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AUTO AFRICA

# Connectedness, community – Chabad’s plan to change the world

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

It happens once every seven years. Marking *Hakhel*, an auspicious time to assemble men, women, and children to encourage Torah observance and study, Chabad’s Unity in the Stadium event promoted solidarity, learning, and inspiration in a world often marred by fear and uncertainty.

“From the beginning, we realised quickly that we were in Hashem’s hands,” said Rabbi Yechiel Shlomo Levitansky, who travelled more than 48 hours from Sumy, Ukraine, to be at the event and share his inspiring story. “There’s not much that you can do when the Russian army is surrounding your city.” He and his South African born wife, Rochi, are Chabad *shluchim* (emissaries) in Sumy.

“For a long time, we were stuck in our city, the sound of gunshots, explosions, every day, every night, sometimes farther, sometimes closer,” said Levitansky. “All of these things were almost unbelievable; we couldn’t imagine that this was actually happening. But on that first

day, after bringing the Sefer Torah scrolls from our shul to our basement in our home which serves as our bomb shelter till today, it started to sink in.”

Since then, he and his family have dedicated themselves to help their community whatever way they can, from near and from far. Along with millions of their countrymen, they initially fled Ukraine, seeking safety across the border where they were overwhelmed by the kindness of strangers, but they eventually returned to their home and community.

In discussing the lessons learnt along their harrowing journey, Levitansky put our country’s challenges in perspective. “So, there’s no electricity, but there’s water,” he said. “There’s no water, but there’s electricity. There’s no water and no electricity, but we still have a home and food. There’s no food, there’s no home, but we’re all together. There’s always a blessing. Focusing on what we do have instead of focusing on what we don’t helps us to be happy and to be thankful for what we have.”



Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

Being thankful to Hashem was a theme of Unity in the Stadium at Wanderers on Sunday, 23 April. It also demonstrated the importance of coming together, studying Torah, and acting in the face of the world’s challenges in order to bring Moshiach (the messiah). The event also commemorated Siyum HaRambam, the completion of the annual Rambam (Maimonides’ code of Jewish law) study cycle. Levitansky said the Jewish world’s prayers had been felt tangibly since the war broke out, giving rise to miracles within their community and amongst their non-Jewish neighbours.

Continued on page 17>>

## Torah Thought

## Who is holy?



**Rabbi Yossy Goldman**  
– Life Rabbi Emeritus,  
Sydenham Shul

Who is holy? Is it the mystic in the mountains, the monk in the monastery, or the guru in the garage? Perhaps it’s the lady with the crystal ball or the meditating yogi?

People today have fallen in love with spirituality, mysticism and Kabbalah. Great! I’ve given lots of lectures on Kabbalah myself. Judaism is certainly rich in spirituality, and the mystical perspective helps us to a deeper understanding of our faith and its practice. But how would Judaism define “holy”? Must one be a mystic to be holy?

The parshah of Kedoshim (Leviticus 19-20), begins with the injunction, “You shall be holy.” Then it launches into a litany of biblical laws from religious to ethical – respecting parents; elders; charity to the poor; honesty in business; observing the Shabbat; not dabbling in the occult; the famous “love thy neighbour”; not taking revenge; the forbidden relationships – all kinds of things that wouldn’t necessarily be associated with becoming spiritual.

So it seems clear from our parshah that though we do most definitely believe in the spiritual component of Judaism, the road to holiness isn’t so much ethereal or otherworldly but practical and pragmatic. Holiness is to be found more in the ordinary everyday things we do or don’t do than in mantras and metaphysics. Self-restraint, discipline, honesty, decency, doing the right thing – these are the things that can lead us to holiness. You don’t need a guru with a guitar, séances, incense, or even long, flowing robes. You need to be a *mensh*, control your passions, and behave correctly. And that, as opposed to all the spooky stuff, is what constitutes holiness.

At the end of the day, the Torah is telling us to be different from those around us. Whether it was the Egyptians and Canaanites of old or the hedonists and

sensualists of today, the message is the same. Holiness means distinctiveness. A Jew must march to a different beat. It doesn’t matter what the rest of the world is doing. We’re a people apart.

Our differentness is expressed in many ways. The same parshah that reminds us to keep Shabbat also cautions us to keep honest weights and measures in our shop, not to lie, to pay our employees on time, and not to gossip.

The same parshah that declares boldly, “Love thy neighbour as thyself” also warns us not to get too lovey-dovey with everyone – not with your daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, father’s wife, anyone else’s wife, and so on.

Yes, I do think there’s something pretty holy about a young couple exercising

self-discipline and waiting patiently until their *chuppah* to express their love for one another. It shows character, nobility, and I have no doubt that they will confirm that it was worth waiting for. Yes, I think married couples who work hard to keep their marriages and family life intact, even though it may sometimes be difficult, are acting in a G-dly manner. That, too, is holy.

Far be it from me to make light of holy men and miracle workers. I’m a great believer. But before we run to faith healers or buy red strings and holy water, perhaps we ought to consult the Torah and try the bread-and-butter stuff of Judaism first. Let us live with honesty, integrity, respect, honour, dignity and discipline. Then we’ll be holy.

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A famous account in the Talmud (Shabbat 31a) tells about a gentile who would accept Judaism only if a rabbi would teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one foot.

Rabbi Hillel, a religious leader and gentle sage, accepted the challenge and said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. That is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation of this – go and study it!”



# Chev warns of welfare crisis over budget cuts

TALI FEINBERG

A humanitarian crisis is brewing in Gauteng after the Gauteng Department of Social Development (DSD) made a unilateral decision to re-allocate millions of rands towards substance abuse, homelessness, and food security. Though it sounds positive, it means non-profit organisations (NPOs) supporting children, the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill, those with HIV/Aids, and the abused won't get desperately-needed government funding.

This is according to Chevrah Kadisha (Chev) Chief Executive Saul Tomson, who says that although it could have an impact on the work of the Chev, he won't allow that to happen.



Impilo Child Protection and Adoption Services protesting the budget reallocation outside the Gauteng Department of Social Development head office on 20 April 2023

"The reduction of several million rand in funding to the Chev Group will in fact result in no decline in service offering, no loss of jobs, and no reduction in salaries to social workers," he says. "This is because we'll find a solution to this funding crisis."

On 25 April, the Gauteng provincial government said it and the Gauteng DSD would review the decision and convene a meeting with the sector on 4 May "to engage them on the modalities of the new funding model and other issues affecting the sector". This came after enormous pressure from the media, political parties, civil society, and NPOs pushing back against the reallocation.

On 18 April, the Democratic Alliance (DA) said it would "write to the minister for social development to intervene urgently before the Gauteng DSD plunges the province into a humanitarian crisis".

"The DA has been inundated with desperate calls from Gauteng-based NGOs [nongovernmental organisations] pleading for help after Gauteng MEC for Social Development Mbali Hlophe announced that the budget would be reprioritised to better align with Gauteng Premier Panyaza Lesufi's identified priorities," said DA MP Bridget Masango. "This was seemingly done without consulting the NGOs, stakeholders, or beneficiaries, and without assessing the devastating impact."

"Some NGOs are also being forced to sign new service-level agreements that comply with their reduced funding. Thousands of vulnerable individuals cannot be allowed to suffer on the whim of a premier and an MEC, and the DA will do everything in our power to prevent a second Life Esidimeni tragedy."

Tomson says, "The fallout from these budget cuts could actually be far worse [than Life Esidimeni]," when 144 people died at psychiatric facilities in Gauteng from starvation and neglect after being transferred from Life Esidimeni to cheaper centres.

But in a statement released on 16 April, the Gauteng DSD said that the budget of R2.3 billion allocated to NPOs remained in place, and NPOs would be funded "accordingly". Hlophe said an example of the reallocated funds was the "provision of agriculture projects to ensure a move away from over reliance on food parcels [and] to enable individuals to produce their own food".

Afrika Tikkun Chief Executive Marc Lubner says, "We have more than 50 staff potentially affected by this and more than 1 000 children who benefit from this DSD contract. We're in conversation with the heads of department with whom we have always worked so well."

Impilo Child Protection and Adoption Services is part of a collective of child protection organisations taking legal action against the department. It's also one of 48 organisations of Gauteng Crisis in Care, formed to challenge the budget re-allocation.

"We held a picket at the MEC's office on Thursday last week [20 April], and handed over a memorandum," says Joy Capon, administration manager at Impilo. "Our director, Sue Krawitz, was interviewed on Radio 702 yesterday [24 April], and as a result, the premier, Panyaza Lesufi, committed on radio to 'fix' the problem. Yesterday evening [24 April], representatives of the group were called to an urgent meeting with Hlope. No promises were made."

"We're hearing of organisations with many years of service closing down," she says. "The most hard-hit seems to be the funding of social-work posts, which have been cut by 61%. We're determined to raise enough funds to keep providing services."

"We employ 10 social workers and one auxiliary," says Krawitz. "All of these staff and our support staff are at risk of losing their jobs if we're forced to close. We've taken an ethical stand to try to keep providing services. Fundraising is now critical. This is in the middle of our water/electricity woes and the economic situation, which is already putting pressure on us and directly affects the babies in our care."

Lisa Vetten, a research associate at the University of the Witwatersrand's Southern Centre for Inequality Studies, is leading Gauteng Crisis in Care in discussions with the Gauteng DSD and Hlope. "I don't think the department thought this through. Hearing first-hand examples of how people will lose jobs and vulnerable beneficiaries will lose services made it more obvious to them."

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She describes a disability NPO in which "30 staff will no longer have jobs at the end of the month, and they care for 1 200 beneficiaries and their families. They said to the Gauteng DSD, 'We need to meet you to hand over our case files.' And the DSD essentially responded, 'We can't take over your services.'"

Tomson says many who work in the welfare sector remain sceptical of the department's plans. "I dread to imagine what will happen to this money [that's being reallocated]. It's mindboggling that they would do this without warning, consultation, and a plan in place about how to redeploy the funds and provide services when NPOs can no longer afford to do so."

Donations account for 70% of the Chev's overall budget. Six percent of the Chev's residential facilities' budget comes from the government. Though that might not sound like a lot, every rand counts, and the Chev will have to make a plan to make up the loss.

"We'll have to rely on the community even further,"

says Tomson. "If we don't look after ourselves, there's nobody else. That means relying on South African Jews locally or abroad. Welfare needs are further exacerbated by the fact that many elderly people are here alone. Without the Chev, they would literally have nowhere to go."

Vetten says, "We've heard verbally that some organisations' subsidies are being reinstated. However, there's been no formal communication. We're demanding full reinstatement plus a cost-of-living increase. Essentially, that letter [on 25 April] is noncommittal."

She emphasises that even if this crisis is averted, it reveals much bigger questions, such as where welfare sits on the government's list of priorities.

And although the Jewish community has realised that it needs to be self-reliant, Vetten says, "Feeling like you're on your own can't be the way we approach social care in South Africa."

SARU decision to axe Israeli team ‘not discriminatory’

NICOLA MILTZ

World Rugby has accepted the claim by the South African Rugby Union (SARU) that it rescinded its invitation to Israeli rugby team Tel Aviv Heat because of security concerns and threats of violence. It said it didn't receive sufficient evidence to support claims by the Israel Rugby Union (IRU) that the motive for the decision was discriminatory.

In a letter to SARU, as well as to the IRU, and the Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law, which had lodged complaints about SARU, World Rugby said it was satisfied with SARU's explanation.

It said it had conducted an investigation into the charges of discrimination that were raised by the IRU, but did not have evidence to support this. Documents and events which helped it to review the saga included public reaction on social media to an Israeli team visiting the country; a Facebook post referring to a "blood bath" at the competition matches; a statement on 3 February from the South African Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) coalition that "If this apartheid Israeli team comes to play in South Africa, SARU will have blood on its hands"; a statement from the department of sports, arts and culture supporting SARU's decision "to ensure a safe environment for its tournaments"; and various media articles referencing "unrest, division, and threats".

South African Friends of Israel spokesperson Bafana Modise said the letter made it clear that "SARU bent the knee to appease political extremists in South Africa who threatened to harm and incite violence should an Israeli team participate in the sport."

Professor Karen Milner of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies said it was a no-win situation. "There are no winners in this whole saga, only losers. It came about ultimately because SARU President Mark Alexander capitulated without a fight to politically driven external pressure rather than standing by a decision taken by his organisation. Once you cave in to bullies, you're left vulnerable to every crazy fringe group which threatens disruption if it doesn't get its own way."

Benji Shulman, the director of public policy, at the South African Zionist Federation, said, "World Rugby has now confirmed the threats of violence posed by political extremists – in this case, being the antisemitic BDS movement."

"This is an attack on our sportsmen and women in South Africa, who should always have the opportunity to compete against international touring sides," Shulman said.

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# Yom Ha'atzmaut beams light into darkness

HANNA RESNICK

Amid the darkness from the loadshedding that swept through Glenhazel on Tuesday evening, 25 April, beams of light emanated from Yeshiva College as the Jewish community came together to celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut. With this year marking 75 years of Israel's independence, the South African Zionist Federation pulled out all the stops to celebrate.

As families with kids of all ages and groups of school friends entered the school grounds, they were greeted by friendly smiles and flags. The area overlooking the field was decked with food stalls selling anything from coffee to soup, to Chip n Dip. One side of the large field had huge, colourful jumping castles and rides, the other a stage for the entertainment.

The first couple of hours was occupied mostly by younger children running around exploring the rides while it was still light outside. Many also sprinted to the tables of toys being sold, and one young girl excitedly turned around to say, "They got us gifts!" An odd surprise was a giant mascot of Marshall from Paw Patrol wandering around the field.

When the sun began to set, the music became louder, the crowd became larger, and groups of older kids and teenagers made their way to the field. In addition to music from

The Kiffness and DJ Sona, there were showcases from all the Jewish schools, including flag shows, singing, and dancing. The South African Friends of Israel hosted a competition for creative renditions of *Hatikvah*. The audience was able to experience snippets of diverse and soulful tributes to the Israeli national anthem in a uniquely South African context.

important message for us as the South African Jewish community. We say with pride, 'This is who we are. We have a sense of history. These are our roots.'

The event celebrated the joy and solidarity of the South African Jewish community as well as Israel's independence. As you walked through large, bustling crowds, you were bound to come across a familiar face wherever



Photo: Ian Ossendryver

Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein spoke about the connection that the Jewish people have to Israel, saying, "As Jews, we know this is the right G-d has given us. It's our history, this is who we are, we don't need the approval of others. "Ultimately, our sense of who we are, our legitimacy, comes from our values, our history from a source that's much deeper than the approval of anyone else. And that's an

you went, strike up a conversation, carry on walking, rinse, and repeat. Small groups of people who walked in together became groups of 50 people dancing together on the field, waving flags in unison. After the mourning and commemoration of the deaths of Jewish people on Yom Hashoah and Yom Hazikaron this past week, this event encapsulated the light, hope, and unity vital to the preservation of our community.

## Israel's prime ministers canvassed in full colour

TALI FEINBERG

A Capetonian artist and a South African *oleh* have combined forces to create a unique series portraying 12 Israeli prime ministers as they've never been seen before.

Thanks to former Johannesburg businessman, now-Netanya resident Myron Zaidel, this collection of pointillist portraits will be displayed for the first time, in Jerusalem, as part of the country's 75th anniversary celebrations. The portraits, titled *Prime Ministers in Perspective*, are the creation of Gavin Rain, one of the world's leading pointillist artists.

"My objective was to create something of value that was unique and transportable in the international language of art," says Zaidel. "As a Zionist, I wanted to take a period of Israel's history, to focus on Israel's first 12 prime ministers up to the end of 2020. The art form itself was appealing to me – you can look at the picture many ways, and if you look at it the right way, you see the full picture."

After admiring Rain's pointillist portrait of the Lubavitcher Rebbe created for Chabad in Johannesburg, Zaidel met the artist in 2019. They agreed on a 12-month project to spotlight 12 personalities who have shaped the country up to 2020 – David Ben-Gurion (two terms of office); Moshe Sharett; Levi Eshkol; Golda Meir; Yitzhak Rabin (two terms of office); Menachem Begin; Yitzhak Shamir (two terms of office); Shimon Peres (two terms of

office); Ehud Barak; Ariel Sharon; Ehud Olmert; and Benjamin Netanyahu (two terms of office). The idea originated when Zaidel was planning his aliya, and "wanted to have something that I could take from South Africa on my personal journey. Gavin's art form is unique, and I believed that creating a collection of the portraits of all the prime ministers of Israel from 1948 to 2022 would be special."

The series will be displayed for the first time in public in a four-week exhibition within the framework of the Jerusalem Biennale in the central space of the historic Sha'arei Tzedek Hospital. Rami Ozeri, the founder and creative director of the Jerusalem Biennale says, "As part of Israel's 75th anniversary celebrations and in times of dispute and polarisation, we're honoured to exhibit this exquisite series of portraits in the Biennale Gallery. When taken together, they tell the collective story of a nation born. The pointillist technique sheds new light on these important figures and expresses the relation between their complete image and the countless components that create it."

Rain came to develop his pointillist style in an unusual way. "One would think it was via inspiration from artists such as [Georges] Seurat, but actually it was via photography," he says. "My grandfather was a landscape photographer, and I was his chief bag carrier when I was young. My interest in digital photography led me into exploring the pixel patterns that make up the image. What's happening there? Aren't we just losing information in all that dead space between pixels? My art comes from this thought process. However, it took me about two years to figure out how to do it."He says taking on this series was intimidating.



Former prime minister, Menachem Begin

Continued on page 5>>

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# Israel's president launches global initiative to promote Jewish unity

## STAFF REPORTER

In the run-up to Israel's 75th Yom Ha'atzmaut this week, Israeli President Isaac Herzog announced the establishment of consultations among world Jewry to precede the launch of a global Jewish advisory council under his office.

“The fact is that between our Jewish communities, and between them and the state of Israel, we’re growing at times more distant from one another. The gaps between us are growing wider,” said Herzog on Sunday, 23 April, at a joint session of the Jewish Federations of North America, the Jewish Agency for Israel, the World Zionist Organisation, and Keren Hayesod in honour of Yom Ha’atzmaut.

“On some of the most essential questions, we’re unable to agree. But, more concerning, often, we’re unable even to discuss [them].

“That critical web of connectedness – the sense of shared purpose and destiny that has sustained our people for millennia – seems to be loosening,” the president said.

“I’m convinced that there’s no greater existential threat to our people than the one that comes from within: our own polarisation and alienation from one another.

“What we need is a global Jewish *beit midrash*. I have committed myself to making this happen,” he said. Herzog’s vision was to have a “first-of-its-kind global council for Jewish dialogue”, which is the aim that will follow what he called *Kol Ha’am* – Voice of the People: The

## President's Initiative for Worldwide Jewish Dialogue.

“It will be a place where we can engage in serious, sensitive, and strategic discussions on the most

between Jewish communities around the world. It will then be tasked with taking action to advance collaborative projects and foster future leadership across the Jewish world.

The president has invited global Jewish communities to a broad consultation process in 14 major Jewish centres, across six continents, to contribute to his vision of a global council for Jewish dialogue.

This series of what he called “strategic labs” will be facilitated

by international consulting firm Deloitte, with the support of the Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organisation, over June and early July. Johannesburg will be the location for the Jews of Africa. The other locations include Israel, North America (New York, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, Mexico City, Toronto), South America (Buenos Aires, São Paulo), Europe (London, Paris, Budapest), and Australia (Melbourne). There will also be virtual labs in English and Hebrew.

Though he's excited about this new direction, Herzog said Israel had a lot to celebrate on its 75th birthday. "Hanging in the balance between life and death in the War of Independence in 1948, we survived. On the ashes of the greatest tragedy in our people's history, the Shoah, we rose up again with the unbeatable spirit that defines our people."

Over 75 years, Israel “cultivated a thriving centre of Jewish and Israeli life that is creative, warm, bold, and innovative”, he said.

“We have woven a rich and beautiful

human tapestry. We have built an army – a people's army – which brings people together from every walk of life to protect our nation. Among them are hundreds of lone soldiers, who choose to hear the calling from around the world and come to Israel without their families to defend our nation.

“We have blossomed across so many fields. And we have harnessed our creative power and entrepreneurial spirit to be a force of good in the world, bringing ourselves to the frontline of solutions to the most pressing needs of our times. The Jewish people throughout the globe, our Jewish diaspora, has contributed immensely to this nation-building project that is Israel. And it has been nourishing for both sides.”

However, “We can also acknowledge that there are some concerning trends in our peoplehood. We recognise them, not to lament our fate or be critical, blaming, or despairing, but as a first measure in responding to them.”

He said he believed the growing gaps between diaspora communities and Israel could be successfully worked out in the best way Jewish people know how – through discussion. “Our Jewish culture is one that celebrates the living vitality of discourse, of contact between different people and different positions, even, and especially, when they don’t agree. It’s one that recognises that, in order to grow, we need to be able to bring a genuine receptiveness to listening and learning and really hearing each other,” the president said.


“What’s at stake in our lives is more than the fate of one generation. In this moment, we, the living, are Israel. For the sake of everything we have achieved and everything we aspire to achieve, let’s commit to working together, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, to shape our shared future. And write the next chapter in the story of our people.”

## Israel's prime ministers canvassed in full colour

**>>Continued from page 4**

“Portraits are serious business. You’re trying to capture an essence. But how? I don’t know these people. I’ll never know them. Political people have different sides to them – public and private. We all do, but I feel it’s more the case with politicians – it’s more polarised. I can read up about these people, but the person you’re trying to capture in that portrait is the private person. That isn’t easy.”

Each portrait took about three weeks to paint: “One week of mathematics and doubt, the rest painting and relief when it works!” All portraits are acrylic on canvas, one meter square, except for [David] Ben-Gurion, which is 1.8m x 1.2m to accommodate his iconic hairline. Each concentric circle on the white canvas is made up of five layers of colour.



A 50-page coffee table book, with text in English, Hebrew, and French, was created to accompany the exhibition and make the collection more accessible. The portraits aren't for sale, and it's hoped that the exhibition will travel to other cities around the world, eventually finding a permanent home in a leading Israeli institution.

**minister, David Ben-Gurion** “They were all challenging, but [Menachem] Begin was possibly my favourite because I’d never tried to do glasses before,” says Rain. “Glasses are thin, and that’s not easy in my style. I also wanted to try capturing that refraction of light on the cheek that gives the portrait character. Luckily, his glasses were quite thick, as was the style of the day, so I had a little room to play with.”

His advice to other South African artists looking to establish themselves is to “listen to all the advice that established artists give you, and then realise that none of it will apply. But find out what they struggled with. Remember that art is a conversation. You have an idea. It stays in your head. This is the actual art. The painting, sculpture, or installation is simply an expression of this art. Art is a conversation between you and the viewer or patron. Don’t forget this. It’s a conversation. Don’t just shout – you also need to listen.”

He emphasises that he couldn't have done this project without Zaidel. "This is Myron's vision. He's the one that has a deep cultural interest in these leaders. Myron chose to explore and express them in this way. If there's any appreciation or credit for this body of work, it's owed entirely to him."

Being the 75th anniversary of the state, “I found this series to be a perfect fit for premiering the collection in Israel,” says Zaidel. “I’ll enjoy sharing the collection with as many people as possible, and creating interest for the work to be exhibited elsewhere. I’m excited to play an active part of celebrating the occasion.”

For him, aliya was “difficult in that we have left our home and immediate close family in South Africa. However, it’s a positive move in that as a retired couple, there’s a better quality of life to be had. I believe our aliya was made in the time it was meant to be.”

If a suitable opportunity arose, he said he would consider bringing the collection to South Africa.

His advice to aspiring artists hoping to establish themselves is to “be original, be unique, be interesting, and do whatever you do with passion.”



### Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion



## Israeli President Isaac Herzog at Yom Hazikaron commemorations at the Kotel

complex and pressing issues facing our people," Herzog said. "It will be a place where we formulate concrete proposals and put into action items to address them. But, most importantly, it will be a place to cultivate the next generation of Jewish leaders. I consider this to be its most important function."

Herzog wants the initiative to foster dialogue between Jewish communities around the world and to advise him on the core challenges facing them. He wants to build Jewish leadership which can make its voice heard in honest and strategic discussion about sensitive and vital issues, according to his office. To this end, he has brought on board the Jewish Agency for Israel and the World Zionist Organisation as key partners.

The Voice of the People will then lead to the establishment of a forum under the auspices of the office of the president of Israel. Made up of members representing global Jewry selected by the president, the advisory council will advise the president on core challenges, including growing rifts

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# Stronger together

I read on social media this week that on Yom Hashoah, we’re reminded of what happened when we didn’t have a Jewish state and Yom Hazikaron is a reminder of the huge cost of preserving Israel. As the Jewish people, we’ve experienced great loss throughout our history, but we’ve also known in the past 75 years the joy of being able to celebrate having a Jewish state.

There have been way too many losses for one nation, and we mourn every single life lost, but the joy of 75 years of a Jewish state is a phenomenal reason to celebrate.

And celebrate is what we’re doing in this edition of the *SA Jewish Report*.  
*Am Yisrael Chai!*

Generally in this newspaper, we bring you the good, bad, and ugly of what we as South African Jews experience and what goes on in Israel, a country indelibly linked to each one of us. But, this week, we look at what we have to be hugely proud of in the country to which we are linked.

Though there are some who differ with me on this, I believe the history of the Jews and the history of Israel is one story, and we’re linked whether we like it or not.

We may not always agree with every single thing that happens there, but we’re proud of what Israelis have achieved in 75 years. They took a desert and turned it into a fertile oasis. They took a country that had nothing, and turned it into the Start-up Nation, brimful of incredible high tech and other innovation.

Israelis know how to live with passion and determination – and they do it with every inch of themselves.

Right now, the country is in a difficult situation politically, but I have no doubt that come what may, it will be sorted out. Not everyone will be happy with the outcome, but then I guess there will never be a time that we agree on everything. We’re Jews after all. We all think we know what’s best and, can I be so bold as to say that often we do?

In truth, we don’t have a choice but to sort things out in Israel, no matter what it takes.

Having spent a week in Eastern Europe recently, it’s truly painful to see what happens when Jews don’t have a Jewish state. And that should haunt every one of us – inside and outside Israel – enough to find a way to find resolutions to the problems.

It’s also clear that as Jews, we have enough enemies, we don’t need to make enemies of each other. So, we need to find a way to accept what others say and believe, but not hold it against them because the truth is that we’re on the same side.

We’re on the side of ensuring the continuation and growth of Israel and the Jewish world. We’re one and, while we’re separate and have so many different views and opinions, we all want to live in peace without having to feel afraid. We may live our lives slightly differently. We may look different. We may come from different parts of the world with different experiences. I may be a Litvak and you may be a Sephardi, but we’re all Jews.

I took my family to celebrate Yom Ha’atzmaut on Tuesday night at Yeshiva College, and what a joyous occasion it was. It was delightful to see people I saw last week and others I hadn’t seen since school days. It looked like there were thousands of people there, and everyone was having a fabulous time. There was such warmth and genuine good cheer, I wanted to bottle it and keep it with me to remember how well we go together. And how strong we are when we work as one.

We have a unique and special community here, which is another thing that I couldn’t help but celebrate when I was out of this country. We may bicker sometimes, but we really do work together for the betterment of all of us.

Testimony to this is the fact that in this very edition, Saul Tomson, who runs the Chevrah Kadisha, vows that no matter what happens to government subsidies, the Chev won’t let the less fortunate, the elderly, or the needy in our community down. I don’t know how he or others manage, but therein lies the secret to this incredible community.

Israel, too, has that innate sense of survival. Though this one disagrees with that one, and this party pushes the buttons of that party, at the end of the day, they will continue to stand together against their enemies.

It seems so pointless that we let differences get in the way of getting to that point. There’s so much to celebrate in Israel. Putting together this edition – which I am sure you’ll agree is something to be proud of – was a joy.

It’s not difficult to celebrate what Israel means to us.

When I close my eyes, I picture walking down the promenade of Tel Aviv beach and then stopping off at Nachalat Binyamina market before continuing my stroll to Neve Tzedek. This makes me smile and feel happy. I long to do that again soon.

For others, their joy may be walking through the old city of Jerusalem, spending time on kibbutz, visiting family, or a myriad of different experiences. But, for the most part, we all have that special feeling about Israel, no matter what we think about the politics.

Politics will find its place in this newspaper, as will lots of other issues, but this week, our team is only too happy to celebrate the Jewish state as it turns 75. May Israel go from strength to strength, and may it find peace on all fronts.

*Am Yisrael Chai!*

**Shabbat Shalom!**  
**Peta Krost**  
**Editor**



# Diaspora just as critical in Israel’s power era

OPINION

BENJI SHULMAN



A few years ago, an important shift occurred in the distribution of world Jewry. Israel became the country with the world’s largest Jewish population, taking over from the United States. As this demographic trend continues in Israel’s 75th year, it will soon have more Jews than the rest of the world combined. Such a situation hasn’t existed since before the destruction of the first Temple.

This heralds a new era in Jewish-Israel relations. For instance, some kinds of Jewish law are considered to be in effect when the majority of Jews live in the land. More than that, it has already started to reflect a change in the power relations between Israel and the diaspora. For most of the past 75 years, the diaspora tended to be the larger voice as it helped and supported Israel in its journey from establishment to fully fledged country. In the new era, Israel is likely to be the key driver of the global Jewish conversation.

As one looks back on 75 years of the birth of the state of Israel, just a few years after the horrors of the Holocaust, it’s remarkable how many insurmountable challenges have been overcome. Creating a viable state, building a modern economy, supporting aliya from Ethiopia, Yemen, and Russia, developing self-sufficiency in water, agriculture, health, and defence, and providing a robust democratic framework for a multicultural society have all been achieved (while having to handle numerous existential security risks).

These achievements shouldn’t be credited to Israel alone as they also belong to Jews in the diaspora who contributed time, money, political support, and military service to the creation of the state. South African Jewry has a particularly rich history in this regard, with our community sending more money to help establish Israel per capita than any other community in the world – in some cases, selling precious silver family heirlooms to help generate cash. South African Jews were also key to the establishment of the Israeli air force. South Africans served in various capacities to support Israel during wartime. Sadly, many paid the ultimate price.

This 75th anniversary presents us with an incredible potential vision for our next chapter. Imagine a future where Jews safely live in their land, practise their faith, live their values, and engage with Jewish and non-Jewish communities around the world. Israel, already a hi-tech, fully developed economy, is able to expand these opportunities across its population sectors, creating new pathways to success and the conditions to promote peace further with its neighbours. Access to new, scalable technologies, an ethic of *tikkun olam*, and some good-old-fashioned *chutzpah*, ensures that Jews globally are able to tackle some of humanity’s greatest concerns in areas such as food security, medicine, and water provision.

As Jews living in Africa, we know this vision

is particularly pertinent on the continent. Theodor Herzl himself wrote, “Once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans.” South African Jews, wherever they may live, are well placed to be a bridge to bring Israeli solutions to African problems.

But we dare not be complacent, both the Jewish kingdom ruled by David and Solomon, and the state created the Maccabean revolt each lasted only about 80 years as unified political entities. We shouldn’t take the stability and unity of Israel for granted. The collapse of these entities was a prelude to division, civil war, and the eventual exile of Jews to far-flung corners of the world and the loss of our sovereignty in the holy land. History warns us that it was internal divisions, economic, political, and religious, that were as important as external enemies in the demise of these polities. Therefore, it reminds us that an independent Jewish nation is as precious as it is fragile, and it’s up to all of the Jewish world to play our part in maintaining it.

We need to be vigilant to guard Jewish unity and solidarity as we continue to debate political and economic issues and how our Jewish values underpin the society we’ve built over the decades. We simply don’t have the luxury of being divided in our international climate.

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has shown the need – should we require a reminder – of a Jewish state that can provide a place of refuge for Jews around the world at a moment’s notice. This continues to be under threat by heavily armed Islamist extremist groups that exist on all of Israel’s borders, making use of rockets and conventional armaments aimed at cities, and acts of terrorism against civilians.

Iran, a human rights violating theocracy that’s especially loathing of women and minorities, continues its work to create a nuclear weapon nearby. This, while some in the West continue to drive a campaign of delegitimation and boycotts against Israel in the media and civil society. This results in growing antisemitic threats against diaspora communities around the world.

Without full security and confronting and defeating these evils, we’ll never be able to have true peace with all of Israel’s neighbours.

South African Jewry has an important role to play here as well. Our country has been the host and staging ground for the pernicious establishment of the apartheid analogy, which has been exported globally. Playing a part in the process of debunking this lie is something that we are uniquely positioned to assist with. There’s no reason why South Africa and Israel shouldn’t be on friendly, co-operative terms. As the African National Congress and its fellow travellers continue to slide into political irrelevance, we should take the opportunity to bring our two societies closer in whatever way we can.

As we celebrate 75 years with Israel as South African Jewry, our connection gives us strength and a place amongst global Jewry to continue playing a part in the next unfolding chapter of the Jewish people. *Am Yisrael Chai.*

• Benji Shulman is director of public policy at the South African Zionist Federation.



Israel’s hi-tech and fully developed economy presents many opportunities for the future



# Boats and bullets – South African veterans remember 1948 war

AVI KUMAR

For many Jews, it was but a dream to rebuild their nation after 2 000 years in exile. When the opportunity arose in 1948, the Jewish community in South Africa were swift to heed the call. Out of 4 000 foreign volunteers in Machal, South Africa sent one out of five fighters.

"I always loved adventure, that was a big part of why I went," said Joe Woolf, a machalnik who passed away in February at the age of 95. He spoke to the SA Jewish Report shortly before his passing. Most surviving South African machalniks are now more than 90 years old.

South Africa proportionately contributed the largest group of machalniks, with a total of 806 South Africans giving service to Israel, including 133 women and 12 gentiles. Only the United States, with the world's biggest Jewish population at the time, sent more fighters. The late American machalnik, Tom Tugend, said, "The whole diaspora was here, and South Africans were among the most dedicated soldiers we had."

Because American, South African, and British Jews were highly represented in Machal, English became the main language of the division. Many didn't speak Hebrew, "but as long as you could understand Yiddish, that was good enough to get by, and many of us in South Africa could at least understand some of it," said Dr Hymie Goldblatt.

In an interview from Moshav Ilaniya, where he now lives, Woolf recounted his journey. He was born in Lithuania, and moved to South Africa as a child. Many of his relatives back in Europe perished in the Holocaust. In Lithuania, he said, 97.6% of Jews died in the Holocaust, the highest per capita of any country affected by Nazi atrocities.

"If we had stayed behind in Lithuania, we most



certainly would have perished," he said. Since many South African Jews had Litvak origins, many, like Woolf, had lost family members in the Shoah. Wolf had to forge his parent's signature since they didn't give him permission to leave and join the Israeli army as he wasn't 21 or a South African citizen yet.

Woolf recounted the voyage to Israel, which took many weeks. "A journey from Africa to the Middle East wasn't just one direct flight like it is today. Back then, planes stopped overnight for refuelling." They left Palmietfontein Airport (south of Johannesburg) in the morning, with a breakfast stop in Bulawayo, Rhodesia. They also stopped in a few different countries en route before reaching Italy, where he spent some time and embarked on a boat to Israel.

Israel had already declared independence by the time he arrived in Haifa on 24 August 1948.

Woolf said Israel urgently needed pilots, while infantry soldiers were obviously needed, but they didn't need to be shipped in so quickly. "I was an infantryman, we were basically 'cannon fodder', that's why our journey took longer. They sent the pilots by ship, on a quicker route." Woolf joined the English-speaking Infantry "B" Company.

There were fighters from all over the globe including India, Scotland, Canada, and Kenya.

He was in what was known as the training platoon, under Stanley Meddicks from Kenya. Woolf was surrounded by battle-hardened and experienced World War II veterans, which he said was a real morale booster. He recalls what he called "the battle of Tamra [an Arab city in the lower Galilee]" as his "most intense moment in the war". They initially scaled a mountain near Kabul village (near Tamra) with no difficulty, but in no time, came under fire from Jordanian troops.

"That's when our squad saw the most action," Woolf said. Many died or were wounded, and Woolf said it was overwhelming for a youngster like him.

Hyman Josman belonged to the Betar youth movement in South Africa and, like most South African Jews, he was a Zionist from a young age. He also took the route via Italy and, anticipating a "rough ride", he brought chocolate from South Africa and survived off that, since the conditions on the boat from Italy were "awful".

Josman's most distinct memory is the heavy machine gun he had to carry, which "like everything, was Czechoslovakian-made". Back then, "Israel didn't have the advanced weapons that it does today."

His most memorable moment was when a trigger-happy Irish machalnik named Jack Harris fired away when there was no enemy in sight. When Josman asked why he was doing it, the Irishman replied, "I don't know. But you better keep your head down!"

Ruth Stern née Saretzky was a nurse in the war. Stern

was the only woman among the 20 volunteers who left South Africa together. Before her departure, an elaborate cover story was concocted by the organisers complete with a fictitious airline, Universal Airways, as a cover to allow them to leave South Africa legally. Each one was assigned a different story. Her alibi was that she was a student going to study in England via Italy.

Just before leaving, as Saretzky sat sipping tea with her father on the veranda, he attempted a last-ditch effort to convince her. "It's not too late to change your mind. Please consider the practical side and the dangers," he said. "All the volunteers are war veterans or qualified doctors and nurses. You're too young and inexperienced."

Her mother added, "Causing others to worry about you, you might even be a hindrance, Ruth dear."

But Saretzky was determined. Nothing would hold her back. "I have no regrets doing this," she said "It's not every 2 000 years that we get to fight for our country."

She treated patients of all ages. "Many survivors came with so much trauma already."

Hymie Goldblatt, hailed from Reddersburg, a small farming town in the Free State, which when he was growing up, had two Jewish families. Goldblatt had been in the medical corps during World War II, and was able to visit the British Mandate of Palestine for the first time in 1946, where he thought to himself, "It's nice to be among fellow Jews in a place where we won't experience antisemitism. I will return here one day."

And so, he returned two years later as a machalnik. Describing his work as a medic, he said, "Many of the wounded died losing blood, and it was our job to save them." His unit saved many lives in the south around Beersheba, where they operated.

Today, all these former machalniks are in retirement, but they say their memories of those days are some of the best in their lives. "I have no regrets, Israel is our homeland," Woolf said.



Joe Woolf



Dr Hymie Goldblatt



Ruth Stern

Photo: Avi Kumar

## AFRICAN FRIENDS OF SHEBA GALA: AN UNFORGETTABLE NIGHT OF INNOVATION AND INSPIRATION



Over 180 guests, including esteemed board members and international dignitaries, attended a spectacular Fundraising Gala for Sheba Medical Center hosted by the African Friends of Sheba. The evening was dedicated to celebrating healthcare innovation and breakthroughs during 2022.

The event featured an Israeli delegation from Sheba, which included Prof. Eytan Mor, Director of the Transplant Center, Dr. Zion Zibly, Director of the Neurosurgery Department, and Mr. Yoel Har-Even, Head of Sheba Global. The Israeli Ambassador to South Africa, Eli Belotsercovsky, and the Emirate Ambassador to South Africa, Mahash Alhameli, also attended, adding a global dimension to the event.

Highlighting Sheba Global's achievements in the past year, Yoel Har-Even provided a comprehensive overview, which included the medical center's efforts in treating 6,000 Ukrainians as part of the "Shining Star" field hospital in Mostyska, as well as ongoing work in Ukraine, Nigeria, and Ethiopia. Mr Har-Even also explored a collaboration with the United States 5th Fleet to train Kenyan civilian and military personnel in handling mass casualty events.

Kidney transplant innovations were passionately discussed by Prof. Eytan Mor, who described a unique double exchange transplant between family and non-family members. During a heartwarming moment, kidney donor Dan Levy was honored with a certificate of appreciation for his generous act.

On his part, Dr. Zion Zibly presented an innovative medical device that he played a crucial role in developing and implementing. This cutting-edge technology promises to transform the way Alzheimer's, Dementia, and other neurological disorders are treated. He also discussed an innovative, non-invasive procedure to treat patients with Parkinson's disease and other tremor-related symptoms, captivating listeners in the process.

The evening not only showcased innovative advancements in medical healthcare but also highlighted Sheba's global impact, leaving a lasting impression on all who attended.

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To donate and learn more, contact: Naomi Hadar, Executive Director Phone: +27-82-90-777-28 | Email: [naomi@shebamed.co.za](mailto:naomi@shebamed.co.za)



# Lights, water, action – Israel makes a difference in Africa

TALI FEINBERG

Before Israeli water-tech company BlueGreen Water Technologies intervened at Setumo Dam on the Molopo River in South Africa's North West Province in 2020, the water had become so toxic that people could no longer drink it even though it was their main water source.

It took just six months for the company to eradicate toxic algae blooms in the water. For the first time in decades, the people of Mahikeng were able to access clean drinking water, enjoy Setumo Dam as a safe water source, and unleash its potential for recreational purposes.

All this happened with full co-operation between BlueGreen Water Technologies and Sedibeng Water, the company overseen by the department of water and sanitation, demonstrating how South Africa and the African continent can open itself to Israel's support, and how Israeli companies and government are happy to help.

"We have established good relationships with the government," said

BlueGreen Water Technologies Chief Executive Eyal Harel at the time. "It sees the problem for what it is, and is taking a long-term approach. We're totally committed to improving water quality in South Africa, and we see the same from government."

While Israel-haters call for Israeli assistance to be banned from the continent, it's clear they are putting their hatred first and the interest of the people second. And in most instances, their calls fall on deaf ears, as Israel continues to make a difference in South Africa and beyond.

Israeli engagement with the African continent is, in fact, not new. It dates to the 1950s, when Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, looked to Africa to find support for the newly-established Jewish state.

An egalitarian attitude toward Africa was typified by the architect of Israel's "Africa policy", Golda Meir, who believed Israelis and Africans had much in common as they were both engaged in the process of nation building. "Like them, we had shaken off foreign rule; like them, we had to learn for ourselves how to reclaim the

land, how to increase the yields of our crops, how to irrigate, how to raise poultry, how to live together, and how to defend ourselves," she said.

Meir's first trip to the continent was in 1958, starting in Liberia. In this country, the Gola people crowned her queen in a traditional ceremony, prompting Israeli poet Avraham Shlonsky to suggest that the Gold Coast (Ghana's colonial name) be renamed "Golda Coast". This is according to writer Masimba Musodza, who was born and grew up in Zimbabwe and now lives in the United Kingdom. He says Meir also toured the Victoria Falls in Zambia.

"In Meir's wake, thousands of Israeli experts in fields such as military, police and intelligence training, agriculture, regional planning, and community work were dispatched, working in 33 countries across the continent. Many African leaders and technocrats visited Israel to see for themselves these brilliant ideas at work," wrote Musodza in 2016.

He points out that during her tenure as foreign minister, Israel voted at the United Nations in 1962 to condemn South Africa's apartheid policy, having obtained the support of the Knesset.

"I believe we are on the threshold of a revolution in relations between the African continent and Israel, one that takes us back to that Golden Age (*Golda Age?*) where this remarkable woman distinguished herself," wrote Musodza. "She left us an enduring legacy on which to build a new relationship."

vaccine rollout, logistics, and public education.

Israel has had an impact in numerous spheres through Mashav (Israel's Agency for International Development Co-operation), after Meir pledged Israeli help to find solutions to severe challenges in food security, water safety and sanitation, healthcare, economic growth, community building, and the empowerment of women and education.

studying at night. Israeli drip-irrigation technology waters fields efficiently.

In July 2022, a four-member group from the University of the Free State took a five-day study tour on trans-boundary water and wastewater management in Israel. About a month later, a delegation of Israeli water experts arrived in South Africa to help the Tshwane municipality solve its water issues.

These are examples of Israel's long



BlueGreen Water Technologies deploys its water treatment from the air at Setumo Dam in the North West Province

Private Israeli companies, start-ups, and non-profit organisations have also played a crucial role. Sivan Yaari has led the way with her organisation, Innovation: Africa, which has brought electricity and safe drinking water to more than a million people in rural Africa using Israeli innovation and technology. The organisation uses Israeli-designed and made solar panels and water-treatment systems.

Operating out of Israel, it has provided electricity and water to more than 170 communities in eight African countries. It's clear that the organisation could assist South Africa with its energy crisis, and it is already working to solve water crises in villages across South Africa.

Backed by generous sponsors including

history of working with Africa's people to improve infrastructure, services, and quality of life.

Inviting Africans to visit Israel is also a vital part of Israel's ability to assist. As recently as February 2023, Angola sent a high-level delegation to Israel, led by the country's minister of higher education, science, technology, and innovation, Dr Maria do Rosario Braganca.

"This is my first visit to Israel as minister of higher education, science, technology, and innovation," said Braganca during the visit. "I would like to learn from Israel how to advance our systems in Angola. In particular, Israel has been developing education systems from pre-school to higher education in order to fulfil the goal of having more than 50% of its population achieve a university degree. We can use this knowledge in our country. It's also important for us to see how the theme of innovation is being developed so well in Israel. We hope to enjoy the fruits of the future co-operation between Angola and Israel, particularly in the field of higher education."

Israeli Ambassador to South Africa, Eli Belotsercovsky recently shared that from 1994 to date, about 100 South African experts have been trained in Israel, some of whom currently occupy senior positions in government.



IsraAID rolling out COVID-19 vaccines in Eswatini in March 2021

Indeed, in recent years, relations between Israel and Africa have thrived and may even be a Golden Age of relations, as Musodza predicted back in 2016. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Israel-based non-governmental organisation IsraAID assisted Eswatini (formerly known as Swaziland) to build its response to the virus, including

Investec, these projects are in 37 South African villages so far. Innovation: Africa first sinks a borehole to tap groundwater in a village, and then installs a solar-powered pump, water tower, and reticulation system. It hires local villagers to assist and learn how to maintain the system. The solar panels also generate electricity for medical clinics and light for

He wrote that Israeli technical co-operation over the years in South Africa has focused on water, agriculture, and food security, and emphasised that the relationship was a real partnership, with "Israel and Africa working together to create a better world".


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# The privilege of being born before 1948

OPINION

RABBI RAMON WIDMONTE



I believe it is a privilege to have been born before 1948. As contentious as that may sound, let me explain why.

I take tours of Jews, young and old, to Israel, Poland, Lithuania, and Europe. Many of those tours are focused on connecting Jews to a heritage that many of us view as long gone – the Lithuanian and Polish *shtetl*; the tight-knit community; worlds of pre-war Zionism, Jewish life, culture, Judaism, Hasidism, and more.

It's so difficult to reconstruct a mode of living, breathing, and existing which is so far removed from our own modern sensibilities, but I have had the privilege of working with survivors of all shapes and sizes who are able to make this happen. They can weave the visions of life as it was. It's astounding to walk with them through their home towns and see their lives glimmer and take shape around us – the loves, the petty squabbles, the grandeur, the ordinary, and the sublime. It's truly humbling and grounding. They enable our groups to shift their minds and hearts back 100 years to sync (however partially) with the life and mores of Jews at that time.

But year after year, the most difficult thing for 21st century Jews to grasp, in any way, is how Jews processed, reacted to, and lived with antisemitism. It's one of those areas which seem perpetually lost in translation. For years after the Holocaust, many survivors were discouraged, even by fellow Jews, from discussing their experiences. My own family told me that my two great-aunts, both survivors of Auschwitz,



who arrived in South Africa after the war, were told squarely that "everyone suffered" in the war, and they shouldn't focus on their past and suffering.

I suggest that the reason that Jews after 1948 – and that includes all of us born after 1948 – struggle so mightily to deal with the events of the Holocaust, why so many inaccurately described their fellow Jews as "sheep" being led passively to their slaughter, was because after 1948, every single Jew in the world had their minds switched completely into a new mode of thinking, feeling, and being.

As Rabbi Soloveitchik said, this shift in mindset was simple yet so profound: after 1948 and the founding of the state of Israel, Jewish blood was no longer "*hefke*" (valueless). After 1948, Jewish blood was worth something, and shedding Jewish blood incurred consequences. For 2 000 years, Jewish life and death were irrelevant in most of the countries of our exile. In Europe after the Crusades, this point was driven home again and again. But how do you

view your life if you know that your neighbours and fellow countrymen don't view you as a real human being? How do you live knowing that today or tomorrow, you might be fined, sanctioned, exiled, pogromed, raped, pillaged, or tortured? What happens to you, your family, and your collective psyche if you live like that for 1 000 years? Can you imagine that?

You see, you can't imagine it. I can't; we can't. And that's Israel's gift to us; that we cannot possibly imagine that reality. We can read about it, we can try to talk to our precious few survivors to understand it. But we can't really.

And that's the privilege that we lack, being born after 1948.

Someone born significantly before 1948 really gets antisemitism in a way that we cannot. That person has lived in both worlds – before 1948 and after. Such a person can truly appreciate the sea-change wrought by the founding of Israel for Jews in this regard. In other, more positive areas, Israel's founding, surviving, and thriving has had a tremendously positive impact on Jewish life worldwide. However, this soul-wrenching change regarding antisemitism seems to me to be one of the most significant for all of us, especially today, in a period of resurging hate for Jews worldwide.

For that reason, most of us born after 1948 cannot fully appreciate Israel's impact on our lives. Before 1948 there was no person, no group, no state who would inevitably stand up to protect Jews no matter where they were in the world. After 1948, every Jew knows that Israel will always be there for them, everywhere. The impact this has had on every Jew everywhere is incalculable – we no longer live with the same fears, insecurities and instability that were our staple for two millennia.

After Yoni Netanyahu and his team swooped into Entebbe in 1976 to free all the Jewish (Jewish, not Israeli) hostages, how could my worldview be anything like a Jew living in Warsaw in 1930? I've always lived in an environment where my life matters; I simply cannot appreciate what it is like to live without that, and that is a privilege someone has who was born before 1948 – they can really appreciate Israel.

Just this past week, a member of the Labour Party in the United Kingdom wrote openly that Jews have never suffered from racism. She likened the discrimination against Jews to that made against redheads.

If that's the comment made today post-Holocaust, can you imagine how people were speaking and writing in 1939?

Well, you cannot imagine it! And that's Israel's gift to all of us.

• Rabbi Ramon Widmonte is the dean of the Academy of Jewish Thought and Learning.

## Rehabilitated soldiers share hope and inspiration

HEATHER DJUNGA

Sharon Shtrachman will never forget that awful moment in 2015 when she and her husband, Miki, received the call to say that their daughter, Lee (now 27), who was on border patrol in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), had been injured. A terrorist had rammed his car into Lee. Then, with a knife in his hand, he chased her through the streets of Jerusalem.

Shtrachman described the harrowing trip to the hospital to find her daughter as "the hardest moment" in her life. "I knew the child I gave to the army, but that child was very different to the one I got back," she told the *SA Jewish Report*.

Her daughter sustained injuries to her legs, chest, and head, and their extent meant she would have to undergo an extensive two-and-a-half-year rehabilitation. "It isn't just the physical wounds which are left after a soldier is injured," Shtrachman, who also has two sons, aged 30 and 22, explained. "There's also emotional trauma, specifically post-traumatic-stress disorder (PTSD), to overcome."

The Shtrachmans were in South Africa this week as a guest of Sydenham Shul for this week's Yom Hazikaron commemoration. They head up the operations of Belev Echad, an organisation which helps wounded IDF soldiers recover. They travelled with Dana Ofir (25), a former IDF soldier who, after being wounded in a terrorist attack in 2016, has used her story to inspire formerly wounded soldiers. Like Lee, Ofir was the survivor of a car ramming.

"For as long as I can remember, I was stubborn and always followed my dreams. I wanted to have an impact on the people in the army. There were obstacles in my way to becoming an officer, but I made it happen," she said.

Ofir said she was on an education trip to Jerusalem on the last days of her officer's course. "We visited a beautiful spot with a view of Jerusalem, called Armon Hanatziv, when everything went black in a second.

A terrorist driving a truck like a madman ran over the group of cadets. I was among them." The group was left devastated: 15 soldiers were injured, four killed, and three others, including Ofir, were seriously injured.

Ofir spent two months in a wheelchair following the accident and then some time afterwards trying to regain her courage to live, struggling, as many wounded soldiers do, with PTSD. "The rehabilitation process was exhausting and demanding. I did physiotherapy four days a week, for three hours at a time," she said.

Like Ofir, Shtrachman's daughter, Lee,

Dana Ofri, Miki and Sharon Shtrachman, Rebbetzin Estee and Rabbi Yehuda Stern



had a long recovery period. "The doctor said she would never walk again, however, she was determined, as were we." Following intensive therapy, Lee is now walking again. "We believe she's a miracle, even though she still lives with PTSD and has some problems

with her legs," Shtrachman said.

"Many who have been involved in war or the target of terrorism cannot sleep at night. All the time, they are looking around to see if someone might attack," she said. "Some get nervous when there's a loud voice. Some need to be assured constantly that everything is ok. They might experience problems in their relationships. Some find it hard to walk."

Her daughter's trauma isn't over. "She feels sick because of ongoing surgery and struggles with PTSD. But we help to remind her and the others that they are heroes," Shtrachman said. "On Yom Hazikaron, we remember those who have died, however there are soldiers who, while they

**Continued on page 10>>**

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With Hugh Raichlin



# “You’re not alone,” ambassador tells families of fallen

HANNA RESNICK

“Even before the state of Israel existed, the Jewish people paid a heavy price, the heaviest price of all, for our land,” Israeli Ambassador Eli Belotsercovsky said at the Israeli Embassy’s Yom Hazikaron memorial on Tuesday, 25 April. “It’s tragic that even today, 75 years after Israel joined other nations as the only Jewish state in the world, this number continues [to grow].”

The ambassador said, “In total, 24 213 men and women have sacrificed their lives defending our Jewish state and 4 255 have been murdered by terrorists. Since the last independence day, 194 new names have appeared on this



frightening roster.” He praised those who fought for the state of Israel, saying that “every one of them is a model of courage and ultimate devotion”. He also emphasised the support Israel has received from the South African Jewish community since 1948. “Ever since the establishment of the state of Israel, the Jewish community of South Africa has always been there,” he said. “In the War of Independence, 700 Jewish members of the community volunteered to fight for Israel.” This was the highest number of volunteers from any Jewish community around the world after the United States, Belotsercovsky said. Tzvi Wagner, who lost his brother, Dani, during the Yom Kippur War, lit the memorial torch in the Israeli embassy garden. This year marks 50 years since the Yom Kippur War, in which 2 565 Israelis died during 19 days of war. The wreath of the bereaved families was laid by Sigalit



Tighe, who lost her brother, David Eshel, in 1972, and Jessie Kay, who lost her grandson, Eli Kay, in a terror attack in 2021. These were just a few of the many members of the South African Jewish community who have lost loved ones in Israel who were guests at the memorial event in Pretoria this week. Many were brought to tears by “The Missed Chance”, recited by Israel Centre Head Liat Amar Arran, which describes the life that young soldiers and victims never got to live. “We remember who they were, but the real pain is because we will never know who they could have been,” she read. The memorial ended in an atmosphere of hope in spite of remembrance of terrible loss and tears shed. Speaking to the bereaved families, the ambassador said, “There’s no consolation for your loss, nothing that can be said or done that can fill the terrible void that you feel, the constant pain that has no cure. I want to say only that you are part of us. You have combined your faith with faith in the state of Israel, and you’ll never be alone. I hope and pray that we’ll be worthy of the act of heroism of your beloved.”

# Yom Hazikaron remembers victims as Israel’s toll mounts

STEVEN GRUZD

Since the declaration of the state of Israel in May 1948 – 75 years ago – 24 213 men and women have died defending the Jewish homeland. Another 4 255 have perished in terror attacks. In the past year alone, 36 Israeli civilians and soldiers have been killed. Israel has counted every single victim. They all made the ultimate sacrifice so that Israel could not only survive but thrive. On 24 April, the Johannesburg Jewish community gathered at Yeshiva College in Glenhazel for the annual Yom Hazikaron (Day of Remembrance) ceremony. This solemn day immediately proceeds the joy of



Dana Ofir, aged 25, described how emotional it was for her to be outside Israel on Yom Hazikaron for the first time in six years. She had applied to be a combat fitness instructor in the IDF. In spite of being rejected, she stubbornly harangued the IDF until it accepted her. She was visiting Jerusalem with her unit when a terrorist deliberately drove into the group, killing four people. Ofir was badly injured. Her pelvic bones were crushed. Her tibia, nose, and jawbone were all broken. She had spinal fractures and internal bleeding. She endured operations and has steel pins and plates in her pelvis. Confined to a wheelchair, she fought hard to recover, and miraculously, was able to walk again six months after the attack. She also fought her way back into the IDF and today, is studying sport therapy. Ofir was brought to South Africa as a representative of *Belev Echad* (With One Heart), an organisation supporting wounded Israeli soldiers to overcome their limitations. She’s living proof that anything is possible. She lit one of the eight memorial lamps in memory of her murdered friends. Earlier, Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein delivered a moving *dvar Torah*. He talked about seeing the Dee family in Israel that had lost their mother and two daughters in a horrific terrorist shooting attack this month. He said that the bereaved Rabbi Leo Dee told hundreds of people visiting the *shiva* house how saddened he was that this heinous act of terror did not spur universal condemnation. The South African government needed to hear this, Goldstein said. Its silence about this attack spoke volumes. He quoted from Psalm 120: “We came for peace; others came for war.” Israel’s ambassador to South Africa, Eli Belotsercovsky,



lit another of the lamps. He said that although the IDF was strong in terms of sophisticated weaponry and technology, its real strength lay in being a “people’s army”, a unifying force for the country. He said the sacrifice made by its soldiers should never be forgotten or taken for granted. Rowan Polovin, the chairperson of the South African Zionist Federation, read out a macabre rollcall of those killed in Israel since the start of 2023. He said *Shin Bet*, the Israel Security Agency, had foiled about 300 planned terror attacks this year. Eli Kay, the young South African *oleh* killed in November 2021 at the *Kotel*, was also specifically remembered. A cousin had set one of Eli’s

beautiful poems to music in a moving tribute. One line echoed across the audience: “You are always with me.” Many families of those tragically killed or injured in Israel’s wars have started or joined charitable foundations to perpetuate their memories and help others affected by similar trauma. The organs of the late Lucy Dee were donated to five different patients, including a young Palestinian girl on dialysis. As Goldstein said, “Imagine if Israel had had 75 years of peace instead of war.”



## Rehabilitated soldiers share hope and inspiration

>>Continued from page 9

continue to live, inside are dying,” Shtrachman said. “These are the ones we need to honour and uplift.” She recounted the story of a young soldier who lost three friends in an attack in Israel. “He didn’t want to come out of his room. However, we took him step by step through recovery, noticing that he loved to watch cooking tutorials on YouTube. Today, he’s the chef in a house supporting recovering wounded soldiers.” Ofir spoke of the most memorable moment of her recovery. “Within six months, contrary to medical predictions, I started to run. The first time, I was able to run for five minutes. Those few moments were the happiest I remember.” She said her injury had been a good excuse for her to be released from the IDE, but she didn’t want to accept it as she felt she had to “complete her mission”. She fought to reclaim her position as a combat fitness officer, eventually succeeded, and was put in charge of two combat battalions

of 500 soldiers each. After serving the IDF in this capacity for five years, she was released and is now working as a group fitness trainer and studying sports therapy. Her new mission is to “help friends”. “My wife and I were privileged to host the guests from Belev Echad in our home, and to see their resilience and faith,” said Sydenham Shul Rabbi Yehuda Stern. “They connected more with G-d after the accident, and have a mission and stories to share to inspire Jews of the diaspora. The Jewish community can learn humility from their stories – realising how we are so vulnerable as humans and ultimately, are in the hands of Hashem.” The rabbi said the shul was proud to partner with Belev Echad in bringing this message of hope to the community. “It’s so moving, so powerful that before we celebrate the independence of Israel, we remember those who have suffered and have sacrificed their lives for the state of Israel,” he said.



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# There from the start: Israel’s pioneers and fighters

TALI FEINBERG

It’s hard to imagine a world without a Jewish state, but for most of Jewish history, this was the reality. Yet a small number of our nation was in British Mandate Palestine when the state of Israel was proclaimed on 14 May 1948. It was an unforgettable moment in their lives, and many then risked their lives to defend Israel in its earliest hours.

Being there was the culmination for many of a long struggle to survive the Holocaust. Henia Bryer (née Fishman) arrived before the state was created, having been through the horrors of the Radom ghetto and the concentration camps of Plaszów, Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen. She also survived a death march.

So, the day she heard that she was now living in a Jewish state was “when I finally felt free and safe”, she says. She was in her early 20s, and full of hope for the future in spite of everything she had suffered. “The British left, and we stayed up all night listening to the wireless. It was a night to remember! We danced in the streets, and every bar was open.” She and so many other Jews went from a state of uncertainty and exile to the knowledge that they finally had a small corner of the earth to call home.

But the next day, reality dawned, as the Jewish state had to defend itself from invading Arab armies intent on destroying it. Bryer was already part of the Haganah, and still has her call-up card and photographs of her in her uniform. “We would receive uniforms from different countries. I was in the army for two years, and did all sorts of things – from helping in the canteen to helping find

aeroplanes, which we really needed.”

On Israel’s first Independence Day, she marched proudly with the other Haganah women. Now, as Israel celebrates 75 years, she says those early days were “very hopeful”, and she always believed the Jewish state would endure. She would have loved to have stayed in Israel, but eventually settled in South Africa, where she lives today.

Esther Mayo (née Gabay) was born on Rhodes Island on 20 December 1932, but she and her family miraculously escaped the Nazis, spending a number of years in Tangier, Morocco. Her father always wanted to go to the land of Israel, and eventually, they were given the opportunity to settle in Canada or British Mandate Palestine. He chose the latter. The day they walked off the boat at the port in Haifa in 1945, people told them the war in Europe had ended.

The family lived in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. “On the day of independence, we all sat with our ears up close to the wireless, listening to which nations would recognise the Jewish state. When it was announced, we were all crying. We had many Rhodes neighbours who survived the war and lived close by. We all gathered and cried together.” Mayo eventually met her husband, and they settled in what was Southern Rhodesia. Later, she came to South Africa, and then returned to Zimbabwe, where she still lives today.

It’s a little-known fact that the first group of South African volunteers who came to support the fledgling Jewish state were smuggled ashore from the ocean.



Esther Mayo

“Volunteers first attempted to reach British Mandate Palestine on 15 December 1946,” says Joe Woolf, who wrote about this history. Eight young men, all members of various Zionist youth movements, travelled through Africa in a second-hand military three-ton Dodge truck. They got as far as a town called El-Deum in the Sudan. Shortly after leaving El-Deum, two of them were knocked off the truck. One suffered a cracked vertebra and was sent to hospital in Khartoum. The truck had to be sold to pay for the seriously injured volunteer to be flown back to South Africa.”

According to Woolf, six of the eight returned to South Africa from Port Sudan, experiencing all sorts of adventures along the way. The seventh was the only one to reach Palestine in 1947, via Alexandria, almost a year after the failed attempt. The others eventually reached Israel in Machal (foreign volunteer) groups, and served in various army units in 1948.

The second attempt was made by sea in May 1947. Three Cape Town Jewish businessmen, hoping to establish a Jewish fishing fleet in the Mediterranean, acquired a 500-ton whaler which had been a Union Defence Forces minesweeper. It was renamed Drom Afrika I. Seven young Jewish men, members of various youth movements, were part of the all-South African lower deck.

The voyage via the Suez Canal lasted two months, and it was the first ship to sail into Haifa flying the flag of the future Jewish state, infuriating the British authorities who didn’t permit the crew to land. The ship and its crew spent several frustrating months in the eastern Mediterranean, much of the time in dry dock in Alexandria.

Shortly after the approval of the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly on 29 November 1947, these Jewish sailors were smuggled ashore by the Haganah.

Several South African Jewish pilots as well as one

non-Jewish pilot flew a number of small civilian aircraft from South Africa to Israel, arriving on the second day of the new state. South African Machal served in all branches of the Israel Defense Forces, and included about 170 front-line kibbutz members, a total of about 870 volunteers. This is why Henry Katzew’s book on South African Machal is called *South Africa’s 800*.

Seven South Africans died in battle: Yehezkiel “Chatzi” Berelowitz; Zvi Lipschitz; Gideon Rosenberg; Meir “Matey” Silber; Eddie Cohen; Leslie Bloch; and Lou Hack.

About 100 women were among the 800 who came to defend Israel. One qualified nurse, determined to serve, left behind her one-year-old and five-year-old children with her mother and husband. A South African nurse delivered the first Jewish baby boy born in Beersheba after 2 000 years.

Some South Africans held important command positions. Former World War II veteran and fighter bomber crewman Harold “Smoky” Simon was chief of Israel Air Force (IAF) operations at the beginning of the IAF’s creation. The role of one IAF fighter squadron commander, Syd Cohen, was so important, he was honoured by a send-off of four Spitfires as he left Israel after his service to continue his medical studies in South Africa.

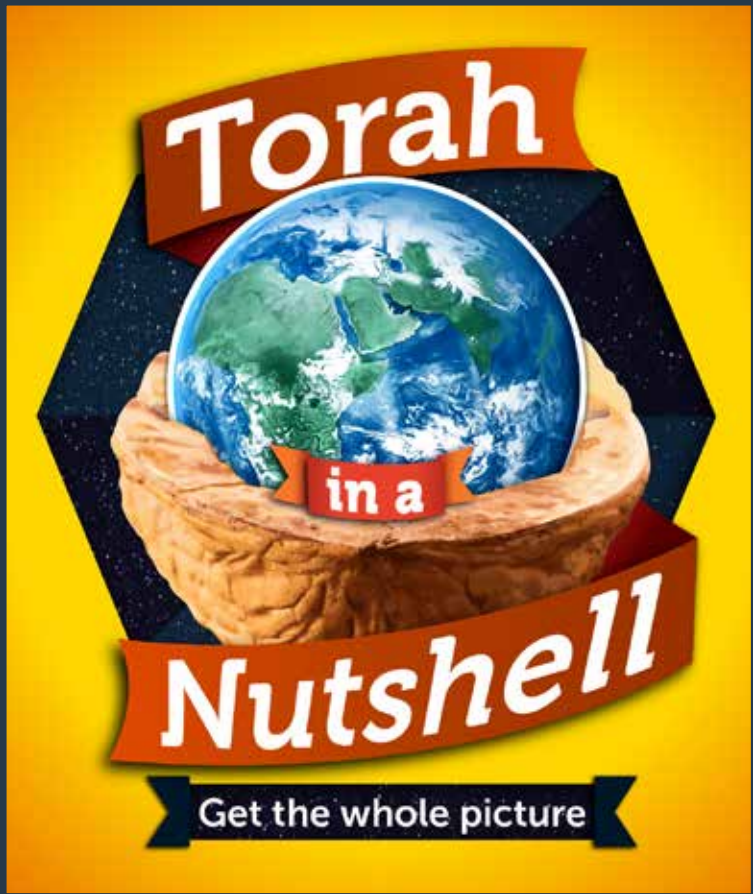
Many South African Machal volunteers interrupted their university studies, and at least seven interrupted their medical studies twice: first to serve in World War II and then again in 1948. When they qualified, they were about 10 years older than their classmates.



Henia Bryer

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# Happy birthday – I hope you have balloons

To celebrate Israel's 75th birthday, the SA Jewish Report asked school children why Israel is important to us this Yom Ha'atzmaut. Here is a selection of their responses:

Celebrating its 75th birthday means the unity of Israel remains stronger than ever and that it remains our home, continuing to stay united as one safe space for all Jewish people across the world. – **Meah Radford, Grade 11, King David High School Victory Park**

Israel means determination and hope, it shows that the Jewish people stand strong and we always will. – **Dina Scop, Grade 11, King David High School Victory Park**

Israel means comfort. Like a mother with her arms open wide, Jewish people will always be safe in her hands. – **Batsheva Richard, Grade 11, King David High School Victory Park**

When I went to Israel, I wasn't just connected spiritually but also with the people, culture, and most definitely the food! The warm breezy beaches and watermelon feta cheese bites are one of the simplest but best things about Israel all packed into one bite. – **Judah Katz, Grade 7, King David Primary School Victory Park**

Israel is a place where community is valued, and this creates a safe place where I can feel truly united with other Jews. Though Israel has faced many challenges in 75 years, the Jewish people have remained courageous and kept together. – **Shira Magid, Grade 7, King David Primary School Victory Park**

Israel is the home of the Jewish people. I went to Israel in 2019, and my favourite thing was riding electric scooters every day. I also love the Kotel! – **Judah Silberman, Grade 5, King David Primary School Victory Park**

Israel represents hope. In all the wars, we miraculously beat our enemies. It shows how strong and resilient Israel is because we're celebrating its 75th birthday! – **Keren Magid, Grade 5, King David Primary School Victory Park**

Israel means peace, happiness, and love filled with lots of customs. It means that people have taken care of it for 75 years and it has grown so much over these years. – **Sara Seeff, Grade 5, Yeshiva College Primary School**

Israel is a safe place for Jews to go when their country turns on them. In my opinion, it's the best place in the world. There's a low chance Israel would get destroyed because we have been going for 75 years. – **Josh Klotnick, Grade 5, Yeshiva College Primary School**

It's a place that I would love to go to because it's where many Jewish people daven and live. It means that the Jewish people have had their land for 75 years, and hopefully, there will be many more birthdays! – **Avidan Basserabie, Grade 5, Yeshiva College Primary School**

Israel is a part of my identity. It has a very special place in my heart. When I think of Israel, I think of a place where I will always feel at home. Although I don't live in Israel, I feel like I can always go there and be a part of the community. Israel's 75th birthday gives me hope that Israel has been independent for this long, it'll keep growing. It gives me a sense of passion because of what Israel has invented and how it has made a name for itself and all Jews in this world. – **Elnatan Sosnovik, Grade 10, Yeshiva College High School**

Israel is our safe haven, and it marks 75 years of freedom to be a Jew. It's certainty that when the world turns its back on us as it did during the unforgettable yet forgotten horrors of the Holocaust, Israel will always be there to say, "Never again!" – **Meira Feinblum, Grade 11, Yeshiva College High School**

For the past 75 years, we've had the state of Israel, a safe haven for Jewish people, our own land with our own army protecting it. It's incredible that we have achieved this milestone, and it should be celebrated for the miracle it is. Never again shall the fate of Jewish people be in the hand of others. Israel will always be there to

welcome all Jews home with open arms. – **Ayala Sifris, Grade 10, Yeshiva College High School**

Israel gives a sense of security, not only to Jews living in Israel but Jews around the world. It's inspiring that Israel has made it to 75, even though most nations don't support a Jewish state. I feel honoured to be alive at this time and to be able to experience such an amazing *simcha*. I wish *brocha* and peace for Israel. – **Ella Trope, Grade 11, Yeshiva College High School**

I'm heading to Israel soon. I'm going to go to the shuk, and I'm going to write a letter and put it in the holes of a special wall. It means that we're going to sing happy birthday, and we're going to have a big cake. I hope we have balloons! **Livia Wachsberger, 4 years old, Minnie Bersohn Pre-Primary School**

In Israel, they speak words from the Torah, it's called Hebrew. The flag has a Magen David, and is white and blue, and my favourite colours are pink, white, and blue. Israel is going to turn 75 years old and have a big party. Do you know that lots of people live there because it is the "house" of the Jewish people? – **Aliyah Tucker, 5 years old, Minnie Bersohn Pre-Primary School**

It's a kind of a town that's quite far away. There are quite a lot of Jewish people who live there. It means that Israel is turning very old like my dad, but he's not actually 75, he's 41. – **Noa Berger, 4 years old, Minnie Bersohn Pre-Primary School**

Israel is a city with quite a lot of buildings. I call it "The Promised Land" because Hashem promised it to us. – **Logan Rosen, 3 years old, Minnie Bersohn Pre-Primary School**

Israel is the home and heart of the Jewish people. When you step into Ben Gurion International Airport, it feels like you have just arrived home and everyone's your family. Israel may just be 75 years old, but we are 3 000 years young. – **Gilad Ancer, Grade 8, King David High School Linksfield**

Israel is a monument to the fact the Jews have survived. – **Benjamin Gulan, age 11, King David Primary School Linksfield**

You feel more connected to Hashem. It represents how we fought for freedom. – **Mia Freund, age 12, King David Primary School Linksfield**

It's the birthplace of my grandparents, and we have the right to live there. The country has kept its independence, and is still thriving. – **Shaun Gewer, age 10, King David Primary School Linksfield**

It's a technologically advanced country. – **Dean Shankman, age 13, King David Primary School Linksfield**

It's a special place where anyone can go at any time and experience life as a Jew. It's meaningful that it has held its own and survived for 75 years. – **Caiden Distiller, age 10, King David Primary School Linksfield**

Reminds me of kindness and Judaism. – **Joseph Katz, age 7, King David Primary School Linksfield**

Warms my heart thinking of it. I remember all the people that died in the wars. – **Levi Franklin, age 7, King David Primary School Linksfield**

I think of the beautiful blessing Hashem gave us. – **Riley Lipworth, age 6, King David Primary School Linksfield**

Israel reminds me that I'm Jewish. – **Jordan Levitan, age 7, King David Primary School Linksfield**

It makes me feel honoured that Jews stood up for Israel. – **Samuel Levick, age 8, King David Primary School Linksfield**

It brings our Jewish family together. – **Piper Cohen, age 7, King David Primary School Linksfield**

It inspires me that lots of people do good stuff. – **Grayson Behr, age 8, King David Primary School Linksfield**

A celebration that the Jews have survived all the hard times. – **Noah Klitzner, age 11, King David Primary School Linksfield**

We have been a beautiful nation for more than 75 years, and we stand strong. – **Mia Klitzner, age 11, King David Primary School Linksfield**

We have had a safe place to live for 75 years, and Hashem has protected us. – **Micah Rabinowitz, age 12, King David Primary School Linksfield**

## Israel – why it's home from home for SA youth

For many, the South African Jewish youth movements are where our love of Israel is nurtured. We asked Bnei Akiva and Habonim Dror what Israel means to them on its 75th birthday.

**Bnei Akiva**

There's nowhere quite like the land of Israel. The air there is different – not just in the way that it's thick and humid in summer and biting and cold in winter. When you step onto Israeli soil, you're surrounded by spirituality. It's impossible to feel anything other than hope and awe when the very paths you walk speak of our deep Jewish history, echoing the footsteps of our forefathers and foremothers, and carrying the legacy of our European ancestors after the Holocaust. The Jerusalem stones practically buzz with the sound of prayer, and the aromas of spicy Israeli food permeates the streets of the many cities, *yishuvim*, and *moshavim*.

In Israel, Jews are able to live an authentically Jewish life. Surrounded by kosher food, by shuls, and an abundance of Jewish tradition, there's truly no easier place to be a Jew. It's because of this that Israel resonates so much with us. Home is a space of comfort, familiarity, warmth, welcoming, and these are only a few of the words one conjures up when imagining Israeli life. Is there anything more exciting than seeing

and at Bnei Akiva, it's an integral part of our Jewish identity. Our past, present, and future all reside within the historical framework of *eretz Yisrael* – the land being as much a spiritual home as it is a physical one. It's because of this that Israel is so important to us. Israel therefore remains – and will forever remain – a pillar of our movement and of the Jewish people as a whole. **Dani Sack – Rosh Logistics**

**Habonim Dror**

As a prominent Jewish youth movement, Habonim Dror Southern Africa has a love and connection with Israel. Our constitution says it best when it recognises Israel as the "central physical, cultural, and spiritual space for the Jewish people that demands full participation from diasporic Jewish communities in shaping its future". It goes on to describe Israel as "an ongoing project for Jewish liberation that's in a state of constant revolution toward justice pioneered by youth amongst other groups".

These sentiments remain at the forefront of our movement's activities, as we aim to educate and instil a love for Israel in our movement members. It's for this reason that Habonim *chaverim* feel a strong connection to Israel's history and culture and see Israel as a critical part of their identity as Jews.



street signs with Hebrew, Arabic, and English lettering? Is there anything as beautiful as walking Israeli streets, seeing Shabbat candles in the windows, beautiful Mezuzahs on doorposts, and hearing little children with kippot singing the tunes of *zemirot*? Israel is embedded within our souls as Jews,

Habonim also loves Israel for the commonalities the state and our movement share, one of them being a commitment to social justice. In addition to Judaism and Zionism, service to humanity is one of our three primary pillars, which means that we are committed to promoting social justice and equality in Israel and around the world. Habonim members believe that Israel can be a model for a just, equitable society, and we're committed to working towards that goal. Israel is a vibrant and dynamic country with a thriving culture, diverse population, and growing economy. We ensure that as many of our movement members as possible are able to visit and build a connection with Israel through our various programmes in the country. Ultimately, there are too many reasons to mention on why Habonim loves Israel. The connection to the land, the shared commitment to social justice, the unique opportunities it offers, and the sense of community and belonging it provides are just a few. For members of Habonim Dror Southern Africa, Israel is more than just a place; it's a symbol of their Jewish identity and a source of inspiration and hope for a better future. **Mira Rudnick – Mazkira Klalit**



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# SA family meets miracle donor who saved daughter’s life

TALI FEINBERG

A woman in Poland and a young Capetonian girl are unlikely to have anything in common. But Rachel Ancer and Magda Lewandowska are “a match made in heaven” in the true sense of the phrase – they are genetic twins. That would have meant nothing if Lewandowska hadn’t made the fortuitous decision to sign up as a bone marrow donor on a whim, coming to Rachel’s rescue at the eleventh hour.

Now, Lewandowska has travelled to South Africa to meet Rachel, instantly forming a bond that speaks to their incredible story of heartbreak, hope, and the power of each person to have an impact.

“Rachel was five when she was diagnosed with a very rare bone marrow failure condition called Pure Red Cell Aplasia,” says Rachel’s father, Jonathan Ancer. “Three years later, at the age of eight, she had a life-saving bone marrow transplant (BMT). On 14 March 2017, the day of the transplant, Rachel and Magda became inextricably linked. On 1 April 2023, Magda travelled from Poland to South Africa, and the two met for the first time.”

Meeting Magda in person was the culmination of a journey that began at the end of a road. That point was the desperation that Rachel’s family felt as she became more and more ill. “While we were waiting [for a donor], we heard Michael Bublé’s song, *Just Haven’t Met You Yet*,” remembers Jonathan. “We somehow felt the song was about Rachel and her donor: ‘I might have to wait // I’ll never give up // I guess it’s half timing // And the other half’s luck // Wherever you are // Whenever it’s right // You’ll come out of nowhere and into my life.’”

And as it turned out, those words came true, thousands of miles away in Gdynia, a city on the Baltic Sea. That’s where Lewandowska (then 35) and her good friend, Karolina Denc, met for a weekly ritual of gym and dinner. After gym on 5 November 2016, Denc wanted to make a detour because DKMS, an international organisation that recruits bone marrow donors, was holding a donor drive.

Denc didn’t want to pressure Lewandowska to join, but at the very last moment, Lewandowska decided to register, and chose to be an international donor. A recipient often needs a stranger with their exact type of bone marrow tissue, but with thousands of tissue types, finding that match is a one in 100 000 chance.

Meanwhile, in another coastal city, on the tip of Africa, Rachel was getting sicker by the minute. “The illness had caused her bone marrow to go on strike and not make red blood cells,” says Jonathan. “Towards the end of 2015, Rachel’s doctor, Dr Marc Hendricks, told us that Rachel had become transfusion dependent and needed a BMT.

“That was when the South African Bone Marrow Registry [SABMR] and Terry Schlaphoff, who at the time was the registry’s deputy director, became

involved. Every morning, Terry rushed to see if one of the international registries had produced a new donor overnight that was a match for Rachel. Weeks turned into months.”

And then, “Terry arrived at work on the morning of 23 December 2016 – the SABMR’s last day before closing for the year – and just like every morning, the first thing she did was to look to see if a donor for Rachel had joined the registry. Bingo! There was a match. Terry described it as a ‘moment of magic’. I think it was a Chanukah miracle. Terry grabbed it, and reserved the donor for Rachel.”

At 15:00 on 14 March 2017, Lewandowska’s stem cells were infused into Rachel and successfully rebooted Rachel’s faulty bone marrow. Rachel, who is now a healthy 14-year-old, says, “It was a dream come true to meet Magda, and she will always be a part of my life. We share the same DNA after all. I honestly don’t know how to thank her enough. As we spent time together and we got to know each other, the bond was obvious. We discovered we had a lot in common.”

The Ancer family and Lewandowska found each other by chance a year after Rachel’s transplant. “There are strict protocols for when donors and patients can meet each other. At the time, SABMR didn’t reveal a donor’s identity to a patient for five years,” says Jonathan.

“All we had been told was that the donor was from Poland, and all Magda was told was that she was a donor for a girl in South Africa. We had, through the SABMR, sent Magda a letter on Rachel’s first re-birthday [the first anniversary of her BMT]. The SABMR made sure there were no identifying details, and then sent the letter.

“Magda received the letter, and went to the SABMR’s Facebook page and did some cyber sleuthing. She saw [Jonathan’s wife] Jean thanking the SABMR for finding a donor. She then found our Facebook page, ‘Rachel’s Circle of Love’. She went through the posts, and stumbled on a copy of the letter we had sent to her. After a few days, she posted a heart under a photograph of Rachel. I saw the heart, and saw that it was from a Polish person, and I just knew that this was Rachel’s donor. And we connected.”

Since then, they have been getting to know each other. “We had been planning to meet Magda, but then the COVID-19 pandemic spoiled that. We then decided that Rachel’s sixth re-birthday [sixth year post-transplant] was the perfect opportunity,” says Jonathan.

They spent about two weeks together. “We wanted to get to know her, for her to meet our families and friends, to share some of our life with her, and to show her how much we appreciate her,” says Jonathan. “We hosted a tea which was a double celebration: to mark Rachel’s sixth re-birthday and to thank the incredible Dr Marc, Terry and, of course, Magda.”

Looking back, Jonathan says, “When we discovered Rachel had a life-threatening illness, we went through many years of hell. I sometimes forget how dark, bleak, scary, and lonely it was. A couple of things

that we did that maybe would be useful to others going through challenges were: Jean and I knew that we had to rely on each other. Many couples don’t survive such trauma, but we knew we had to get through it together. We also joined Rare Diseases South Africa, and were supported by others battling uncommon medical conditions. And we trusted Rachel’s doctors at the Red Cross Children’s Hospital – especially Dr Marc, who walked with us on our journey.”

Jonathan is a copy editor at a news website “and the news cycle often feels like the place where hope goes to die”, he says. “But when I think of the remarkable people who have made Rachel’s recovery possible, my sense of hope in the world is restored.”

The Ancers hope to visit Lewandowska in Poland, and have discovered that Jonathan’s grandfather, Chaim Ancer, came from a village in Poland just 30km from Magda’s grandmother’s village.

“My grandparents left Poland in the 1920s to escape antisemitism,” says Jonathan. “A friend, Brenda Stern, sent this poignant message which has stayed with me: ‘There’s something deeply profound, almost sacred, about Magda’s life giving Rachel her life. It’s extraordinary that out of Poland, a country whose Jewish population was almost totally annihilated in the Holocaust, came this gift of life for the great-granddaughter of Polish Jews.’”

## The MAD meeting that brought cartoonist to Chabad

NICOLA MILTZ

Well known Johannesburg Chabad rabbi, David Masinter, took a trip down memory lane when he heard of the recent passing of his long-time friend, legendary *MAD Magazine* cartoonist Al Jaffee.

Jaffee was 102 when he passed away on Monday, 10 April, in Manhattan. He was the satirical magazine’s longest-tenured contributor, who notably had a long-time association with the Chabad Lubavitch movement. This began with an introduction to the organisation by the Parys (Free State)-born Masinter four decades ago.

“With the passing of Al Jaffee, the world has lost a smile,” said Masinter, 64, this week of the famous illustrator behind *MAD Magazine*’s famous “fold-in” drawing, who, Masinter pointed out, retired at 99 years of age.

Masinter was 23 years old and filled with *chutzpah* and the boldness of youth when he cold-called the venerable artist and asked him to put pencil to paper for *The Moshiaich Times* in 1983.

The freshly ordained Masinter was put to work for Chabad’s newly founded children’s organisation, Tzivos Hashem, and was tasked with revitalising its children’s magazine.

“It was an incredible publication with great content, but it had no pictures. It needed something to spice it up and attract more youth,” said Masinter.

Thinking out the box, Masinter told his colleagues he’d try to approach the illustrators at *MAD Magazine* and see if they’d be willing to do cartoons for the children’s magazine.

“I grew up reading *MAD Magazine* in the 1970s,” said Masinter, “It was popular here in South Africa, and even though *The Moshiaich Times* was attracting new, young readers, I felt it could use an even more contemporary touch to reach a wider audience.” Today, Masinter is the director of Chabad House Johannesburg and the founder of Miracle Drive.

Masinter together with Rabbi Yerachmiel Benjaminson, the executive director of Tzivos Hashem, approached the head honcho at *MAD Magazine*, Al Feldstein, and asked for his best illustrators. They were introduced to Dave Berg, Al Jaffee, and Joe Kubert, accomplished comic book artists.

“We rocked up at Al Jaffee’s Manhattan apartment one day, and asked him to come on board,” Masinter told the *SA Jewish Report*. “He said yes immediately.” So began a lifelong friendship between the spiritual Chabad emissary from South Africa and the down-to-earth, super talented artist, “with a sardonic sense of humour and a twinkle in his eye”.

Jaffee set to work to reinvent *The Moshiaich Times*’ cartoon character called “The Shpy”.

The Shpy was a part-fumbling secret agent and part-Torah scholar, said Masinter, “He dressed in a trench coat with his hat pulled over his eyes, and had an attaché case filled with gadgets, tasked with doing battle against the *yetzer hora* [the evil inclination].”

“It was a huge success, attracting thousands of young

readers who couldn’t wait for the next instalment of The Shpy, which came out six times a year,” he said.

“It was an absolute adventure to work with Al and *MAD Magazine*’s amazing illustrators helping to transform the Chabad magazine into a worldwide magazine which reached thousands,” said Masinter.

“The true definition of being *frum* is using your talents to improve yourself and the world. When he heard he could do something to help spread Yiddishkeit, he was there. This was a special, G-dly man.”

Jaffee told Chabad.org magazine he enjoyed working on The Shpy character. “He isn’t like Superman or some other hero; he’s someone the kids can relate to. He stands up to the Hamans and the bad guys of the world, protecting Jewish children.”

Masinter as well as other Chabad rabbis such as Rabbi Dovid Sholom Pape, spent a lot of time with Jaffee.

“We’d meet at his apartment or his studio, both filled with artefacts, packed with stuff from floor to ceiling. Sometimes we’d spend up to two and a half hours just talking, chatting about the world and life. There’d be some Torah insights, but mostly I learnt more from him. We were both thirsty to learn,” he said.

It was during those interactions that Masinter learnt about Jaffee’s layered childhood.

Jaffee was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1921 to Morris and Mildred Jaffee, two Jewish immigrants from Zarasai, Lithuania. “Named Abraham, he spent his childhood quite literally being shuttled between the two worlds of America and Lithuania,” said Masinter.

“When he was a little boy of six, his ultra-religious mother left the United States, taking him and his three brothers back to her birthplace in Lithuania. Life in a shtetl wasn’t easy for them. They were poor, he’d say.”

His father would send him comics from America, which left an indelible impression on Jaffee.

When Hitler rose to power in 1933, Morris managed to bring three of his four sons back to America.

In 1940, the fourth son was smuggled back to America, Mildred stayed behind and tragically perished in the Holocaust.

Jaffee began drawing for *MAD Magazine* around 1955. He created the famous fold-in, which gave readers of *MAD Magazine* a satirical double-take on whatever was going on in the news.

Explained by the *New York Times*, the fold-in was an illustration-with-text feature on the inside of the magazine’s back cover that seemed at first glance to deliver a straightforward message. When the page was folded in thirds, however, both illustration and text were transformed into something entirely different and unexpected, often with a “liberal-leaning or authority-defying message”.

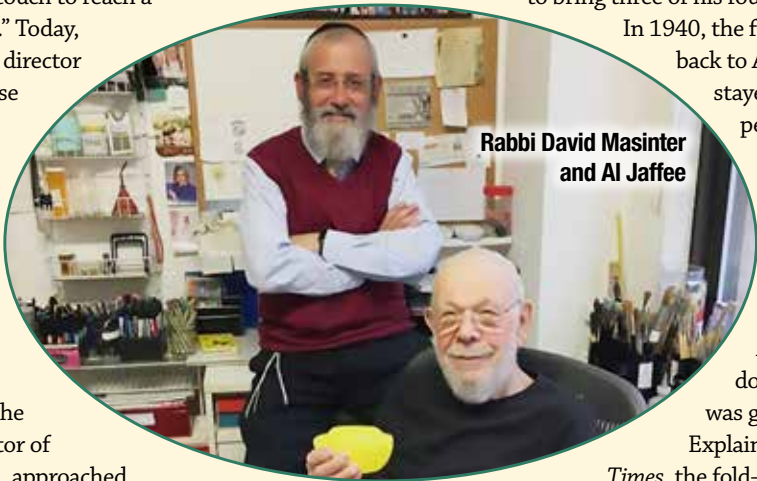
He was also known for inventing *MAD*’s “Snappy Answers to Stupid Questions”.

“Al was so talented, yet humble,” said Masinter. “He’d often tell me that he was fresh out of ideas for his next *MAD Magazine* artwork, that he couldn’t think of a thing to draw. Then, just as he was about to walk into the studio – interestingly on MAD-ison Avenue – an idea would suddenly come to him. He taught me that one should never give up.”

Jaffee is survived by his children, Richard and Debora; two stepdaughters, Tracey and Jody; five grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.



Magda Lewandowska and Rachel Ancer



Rabbi David Masinter and Al Jaffee



# Freedom: the pangs of birth

OPINION

HOWARD SACKSTEIN



I'm told that the moment of birth is painful, bloody, and messy. So, too, was the birth of our democracy in South Africa. More than 300 years of colonial and minority rule, violence, resistance, bloodshed, and oppression ended on a single day, on 27 April 1994, 28 years ago this week.

On that day, South Africans stood in endless meandering lines, maids and madams, bosses and workers, the impoverished and rich, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain, all standing together in queues to decide the fate of our nation.

Not through the barrel of a gun, but miraculously, through the slot of a ballot box, the Rainbow Nation was born.

The date of 27 April 1994 to hold the country's first democratic elections was set in stone by the multiparty Transitional Executive Council that governed the transition. The date was an unmovable milestone on the road to democracy and liberation. But those who set the date had little inkling of what it would take to pull off the largest logistical operation in South African history.

In December 1993, on a crackly almost inaudible conference-call line, FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela phoned Judge Johann Kriegler in Plettenberg Bay to tell him that he had been appointed chairperson of the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), the independent government-funded body that would run South Africa's first and subsequent elections.

The line was so poor, Kriegler misheard the two presidents and didn't realise that he had been appointed chairperson – the one with whom the buck stopped – until he returned to Pretoria at the end of his summer vacation.

How does one put together an election in less than four months, with no voters' roll, no understanding of

how many people are eligible to vote, or even where they live? No census of black people had been done in decades, and no maps existed of townships, rural areas, and squatter camps. We were, in essence, meandering in the dark.

With the help of South African Breweries (SAB now SAB Miller), beer-distribution was used to try predict where populations resided. But this methodology was far from foolproof as SAB didn't deliver beer to shebeens in many of the townships. In the Johannesburg City

Hall where the late Dennis Fox ministered as presiding officer, six concurrent streams of voting remained almost unused as no-one lived in that area in spite of significant alcohol sales in that vicinity.

In areas such as Daveyton and Katlehong, queues stretched more than 16km as we battled to ship enough ballot papers and voting equipment to accommodate hundreds of thousands of voters we just didn't know were there. The presiding officer in one such location told me the story of a 93-year-old lady who stood in the sun all day, waiting for ballot papers to arrive. He begged her to go home, promising that he would

call her the moment additional ballot papers arrived. She replied, "I've waited 93 years for this, I can wait a little longer."

Voting papers were running short, and Kriegler gave the instruction to print tens of millions of ballots overnight. The bottles of indelible ink used to mark a voter's thumb were used up well before the election ended, and Dr Wouter Basson, better known as "Dr Death", the head of the country's chemical and

biological-warfare programme, brewed a new batch of the indelible ink overnight, helping to save the election.

Advocate Anthony Stein, then a law student working for me, got covered in indelible ink when a palette broke while loading a Casper police vehicle to deliver additional ink to one of the struggling communities. Stein was covered head to toe in ink, visible, however, only under ultraviolet light. As he hadn't yet voted, I escorted him to the polling station myself to convince the presiding officer who refused him a vote, as he was already marked with indelible ink, that no-one who voted was marked with indelible ink on their legs, arms, head, and shoulders.

Five hundred thousand election staff recruited, trained, and deployed by Maxine Hart delivered the election in 25 000 locations around the country. Selma Browde, who was Johannesburg electoral officer, used her grandchildren to mark the Nasrec showgrounds with signs to bring ballot boxes for counting because no staff were available, and because no-one had told her that she was responsible for the counting as well.

The election came at a time of chaos and violence. The Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (Afrikaner Resistance Movement), led by Eugene Terre'Blanche, conspired with the leaders of the "independent" Bantustan homelands, to scupper the elections. Right-wing elements set off bombs at the African National Congress (ANC) offices in Johannesburg and detonated explosives at Jan Smuts Airport (now OR Tambo International Airport). Helen Suzman spent a long while screaming at me because she was forced to hide in a police vehicle while visiting what was generally referred to as an election "no go area". The Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) had turned many of the townships and hostels into war zones as it attempted to protect its privileged position and the status of the Zulu king prior to any election. The IFP march on Johannesburg with at least 20 000 Impis armed with assegais and knobkerries resulted in the Shell House massacre which alone left 19 people dead in its wake.

That morning, when I arrived at my office, dead bodies littered the pavement outside our building.

Ultimately, Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi and the IFP were brought into the election with the help of Colin Coleman and Kenyan diplomat Washington Okumu, after Henry Kissinger had left in despair. As part of the deal, De Klerk quietly signed the Ingonyama Trust Act into law, giving the Zulu king much of rural KwaZulu-Natal as a fiefdom.

With the IFP now entering into the elections and the ballot papers already printed overseas and flown in, tens of millions of IFP stickers were printed and affixed to the bottom of each ballot paper.

The election results were magically balanced. The ANC failed to achieve a two-thirds majority, the National Party secured enough votes to justify De Klerk a deputy presidency, and the IFP would have Prince Buthelezi in cabinet as minister of home affairs. It was, in fact, a national unity government.

On 9 May 1994, I lay on the lawns of the Union Building in Pretoria and amongst the throng of hundreds of thousands of people, I fell asleep. I had not slept in weeks.

Blessed by Chief Rabbi Cyril Harris, Mandela took the oath of office on the stairs of the Union Building, as the first democratically elected president of South Africa.

And so, 27 April became the birthday of our nation. Every five years we return to the ballot box and are given the opportunity to overthrow our government, in an ordered and peaceful manner, should we choose to do so.

No matter what I do in life, the sheer exhilaration of helping to deliver peace, freedom, and democracy to the people of South Africa will always be my proudest moment.

• Howard Sackstein is former executive director of the IEC, and is chairperson of the SA Jewish Report.

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# SA olim make exponential impact

GILLIAN KLAWSKY

Space, psychiatry, chocolate, politics, and more. The impact South African *olim* have had on Israel is immense.

“South Africans have made a contribution to Israel a hundred times in excess of the number of South Africans who have come to Israel and the South African Jewish population,” says Peter Bailey, who made aliya 10 years ago.

An amateur historian, Bailey is the author of two books on Israel and highlights South African/Israeli connections during the walking tours he conducts for retired South African *olim*.

There are too many notable South African *olim* to name, he says, including Judge Cecil Margo who set up the Israeli Air Force and Benoni-born billionaire entrepreneur and philanthropist, Morris Kahn, who funded the first Israeli spacecraft mission to the moon in 2019.

South Africa's contribution to Israel's space industry doesn't end there. The recently appointed chairperson of the Israeli Space Agency, Professor Dan Blumberg, moved to Israel from South Africa at the age of eight. Blumberg, who has led the development of the Israeli space scene and was the principal investigator on multiple remote sensing projects, is also vice-president for regional and industrial development at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Among his significant achievements, Blumberg feels his biggest contribution to Israel is through his students. “There are several start-ups that have come out of my lab. It's about the people that I've impacted,” he says. He's also passionate about developing the Negev, and has been celebrated for his ability to map climate change in desert and arid environments.

For Ruth Berman, a Cape Town-born linguistics professor who made aliya in 1954, her students' contributions to the field are a particular source of pride. The recipient of the Israel Prize in Hebrew and General Linguistics in 2022, Berman says that the best part of the honour was the joy expressed by her ex-students.

Berman paved the way for linguistic study of modern Hebrew from the 1970s, when it was studied only as a holy language from scriptural texts. “Nobody really looked at Hebrew as a living modern language,” she says. “That's what I was interested in, and that's what I do to this day.” She also initiated the study of child-language acquisition in Hebrew.

“I did it very much in my own way at a time when there weren't that many women who had senior positions in academia,” she says. “I was a feminist before I knew what the word meant.” Though she had a family and ran a home, Berman passionately pursued her profession, and proudly provided an example for her female students.

Another pioneering South African *olah*, social entrepreneur and social worker Naomi Stuchiner, is also a former Israel Prize recipient, in her case, for lifetime achievement. Driven to continue the work of her late father, Issie Shapiro, a founder of Selwyn Segal who wanted to change the way that people with disabilities were being cared for, Stuchiner started Beit Issie Shapiro more than 40 years ago.

Today, it's Israel's leading disabilities nongovernmental organisation, and serves half a million people each year, focusing on innovation, technology, and inclusion, Stuchiner says. “We've made an enormous impact on disability care in Israel not only through our programmes but also in changing attitudes and legislation, sharing knowledge in Israel and abroad, and providing high quality services.”

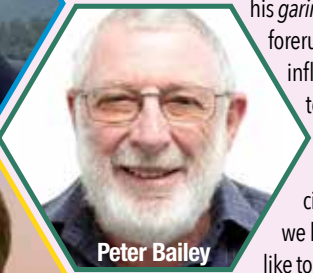
Stuchiner is as enthusiastic about her work as she was 40 years ago. “I'm excited and inspired by the next generation, and by the things that are happening in Israel in the field of disabilities,” she says.



Lenny Sackstein



Naomi Stuchiner



Peter Bailey



Ruth Wasserman Lande

Also still motivated after decades in his field, Professor Bernard Lerer is a professor of psychiatry and the director of Hadassah BrainLabs and Center for Psychedelic Research at Hadassah Medical Center. South African born Lerer was active in Bnei Akiva, and together with friends formed a *garin* (settlement group) called Alon Etzion in Gush Etzion where he and his wife settled in 1972.

Having started a major research programme in the biological causes of psychiatric disorders and the drug treatment thereof, he continues to spearhead research in the development of new psychiatric treatments. Identifying the potential of psychedelic drug treatments early on, Lerer plans to extend his psychedelic research into a clinical unit in the next year.

In spite of his considerable professional accomplishments, Lerer says his proudest achievement in Israel was in helping to establish his *garin*. “It was a forerunner of a very large influx of South Africans to the settlement of Efrat, which then became a city close to where we live,” he says. “I like to think that my wife and I, together with our colleagues, made a big impact on Israel by starting something new where many of our children, grandchildren, in some cases great-grandchildren live today.”

Also part of Bnei Akiva South Africa, Lenny Sackstein made aliya at 25 after completing his legal studies. He requalified in Israel, but also pursued entrepreneurial opportunities. Investing in a duty-free processed cheese shop at Ben Gurion Airport, Sackstein and his partners realised that there was a stronger demand for confectionery. Later collaborating with fellow South African Lawrence Goodman, whose family ran a sweet company, Sackstein learned the business and opened a sweet factory, which slowly grew, eventually going public.

Today the business, known as Carmit, is the second largest chocolate manufacturer in Israel. “We've just completed a new factory, offering a new product range together with chocolate, which will open in May as we celebrate 50 years of the business,” Sackstein says. He also oversees a successful real-estate portfolio and is invested in his daughter's brainchild, Make Eat, a shared cooking space for small-scale food manufacturers.

“It's all been thinking out of the box, meeting demands, and working very hard,” he says. “We've made an impact on Israel – albeit very quietly.”

Former Israeli Knesset member Ruth Wasserman Lande, who was born in Israel but grew up in Cape Town, calls Israel, “a safe haven for world Jewry”. After matriculating from Herzlia High School, she returned, studied, and became a lone soldier in the Israel Defense Forces.

Building her military, academic, and political credentials, Wasserman Lande was accepted by the ministry of foreign affairs, where she insisted on being sent to the Israeli embassy in Cairo – “a challenging but eye-opening experience”.

Later, Wasserman Lande was an advisor for former Prime Minister Shimon Peres, and more recently, she represented the Blue and White party in the Knesset. She was also the co-founder and chairperson of the Knesset's Abraham Accords Caucus.

Now the chairperson of World Jewish Congress's newly established Women's Impact Forum, Wasserman Lande is also an active political commentator. “I've been a big advocate of cohesion, a huge issue in Israel today where society is so divided,” she says. “This is very much a legacy that I've taken from South Africa, especially because I matriculated in 1993 as everything was changing. It helped me understand that social cohesion, particularly in Israel, is an issue of national resilience.”

# The bantamweight which lifts the world

OPINION

ROLENE MARKS



When Theodor Herzl envisioned the modern Jewish state in our ancient homeland, he had a plan for how it would look. More than that, he thought about what contribution the Jewish state could give to the world.

If we measure countries according to their size, Israel would be determined a flyweight, at the very most a bantamweight. Boxing metaphors aside, Israel is so tiny, it's almost impossible to find the country on a map of the world.

When disaster of any kind be it natural or otherwise occurs anywhere in the world, tiny Israel packs a mighty punch by responding immediately where needed.

When the call goes out – and even sometimes when it doesn't – Israel is the first to respond. This even extends to countries that Israel has no formal diplomatic ties with because helping your fellow man in a time of crisis trumps politics every time.

Israel has a long history of humanitarian aid. It's woven into the fabric of our society. Just 10 years after the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948, the country adopted an official humanitarian aid agenda, providing vital relief to more than 140 countries.

This effort doesn't just come from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) or government resources, but also NGOs (non-governmental organisations) such as ZAKA, IsraAid, F.I.R.S.T., United Hatzalah, Latet and others. Even the United Nations (UN) has recognised Israel for its contribution. Rare praise from this embittered institution!

Israel has a unique ability to dispatch search and rescue teams and field hospitals fast and effectively. Unfortunately, it's a skill learned in difficult and sometimes tragic circumstances, but it's used to help others in times of distress.

**Search and rescue in the United States and Turkey**

In June 2021, a team of IDF Home Front Command elite search and rescue soldiers departed for Miami in the United States following the devastating collapse of 12-floor apartment building Champlain Towers. It would be the first team of rescuers outside of the United States to assist in a domestic disaster.

The IDF mobilised to help again in February this year, when a deadly earthquake struck Turkey and Syria, launching Operation Olive Branch.

One of the first on the ground, Israel's team saved the lives of 19 civilians. They also recovered countless souls killed by the earthquake. It's impossible to imagine what they witnessed and what people endured, such is the magnitude of this tragedy.

Operation Olive Branch brought together volunteers from many Israeli and Jewish organisations including ZAKA, a NGO rescue and recovery organisation. “ZAKA volunteers from Israel and South Africa worked together, shoulder to shoulder, along with IDF search and rescue soldiers,” said Mission Head Haim Otmazgin.

Israel also offered humanitarian aid to Syria (albeit through third parties). Syria doesn't recognise Israel, and the two countries remain in a state of war. Syria's complicated internal political issues hampered rescue efforts. Aid organisations expressed anger and frustration that the Assad regime wasn't allowing much needed humanitarian aid to get to those who needed it the most.

Other countries Israel has helped include Mexico, Armenia, Cambodia, Pakistan, Haiti, Nepal, Romania, Argentina, Croatia, Kenya, Turkey, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and more.

**Mashav**

Herzl wanted the Jewish tenet of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) to be synonymous with the country he envisioned. In keeping with this philosophy, Israel's foreign ministry has a special department called Mashav, which is the Hebrew acronym for “Israel's Agency for International Development

Co-operation” and today, there are projects all over the world, most notably on the African continent.

Mashav contributes to developing countries in fields where Israel has relevant expertise, accumulated during its own history as a young country facing similar challenges.

The belief is that “training the trainers” and human capacity building are the best way to achieve maximum developmental impact. Education and the transfer of skills is empowering and guarantees sustainable growth.

**Access Israel**

When Russia invaded Ukraine, many were able to evacuate swiftly to neighbouring countries, but what about the disabled?

Access Israel understood the need to make sure that the solutions on the ground fit the most vulnerable, namely the elderly and those with disabilities, who are often left behind because of the complexity of arranging accessible evacuation. Requests for help for disabled people with specific and unique needs started to pour in, and the Purple Vest Mission was born, ensuring that volunteers were on hand to assist the most vulnerable get to safety in the most sensitive way possible.

**Save a Child's Heart**

This organisation's mission is simple – to perform as many life-saving procedures on children with life-threatening heart problems as possible. Israeli humanitarian organisation Save a Child's Heart, treats children suffering from congenital and rheumatic heart disease who have little access to care in their own countries.

To date, more than 5 000 children have been brought to Israel from nearly 60 countries where they have little or no access to the medical care they need. It combines paediatric care with an in-depth post-graduate training programme for medical personnel from these developing countries, some of which Israel has none or even hostile relations with. Countries include Ethiopia, Iraq, at least 50% from Gaza and the West Bank, Syria, Ghana, Haiti, Rwanda, Somalia, Moldova, Romania, Vietnam, and many more.

In 2018, Save a Child's Heart was honoured with the UN Population Award in recognition of its outstanding contribution to population and health.

**Israel Defense Forces rescuers at work in Turkey**

Photo: IDF

**Operation Good Neighbour**

For years, Syria has been embroiled in a bitter civil war that has had a devastating impact on civilians. Witnessing the shattering impact of the conflict, the IDF launched Operation Good Neighbour to bring civilians into Israel, at great risk to them and our soldiers, to give them access to life-saving medical attention.

In the cloak of night as battle raged around them and with no help from the UN stationed close by, Israel's soldiers brought thousands of civilians into the country. The IDF also helped transport members of the NGO White Helmets and their families out of Syria and into safety in nearby Jordan.

Israel may be a real bantamweight, but the Jewish state knows how to deliver a knockout punch when it comes to helping the world. These are just a snapshot of countless missions. As we celebrate 75 years of independence, we can raise a toast to the remarkable example Israel has set when it comes to humanitarian efforts. *L'chaim!* Herzl would be proud.

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



# I am Ella shows real-life hero in full colour

Cape Town author **Joanne Jowell** recently launched her latest biography, *I am Ella*, about Holocaust survivor Ella Blumenthal. The *SA Jewish Report* speaks to her about it.

### How did you get involved in writing this book?

Ella's daughter, Evelyn Kaplan, called me in 2017 after reading one of my other books and asked if I would help the Blumenthal family to record Ella's story for their own archives. She didn't have any plans for a published book at that stage. Their mission was to create a full, written account of their mother's life for their children and grandchildren.

### What drew you to her?

The very name "Ella Blumenthal" drew me to Ella. She has become a well-known figure in the Jewish community, particularly in Cape Town, and her magnetism is famed.

### Describe Ella.

Ella is the coolest centenarian you'll ever meet. She has deep faith in Hashem, and is full of vitality and compassion. She's sassy, street-smart (yes, even these 21st century streets), and mischievous. She has a keen eye for detail and design (her parents had a textile business in Warsaw, and Ella and her husband, Isaac, ran a clothing business for many years), and I have never seen her nails unvarnished. She holds and imparts an enviably positive outlook on life.

### How did you research the book?

My main source is always my protagonist – in this case, Ella herself. We spent many hours talking, and she took me through her extensive personal archives of articles, books, photographs, and artefacts.

I had done some academic study of the Holocaust during university, and have always had an interest in Holocaust novels and books. Before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, I enjoyed a Melton (School of Adult Jewish Learning) course about the Holocaust as reflected in diaries and memoirs, and was fortunate to have the expert eye of Richard Freedman, educator and director of the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre, to review the manuscript and write the foreword for *I am Ella*. I drew on my own visit to Poland some years before I ever knew I would write Ella's story, where perhaps a prescience took me to many of the places where Ella herself once lived: Warsaw, where Ella grew up; the Warsaw Ghetto and Mila Street where Ella hid and survived the uprising; Majdanek, where Ella literally walked free from a gas chamber; and Auschwitz, where Ella was one of the early prisoners. I also found the numerous Holocaust museums and centres around the world to be invaluable and generous resources.

### Ella's story has been told in a recent documentary. How is this book different?

Sanktuari Films' documentary, *I Am Here*, has deservedly collected multiple awards for its moving depiction of



Ella's life story using a clever mix of interviews, film footage, and animation. The written version of Ella's life can obviously provide far greater detail and, although we have included many photographs in the book, it's the words that must fill in the colour. My own style of non-fiction writing is to include myself as a character. I occupy the place of the reader. I can ask the hard questions, probe deeply, follow tangents, and offer multiple perspectives to create the most rounded account of a long and full life. This approach adds dimension and depth to memoir. My aim is for the reader to feel that they build their own relationship with the remarkable Ella, with me as their proxy.

### Describe the process of writing it.

First comes the relationship. Then the writing.

I spent many hours with Ella during which we got to know one another and shared much more than her responses to my interview questions. We drank tea, ate biscuits, she asked about me, and I asked about her. Nothing was off limits. I didn't want to contain or restrict Ella in any way, nor force her to stick to the chronology of her life story, because memory isn't linear.

Two other books, a literary festival, and a global pandemic then got in the way, and I settled down to write *Ella* only about four years after we met for our first interview. We topped it all off with some additional family interviews right near the end of the writing process – these were a highlight! The writing took about nine months from pitch to edit.

### What made you choose the title?

When you read the book, you'll discover that there's a fascinating story behind Ella's name, so the simple statement, "I am Ella", is in fact quite complex and layered. The title is also a declaration of strength and a statement of identity. (Do you know that she has never been able to reclaim her Polish citizenship after being relegated

stateless by the war?) It's also an evolution of the beautiful title of the documentary, *I Am Here*, in that it proclaims, "I survived; though I died many times. I'm here, I thrive at life, and am still here to tell a remarkable tale. I know who I am – all of who I am – and I want you to know me too. I am Ella."

### What makes her story so remarkable (as opposed to other survivors)?

Every single survivor story is remarkable and, as Dr Edith Eger puts it, "There's no hierarchy of suffering." But Ella's story reads like a hit list of Holocaust hot-spots, and her experience in Majdanek of being sent to the gas chambers and then released from that certain death, is unique. Apart from her jaw-dropping story of surviving the Holocaust, there's the fullness of her fascinating life experience after liberation: wheeling and dealing in Paris; moving to Palestine under a false identity; becoming engaged to her South African fiancé after just 13 days; relocating to the tip of Africa; hiding her survivor status; building a loving family and a successful business; learning to speak her mind and her heart; living a life of jubilation, mischief, and gratitude. This is what makes Ella and her story so remarkable.

### Why do you believe people should read this book?

So many people tell me that they can't read Holocaust stories, that they can't watch Holocaust movies, that they could never bring themselves to visit the concentration camps... they simply find it too painful to engage with the subject. To them, and to everyone, I say: this book is so much more than a Holocaust story. Ella has been blessed to live a long and full life. Though her war years were certainly formative, they don't comprise her life's majority. While this book obviously deals with the horror of the Holocaust, it's also replete with the humour and beauty of Ella's life before and after the war. You may even laugh more than you cry. Stylistically, the story moves back and forth between past and present; it's always infused with Ella's infectious personality and her incredible

capacity to find light in the darkness. So, even when you read about overwhelming cruelty and inhumanity, you are always bolstered by the living, breathing strength of your incomparable guide through that underworld – Ella, remarkable Ella. And you know how the story ends – with survival, with life.

### What impact has Ella had on you and, perhaps, your family's life?

Ella embodies the lesson "Don't sweat the small stuff", always reminding me to zoom out, consider the bigger picture, and approach life as an adventure. Her outlook has become a barometer for my own approach to challenges, even ones as seemingly insurmountable as a global pandemic (which Ella simply knew she would get through too, and which she used as an opportunity to further connect with her family, near and far, and appreciate the beauty of her world).

My children are equally drawn to her – as they should be, because this book was written for them and future generations so that we never forget, and we remind ourselves how to live.

### Has working with Ella had an impact on your view of the Holocaust?

Even though I had read many Holocaust stories and visited Poland and the camps, I gained a whole different appreciation and resonance through Ella. She also actualised the mythical – names like Mordechai Anielewicz, Adam Czerniakow, Janusz Korczak; places like Mila Street, the gas chambers of Majdanek, post-war Paris... these are people and places on which Ella had laid her very own eyes. For me, she turned the black-and-white of history into full colour, and she made me see that we're all connected, affected, and obligated to perpetuate memory.

### What do you want your readers to take home?

Consider this book an opportunity to meet and get to know a real survivor, a hero in real life. My fervent wish is that once you've read *I am Ella*, you'll feel as if you, too, have met Ella, spent hours in deep conversation with her, and have enjoyed tea and biscuits in her merry company.

south african

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## Connectedness, community – Chabad’s plan to change the world >>>Continued from page 2

In recognising this and seeking connection, his shul's numbers have increased exponentially. Though some have fled the country, many new members have come, some moving to Sumy from other Ukrainian cities, but most living nearby who have joined services for the first time, demonstrating the need for unity and prayer.

Along with master of ceremonies, former South African cricketer Mandy Yachad, and opened by Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein, the event featured other local and international speakers. These included Miracle Drive Chairperson Simon Kuper; Robbie Brozin, leading entrepreneur, and co-founder of Nando's; and Michal Oshman, bestselling author and the head of company culture, diversity, and inclusion at TikTok Europe.

"We are like one person with one heart," said Goldstein, who led attendees in reciting *tehillim*. "That's what makes South African Jews so special – our unity. The power of Jewish unity is what *Hakhe*l is all about."

Kuper spoke of South Africa's challenges and the frustrations that they evoke. Yet, he said, the solution is to do acts of kindness, as our community's leaders teach us. Speaking of Chabad's Be Kind campaign which features visible signage inspiring all who see it, Kuper said, "Being kind isn't a message, it's an action. Being bold with our actions can be a spiritual experience."

Echoing the need for action, Brozin, quoted the preamble to our Constitution, which provides a "rule book" for us to all live together and promote human

dignity. This, he said, together with the Rebbe's words that "South Africa will be good for Jews until the coming of *Moshiach*" are what underpin his "hope and optimism" for the country in spite of our challenges. "As South Africans, we're human beings first," he said. "It's up to us, our actions will change this country and develop it for our grandchildren and our grandchildren's grandchildren."

In a pre-recorded video message from the United Kingdom, Oshman, the author of *What would you do if you weren't afraid?* spoke of the importance of working to connect to one's community. "The world is facing a lot of uncertainty and many of us are afraid, overwhelmed, and unsure," she said. "We're trying new things and sometimes we get it right and sometimes we get it wrong. What helps us stay safe and what keeps us connected is our community, and the sense of belonging it brings."

Shaun Matisonn, deputy chief executive at Vitality Global and the head of the Vitality network, stressed the fact that the *Rambam* is for everyone. Illustrating this idea, Grade 5 and 6 representatives of Torah Academy Primary School, who have mastered hundreds of laws and *mitzvahs* as explained by the Rambam, shared some of the lessons they've learnt.

"We had this event because the world is upside down," Chabad House Johannesburg Director Rabbi David Masinter told the *SA Jewish Report*. "We need more unity and kindness to bring *Moshiach*."



# A walk in the city of *balagan*

PERSONAL STORY

My favourite Israeli word – the one that best sums up the spirit of the place, its hustle, bustle, and jostle, its teeming intersection of cultures, beliefs, and ideologies – is *balagan*. It’s Russian in origin, and it’s used to describe a chaotic, crazy, mixed up, confusing situation, which makes it a convenient synonym for everyday life in Israel. But balaganism can be a positive force too, giving rise to creative thinking and fresh approaches to solving complex social problems.



Whenever I’m in Israel, as I am right now, catching up with family in the week of Yom Ha’atzmaut, I lift up my eyes and I see the proof. In the midst of all the *balagan*, Israel is building, building, building. One morning, I stood on Polego Beach in Netanya, looking at the tideless, tablecloth-flat Mediterranean, and wondering why there was a tsunami warning sign in three languages on the shore. I suppose you can’t be too careful. Then I turned around and saw a typical Israeli sight. A patch of scrub clinging tenaciously to a dune, and beyond that, a front-end loader scooping rubble into a skip, and beyond that, a congregation of sleek, ultramodern apartment towers, crowded like Tetris blocks around a luxury shopping mall. What struck me about the towers, aside from the tightropes of blue and white bunting strung between them, was the absence of a distinguishing characteristic of Israeli urban architecture: externally affixed air conditioning units. The standard Israeli apartment block, especially ubiquitous in the inner cities, is squat, boxy, and desert coloured, with air conditioners studded like rock-climbing handholds on the walls. Now and then, you’ll come across a block that has been appropriated as a canvas by a street artist, dressing the strict functionalism of bare concrete in splashes of colour, whimsy, and wit. But for the wandering architectophile, there is joy to be found too

in the unadorned façades of buildings that have their own story to tell about Israeli history, culture, life, and lifestyle. In Tel Aviv, there’s an area called White City, which is famous for its hundreds of wonderworks of the Bauhaus school, the legacy of a group of architects who came here as refugees from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. Adapting their modernist European aesthetic to local conditions, they designed public and residential buildings of sinuous grace and elegance, raised on pillars to let the cool breeze in, with soft curves accentuated by sharp, jutting angles. There are few more pleasing city experiences than to wander down Dizengoff Street, admiring these dazzling confections of whipped-cream concrete, with their long, narrow balconies shading each other, and then to park at a pavement café and admire them some more from a seated position. Tel Aviv, the Hill of Spring, was designed from the ground up as a garden city, and there’s proof in the human scale of its tree-lined boulevards, its rushing fountains, its playgrounds and parks, and its rest benches in the



Photos: Gus Silber

glare of the glass skyscrapers. But there’s room in the city for eccentricity too, and on a crazy whim, I schlepped from the Bauhaus to see the Crazy House, perched on the beachside on HaYarkon Street. It’s a nine-storey slab with balconies undulating like ocean waves on the sea-facing side, and a fresco of a desert wadi on the other, and it’s slapped on both faces with distorted, disjointed forms that bring vegetation and human skeletons to mind. It’s the funhouse-mirror opposite to the cool and disciplined Bauhaus style, a Daliesque dream of a society teetering on the precipice of chaos. The Crazy House is ugly in a beautiful

way, in contrast to my next stop, the Herta and Paul Amir Building at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art on Sderot Sha’ul HaMelech, which is beautiful in an ugly way. Within the complex of galleries are works by Picasso, Miró, Van Gogh, Monet, Klimt, Jackson Pollock, Roy Lichtenstein, Henry Moore, and others; without is a building of polished folds and angles that looks like an origami reimagining of Noah’s ark. Then there are the buildings that are neither beautiful nor ugly, merely brutal, such as the Psagot Investment Tower on Ahad Ha’am Street, which rises Babel-like, the rows and rows of windows interrupted, 15 floors from the top, by a jolt of negative space with a pillar in-between, like the handle of a jug. This architectural style is known as Brutalism, not because of any predilection for brutality on the part of the architect, but because it calls for copious amounts of “beton brut”, meaning raw concrete. Still, a good Brutalist building – another example being Ponte in Johannesburg – will always bring dystopian science fiction to mind, which is why I like to stop and stare and wonder what it must be like to walk down those long, neon-lit corridors in search of one’s office cubicle. But a walk through the streets of Tel Aviv will always lead me, in the late afternoon, to the long and winding promenade, where I can watch the sun sinking over the ancient towers and temples of Jaffa, and look back at the ever-changing skyline, in all its mixture of stone and glass, old and new, order and chaos and *balagan*.



GUS SILBER

• Gus Silber is an award-winning journalist, editor, speechwriter, and author.

## Bringing SA flavour to ‘secret garden’ in Tel Aviv

TALI FEINBERG

Sought-after Tel Aviv chef Danna-Lee Berman (32) is about to open her own restaurant in the heart of Tel Aviv, and is bringing her African heritage to the table. Even though she and her family made aliya from Johannesburg when she was only six years old, her roots have stayed with her, and she still has a strong South African accent. Now, as she opens her first eatery, that foundation will come to the fore. Though her father’s family is Israeli, her mother’s parents are originally from Zambia and Zimbabwe. “My grandpa was a butcher. He had a huge farm, and everything was around meat. He was always teaching me about meat, how to make biltong, and he was always very particular about his meat and that nobody knew how to cook it properly. My grandmother would be on the cover of a cooking magazine. She bakes and cooks, and is the best chef in the world in my eyes. So, everything was around Friday night with ‘gaga’ and ‘grammy’.” As a Jewish South African family, we always had Friday night dinner, and we loved it.” Berman always wanted to be a chef, and worked her way up from the bottom of the industry, straight after the army. She trained at Le Cordon Bleu Australia, graduated with honours, and worked in top restaurants with leading chefs in

Israel and Australia, such as Jamie Oliver’s Italian restaurant in Sydney, and Pronto and Chader Ochel in Tel Aviv. She also won Best Upcoming Chef in Tel Aviv in the *Time Out Food & Drink Awards* in 2018. Now, she’ll finally get to run her own show, and the “theatre” where she’ll present her work couldn’t be more special. “The location is in the middle of the national theatre, Habima, so in the middle of busy, *balagan* [crazy] Tel Aviv, and it’s a small, hidden garden called Gan HaShikmim. Shikmim means “Sycamore”, a very rare tree – there are only about five left in Israel – in that secret garden. So it’s a safe haven and oasis in the middle of central Tel Aviv. It has a lot of history – it’s about 59 years old – and a lot that has happened there, but there’s also been nothing there for years. We want to bring it back to life. “I always knew I wanted to have my own restaurant, cook my own food, and do my own thing, representing my beliefs in how restaurants should be managed and how a kitchen should look. I always knew I would own my own restaurant one day,” she says. Even though Berman is well-known for French and Italian cooking, the Shabbat cooking that developed her love of food will make its appearance – for example, in a dish featuring pickled brisket. “It will be very me,” she says. “I’m French trained, but I fell in love with Italian food about five



Danna-Lee Berman

years ago.” She’s well-known for her pastas, and the menu will be “a true representation of me: a lot of French, Italian techniques and traditional dishes, but a lot of South African things that I grew up with and flavours I grew up on. I don’t think you’ll be able to put a tag on the restaurant or what type of food it is, as there are so many influences.” She loves being part of Israel’s thriving food scene, and says “Israeli food is amazing. We’re in the Middle East so there are Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian, Egyptian, Greek, and Turkish influences, and then we have Jews who have come here from all over the globe, from Europe to North Africa. This results in the most delicious, special, unique food in the world.” Berman was one of three Israeli chefs to take part in Tel Aviv Groove

in 2022, where they brought the essence of Tel Aviv food to Los Angeles with a series of pop-up culinary events. “I love feeding and hosting people, working with new cooks, flavours, eating, smells ... everything that food represents,” she told the *Jewish Journal* at the time. “I love it when people close their eyes when they taste something delicious. People can fight over millions of things, but when there’s good food, everyone can sit at the same table, eat, and be happy.” Though she absolutely loves her work, it hasn’t been without challenges. She took part in an Israeli cooking reality show a couple of years ago, which she describes as a tough experience. She has also always struggled with her weight. “I was my heaviest in 2019. I started therapy, as living the life of a chef meant I was on

the verge of a complete breakdown. I realised that I needed to look after myself. It wasn’t about being thin but rather looking after my health and happiness.” Then the pandemic arrived, and “It was like the world was telling me to stop running and just stop for a minute and take care of myself. Just from making that decision, I lost 50kg and became addicted to sport.” She has travelled a long journey, but all roads eventually lead back to her roots. “I always feel connected to South Africa, and always say I’m South African and proud of it. I still feel like it’s home. I love South Africa – everything about it. I always feel very South African even though I’m very Israeli. South Africa is the most special place in the world. I’m proud and happy to be a part of it.”



# 'Manne' for megawatts

Once again, South Africa leads the world. And this time it's in the vexing area of gender assignment. The debate around gender can finally be solved. And, at the risk of being "cancelled" (again), I'm going to suggest that South Africans could showcase this to the world. There are two genders, male and female, and the determination thereof is simpler than could previously have been imagined. To prove the theory, the following is required: a family sized dining room table, six comfortable chairs, refreshments, and six South African participants. The group of non-gender-specific (or is that gender non-specific) subjects will need to allow a few hours to determine unequivocal results. But in my experience, outcomes might be determined after as little as 15 to 20 minutes. Although there are several alternatives, for the quickest and most accurate finding, I would suggest the following process: The group gathers around the table. Refreshments are offered. After about five minutes of general chatter, the group controller will need to ask, "What time will loadshedding take place?" Whereas there might be a few suggestions and answers, along with the required bashing of the African National Congress, one person will always answer, "I don't even know anymore. Not since we installed solar." This is the alpha male, and he can be categorised immediately in terms of gender. One participant down. The remaining five will now enter the alternative-energy discussion. Rent to own versus outright ownership will be debated. And whereas all members of the group might have a view on this, the men are more likely to spend time contemplating the business model of the installers. As

## INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



though it matters. It's important to note that female participants will sustain a maximum of three minutes of interest in the discussion before moving on to another subject. In addition, they won't use terms that include "megawatts, voltage, kilowatts per hour, lithium, or efficiency". Use of any of this terminology will place them in the male category. That said, the group controller needs to be aware that there's a reasonable chance that females in the group might use words such as "solar panels", and could even know how many they have on their roof. Use of "solar panel" is gender neutral, and shouldn't be utilised for assignment purposes. I arrived at this gender determination methodology purely by accident. It was, in fact, my wife who first pointed out that men seem to be able to spend a significant amount of time discussing electricity supply and the alternatives to Eskom. She might have put it differently and said, "It's so boring!" and "It's not normal how much time you and your friends can speak about this!" In frustration, she may have added, "Do you actually care how much electricity the garden fountain uses and what percentage your battery is sitting at every minute of the day?" The answer was a resounding "Yes!" And when I said so, she shook her sadly and walked away. Indeed, the stereotypes employed might well offend some. And they might not be absolute. Before disagreeing, find a family sized table, gather six people together and ask, "What time is loadshedding?" And then let's chat.

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

# Great commemorations



## ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner

This week, our community joined fellow Jews the world over in celebrating Yom Ha'atzmaut. Every such anniversary is a special occasion, of course, but what made this year's Israel independence day even more so is that it marked the 75th anniversary of the modern Jewish state. The national rebirth of the Jewish people in their ancestral homeland is, indeed, a modern-day miracle, especially coming so soon after the unprecedented tragedy of the Holocaust. It represents the fulfilment of a 2 000-year-old dream of Jewish nationhood reborn and the affirmation of a connection to the land of Israel stretching back about 35 centuries. From the outset, it has also realised its core mission of providing a refuge for persecuted Jews everywhere, including Holocaust survivors and the hundreds of thousands driven out of other Middle East as well as North Africa countries shortly after the state's establishment. Even while we celebrate, however, we're mindful of the very high price that the restoration of Jewish sovereignty has entailed. Not by its own choice, Israel has been at war from its very birth, and many thousands of its citizens, mainly young people serving in the Israel Defense Forces, have lost their lives as a result. Fittingly, therefore, Yom Ha'atzmaut is always immediately preceded by Yom Hazikaron, when those who died in defence of the state are remembered and honoured. To a degree unusual in the diaspora, Zionism caught the imagination of the Jewish community in South Africa. Levels of religiosity might have differed significantly and within the Zionist movement itself, there were a range of different ideological approaches, but there was a shared enthusiasm for the Jewish national project. Zionism was embraced by Jewish communal bodies across the spectrum. They included women's groups, the youth

movements, and the full range of religious, cultural, educational, political, and sporting organisations. About 25 000 former South African Jews have since settled in Israel, in the process creating powerful additional ties to the state through family and other connections. Community surveys conducted by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies over the past two decades continue to show exceptionally high levels of support for and connection to Israel throughout the community. Yom Ha'atzmaut this year falls just one day before Freedom Day in South Africa, when South Africans commemorate the country's first all-inclusive, non-racial elections 29 years ago. South Africa's peaceful transition to multi-racial democracy following years of escalating violence and societal breakdown was also widely described as a miracle at the time. Like the birth of Israel, it marked the beginning of a hopeful new chapter in the nation's history. As a proud South African and proud Jew, it was a stirring experience to celebrate both events in the same week. This month, the South African Jewish Board of Deputies also reached a memorable milestone by marking 120 years of service to the South African Jewish community. Our commitment to the core goals of the Board's founders remains steadfast – protecting Jewish civil rights in South Africa, and leading our community in identifying with and contributing to the building of a strong, prosperous and democratic South Africa.

- 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

## Letters

### MEDIATION A GREAT WAY TO ERADICATE SCOURGE OF BULLYING

Reading "Bullying is systemic and teachers don't get it" (SA Jewish Report, 30 March 2023) evoked feelings of gratitude that this was being discussed, but also sadness. First, it's sad that bullying is happening at all. Anywhere. To anyone. It speaks to the lack of education, wisdom, and maturity that the bully has. They haven't been educated to accept others, to appreciate diversity, and recognise that we all have a divine spark in us all originating from the same source. Most young people won't develop these attributes on their own. Secondly, most teachers, social workers, and educators aren't equipped to deal with bullying issues when they do arise – and they arise regularly! Even more, the school system often doesn't deal with the situation effectively when a child does actually come forward to report the bullying. When bullying is reported to the school, half the job is done. Now the school has a responsibility to deal with it effectively, not sweep it under the carpet. In my experience, mediation is a great way to nip the whole thing in the bud. There was a situation where another child insulted my child. No one witnessed that

part. In response, my child retaliated and was caught. I was called to the principal's office. Luckily, I knew in advance what this meeting was about, so I discussed it with my child and then presented their side of the story to the principal. To her credit, she decided that mediation, facilitated by a social worker, would be the best way to go. It lost its momentum, and didn't escalate. Why? Because it was laid out in the open. Secrecy is a huge contributing factor in any bullying or abusive situation. When a school facilitates mediation between two students who have an issue, the underlying message is that there are no secrets. If you offend/bully someone, you'll be asked about it and held accountable. Holding young people accountable not only benefits their victims, but gives them an understanding that their words and actions actually do affect others. Parents should welcome mediation, even if their child is the bully, because being accountable for one's behaviour is a real part of life. It's much better for that lesson to be learned when children are young rather than when they become adults. It's actually a gift and not something to fear. – Michele Engelberg, Johannesburg

### PRIDE IN BEING PARENT OF A FIGHTER ON YOM HASHOAH

I had the privilege of accompanying Sasha Said to the Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom Hashoah) commemoration at the Pretoria Hebrew Congregation on 17 April, a profoundly moving event. But for me, there was another element. Sasha has been heading up the South African Union of Jewish Students at the University of Pretoria this year, and it has been a challenging year. Showered with hate and antisemitism disguised as anti-Zionism, she has been followed, shouted at, and emotionally and verbally abused. Still, she's made of more potent stuff, and has stood her ground and fought back where necessary. I have witnessed strength and the occasional breakdown, and it's not easy for me to explain just how proud I am of her (and how my protective side wants to follow her onto campus and kick some butt.

She won't let me! Probably a good thing.). But on 17 April, I witnessed something incredible. From the moment we walked in, people lined up to say hi, and shake my hand. Each one took a moment to commend her strength, fortitude, and work ethic, some with a dash of humour and some in sheer disbelief. From every one of them, the same sentence, "You must be so proud." The answer, of course, is "You have no idea." What can we wish for our children? Health and happiness, of course, but perhaps more than anything else, that they should carve their own niche and leave their own legacy. Sashki Laski, what can I say? You are you! A product of your parents and those that surround you, of course, but more than anything else, you are Sasha Eve Said, and I'm so proud of you! – Mike Said, Johannesburg

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# Picture of growth

South African photojournalist **Ilan Ossendryver**, who has lived in Israel and visited it many times over the past 25 years, shows the country's growth through his lens.



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