP Nel Museum has maintained a good working relationship with the Polish Association of Siberian Deportees and supports its annual reunion every year at the museum," said the CP Nel Museum, in announcing the new memorial. "It came as good news when the association forwarded the request to erect the monument. The museum is currently compiling an application to Heritage Western Cape for a permit."

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# End of an era as ANC crumbles

STEVEN GRUZO

Political analyst Dr Frans Cronje believes there's a strong likelihood that the African National Congress (ANC) will lose its majority in the National Assembly in 2024, according to his data. The party will no longer be able to do as it pleases and face automatic re-election. Polling indicates that the ANC has dropped in popularity from about 70% of voters in 2004 to about 40% or less today. The Democratic Alliance's (DA's) support is up to 30%.

"As the ANC fails to meet the expectations of people in their millions, they are beginning to abandon that party and look for pragmatic alternatives in the country's political opposition. Whoever is going to govern after the 2024 election is going to be in a coalition," Cronje said.

Cronje, the director of the Social Research Foundation (SRF), was in conversation with Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein in a webinar on 1 March. Cronje, known for his incisive and forthright analysis, spent almost 20 years at the South African Institute of Race Relations.

His approach entails "a cold, hard look at the data that informs the country, a good understanding of history, and being excellently informed on the ground on what politicians, business people, and foreign diplomats say about the country. There's no guesswork. There's no dreaming. There's just calls on what's happening now and what's going to happen."

Cronje was among those who cautioned that the enthusiasm around

Cyril Ramaphosa replacing Jacob Zuma as president – "Ramaphoria" – was misplaced. Predicting that Ramaphosa would disappoint as a leader made him unpopular in the country's boardrooms.

He reminded the audience of former State President PW Botha's disappointing and defiant Rubicon speech in Durban in August 1985. "The context wasn't dissimilar to that of today. Growth rates were very low. There was violent political anarchy across the country. Young white conscripts were engaged in running battles with black liberation movement activists. The country was in a bad space. The Cold War was on the go. Botha said, 'We will not change under pressure, we will carry on.' It was a dark moment."

No-one believed that in a decade, South Africa would have hammered out a political settlement, or that the ANC

“

**The black middle class will abandon its party in time, and it will be the end of Africa's great liberation movement.**

government in its first decade in office would cut debt levels in half, secure a budget surplus, and double the number of people in employment, Cronje said. So,

there's always hope of positive change.

In spite of the ructions in South Africa's large metropolitan municipalities, coalition governments can function efficiently elsewhere. "Our electoral system lends itself to coalitions," Cronje said, "and I doubt we'll have the situation where one dominant party can impose its will ever again. In many smaller towns, coalitions



Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein

work well where parties work with each other to find solutions that benefit the people. Parties that foil coalitions are exposed for that. It's reasonable that in the fullness of time, the country's coalitions will work better."

The SRF's polling research indicates that South Africans aren't as polarised as some want us to think. "People have the same value system, they have the same expectations of what should be done to fix the problem, and they want the same things for their children," Cronje said.

Cronje said that with an ANC-Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) coalition, "The country will get significantly worse. It would be an extinction-level event. It's

a realistic prospect, and it's extremely dangerous, to combine the ANC brand of incompetence and corruption and the EFF brand of anarchy and violence. The ANC is weak in the urban areas – it's a rural party now. By the 2029 election, I expect to see the ANC get somewhere between 20% and 30%." It has lost support of the young, the tertiary-educated, and the employed,

he said. "The black middle class will abandon its party in time, and it will be the end of Africa's great liberation movement." Cronje said a pragmatic ANC-DA coalition would bode well for the country, and even a DA small-party coalition that excluded the ANC.

"In the South African Jewish community, there are a growing number of people who can't

where religious leaders actually said to the president that load shedding was inflicting much more suffering on the people of South Africa than COVID-19," said Goldstein.

"When I hear that the chief rabbi hasn't had a bath for three days due to water shortages, we must know things are very, very serious," Cronje retorted. He said there was much the government could do to add megawatts to the national electricity grid to reduce load shedding stages including buying enough diesel for gas turbines, proper plant maintenance, and better-quality coal for running power stations, even before considering renewable energy or independent power producers.

"If sufficient resources are made available to the country's pro-democracy organisations, it will be possible to thwart every major attack on the country's democratic institutions, from freedom of speech reports, property rights, to the market economy and electoral system," Cronje said.

After the webinar, Cronje told the *SA Jewish Report* that people across the board were extremely concerned about where things were heading and were "slightly lost for direction". But he feels the chances for reform are better now than they were five years ago. He said he couldn't tell people whether to emigrate. "They must weigh up the evidence, and make an informed decision in the best interests of them and their families. It's a very difficult choice."



Dr Frans Cronje

come out at the end of the month," said Goldstein. "You cannot rely on government services for anything, so therefore, there's private security, private education, private healthcare, and now people have to provide their own electricity and water. There's real anxiety about the future."

"A few weeks ago, I was in a meeting



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## Politics just got personal

The community was sucker punched this week with the government voting to downgrade the South African embassy in Israel to a mere liaison office.

It's true that the embassy has been effectively downgraded ever since September 2018, when the government quietly brought the last South African ambassador, Sisa Ngombane, back home. Even then, it was obvious that the government had no intention of sending him back, nor did it plan to appoint anyone else to the post. It just left things as they were, slowly draining the embassy's resources.

For the most part, South Africans thought that the embassy had been downgraded, but it hadn't. Every now and again, we would remind people in the newspaper that the embassy was still an embassy. At other times, we thought it best not to say anything because we didn't want to remind people of the reality just in case it pushed the government to act on its unresolved 2017 African National Congress (ANC) conference resolution.

Now, nothing can stop the downgrade. President Cyril Ramaphosa may have the power to do so, but as he has made abundantly clear over the years as our leader, he's not going to rock the boat.

He's not going to stand up for this minority – albeit powerful – community, South African Jews. It takes guts, a deep sense of what's right and wrong, and a genuine benevolence for your civilian population to stand for us. I don't believe, at this point, that our president cares enough to do something like that. He's never one to stand up against his party, and it was his party that railroaded the vote.

So, why, you may wonder, am I or the community surprised?

This is a deep insult to us as a community, and a clear disregard of our connection to the Jewish state. It's also yet another indicator of the government's blatant one-sided view of the Middle East. It's pally-pally with Iran, Cuba, China, and I can name so many more countries that have disgusting human rights records against their people. South Africa ignores what these countries do but goes guns a-blazing for Israel, this tiny Jewish state that remains the only democracy in the Middle East.

There were parties who stood with us, the African Christian Democratic Party, the Freedom Front Plus, the Inkatha Freedom Party, and the Democratic Alliance, but their numbers couldn't come close to those within the ANC. The ruling party's position was clearly and vehemently against Israel – or was it against us?

It feels personal, although I'm not sure that those outside of the community would necessarily understand why. It's just a diplomatic posting in a Middle Eastern country, isn't it?

The reality is that it is all about us. Israel doesn't care what the South African government does. Yes, it may feel the insulting slap and be irritated by it, but not much more than that.

The only people who will be affected by this are those in our community. Our relationship with Israel, the Jewish state, is deeply important to us. And it's hard to stomach our government cutting yet another tie with Israel. It feels like a personal attack.

Is it, though? I cannot categorically say.

I wonder if the government has any idea how upsetting this is for us. Who does it honestly think it's hurting by doing this?

Surely our leaders realise that after all they have said about Israel, it's "water off a duck's back" for the powerful Jewish state.

And it's possible that the next step that Israel takes will be to downgrade its embassy here, and recall its ambassador. Again, it wouldn't hurt Israel, but it would be devastating for us. Another link broken between our community and the Jewish state.

The crazy thing is that it was Lindiwe Sisulu when she was minister of international affairs and cooperation, who first began going on about the downgrade, but never actually did anything about it.

Then, it was incumbent foreign affairs minister, Dr Naledi Pandor, who took up the cudgels from Sisulu and began to attack Israel, going on about the downgrade as if it had already happened.

However, neither of them did anything about it. It took a politician, Ahmed Manzoor Shaik Emam, from the National Freedom Party, a party with only one seat in parliament, to ultimately bring it about.

And once the vote happened, it was a done deal. The numbers were overpoweringly against Israel.

For some reason, there were people within our communal leadership who thought a miracle would happen and we wouldn't lose the vote. I have no idea why they thought this, but I believe we needed to do everything we could to avoid it happening. Did we?

What impact will this have in the long term? I'm not sure. It may well be a matter of us finally recognising where we stand in the eyes of the party presently ruling government – hopefully not for long.

Is the ruling party antisemitic? I cannot categorically say it is, but I wonder why it has just one bugbear that seems to be more important to it than dealing with load shedding and corruption.

Does the government care that it hurts us? Again, I don't think so.

But then, I'm not sure that it's terribly interested in what the general populace feels. If it was, it might have maintained Eskom, the roads, and infrastructure better.

Is this the beginning of the end for us? I don't believe so. It makes us angry, and we're definitely reeling from the side swipe.

Are things going to be different after the downgrade? Considering that we haven't had a South African ambassador in Israel for almost five years, it's unlikely to change anything very much.

And what if Israel recalls its ambassador? Let's not jump the gun. It may never happen. We'll consider it if it does.

I hope Israel recognises that decision would hurt us more than the ANC government.

We have every reason to be grumpy and angry with the government for making this happen because it's a massive blow. Is it a blow that will have a reverberating and long-term impact? I'm not sure it will.

To be honest, load shedding and potholes are still far more important in our day-to-day lives. And these are things we can do something about.

Clearly, we aren't going to change the ANC's mind. We will prevail, and we'll get past this. But will we ever forgive the government? Unlikely!

Shabbat Shalom!  
Peta Krost  
Editor



## Let's talk about Andrew Tate

OPINION

REBBETZIN WENDY HENDLER



Andrew Tate is a British born American kickboxer who was launched into the public eye by being expelled from *Big Brother* in 2016 after video footage showed him beating a woman with a belt.

Both parties denied the abuse, and said it was totally consensual, but then Tate went public with his view that women are "dirt". His online profile soared, and he is now has 12.7 billion views on social media.

His statements have sparked widespread outrage and condemnation, particularly for his promotion of misogyny and toxic masculinity. He says women belong in the home, can't drive, and are a man's property.

He also insists that rape victims must "bear responsibility" for their attacks, and claims to date women aged 18 to 19 because he "can make an imprint" on them.

Tate's views have angered domestic abuse advocacy organisations. He has been described as an extreme misogynist capable of radicalising men and boys to commit harm offline.

The mind boggling fact is that this 36-year-old isn't hiding in some obscure corner of the dark web, but has become one of the most famous figures on TikTok, where his videos have been watched 11.6 billion times.

Although TikTok has now banned him from using its platform, it's not hard to find his posts and videos online. It's easy to hate Tate, yet there are many boys in our community who love him. They see him as their role model, some even going so far as to call him their god.

It begs the question, what message is resonating so strongly with our boys?

Koleinu SA recently did a survey among teenage boys in our community. Every single one of them had heard about Tate, and 70% had seen his videos on TikTok. When asked to describe Tate's attitude towards women, 80% found his opinions to be honest and realistic, while only 6% described him as a misogynist and toxic male.

There appears to be a general feeling among our boys that the male persona has come under massive attack from so many sides – the #MeToo movement; the #MenAreTrash movement; and the feminist movements which seem to dominate the current narrative.

In our survey, 70% of the boys said movements such as #MeToo have labelled men as toxic and misogynistic.

Of the 86% of boys who said they had a positive male influence in their lives, 67% stated that their role model's behaviour influenced the way they treat women.

Worldwide, the place of men, the place of women, and the ideas of masculinity and femininity have been shaken up. Gender has become fluid, and with this has come confusion and insecurity in our teenage boys about their own identities and personas.

In their search for male role models, they have found Tate, who for them represents the ideal male in many ways. From our survey, it's clear that they choose to ignore the harmful, dark, and ugly beliefs about women which he brazenly promotes, and focus the positive aspects of who he is – powerful, successful, self-made, and influential. They also seem to value his financial advice and personal-growth input.

Teenage boys face much insecurity in today's world regarding self-image, physique, sexuality, social standing, and ability to fit in. Tate hones in on these vulnerabilities, and offers them guidance for success in life. He appears to have what many boys have been trained to think they want – good looks, muscular physique, fast cars, women, fame, and virility.

For his many teenage fans, Tate is a god for teaching them the ways to be "a man". What to adults is clearly frightening in his messaging is attractive and even compelling to kids.

According to our survey, 55% of boys feel that he is making an impact due to his honesty, strong sense of self, and independent thinking.

For parents coming across these extremely disturbing

and radical views for the first time, there must be fear about how this man might be influencing their sons, particularly in light of the survey results showing that 73% of boys interviewed find his messages appealing.

Parents may easily feel overwhelmed by the manner in which social media so effectively promotes and normalises hateful, controversial, and divisive narratives. They may feel at a loss to know how to deal with this.

But there are ways to tackle this conversation and use it as a teaching opportunity, not only about Tate, but about the dark side of social media and misogyny in general.

Here are some tips. First, try to understand your child's world. Watch a few of Tate's videos and gain a better grasp of the message he's promoting. Try to figure out his appeal in the context of your child's environment. Try to ascertain what in Tate's messaging resonates with him and what need Tate is filling in his life.

Is he speaking to the confusion your son may have about his masculine role? Is he offering a path to status, success, and wealth, or is he just making him feel heard for the first time?

Child development expert Luke Lamprecht says the most important thing we can do for our children is to encourage critical thinking. In the discussion about Tate, ask your child what he thinks about Tate's attitude towards women. Ask him if he sees any problems with this way of thinking, and whether Tate's attitudes towards women are something he would want to adopt in his own life.



Dig a bit deeper, and ask how these attitudes may affect his relationships with his parents, sisters, family members, teachers, future wife, etc. Help him to unravel what aspects of Tate's message may be useful to him, and what he finds objectionable or damaging.

The most important part of this conversation will be the gift you give your child of listening respectfully in an open, curious, and non-judgemental manner. This is how you serve as a role model and create a space for your child to analyse their thoughts in a safe and loving environment.

Remember, children learn more by what they see and experience than by what they hear. If you witness your child expressing derogatory views about women, immediately name the behaviour for what it is.

For example, "What you have just said is misogynistic/sexist/violent/abusive." When we ignore, we normalise.

Some may say that the damage has been done, and it's too late to curb the influence of Tate on our youth. But is it ever too late for parents, especially fathers, to model respectful behaviour with and around women to help combat misogyny that runs rampant and often unchecked? We think not.

• Rebbetzin Wendy Hendler is the co-founder and director of Koleinu SA, the helpline for victims of abuse in the South African Jewish community. The helpline number is 011 264 0341, operating on Sunday to Thursday, from 09:00 to 22:00, and after Shabbat until midnight.



# A legal revolution or necessary legal reform?

OPINION

RAN BAR-YOSHAFAT

I have great empathy for Israeli demonstrators protesting against legal reform. The feeling that democracy is being taken away from you and that the rules of the game are being changed, is a terrible one.

With a prime minister being tried for corruption, a minister recently convicted, and a coalition with religious parties, I understand why they are concerned. I hear their voices, and hope that the coalition will hear them too.

I have felt this way for the past 15 years together with a large group of Israelis who have felt this way since the mid-1990s.

Many Israelis, I would argue, and a lot more than those who are now protesting, feel that the current state of affairs in Israel is unfair and undemocratic. They feel that the Supreme Court has taken more and more power into its own hands, making their political choices less relevant and turning them into second-class citizens whose voices aren't heard.

They feel unheard because the Supreme Court cancels laws and overrides government decisions – laws regarding Israel's immigration policies, and decisions ranging from military restrictions to when a holiday should be celebrated.

I'm all for a liberal democracy in which the power of the government is limited, and rights, especially individual freedom, is preserved. However, this is for the people and their elected representatives to ensure not the courts.

I have a feeling that had National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir been nominated as a Supreme Court Justice, many people currently against the reform wouldn't be happy with him having the final word.

The proposed reform, all parts of which could be subject to negotiation, suggest allowing the Supreme Court to declare laws to be unconstitutional only under a full bench (15) and with a substantial majority (12).

Should parliament still wish to pass such a law, it would be able to override the court's ruling if there was a majority of Knesset members – 61 MKs.

One proposal suggests that if the court's decision is unanimous, it cannot be overridden by parliament. Another suggests that an override be required to pass with a 61 majority in two votes, the second to take place after a new Knesset is elected. Only then will the Knesset have the final word.

One of the key elements of a vibrant democracy is the separation of powers. The



judicial branch in Israel should remain just that. However, when it comes to nominating judges, there's room for politicians to agree on appointees, just like in the United States, and just like in most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries, as well as in South Africa.

The current selection committee consists of nine members. Three of them are sitting justices, two are representatives of the Israel Bar Association, two are ministers, and two members of parliament – one from the opposition and one from the coalition.

Appointing a new justice to the Supreme Court calls for seven out of nine majority. This enables the justices veto power. Not only is the judicial branch rife with nepotism, it also fails to represent the Israeli public.

The current proposal calls for replacing the two Bar representatives with politicians. There are several options for how they will be appointed, but eventually all of them give the upper hand to the government. I don't agree with this reduced separation of powers. Politicians come and go. Judges, once elected, are independent.

Another part of the reform addresses the court's authority – or lack thereof if to be accurate – to review and invalidate basic laws. Although Israel doesn't have a Constitution, the Supreme Court is allowed to cancel a law if it deems it to be in contradiction of a basic law.

There's no legal basis for the court to address the basic laws themselves. After all, there's something dishonest in arguing that Israel doesn't have a Constitution but the basic laws are the Constitution. There's something dishonest in claiming that the basic laws are the highest norm of society, but the court is authorised to discuss them on the basis of higher-norm principles that aren't written anywhere.

At the end of the day, the real issue with this legal reform isn't the legal parts of it. If the dispute is about having another member of the opposition, or requiring a 63 majority instead of 61 in a voting process, that can be discussed.

The real concern is the distrust that exists, with both sides believing ill intent on the part of the other. If we could have a real conversation, we could find the true difference of opinion – who should have the final say in a (liberal) democracy? Is it the public through its elected representatives, or unelected judges and legal advisors, who some people refer to as gatekeepers?

• *Ran Bar-Yoshafat is deputy director of the Kohelet Forum.*



Israelis protest against the government's planned judicial overhaul in Jerusalem

# The fight over Israel's democratic institutions – what's actually at stake?

OPINION

YUVAL SHANY



The radical legal reforms introduced by Israel's new government in January, a few days after taking office, and the accompanying legislative blitz the ruling coalition initiated shortly thereafter in the Knesset, has thrown the country and its political system into a state of turmoil.

The planned package of reforms include four main components: strictly limiting the power of the Supreme Court to review the constitutionality of legislation; limiting its power to review executive acts; politicising the process for appointing judges; and weakening the powers of government legal advisors.

Each of these measures is bound to empower the governing coalition significantly. Their combined effect is expected to dismantle Israel's current system of checks and balances; undermine the rule of law and judicial independence; and effectively transform Israel from a (flawed) liberal democracy to one only in name.

To understand the serious implications of the reforms, one has to consider the anomalous and weak nature of Israel's constitutional system.

Israel has no comprehensive Constitution. Rather, its constitutional order is built around 13 basic laws passed by the Knesset over the years, which protect some human rights and delineate the power of state institutions.

The basic laws are passed, however, using the same process in which ordinary legislation is passed.

Since Israel is a parliamentary democracy in which the majority in the Knesset forms the government of the day, the parties that have even the slightest majority in the Knesset control both the legislative and executive branch. Furthermore, they also control the process of passing new basic laws and can thereby change the constitutional "rules of the game".

In the absence of institutional checks and balances such as those found in most other democracies (for instance, two houses of parliament, presidential veto, federalism, membership of regional blocs, and human rights mechanisms), the one meaningful check on the power of the ruling coalition is the Supreme Court.

The latter has construed the basic laws over the years (admittedly, not without controversy) as granting it the power to review the compatibility of ordinary legislation with basic laws. It has developed administrative-law tools designed to limit the abuse of government power, including assessing whether government measures are patently unreasonable.

Some court justices have also observed that even basic laws that violate the country's core democratic features are reviewable.

Relying on these powers, the court struck down over the years 22 laws, including laws that exempt ultra-Orthodox men from military service; facilitate the prolonged detention of asylum seekers; and confiscate private Palestinian land in

the West Bank. It also nullified "patently unreasonable" government decisions, such as appointing for certain ministerial positions politicians standing trial for corruption or those convicted of tax fraud.

Though the actual number of laws and measures invalidated by the court is relatively low when compared to courts in other countries, the impact of these judicial decisions has been amplified by government lawyers who instructed government ministries to refrain from proposing legislation or taking executive action which is likely to be struck down by the court.

The planned reforms seek to dismantle all of these checks and balances that have been developed over the years, one by one.

The court would be explicitly forbidden from reviewing the basic laws itself. Its decisions to strike down legislation would require a super-majority on the court – 12 out of 15 serving justices – and the Knesset could reintroduce any law that was struck down by a simple majority – 61 out of 120 serving members of the Knesset.

Effectively, this would empower the ruling coalition to enact legislation harming human rights and minority rights, as well as to change the democratic rules of the game in its favour.

Furthermore, the system of judicial appointments will be dramatically changed from a selection process, which since 1953 has been dominated by professionals (five out of the nine members of the judicial selection committee are lawyers or judges), to one dominated by politicians (five out of the nine members would be politicians from the ruling coalition).

This would be a significant blow to judicial independence in Israel, and would effectively give the ruling coalition power of control over all three branches of government.

The reforms also seek to remove or severely limit the power of the court to review the reasonableness of government measures, opening the door for corrupt decisions and administrative acts that violate human rights. This would also release government officials from a duty to follow legal instructions issued by government lawyers, allowing them instead to adopt their own (potentially tendentious) interpretations of what the law is.

Israeli democracy is already institutionally weak and hardly liberal in its overall orientation, given that it tolerates many chronic violations of human rights, especially in the field of state and religion and the minority rights of Arab Palestinians, and has afforded very limited protections to Palestinians living under Israeli military rule. The upshot of these initiatives, if accepted, is that Israel would become a hollow democracy. It would become a liberal democracy in name only.

It's not surprising that hundreds of thousands of Israelis have taken to the streets in recent weeks to stop what they call the "legal revolution" or "legal coup d'état" that would fundamentally change the nature of the country. Rightfully, they regard the coming weeks – during which the reform will either pass or be stopped – as Israeli democracy's moment of truth.

• *Yuval Shany is deputy president of the Israel Democracy Institute.*



The parties that have control of the Knesset also control both the legislative and executive branch of the government

Ran Bar-Yoshafat and Yuval Shany will take part in a live debate being held by the South African Zionist Federation on judicial reform on 9 March at 19:00 on Zoom. See [www.sazf.org](http://www.sazf.org) for more details.

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# The Megillah that might have been

OPINION

Last year some time, in an attempt to show us, a group of eager, but unsure English honours students what a bad argument looks like, one of my lecturers quipped, “It’s like writing an essay arguing that Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet was a feminist figure!”

At first, this was difficult to decode. Elizabeth is strong. She speaks her mind. She even rejects Darcy, and his inheritance of £10 000 a year. However, as my lecturer pointed out, feminism, at its core, is about equal rights and equal opportunities, regardless of gender. Elizabeth Bennet may be admirable, but nowhere in *Pride and Prejudice* is she concerned with the overall status of women.

This is a common mistake. We equate strong, outspoken women with feminists, especially fictional, or historical women, who are unable to correct or contradict us. In the story of Purim, Esther and her eponymous Biblical book is cast in the same role. The internet is littered with articles: “Esther is a postcolonial feminist icon”, “Was I, Esther, a feminist?”

There’s no doubt that Esther deserves our respect. She plucks up the courage to approach King Ahasuerus, even though by doing so, she’s putting her life at risk. She hatches a plan to save her people, and curries favour with the king and Haman. In the end, she reveals her Jewish identity to Ahasuerus, and demands that her life and her people are spared from Haman’s evil decree. Esther is brave and she is smart.

At the same time, Esther is also constrained. This is best illustrated in the Megillah’s strange and unexpected conclusion. For nine chapters, the focus has been on the tightly-packed, tense drama between Haman and the Jewish people. The Jews are saved, and the Megillah concludes, “Now Esther’s order confirmed these matters [the matters of Purim], and it was inscribed in the book.” This, it would seem, is the logical end to the story.

However, there’s a short, final chapter – one that’s often forgotten. Chapter 10 of the Megillah details Mordechai’s rise to greatness, and ends with the line, “For Mordechai the Jew was viceroy to King Ahasuerus and great among the Jews and accepted by most of his brethren; seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all their seed.” This is the line that sticks with us when we finish the reading.



Each year, when we get to the end of the Megillah, I have the same question: Why is everything all about Mordechai all of a sudden? What happened to Esther? I thought this was her story? The answer is, of course, that it’s both their stories. But in the world of fifth century Persia, it was always going to be Mordechai’s story.

Mordechai needed Esther to negotiate with the king. She acted as a token, as a piece, in a larger game of power played between men: Mordechai, Ahasuerus, and Haman. Ultimately, Esther is pushed out of the narrative, as Mordechai’s prominence takes priority.

All that we hear of the brave, powerful Esther after the Purim story, is that she has a son, Darius, with the king. Darius eventually allows the Jewish people to return home, and urges them to rebuild their Temple.

Whereas Mordechai rises to political power after the curtain is closed, Esther is pushed into a traditional child-bearer role. This, of course, shouldn’t undermine Esther’s achievements and her agency. She did what she could within a limited system. But she didn’t – and couldn’t – overhaul that system.

The day after Purim, 8 March – and the same day as Shushan Purim – is International Women’s Day. International Women’s Day is roughly 100 years old. The first National Women’s Day was marked in the United States in 1909 by the Socialist Party in honour of the garment worker’s strike. Interestingly, the feminist agenda hasn’t shifted much since. Garment workers, specifically those in the Global South, are predominantly women. These workers rarely earn a living wage and work in difficult conditions. Their plight is one of the most pressing feminist issues of our day. Women’s Day became international the next year at

the initiative of Clara Zetkin, the leader of the Social Democrats in pre-war Germany.

International Women’s Day is about celebrating the centuries of fighting for women’s rights, and the huge advancements that have been made. On International Women’s Day, we can look at a figure like Esther and be proud of her: of her power, her

strength, and her courage. At the same time, we can celebrate that today, the Megillah would have ended differently. Esther would be able to be the only hero in her story. She wouldn’t need Mordechai. The Megillah would end with her – and just her.

This week offers us a special opportunity. We get to look back at history, and we get

to recognise the achievements of remarkable women – from Esther to Zetkin. We celebrate what has been done, and, at the same time, we look ahead to all there’s left to do.

• Jessica Goldblatt is an English Literature Masters student with a passion for Jewish education and social justice.



JESSICA GOLDBLATT

## Sarajevo Jews celebrate a second Purim

DAVID I. KLEIN – JTA

Many Jews around the world celebrate Purim in the same ways: by reading the story of the heroic Queen Esther, dressing in festive costumes, and drinking alcohol.

For many of the 900 or so Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it will be the first of two annual Purim celebrations.

Since 1820, locals have also observed the Purim de Saray (Saray being a root of the word Sarajevo) early in the Hebrew calendar month of Cheshvan, which usually falls in October or November. In that year, the story goes, a local dervish was murdered, prompting the corrupt Ottoman pasha of Sarajevo, a high-ranking official, to kidnap 11 prominent Jews, including the community’s chief rabbi, a kabbalist named Moshe Danon. The pasha accused them of the murder of the dervish – who had converted from Judaism to Islam – and held them for ransom, demanding 50 000 groschen of silver from the community.

But the pasha, who was a transplant from elsewhere in the Ottoman empire, deeply offended the multiethnic populace of Sarajevo, who considered the Jewish community – then about one-fifth of the city’s entire population – an essential part of their home. So local Jews, Muslims, and Christians rebelled together, storming the pasha’s palace and freeing the imprisoned community leaders.

Ever since, Bosnian Jews have celebrated that story by visiting the grave of the Sarajevan Jewish historian, Zeki Effendi, who was the first to document it. Dozens also take part in a pilgrimage every summer to the grave of Danon, who is buried in the south of Bosnia, not far from the Croatian border. For centuries, several other Jewish communities around the world observed their own versions of Purim based on stories of local resistance to antisemitism.

Jews settled in and around Ancona on Italy’s Adriatic coast in the 10th century, and by the 13th century, they had established a flourishing community. The city’s first local Purim story, marked on the 21st of the Hebrew month of Tevet (usually in January), was established at the end of the 17th century and marks an earthquake that nearly destroyed the city.

“On the 21st of Teveth, Friday evening, of the year 5451 (1690), there was a powerful earthquake. The doors of the temple were immediately opened and it was filled with men, women, and children, who came to pray to the eternal in front of the holy ark. A true miracle then took place in the temple: there was only one light, which remained lit until it was possible to provide for it,” wrote Venetian Rabbi Yosef Fiammetta in 1741, in his text *Or Boqer* (The light of the morning).

Other Ancona Purims were established a half and three-quarters of a century later, respectively. The story of the first

commemorates fires that nearly destroyed the local synagogue but miraculously didn’t, and the next tells of a pogrom that nearly destroyed the community as Napoleon marched through Italy during the French Revolutionary Wars.

Today, these stories have largely faded into memory. But a few centuries ago, Italy had a high concentration of communities that celebrated local Purims, including in Casale Monferrato, Ferrara, Florence, Livorno, Padua, Senigallia, Trieste, Urbino, Verona, and Turin – some into the 20th century.

In Tripoli, Libya, local Jews established the so-called Purim Barghul after the deposition of a local tyrant, Ali Burghul, an Ottoman officer who was installed in the late 18th century after the downfall of the Qaramanli dynasty. After factions of the Qaramanlis were reconciled, Burghul was driven out. Jews would go on to celebrate that day, the 29th of Tevet (usually in January).

In northern Morocco, Jews commemorated the defeat of a Portuguese king, Don Sebastian, who attempted to take over parts of the country but was defeated in a battle in August 1578. Scholars still debate which city was the origin of the Purim of Saragossa story – it could have been Zaragoza in Spain or



Ancona, Italy

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Syracuse in southern Sicily, which was often referred to in the medieval era as Siragusa. Both cities were part of the Spanish empire in 1492, and were depopulated of Jews following the Inquisition.

Either way, Sephardic descendants in places around the world, including Israel and the Turkish city of Izmir, observed their own Purim story by fasting on the 16th of the Hebrew month of Shevat – generally in February – and feasting on the 17th.

The story tells of an apostate named Marcus who slandered the Jewish community to a non-Jewish king, putting their status in jeopardy. But at the last minute, Marcus’ deception was revealed, and he is executed while the community is saved.

Regardless of its origins, the megillah of Saragossa continued to be published through at least the end of the 19th century.

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# War and Purim: embattled Kyiv Jews celebrate survival

MARCEL GASCÓN BARBERÁ  
– JTA

In a historic building in the most industrial part of Podil, the hipster district of Kyiv that once was the heart of the Jewish trading community, a senior and passionate Esther seduces a much younger Ahasuerus. She flirts with the handsome king to the raucous giggling of the audience, which breaks into applause when the Purim *shpiel* comes to an end.

A year and a few days into Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Jews in Kyiv and the rest of the country have celebrated Purim in precarious economic and emotional circumstances under the continued threat of Russian attacks. Still, many of them are in much better spirits than in 2022, when the Jewish holiday of joy found Ukrainian Jews in a frantic state of worry and uncertainty about their immediate future.

“A year ago, you could see the fear in people’s eyes; now they are proud because Ukraine has resisted, and Jews are fully involved in the cause,” Rabbi Irina Gritsevskaia told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) during the Purim celebration in Podil. She is an Israeli rabbi who is the executive director of the Masorti movement-affiliated Schechter Institutes and periodically travels to Ukraine to serve the country’s Masorti communities. Masorti Judaism is similar to the Conservative

movement in the United States.

“Last year it was very hard, because people were in shock, afraid, and they didn’t know what to do,” said Ariel Markowitz, a Kyiv rabbi from the Chabad-Lubavitch Orthodox movement, which held its own Purim celebration on Monday night. “But now we know that we have a strong army, that we have a chance, and many people have actually returned to Kyiv.”

The year-old war has shaken up Ukraine’s Jewish community, with members leaving the country or moving within it to avoid Russian shelling and its effects.

“Everyone has pretty much made a decision on whether to stay or to leave, and we are reorganising our community,” said Gritsevskaia.

Although at least 14 000 Ukrainians have moved to Israel since Russia’s all-out invasion started, and many more thousands have found refuge in Germany and other European countries, Gritsevskaia wants to focus on those who stayed. Estimates of the Jewish population in Ukraine ranged before the war from just less than 50 000 to up to 400 000, depending on who counted.

One of the people who left the country was the former Masorti rabbi in Ukraine, Reuven Stamov, who moved with his family to Israel. Currently, the Masorti movement, whose Ukrainian following Grivtseskaya estimates in the thousands, doesn’t have a rabbi permanently in the country. But the

community keeps active in Kyiv and other cities, such as Kharkiv in the east, Odessa in the south, and Chernivtsi in the southwest, thanks to activists, volunteers, and rabbinical students, plus the visits by Gritsevskaia, who first returned for Purim last year.

“Community life has never been so important,” she said.

Gritsevskaia pointed to the difference that having access to material help, connections, and emotional and spiritual support makes for those who arrive in new cities from places in the south or the east occupied by Russia or close to the front.

She acknowledged that some Jewish organisations have ceased operations in Ukraine, and stressed the need to strengthen the work of those committed to remain, so Jewish life in Ukraine can be as “diverse” as before and people “have options” in the way they practice their Judaism.

Among the Ukrainian Jews who decided to stay is the director of the MILI Foundation, the entity that organises the Masorti community in Ukraine. Maksym Melnikov moved to Kyiv from his native Donetsk in



Members of the Masorti community in Kyiv perform in a Purim *shpiel*

Photo: Marcel Gascón Barberá

2014 after Russian-backed separatist militias declared the independence of part of the region and war broke out in Eastern Ukraine.

“I came when they started to occupy our land in Ukraine,” Melnikov told JTA at the Masorti Purim celebration in Kyiv, just before taking the stage to help Gritsevskaia read the Purim megillah. “Almost a decade later, war came after me to Kyiv, and I don’t want to move this time. I’m staying.”

Since 2014, many of Melnikov’s friends and acquaintances from Donetsk have moved to Kyiv. While Russia’s full-scale invasion has pushed many Jews from Kyiv to move westwards or leave the country, the western city’s communities have received a new infusion of people from the eastern

cities more affected by the war. Gritsevskaia said the Masorti community in Chernivtsi had experienced a notable revival. Situated near the border with Romania, Chernivtsi is one of the few Ukrainian provincial capitals that hasn’t been bombed by Russia, and thousands have moved there. “They have received another family and are very strong right now,” she said about the oncedwindling community in this historical Jewish centre.

The massive uprooting of entire Jewish communities has been experienced keenly by Chabad, which has the largest Jewish presence in the country, with hundreds of emissaries serving Jewish communities in dozens of cities.

“We’ve had a huge increase in those looking for help,” Markowitz told JTA hours before the start of Purim at Chabad’s community centre in Kyiv. Many of them, he said, had come from Mariupol, a city bombed into submission by Russia at the beginning of the war.

Chabad is one of several organisations providing aid to Ukrainian Jews, including support in obtaining food, medical care, and generators.

The rise in demand for these services isn’t just driven by refugees, but by families and individuals who have lost their source of income due to the economic disruption caused by the invasion.

“There’s inflation, a lot of companies closed, and people lost their jobs or are unable to help their family,” Markowitz said.

Besides the demographic and economic shake-ups, the war has brought changes in the way Jews relate to their Ukrainian identity. Perhaps the most striking has been a rapid shift away from speaking Russian, the first language of many Ukrainian Jews until recently.

“You can definitely see how a new sense of national identity is being born,” said Maria Karadin, a Russia-born Israeli who moved to Ukraine with her husband in 2005.

## PURIM CELEBRATIONS



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# Judaism helps surfer swim towards the light

TALI FEINBERG

Shaun Tomson may have been an award-winning surfer, but when his son died suddenly in 2006, he felt like he was drowning. His Jewish identity became his life raft. Now, Tomson inspires thousands around the globe, from corporate chief executives to schoolchildren, to live life according to their own code, ensuring that they always “paddle back out” and know that there will always be “another wave”, even in the face of devastating loss.

“For my Barmitzvah present, my father took me on a surfing trip to Hawaii,” says Shaun. “That was a formative moment. It was a total representation of what a Barmitzvah is. Here I was, a young boy, paddling out in 25-foot (7.6m) surf. I came back to South Africa changed.”

Shaun went on to be listed among the top 10 surfers of the century, and was the 1977 World Surfing Champion. He won 19 major professional surf events, and has been listed as one of the 10 greatest surfers of all time. During his career, he was both the youngest and oldest surfer to win a pro event, and is considered to be one of the architects of professional surfing. He was inducted into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in 1995.

“We lived across the road from the beach in Durban, so swimming was always part of our lives and surfing was a natural evolution of that,” he says. “My father was a swimming champion, but that dream ended when he was badly attacked by a shark 100m offshore in the same waves where he taught me to swim and surf. But he never lost his love of the ocean.”

“Both parents taught me resilience. My mom grew up in Malta, surviving 3 600 bombing raids during World War II. It remains the most heavily bombed place in history. She was eventually evacuated to South Africa. And my dad fought the Nazis.”

That resilience was severely tested when Shaun’s own child, Mathew, died suddenly at the age of 15. “I wanted to sink to the depths. But as my mother always said, ‘G-d is like a good neighbour, you knock on his door, and he’s always there.’” And so it was his Jewish roots that Shaun turned to.

Though Shaun and his family had emigrated to the United States, Mathew was visiting South Africa for a semester where he was told about the “choking game” where players get a brief high from cutting off their own air supply. For some reason, it went wrong with Mathew.

“Teenage boys are renowned for making bad choices,” says Shaun. Male teenagers are more likely to die than female teenagers every single year of age from 12 to 19 years. Now, he’s working to turn those statistics around by helping teens understand that they always have a choice.

Two hours before the tragedy, Mathew told his father about an essay he had written on tube riding – Shaun’s area of expertise of riding inside the wave tunnel. Mathew wrote that when you’re

riding a wave like that, “the light shines ahead”.

“When he died, I started going back to my old shul,” says Shaun. “I looked at the *ner tamid* [everlasting light] above the ark that held the Torah I read from on my Barmitzvah, and it gave me hope. Judaism is about hope and light. Faith is there in the darkest hour. That’s how I found a way forward to a new life.”

To return to life, Shaun also had to return to surfing. “I had lost my ‘stoke’ – my joy of living. A friend insisted on taking me surfing in Durban North. It was a break I had never surfed before. The sun’s rising, boiling up out of the ocean, and the waves are washing away my tears. G-d is washing away my tears. I can feel Mathew is with me. I catch my first wave, and the world starts to get back into balance. The name of the break was ‘Sunrise.’”

“How could I even think of experiencing happiness or joy again?” he remembers wondering. “But we all have a choice to paddle out and move towards the light. I’m fascinated by choice.” He went on to do a Master of Science in Leadership at Northeastern University, and shares his academically-tested Code Leadership Method around the world.

“I now speak to hundreds of people about our personal power: writing 12 lines of our own code. Each line must start with the words, ‘I will’. It’s like a Swiss Army Knife, providing tools for every situation. I’ve worked with people

all over, including post-traumatic stress disorder survivors in Israel,” he says. “Our own words transform us. The code is open-source – anyone can access it. It’s also an equaliser. The CEO’s code is no more important than that of the intern.”

He and his wife, Carla, also adopted a son, who is now learning for his Barmitzvah. “When we were thinking of a name, we decided on Luke. Only afterwards did we find out that it means ‘light.’”

As someone who has survived the unthinkable, he says, “All of us suffer loss. What I’ve discovered is that there are steps you can take to move forward. The first is unconditional acceptance of the loss. Then, one needs to forgive – yourself, your lost loved one, or anyone associated with the loss.

“Then, when you’re ready, you need to give back in some way, to uplift your own heart. You need to get involved in something inspiring that memorialises the person. Then, it’s vital to get into nature, to see how we’re part of a bigger picture. Connectivity is super important

– with your faith, with the people you love. And be open to help, including professional help. Be vulnerable. Time is your friend. The sun will rise tomorrow. That’s what our faith represents.”

With their bright orange and yellow covers, his books all allude to light. His latest book, the *Surfer and the Sage: a Guide to Survive and*



*Ride Life’s Waves*, written with theologian Noah benShea, even has 18 chapters to coincide with *chai* (life). Shaun, who was recently featured in a documentary about antisemitism in surfing, wants Jews to put their divisions aside. “As my Hebrew teacher, Morris Zimmerman, used to say, to the outside world, you’re

a Jew, no matter which denomination you come from.”

The documentary, *Waves Apart*, by Josh Greene, ends on a hopeful note that aligns with Shaun’s outlook. The last scene features a group of Jewish surfers at a beach, reciting the *Shema* in the water before hitting the waves as the sun begins to set. In the last shot, the group sits down to a Shabbat meal on the beach.

“Looking for the light as opposed to looking for the darkness,” says Shaun. “That’s what Judaism is all about.”

Shaun Tomson

## ‘Kidpreneurs’ show it’s never too early to build a business

GILLIAN KLAWSKY

It all starts with a good idea and the determination to act. From making and selling beaded accessories, popcorn, and candyfloss to trading used clothes, capturing online content, or working as a DJ, “kidpreneurs” demonstrate the power of proactivity and self-belief.

Making and selling customised beaded accessories mainly in the form of bracelets and phone charms, brother and sister team Jayden and Cami Myers started their business BEADazzled in February 2022. Now 14 and 12 respectively, the siblings love collaborating with clients to create bespoke pieces.

Initially asking her mother, Nadine, for beads and letters to bead for fun, Cami made her parents bracelets that said, “best mom” and “best dad”, which became treasured gifts. “Jayden then joined in on the hobby, and they made bracelets for all our family and family friends and sold them for really cheap,” says Nadine. The products were a hit, and people increasingly asked for more to give as gifts to friends.

Jayden, who exhibited entrepreneurial flair from the age of seven, decided it would be a good idea to start a beading business. “When I saw how passionate and committed they both were to completing orders, I backed them 100% and helped get the word out on social media,” says Nadine.

Though Nadine financed the initial bead supply, the kids soon were able to buy stock with their earnings. BEADazzled has grown at markets and through the online marketing channels that Nadine manages.

“I love making up orders and seeing how the designs turn out from the beads and colours people choose,” says Cami. “The best part is selling at markets, because although we wonder who would want to buy something made by a kid, people love what we do. When we make a sale, especially to an adult who orders for themselves, it makes us believe in ourselves and know that we have a successful business.”

From selling biscuits to his mother’s co-workers to negotiating payment for chores, Levi Smith, now 11, was always looking for ways to make money. Yet starting his current venture, Tasty Treats by Levi, wasn’t his original plan. “At the beginning of 2022, Levi sold our leftover building bricks to our neighbour, who was also building,” recalls his mother, Chaya. “He used that money to buy a mini candy floss machine from Takealot for fun.”

Levi later chatted to his uncle about getting an industrial machine which his uncle and parents financed, and his candy floss business was born. “He started small at a cousin’s birthday party and his first proper function was a Purim party at Sunny Road Shul,” says Chaya. After a few events, he repaid his parents and uncle, and later bought an economical popcorn machine. And so, Tasty Treats by Levi was born.

Having grown by word of mouth, the business now caters for Barmitzvahs and Batmitzvahs, birthday parties, school market days, and Jewish holiday events. “We feel it’s important to encourage

extracurricular activities and not just focus on academics,” says Chaya.

“Running my own business is important because when I want something, I don’t have to rely on my parents so much,” says Levi. “I’m busy saving for a ticket to London in November for my cousin’s Barmitzvah.”

Earning his own money and making people happy was also a drawcard for Zack Tobias, who began to work as a DJ professionally at the age of 14. Having developed a love of music at the age of nine when he began playing the saxophone in the King David Music programme, Zack soon found that his passion lay in being a DJ. At the age of 14, he began to DJ professionally.

“My parents supported the idea after seeing my talent, and they invested in my first bundle of equipment,” says Zack, who at 23, is now an in-demand DJ at a range of functions including matric dances and Barmitzvahs and Batmitzvahs. “My mom, Kim, used to schlep me to all the gigs I booked and got the reputation of being my ‘momager.’”

The son of two entrepreneurial parents, Zack came from a home where a business mindset was always encouraged. Seeking to educate himself before going live, he completed an extensive DJ course. “If a passion becomes a business, it doesn’t feel like work,” he says.

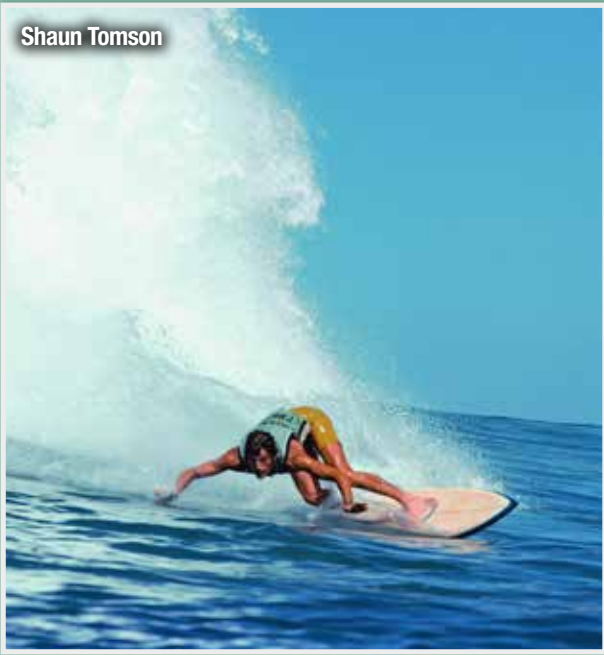
“I always had a natural gift and worked hard to turn it into a profitable business.” Networking through the community, Zack soon became known for his pop-music remixes and ability to read his audience.

“My husband and I encouraged Zack to follow his dreams,” says Kim. “We feel our kids need to know how to earn their own money and look after it.” Reflecting on what he’s gained through his early start, Zack says, “I’ve matured profoundly by starting a business at a young age, and this has allowed me to use this knowledge in my future career.”

Now in matric, Chloe Zindel has run her own small, profitable businesses for years. From making and selling hair scrunchies in primary school to starting Yaga, an online second-hand clothing platform at 14, she’s always been motivated to work.

“I was never spoiled with materialistic things like a lot of my peers,” she says. Chloe knew she had to make her own money to cover the costs of “nice-to-haves” including beauty and hair treatments and extra clothes. She dedicated increasing time to Yaga during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep busy and increase her earnings. Chloe later developed a concept called “I will hold your phone”, in which she takes behind-the-scenes content, video, reels, and produces TikToks for private people and corporates on photo shoots. Chloe’s businesses have largely evolved from her involvement in Boost Gymwear, her mother, Anthea’s, fitness-apparel brand.

“For me, it’s always been important to be a working and financially independent woman,” says Anthea. “That’s what my daughter has always known. I hope that I have inspired her to be the same one day.”



Levi Smith



Chloe Zindel



Zack Tobias



Cami Myers



# A half-hour Barmitzvah, and a lifetime of memory

TALI FEINBERG

Denis Hirson had one of the most curious Barmitzvahs any Jewish boy could have had. It was probably one of a kind. However, it was writing about this experience that took him deep into his and our fascinating South African past, into the forces that shaped local Jewry, and into his own family's sacrifice in the face of devastating challenges.

Hirson, who is in South Africa to launch his seventh book titled *My Thirty Minute Bar Mitzvah: A Memoir*, is the son of the late Baruch Hirson, who was a South African political activist, academic, author, and historian who was jailed for almost a decade in apartheid-era South Africa. This had a profound impact on the lives of his children, including Hirson, who now lives in Paris.

"We called it a Barmitzvah, and didn't call it a Barmitzvah," says Hirson, looking back on the event, which he would prefer people to uncover in his book. "I actually don't know what it was." His father's political conviction led to Hirson having a confusing relationship with his Jewish identity.

On the one hand, his father was born Bertram, but changed his name to the very Jewish and Israeli name of Baruch. Hirson's mother, Yael, who was born in pre-state Israel, also carried a very Biblical and Israeli name. But that was where Judaism essentially began and ended in their home – at least on the surface, Hirson told the *SA Jewish Report*.

"My father changed his name when he was part of the radical, left-wing Zionist youth movement Hashomer Hatzair," recalls Hirson. "Later, he was both divorced from



his Jewish values and driven by them. Yet, if you asked him, he had trouble making the connection."

Hirson's mother is still alive at the age of 96. When she heard the name of the book, she said to Hirson, "You've got *chutzpah*!"

By this, he said, "She meant that we shouldn't be so upfront about our Jewish identity so as to include it in the title of a book. Were we not taught to disappear into the undergrowth, to camouflage ourselves? So, in a way, this is a 'coming out' and acknowledgement of our Jewish identity as a family. It was only later in my 20s in France that I reconstructed my identity, and that was when my Jewishness emerged."

Hirson's father was arrested when Hirson was just about to turn 13. He spent six months in solitary confinement and then nine years in jail. "That was until I was 22. It was awful. I became a sort of surrogate mother and father to my much younger siblings. I accumulated so much anger against my father. But how can you be angry with a parent who did this only because he

was fighting for the rights of others?"

"So, I didn't express the anger until later. I could write this book only after he passed away. I loved him to the end, and I understood his position."

The day his father was released in 1973 is etched in Hirson's mind. Facing a banning order and house arrest, his family were essentially forced to leave South Africa.

"He came walking down the garden path. We made him a great big breakfast that he didn't eat. We didn't really know what to say. He spent four days sorting through books. Most of the house was packed up, but the books were his territory. A Special Branch [security police] man was parked outside the gate. Many people wanted to see him [Baruch], but he was allowed to see only one person at a time. He spent hours wandering around the house at night."

"We were taken to the airport by a policeman in uniform. We said goodbye to a few people. We flew to Cape Town, where we all got on the ship to England. In a photograph, you can see my teeth locked together. It wasn't the moment to express anger. And after all, I had enjoyed 12 years [before prison] with my father, which is more than my siblings had."

Hirson acknowledges that his father's life and legacy are a gift, and he feels that he ultimately had a happy childhood. Writing this book came about by chance, as he

"pulled on a tiny thread, delving into what happened on my 13th birthday" during a writing workshop.

He says his family's story "had a lot to do with making me into a writer. As a child, I didn't have the words for what happened. But I could feel the political environment in my body, even during Sharpeville, [on 21 March 1960, when a protest over pass laws resulted in police opening fire on protesters, killing 69 and injuring 180], and I wasn't yet nine years old. I've learned that with trauma, you can make it an ally, and for me, it has been a fuel for writing."

Doing a reading at Beit Emmanuel Synagogue in Johannesburg last week, Hirson was moved to see members of his father's family in the audience, "including my aunt, who was sitting at the Pesach table described in the book". As his father had been estranged from his parents and brothers, this was a "full-circle" moment.

Soon after arriving in England in his early 20s, Hirson joined a group of South African exiles who became gardeners in the English countryside. "I think we needed to ground ourselves. It was about becoming servants, getting back into our bodies, and being a bit lost." He later made his way to Paris because "I needed an entire change."

He worked as an actor for 10 years, and taught science students about creativity, but eventually, he returned to the written word, tilling the land of his own story and buried Jewish identity. In fact, his book of poetry is titled *Gardening in the Dark*.

And yet, there are things he never managed to unearth again. After his father came out of prison, "We never got him back. I'm not sure he ever really left prison. His life became narrower and narrower. Those nine and a half years structured the rest of his existence," he says. He believes that open conversations within the South African Jewish community are the only way to really come to terms with the past.

- Hirson will be speaking at various venues in Cape Town and Makhandla (previously Grahamstown) from 11 to 27 March, including the Jewish Literary Festival in Cape Town on 21 March. To find out more, email [karen.lane@workingtitle.co.za](mailto:karen.lane@workingtitle.co.za)



Denis Hirson's book, *My Thirty Minute Bar Mitzvah*



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# Israeli cycling champs uplift Rwandan kids

HANNA RESNICK

An Israeli cycling team has proved to be as committed to improving lives around the globe as it is to cycling, most recently in Rwanda, where the team is creating a safe haven for children. Israel-Premier Tech (IPT)'s latest project, the Field of Dreams Bike Centre in Bugesera, Rwanda, has provided the community with training facilities, equipment, coaches, and even solar power, and it appears to just be the beginning of its mission. It's dedicated to enriching the lives of thousands of youngsters with cycling as a starting block. The team, co-owned by Sylvan Adams and Ron Baron, was founded in 2014 with a vision of giving a chance to young Israeli riders to get to the forefront of professional cycling. Since it was launched, the team realised it had a greater purpose and responsibility. "It wasn't enough to compete just to win," said spokesperson Tsadok Yecheskeli. "We wanted to use our exposure to change people's lives," particularly the lives of the younger generation. The Field of Dreams centre forms part of the team's Racing for Change initiative. This initiative, in which the

team uses sport to help those in need, has had a positive impact on various countries around the world, such as in Afghanistan about a year ago, where it helped to rescue more than 100 cyclists (mostly vulnerable young women) after the takeover of the Taliban. After participating in the Tour du Rwanda (the biggest cycling race in Africa) for many years, the team was eager to find a way to develop cycling and support the youth in the country. Two years ago, it met a genocide survivor in Bugesera who had opened a community centre there. "He told us that Bugesera is the only place in Rwanda where women [traditionally] ride bikes," said Yecheskeli. He said that the team felt strongly about helping this man get a team of young women together, and began bringing in coaches and equipment from Israel. Last year, the community centre agreed to develop



Sylvan Adams with Rwandan President Paul Kagame

the large field behind the centre into a dedicated space for the cyclists. "I remembered the movie *Field of Dreams* which was about building a baseball field somewhere in remote Iowa, and suddenly a whole lot of people go there to play," said Yecheskeli. "So, I suggested we try to do the same and build a centre for cycling for those kids so they can bike for fun and develop their skills." They then started a fundraising campaign for fans and supporters to donate to this initiative. The founders of

Photo: Drone Skky Line Ltd

Photo: President's Office



Field of Dreams centre in Bugesera, Rwanda

the team also agreed to match all donations that were received. More than 1 000 fans donated, allowing the team to start building state-of-the-art facilities, including a pump track and racetrack. The next part of their plan is to build a dedicated cycling academy. Though IPT intends to be involved in the community for many years to come, the main goal of the project is to boost the community and allow for meaningful social development. This project not only allows kids to have fun and learn new skills, it will assist some to continue training and become professional cyclists or coaches that will eventually train the next generation. "We're not doing it ourselves," said Yecheskeli. "We provide money and expertise, but it's theirs, it belongs to the community. We're not just giving them money and then leaving, rather giving them a hand and the tools that will allow them to flourish in the future." IPT has also partnered with Israeli company Ignite Power to provide solar energy systems to assist those who have been living without electricity. According to their press release, "The kids who participate in the cycling programme at the team's new Field of Dreams in Bugesera, Rwanda, will be able to do their homework after dark for the first time in their lives. "Over the past few days, more than 20 homes have already been connected to electricity through this project, and many more families will be connected in the next few weeks. Ignite Power has committed to connecting at least 200 homes a year." A few days ago, a solar panel was connected to the mud home of the Nyiraromba family after one of the children began cycling at the Field of Dreams centre. This was the first time the child's grandmother was able to experience living with electricity after being in that home for 78 years. "It may be too late for me, but I am happy for my grandchildren," she said. Adams thanked Ignite Power for joining forces, saying, "Bringing light and energy to homes is an enormous gift. This Field of Dreams that we built is the foundation for virtuous branches that provide sorely needed aid to our adopted Bugesera community. The best example is our partnership with Ignite, bringing solar-powered electricity to our community for the first time. These installations provide electricity for light, cooking, even the ability to charge cellphones, saving people from the prohibitively expensive service provided by charging vendors. The residents are immeasurably grateful, and I'm truly gratified to see the difference we're making with our activities and partners." "We're thrilled to partner with Israel-Premier Tech and its Field of Dreams project in Rwanda," said Gil Karie, the director of innovation and strategic initiatives at Ignite Power. "This collaboration reflects Ignite's commitment to empowering the people who need it most with access to reliable, clean energy to transform their lives. By deploying these systems, we enhance education and economic development, reduce fire and health hazards, and create a more sustainable future for all." Rwandan President Paul Kagame expressed full support for the project. The president said that he was "deeply appreciative" of those who have invested in Rwandan cycling infrastructure. Adams explained why he's so passionate about helping this community in Rwanda. Not only do Jewish people have the "ancient imperative" of *tikkun olam*, "which requires each of us to do something good in the world", but the Rwandan and Jewish people share the common wound of a horrific genocide in the past century. "It's a project that we feel this community really deserves," said Yecheskeli, who also mentioned *tikkun olam*. "It's our moral obligation to take care of other people, not only our own, no matter their religion or where they come from. We don't care about those things. We care about these youngsters and how we can touch their lives."

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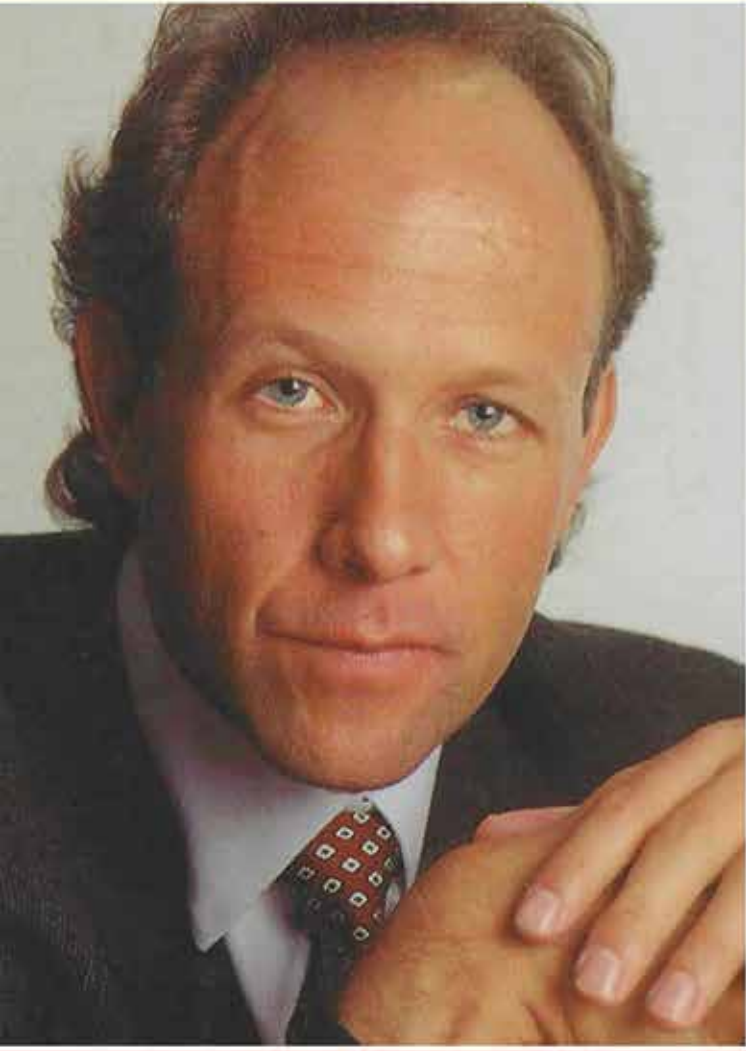
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# Real-life wedding singers give us the chuppah on simchas

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

When a recently dumped wedding singer hits notes of misery at joyous celebrations, it’s the love of a waitress working at the same functions that brings him new hope. As Hollywood marks the 25th anniversary of the classic Adam Sandler “rom com”, *The Wedding Singer*, we chat to some of our community’s real-life wedding singers to see what really goes behind the scenes of a *simcha*.

They may not have met their soulmate while performing, but our community’s singers add a dose of magic to every *simcha*. Chatting to us amidst the rush that is the pre-Pesach wedding season, they reveal that after being derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, full-scale celebrations have made a comeback.

“There was a lot of talk that people were loving these small, intimate

*chuppahs*.

He’s a recording artist with original songs streaming on Spotify and also fills the role of chazan of Sydenham Shul, but Lichtenstein remains passionate about performing at weddings. “The ability to work with young couples as they start their homes and to elevate Jewish *simchas* through music is the greatest privilege,” he says.

Wedding singer, performer, and chazan of Linksfield Shul, Shmuli Brill agrees. “I love music.

Performing



Photo: John Armstrong

Choni G



Shmuli Brill

at weddings is my favourite part of singing, especially at the *chuppah* when the bride and groom walk down the aisle and when I sing the *sheva brachot* (seven blessings) and *Im Eshkacech Yerushalayim*.

Also growing up singing, Baruch Raff later formed the Lechatchila Band with his cousin, keyboardist Meir Raff, which is very popular in the Johannesburg religious wedding circuit.

“Weddings are such a happy bubble, and I often find myself chuckling on stage when I see some of the antics going on down below,” says Raff, reflecting on the humour that often punctuates such *simchas*. Yet his funniest experience as a wedding singer wasn’t actually at the event itself, but rather on the way

home, when he and Meir were pulled over.

“The traffic cop wanted to breathalyse me, which I was happy to do, but I told him that we were wedding singers on the way home from a wedding, and that we hadn’t been drinking,” Raff recalls. “He told me to get out of the car and sing him a song. So, there on Grayston Drive at 00:30, I was belting out the song *Baruch Hashem*.”

Dean Witz, the vocalist for Jewish band The King’s Men, has also been singing since childhood. Beginning his more than 20-year stint in the Pretoria Shul Choir at the age of seven, he ultimately became choir master. Initially singing at *chuppahs* as a teenager, Witz later formed The King’s Men which provides full music and sound packages for weddings and other *simchas*.

Witz says reality is very different to *The Wedding Singer*. “In the movie, you often see Adam Sandler walking off and someone else taking over. In real-life, the function falls on you and the band, so you’re going nowhere. There’s also not nearly as much *tzoris* at weddings,” he laughs.

Aside from being able to work with couples to plan their wedding day and create lasting memories, Witz also enjoys the camaraderie he’s established with other wedding suppliers. “We’ve all gone through a lot together, especially during the pandemic, and now it’s great to catch up, pull together, and do what we’re passionate about.”

Well-known Jewish singer

Choni G performs at *simchas* throughout South Africa and around the world. Naturally musical, Choni started out as a child soloist in the Sydenham Shul Choir – the shul his father Rabbi Yossi Goldman led. Forming a solid foundation in this and other choirs, Choni was ultimately chosen to tour America as a backing vocalist for world-renowned Jewish musician Matisyahu.

Later performing at a high-profile wedding in South Africa, Choni’s popularity as a wedding singer grew by word of mouth. In 2014, he moved to Cape Town to become the chazan at Gardens Shul, and steadily established his reputation as a premier wedding singer. Though he works on multiple music projects, Choni has carved a niche for himself on the local and international Jewish wedding circuit.

Over the years, he’s witnessed four



Photo: Jason Crouse

Baruch Raff

grooms injure themselves during hora dancing, which he describes as a “Jewish mosh pit”. Yet, something that Choni is particularly proud of is #bringingbenchingback, where he has made *benching* (grace after meals) less a time where less religious guests typically duck out for a drink or smoke, and more of a drawcard. He does this by using a fusion of chords to meld traditional benching tunes with well-known pop songs, and getting people onto the dance floor.

“Having secular people tell me this is a highlight for them is huge,” he says. “I’m trying to bring the meaning of the words and the spirituality and holiness of Judaism out through my singing. This is one of my missions.”



Photo: John Armstrong

Moshe Lichtenstein

weddings,” says Moshe Lichtenstein, lead singer and co-founder of The Chupa Band. “But although there was a gradual start with small crowds, as the restrictions lifted, so the guestlists increased on a sliding scale until we were back to guest lists of up to 400 people and more.”

Having lost their bass guitarist Jason Green to COVID-19, The Chupa Band endured far more than the typical challenges musicians faced during the pandemic. Yet it remained dedicated to empowering musicians and creating full-scale wedding productions from *chuppahs* to *horas* to *benching*, sometimes even collaborating with musicians from the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra to provide orchestral

I really get emotional. Music is a massive part of a wedding day, and when I sing and get into the mood of the *simcha*, everyone else does too.”

Being asked to sing *You’ll*

*Never Walk Alone*, Liverpool Football Club’s anthem, took one particular *chuppah* to another level, for both the groom and for Brill, who is a dedicated Liverpool fan. “I sang it with extra passion,” he laughs.



Photo: PhotoSauce Photography

Dean Witz

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# Ensemble plays hidden treasures of Hebrew Baroque

HANNA RESNICK

Johannesburg-based Jewish music aficionado, Adam H. Golding, has a passion for music, but in particular what’s known as Early Music, which includes Renaissance and early Baroque compositions.

His passion is so strong, he set up a full Renaissance instrumental and vocal ensemble in 2017 by seeking out a select group of musicians. Today, the African Renaissance Ensemble performs regularly for a variety of audiences in Johannesburg and Pretoria. Its aim is to share its love of scarcely performed music, written between 1400 and 1750.

This month, it’s performing a unique concert, Hidden Treasures of the Hebrew Baroque, dedicated to early Hebrew music. “It will be a journey of discovery of the birth of synagogue music,” says Golding. “There has never been a concert like this before in South Africa.”

“We had the first rehearsal in my flat with all modern instruments and musicians who weren’t familiar with the style or music at all,” said Golding. “Slowly, over the next few years, we started attracting specialists, and now the group is made up of people who are all absolutely passionate about Renaissance and Baroque music.”

The group began with just one violin, one guitar, and a cello. Today, it has more than 10 instrumentalists and five vocalists. “We’re also really lucky to work with harpsichordist and multi-instrumentalist John Reid Coulter,” said Golding, whom he referred to as “the absolute authority on early music in South Africa”.



Adam H. Golding, Este Meerkotter, Leigh Nudelman, and Joao Ribeiro

Golding said he decided to form the ensemble after conducting a choir at a festival in Berlin that was dedicated to the music of Salamone Rossi, an Italian Jewish violinist and composer (1570-1630).

This year marks 400 years since the publication of Rossi’s *Hashirim L’Shlomo*, the first published collection of choral synagogue music, as well as the first music to be notated in Hebrew. The group will commemorate Rossi’s work as well as a selection of other Hebrew music from the Baroque period.

The African Renaissance Ensemble has collaborated with the Lewandowski Chorale (also founded by Adam Golding in 2012) for this concert. The concert will involve six vocal soloists and a choir of about 20,

accompanied exclusively by reconstructed period instruments, including three baroque violins, a baroque viola and baroque cello, along with two traversos (a wooden baroque flute with a beautiful and mellow tone), a theorbo (a long neck lute – one of only two in the country), as well as harpsichords, recorders, and a mandolin.

“Rossi worked as court composer to the Gonzaga dukes of Mantua,” said Golding. “He was highly respected as one of the great composers of his time and one of the major composers to transition from the Renaissance into the Baroque.”

As a proudly Jewish composer living in Italy during the Renaissance period, Rossi didn’t compose church music instead composing Jewish liturgical music in a similar style. In 1616, he began setting traditional Jewish prayers and hymns to contrapuntal music in the vocal style of his time, according to Golding.

Synagogal music, up until this point, had been forbidden in shul services, as a form of mourning of the destruction of the Temple. Rossi was encouraged by Rabbi Leon Modena to publish his works in 1623.

Rossi’s music, however, fell into obscurity sometime after his death, and it was only about 200 years later that composers like Salomon Sulzer and Louis Lewandowski began composing choral music for synagogue that became the music we are

early music is more accessible to a modern audience than classical music, resembling a folk style that’s enjoyable for audiences of all ages. The pieces are relatively short – usually less than 10 minutes – and are interspersed with explanations and anecdotes from Golding about the history of the pieces.

“Our concerts aren’t simply performances, rather, we use the music to weave together a story,” said Golding. The concerts are usually held in small, intimate venues to allow the audience to be fully immersed in the music.

“The music that will be performed in this concert bears no resemblance whatsoever to the music anybody is likely to have heard in a synagogue, aside from it being in Hebrew,” he said. The first half of the concert celebrates the music of Rossi, whilst the second part will feature the works of two non-Jewish composers, Carlo Grossi and Ludovico Saladin, who were commissioned by the Jewish communities in Venice and Provence to compose music to celebrate the occasion of Hoshana Rabbah and the ritual of a Brit Milah, respectively.

The concert will take place on 25 and 26 March at the state-of-the-art Wits Chris Seabrooke Music Hall, the only purpose-built concert hall in Johannesburg.

To find out more or book tickets, got to: [earlymusic.co.za/concerts](http://earlymusic.co.za/concerts)

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Vote to downgrade embassy – a ‘slap in the face’

>>Continued from page 1

“This isn’t reflective of the views of many people either in the government or amongst the voters who put these representatives into office,” said Madeleine Hicklin. “It’s even more sad that it was initiated by a party with only two seats in parliament, but which plays into the hands of the ANC and its acolytes who have no intention of thinking for themselves and who buy into the political theme of ‘apartheid Israel’ at all costs.”

The DA’s Darren Bergman, the party’s shadow minister of international relations, said the country would “suffer further alienation in trade and technological advances all because politicians are exploiting the plight of people in other continents to cause wedge issues in South Africa when they cannot even look after their own citizens. Sadly, no-one won today, but I can assure you millions lost.”

“The ultimate loser will be South Africa, which has so much to gain from Israeli innovation and development. This idiotic move is self-destructive,” said the DA’s shadow minister for employment and labour, Michael Bagraim who described the development as a tragedy for South Africa.

“As usual, the ANC and its allies are only punishing South Africa itself and South African nationals who need active embassies to provide services and promote exports and SA’s global interests,” said Arthur Lenk, a former Israeli

ambassador to South Africa. “As for Israel, almost no-one notices or cares whether there is a South African ambassador here or not as we are busy with our deepening relations with the vast majority of African countries and a growing number of our neighbours throughout the Middle East. So, Israel will continue to go forward, building its economy and national interests across Africa and around the world. We will be just fine, thank you very much.”

Steven Gruzd, an analyst at the South African Institute of International Affairs, said the development was likely to make the community feel “uncomfortable” and that “questions about whether to remain here might surface at a time when skilled South African Jews are taking their skills elsewhere at a rate of knots”.

Political analyst Daniel Silke said it was an unfortunate foreign policy decision on the part of the ANC, which further shifts the government towards a one-sided approach in the Middle East, removing it from having any kind of mediation role “even if it wanted one in its wildest dreams”.

Silke said he didn’t believe the government would go so far as to expel the Israeli ambassador, but the situation would remain “tense and unpleasant”. “For as long as the ambassador can remain in South Africa, I suspect he will,” he said.

The Israeli ambassador to South Africa, Eli Belotserovsky, declined to comment.



A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

# A sad day for parliament



Anti-Israel factions have long been pushing for South Africa to downgrade its embassy in Israel. A resolution to this effect was taken at the 2017 ANC Elective Conference, but until now, it hasn't been official government policy. Regrettably, on 7 March, parliament voted in favour of a resolution calling for an embassy downgrade. Before it becomes official policy, however, it must still be ratified by cabinet and signed off by President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Both before and after the vote, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) issued statements. Among the points made were that though framed as a human rights motivated gesture, the downgrade was in reality driven by an obsessive enmity towards the world's sole Jewish nation state and a desire to undermine it even when this went against South Africa's own best interests. We stated that it was ironic that this unjust and discriminatory resolution was adopted on Purim, which commemorates how the forebears of the Jewish people were threatened with genocide; that parliament evidently preferred to "engage in pointless gesture politics at the behest of those driven by an obsessive hatred of the Israeli state" to addressing the country's own vital interests; and how unbefitting the unreflecting virulence of the anti-Israel rhetoric, with all its falsifications, misrepresentations, omissions, and exaggerations, was in a forum founded on the fundamental values of respectful, constructive, and honest discussion. It's sad indeed that our parliament has been allowed to become a platform for demonising and defaming the Jewish state.

## Irwin Cotler on Israel's judicial reform

The proposed overhaul of the judiciary is one of the most bitterly divisive questions to emerge in Israeli society for many years. As Jewish leaders, it would be remiss if we didn't fully understand and discuss the ramifications of change in a country to which we are

## ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner



so strongly connected. We were therefore grateful to have Professor Irwin Cotler address our national leadership at our National Executive Committee meeting on Sunday. There are few global Jewish leaders as well positioned to clarify what the issues are than Cotler. A former Canadian Minister of Justice and an internationally renowned human rights activist and legal academic, he has also been at the forefront of combating antisemitism on the global stage. Over the past four decades, he has also been a warm friend and unstinting source of support to our own community. We thank him for taking the time to share his wisdom, expertise, and experience on this sensitive and complex subject.

## Bakery with heart

On 1 March, SAJBD representatives attended the official launch of a new bakery named Heart 4 Africa on the grounds of Sacred Heart College in Observatory. The SAJBD partnered with The Angel Network, Rights 2 Live Africa, and Sacred Heart College in establishing the facility, which specifically employs migrants who otherwise would have no work or opportunity to earn an income. Our involvement in initiatives to assist to the migrant community dates back to the early days of the COVID-19 lockdown, when those not qualifying for government relief on account of not being South African citizens were in an especially difficult situation. In a small but practical way, Heart 4 Africa will help empower members of this vulnerable and frequently overlooked constituency.

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

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

# Dressed down at shul

She looked like a perfectly lovely person. Wearing a long flowery dress with a wide-brimmed straw hat that had a matching pink band around it, she walked up to me and wished me Shabbat Shalom. "Are you by any chance Howard Feldman?" she enquired. When I confirmed that indeed I was, she uttered an expression that always fills me with dread. "Would you mind if I engaged you on something?" In my experience, no good ever comes from someone wanting to "engage" on anything. Because what it really means is that I have said something that has offended them, and they would like me to know just how appalling I have been.

"Sure," I said, because I was taking a break from a long shul service, and I was curious which article, show, or podcast might have triggered her.

"Do you really live in such a privileged world that everyone in your sphere has enough money to debate between going to Plettenberg Bay and Cape Town for their holidays?" was her launching salvo. The background is that a few weeks prior, my column in this publication addressed our holiday insecurities and I used the "other side" idea to discuss this point. Clearly not everyone thought it hit the mark.

I paused. Looked at her freshly scrubbed, healthy, and pleasant face and said, "I'm sorry. You're right. I neglected to mention those who travel to Israel, Thailand, and even Umhlanga. That was wrong of me." "No!" was her retort. "That isn't the point. The point is that some people can't afford to go away. Things aren't easy."

Because she really was a kind and caring person, I explained to her that satire and humour needs to function on certain assumptions. So, if, for example, I'm writing

## INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



something humorous about solar installations, if I must consider that there are people in South Africa who have never had electricity, I couldn't write it. I couldn't write about school lunches knowing that people in Syria don't have schools, and I couldn't write about runners when some people don't have legs.

The result would be a dull and grey world devoid of sparkle. Which would be sad. Even for people who can't afford Cape Town in December.

The flower-dress lady did raise a point. There are many in our community who are struggling. The cost of almost everything, the impact of the electricity crisis, and global pressures have placed an enormous strain on everyone. It's tough out there, and no-one is immune.

Which is why it's perhaps a good time to consider supporting members of our community if it's an option. If we know a contractor, a service provider, or business, perhaps it's a good time to give them a chance. Obviously not at all costs and not at great compromise, but if there's an opportunity to assist, now is a great time to do it.

Often when a person in a flower dress and a straw hat "engages" me on something, it's because they have been triggered by a vulnerability in their own life. I'm no stranger to that. Mostly I enjoy the reaction because it's my job to encourage conversation. In this case, it gave me something to ponder, and taught me that remaining in shul during the service is a smarter decision than wondering around the campus.

advertorial

# Lithuania invites Jews to apply for compensation for expropriated property

Lithuania, seeking historical justice, transferred €37 million over the past decade to the Good Will Foundation as compensation for Jewish communal and religious property seized by the Nazi and Soviet regimes.

At the end of last year, Lithuania took another important step in restoring historical justice when the Lithuanian government decided to allocate an additional €37 million in compensation for illegally expropriated private immovable property including heirless immovable property taken into ownership by the state because it was left without owners or heirs as a result of the Holocaust; and for immovable property of Lithuanian Jews or their heirs whose property wasn't returned in the context of previous restitution legislation.

Lithuania will pay from €5 million to €10 million of the total €37 million as compensation for eligible Holocaust survivors and their families. The remaining funds represent the Lithuanian government's acknowledgement of heirless Jewish property, referenced in the 2009 Terezin Declaration.

"The Good Will Compensation Law provides an important measure of justice to Lithuanian Holocaust survivors and their families for the horrors they suffered during World War II and its aftermath. It continues the process of property restitution and supports present-day Jewish life in Lithuania," said Rabbi Andrew Baker, the director of international Jewish affairs at the American Jewish Committee. "The law sets Lithuania apart from most other countries in the region that have yet to take any measure with respect to heirless property."

In connection with this decision, the embassy of the Republic of Lithuania has been asked by the Lithuanian Good Will Foundation to circulate the following information amongst South African Jewish communities:

"The Good Will Foundation invites eligible Holocaust survivors and their heirs to submit an application for a one-time payment of symbolic compensation for the private real property expropriated in Lithuania during the occupation of totalitarian regimes."

All information and application documents can be found in the link below:  
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## King David demystifies history in My Family exhibition

Extensive research into family history by Grade 7 students at King David primary schools culminated in an exhibition of presentations that showcased their findings.

Pupils from King David Victory Park, King David Sandton, King David Linksfield, and King David Ariel Primary School displayed their hard work, creativity, and research skills in this year's My Family Story Exhibition.

The exhibition was a culmination of weeks of research by the students, who worked to uncover and document their family stories, interviewed family members, conducted online research, and created presentations that showcased their findings.

Parents, grandparents, teachers, and community members were impressed with the depth of research and creativity on display. The event



was judged by Ronli Dorfman, Anthony Rosmarin, Leeat Amari, and Melissa Chipkin, and experts from the Israel Centre.

The judges selected the following winners based on their research, creativity, and presentation skills:

King David Primary Victory Park joint winners: Phoenix Bernstein and Rael Fine; King David Ariel: Tyler Saltz and Ryan Hellmann; King David Sandton: Caleb and Judah Levitan; King David Linksfield: Kiara Bergman and Chiara Riback.

## Community rises to challenge of refugees with new bakery

A new bakery was launched on 1 March on the grounds of Sacred Heart College, Observatory, as part of a local community upliftment initiative. Named Heart 4 Africa, the bakery employs migrant residents who otherwise would have no work or opportunity to earn an income. Ten women have been empowered to run the facility.

Members of The Angel Network, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), Rights 2 Live Africa, and Sacred Heart College, were present at the launch. The bakery is part of teamwork by these organisations to assist the migrant community.

Jean Bwasa, the founder of Rights 2 Live Africa, said that having come from the Congo, he and his family had experienced much hardship in South Africa.

"When the COVID-19 pandemic came, things became exceptionally tough for the migrant community. While the government was looking after its own citizens with food parcels, the migrant community received nothing, with many reaching a point of desperation," he said.

Bwasa approached Tali Nates of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, with whom he had been in

collaboration. She referred him to Glynne Wolman, the founder of The Angel Network, and she and her team, together with the SAJBD, offered to assist.

"We put together 250 food parcels for the community, and have continued to work together. Today's launch is the result of ongoing teamwork," Bwasa said.

Sacred Heart College head Heather Blanckensee said the school's mission was to give hope, dignity, and honour to every person, including refugees.

SAJBD Communications Manager Charisse Zeifert said her organisation was "more than thrilled" to be a part of an initiative which uplifts vulnerable residents. "The facility doesn't just look beautiful now; it smells wonderful. There's nothing more appetising than the smell of warm, freshly baked bread" she said.



Bakers at Sacred Heart College

### Sunday 12 March

- Second Innings hosts a talk by Rochelle Keene, *Contributions to World Medicine by South African Doctors*. Time: 10:00. Venue: Golden Acres. Cost: R40 (R20 members). Contact: 082 561 3228 or greciagabriel1@gmail.com
- The Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre will be screening the documentary *Spielberg*. Time: 18:00. Cost: R100. Contact: 087 188 1815 or hazel@rchcc.org.za

### Monday 13 March

- The Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre will be screening the documentary *Promises*. Time: 14:00. Cost: R60. Contact: 087 188 1815 or hazel@rchcc.org.za

### Wednesday 15 March

- Second Innings hosts a screening of *Fiddler's Joyous Journey*. Time: 09:30. Venue: South African Military Museum Auditorium in Saxonwold. Cost: R120. Contact: 082 561 3228 or greciagabriel1@gmail.com

### Thursday 16 March

- ORT SA hosts a talk by Aki Kalliatakis, *Basic Business*. Time: 08:30. Cost: R200 (R100 for members). Contact: 011 728 7154 or admin@ortjet.org.za



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