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Communal leaders ask Israel not to forsake SA

NICOLA MILTZ

South African communal leaders flew to Israel to urge Israeli leadership not to give up on the local Jewish community and countless South Africans who support Israel.

With diplomatic ties between the two countries all but severed, the leaders of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) and the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) made a passionate plea for Israel to maintain the relationship between the two countries.

They called on Israel to maintain the strong bonds built over decades, emphasising the importance of continued dialogue and co-operation during these challenging times.

Their trip comes in the wake of the South African government's vehement anti-Israel stance, especially following the accusation of genocide brought by South Africa at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Their message was clear: it's crucial for Israel to stay engaged with South Africans and support its Jewish community and pro-Israel supporters, millions of whom are ordinary South Africans on the ground who share a love for the country.

"We felt it was crucial for Israel to hear first-hand how much support it has in South Africa in spite of what the mainstream media portrays; that just because the ruling African National Congress [ANC] has behaved

disgracefully in its hostility towards Israel doesn't mean all South Africans feel the same," said Zev Krengel, SAJBD national vice-president.

He went on the week-long mission with SAJBD National Director Wendy Kahn; SAZF National Chairperson Rowan Polovin; and SAZF President Avrom Krengel. They spent their time in high-level discussions with top politicians and leaders, to whom they offered

presentations highlighting the support for Israel among millions of ordinary South Africans who believe in the state of Israel and its right to defend itself.

Israel President Isaac Herzog requested the visit, offering the South African Jewish leaders an opportunity to shed light on the complex political dynamics that contributed to strained relations between the two countries.

The South African team emphasised that the headlines and soundbites didn't fully reflect the genuine sentiment of many ordinary South Africans, a significant number of whom are Christians with strong pro-Israel views.

The delegation gave numerous instances in which the tightly-knit community and South Africans in general united to express solidarity with Israel, particularly during the days immediately after the 7 October atrocities, when President Cyril Ramaphosa and his administration refrained from offering support to the community.

"As world landmarks lit up in support of Israel after the deadly Hamas attacks, South Africans, too, lit up the skies 'during the time of darkness' by displaying the Israeli flag on the Ponte building," said Kahn citing one of many examples including rallies, solidarity events, and prayer vigils calling for the immediate release of the hostages held in Gaza.

The delegation met Herzog, Foreign Affairs Minister Israel Katz; Diaspora Affairs Minister Amichai Chikli; Shlomi Zafrany, ELAL's vice-president of commercial and industry affairs; Yair Lapid, the leader of the opposition; Jewish Agency Director Major General Doron Almog; Israeli Ambassador Sharon Bar-Li, the deputy director of the Africa division of the foreign affairs ministry; Tzachi Hanegbi, the head of national security in the prime minister's office; Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer; and Knesset member Yuli Edelstein.

"They seemed genuinely encouraged by what we had to say," said Polovin.

"One of the main objectives of the mission was to ensure that communication lines remained open and emphasise that the ANC government's extremely harmful position on Israel doesn't represent the sentiment of South Africans.

"We stressed the importance of maintaining diplomatic relations, that it was vital to have an Israeli ambassador, and for Israel to have representation in the country," he said.

The delegates explained that though antisemitism had risen substantially since the 7 October Hamas massacre, levels remained relatively low compared with other countries, and that South Africa remained

a safe country for Jews.

"It was important for us to explain to Israel how horrified we were with our government, and to express that it was one of the darkest days for the community when South Africa accused Israel of genocide at the ICJ," said Krengel.

"We clarified that South Africa's situation was unique compared to many other countries, where democratic governments typically supported Israel, but their citizens not necessarily so. In contrast, in South Africa, it was the reverse – the people largely support Israel, while the government doesn't," he said.

"It was important that they heard first-hand that ordinary South Africans and many political parties hadn't bought blindly into the ANC's obsession of trying to stop Israel from defending itself."

The delegates impressed upon the Israeli leaders that now, more than ever, was the time to engage actively with South Africans.



SAJBD National Vice-President Zev Krengel and Israeli President Isaac Herzog

The bread and better of Judaism

Torah Thought



Rabbi Dr David Nossel

Our Talmudic sages instruct us to be careful not to embarrass bread. Why would anyone think of embarrassing bread? More puzzling is how does bread get embarrassed? Has anyone ever seen a bagel blush? This instruction certainly sounds strange, whichever way you cut it.

According to the sages, if one has bread and wine on the table, one must not make a blessing on the wine before making a blessing on the bread as this will embarrass the bread. This situation is by no means an uncommon one. In fact, it occurs at every Shabbos and yomtov supper and lunch. These bread-based meals must be preceded immediately by kiddush, the ceremonial sanctification of the day, which includes a blessing over wine or grape juice.

It's because of this concern for the shame of the challah loaves that we place a cloth cover over the challahs during the recitation of kiddush.

What does this mean? On a simplistic level, the sages are training us to be sensitive people. If one is able to feel the hurt of overlooked bread, imagine how aware one should be regarding the hurt of an overlooked human being! However this interpretation seems somewhat half-baked.

On a deeper level, the sages are giving us one of the greatest insights into Jewish values.

Jewish practice has two fundamental components: ritual and righteousness. Judaism is full of rich ritual practice, and symbols abound. In addition, Judaism overflows with decency and virtue.

It makes sense to say that each of these components represents an essential part of Jewish living. The rituals are reminders. They remind us of our heavenly relationship with G-d. Virtues are behaviours. They actualise our earthly relationship with godliness.

As vital as both of these relationships are, is it possible to prioritise one over the other? Could it be that one of the two relationships comes first and the other comes second?

Yes, say the sages. In terms of time, our relationship with G-d comes first. That's

why kiddush, which is made over wine and symbolises our sanctification of and devotion to G-d, must come first. However in terms of honour, the bread, which symbolises our energy and our effort to engage in acts of goodness and godliness, deserves to be placed before the wine. If steps aren't taken to avoid dishonouring the importance of bread, it would be most embarrassing.

To seek connection to G-d is good. Like good wine. To engage in godliness is better, for that's the bread and better of Judaism.

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‘ Hamas leaders must account for sadistic sexual violence ’

NICOLA MILTZ

WARNING: GRAPHIC CONTENT

South African Jewish gender-based violence activists are calling for Hamas leadership to be held to a higher level of accountability for sexual violence towards Jews that was “beyond the scope of human comprehension” during and after 7 October.

This was in response to a report released last week by an Israeli rape crisis support group that concluded that brutal sexual violence against women, children, and men committed by Hamas terrorists was “systematic and widespread”.

“Certain acts stand out as unprecedented in the annals of wartime sexual violence,” said Wendy Hendler, the co-founder of Koleinu SA, an organisation that supports victims of abuse.

“The intentional and repetitive nature of the brutality across the many attack sites, the barbaric nature of the assaults, including the mutilation of faces as well as genital organs, the infliction of sexual torture, was aimed at humiliation, demoralisation, and degradation of Israeli society,” Hendler said.

According to the report, most of those sexually assaulted by Hamas terrorists were killed afterward, and some even during the act of rape. Others were found dead later, their genitals mutilated beyond recognition or penetrated with objects or weapons.

The report by The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel (ARCCI), an umbrella organisation of nine such organisations in Israel, found that the Hamas attack included “brutal acts of violent rape”, often involving threats with weapons specifically directed at injured women, and multiple incidents involved gang rape.

Upon reading it, any decent person, will be left sick to their stomach at Hamas’s weaponisation of rape. Hamas has repeatedly denied the allegations.

The grim 35-page report details the “sadistic and systematic” nature of the sexual violence employed by Hamas terrorists during its attack on southern Israel, as well as evidence of such crimes being perpetrated on an ongoing basis against hostages still held in Gaza.

The association said the report, written by Dr Carmit Klar Chalamish, the head of the organisation’s research department, and Noa Berger, its director of content, “is the first official research since October 7, consolidating evidence and providing conclusions” from “numerous confidential and public pieces of information”.

Said the report, “Often, the rape was perpetrated in front

of an audience – partners, family, or friends – in a manner intended to increase the pain and humiliation of all present.” They were forced at gunpoint to watch their loved ones being violated. The attackers also “cut and mutilated sexual organs and other body parts with knives”, it said.

The report, which was submitted to the United Nations (UN) last Wednesday, 21 February, asserted that its information and analysis “clearly demonstrates that sexual abuse wasn’t an isolated incident or sporadic cases but rather a clear operational strategy”.

Based on analysis of the information collected by the organisation, the report concluded that sex crimes were committed against people in four main locations: at the Nova music festival; in kibbutzim; on Israel Defense Forces bases; and against hostages held in Gaza.

The report was based on confidential and public testimony, eye-witness accounts, interviews with victims

and emergency medical workers, and news articles. One such article included a month-long investigation published by *The New York Times* in late December, which documented a pattern of gender-based violence in the Hamas-led 7 October attack.

The report was sent to decision makers in the UN to leave “no

room for denial or disregard”.

“The terrorist organisation Hamas chose to harm Israel strategically in two clear ways – kidnapping citizens and committing sadistic sexual crimes,” said ARCCI Executive Director Orit Sulitzeanu. “Silence will be remembered as a historical stain on those who chose to remain silent and deny the sexual crimes committed by Hamas.”

The report highlighted that it couldn’t provide the full numerical measure of the extent of Hamas’s sexual violence, “most of which resulted in the victims’ deaths, making their full extent unknown and possibly unknowable”.

Men weren’t spared from sexual assault, and several were found with mutilated genitalia.

“Since it takes on average 20 to 30 years for a survivor of sexual abuse to come forward, we can expect that we’re going to be hearing more and more horrific reports for years to come, particularly the sexual assaults on males who struggle to talk about it ever,” said Rozanne Sack, the co-founder of Koleinu SA.

“Part of Hamas’s psychological warfare was to target males, either to make them watch family members being sexually assaulted or to be sexually assaulted themselves in front of their spouses. The aim of this is to render them helpless and inflict long lasting psychological guilt. Part of the core identity of males involves their role as protectors of the family. The impact of this psychological damage to the psyche of men will be felt in families for generations to

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Whereas wartime rape is a known phenomenon throughout history, Sack said she believed that the sexual atrocities of 7 October were exceptional “in that they can be proved to be part of Hamas’s war policy, instructed in advance to all terrorists as a key component of their terror strategy”.

Because of this, she said, “We need to demand that Hamas leadership is held to a higher level of accountability in the International Criminal Court for these crimes that are beyond the scope of human comprehension.”

Miranda Jordan-Friedmann, the founding director of Women & Men Against Child Abuse, and Luke Lamprecht, the head of advocacy at the organisation, said Hamas perpetrators of these crimes should be held to account.

“These men representing Hamas should be brought to an international court, and should be tried for multiple rapes all with aggravating circumstances, including torture. It’s clear that the motive was to defile the most vulnerable in a society in a way that they won’t be able to live with themselves. They used rape as a weapon of war. The victims will be traumatised for the rest of their lives, and therefore the men that did this should also serve life sentences.”

Christian peace rallies defy anti-Israel lobby

>Continued from page 1

The majority of South Africans are Christian, Van Niekerk said, and T2R SA was birthed as a means to bring change from the ground up. He said that as both a Christian and an economist, the government’s decision to distance itself from countries like the United States and United Kingdom and side with certain nations was concerning as it was stirring up flames of antisemitism and would ultimately have an impact on the economy.

Praying for Israel didn’t mean that the Christian community didn’t care about Palestine, he said, as prayers went out for Israel and Palestine and for peace in the region.

“As T2R SA, we feel a strong connection with Israel, which is dear to us,” said Van Niekerk. “On the morning of 7 October, we were praying together in a farm area outside of Bloemfontein to dedicate the land of South Africa to the Lord. When we came out of prayer was when we first heard of the attacks on Israel. We felt it was a significant moment for us at T2R SA, as the mandate to pray for the peace of Jerusalem was divinely imparted on the morning of this special meeting.”

Bester said that the event had drawn overwhelming support and positive feedback from communities and churches.

He said he had built amazing friendships and relationships with Jewish South Africans and people in Israel over the past two decades, and the hurt and heartfelt cry of dear friends had had an impact on him in a way that he couldn’t describe in words. “Israel is the apple of G-d’s eye according to His word. I won’t poke my finger in the eye of the one I worship with all of my heart,” Bester said.

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War and peace – Israel’s hard choices

TALI FEINBERG

“No-one imagined that the worst pogrom against the Jewish people since the Holocaust would happen in Israel, the place Jews are meant to come to feel safe,” says Israeli diplomat and international lawyer Daniel Taub.

However, he has noticed a strange irony to this tragedy, namely that “nobody I know in Israel wants to leave”. In fact, Israelis have been returning in droves since 7 October, both for reserve duty or simply to be there, “because in a crisis, you want to be with family. It’s striking that on the eve of this war, Israel was more divided than it’s been in its history. It’s currently extraordinarily united.”

Taub himself was hesitant to leave the country. But in the end, he made a whirlwind trip to Cape Town in late February to meet politicians, the media, and the community, to share what Israel is going through and to shed light on the facts of its war against Hamas.



Taub, who served as Israel’s ambassador to the United Kingdom from 2011 to 2015, told the *SA Jewish Report*, “This was a war we didn’t expect, a war we didn’t want, yet it’s a war we have no choice but to fight. One of the tests of failure is whether the 200 000 Israelis who have been evacuated from the north and south feel comfortable going back to their homes. Because if not, Iran and its proxies would have succeeded in shrinking the state of Israel, and that’s not something we can afford.”

He reflects on how 7 October could have happened. “A lot of people are thinking back 50 years, to the last time we had what’s called a *conceptia* in Hebrew – a fixed paradigm of thinking that turns out to be tragically wrong.” He’s referring to the Yom Kippur War, which broke out 50 years and one day before 7 October 2023. “In this case, we didn’t have just one *conceptia* here, we had a number that proved to be catastrophic – in terms of intelligence; assumptions about what Hamas wanted; military preparedness; and so on. But, alongside those catastrophic failures, there

have also been some extraordinary achievements.

“For example, when you speak to military experts, they recognise that the environment in which we’re fighting is possibly the most complex field of combat. Particularly people who have experienced combat in Afghanistan, Iraq, and so on, have been so impressed with what Israel has been able to achieve in confronting infrastructure that’s been built over 16 years and the degree to which Israel has been able to limit collateral damage.

“We’ve seen other things that have been remarkable that we hadn’t expected, such as the unexpected heroism of our younger generation. What country, when war breaks out, has planes coming in filled with young people returning to fight, with 130% turnout for reserve duty? The wives of these young men, the families that have supported them, and the whole society coming together has been unprecedented.”

Regarding Israel being accused of genocide, Taub said that any critical thinker should start off with the simplest question, namely, for which side in this conflict is every casualty a success, and for which side is it a failure? “Israel not only regards every civilian casualty as a tragedy, but its precautionary measures increase the risks to its own soldiers,” he said. “Israel’s ground incursion into Gaza was delayed by three weeks precisely to

allow for evacuation, even though it was clear that this would allow Hamas leadership to escape and for the movement of hostages and weaponry.”

Meanwhile, “a good litmus test for judging credibility on this issue is to look at what was said between 7 and 10 October, before Israel had any military response whatsoever”, Taub said. “We already had South African leadership blaming Israel.

“We know that South Africa has protected perpetrators of genocide in relation to Darfur. So many core elements, as we saw in the South African application to the International Court of Justice [ICJ], made no reference to hostages, to the Hamas attack, to Israel pulling out of the Gaza Strip in the first place, to repeated efforts for peace. You have to play so fast and loose with history to try advance this theory [of genocide].

“One of the striking things is the effort made by South African leadership and the media to portray the preliminary ICJ decision as a victory,” he said. “Nowhere in the decision does it come close to saying that Israel is plausibly committing

The day the feminist movement failed us

OPINION

LULA PENCHARZ AND AVA COHEN



In 2019, South Africa women faced a harsh reality. News surfaced of Uyinene Mrwetyana, a University of Cape Town student, who was raped and murdered at a post office. This tragedy highlighted the huge epidemic of gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa. Our instinct was to protest and express our support for victims of GBV. We headed to the streets, and cried out. It was a reckoning. We had had enough of the GBV.

We often refer to Habonim as a microcosm of society, and just like the rest of South Africa, our movement educated our *chaverim* on GBV.

We’re not the first to comment on the lack of condemnation by the media and international organisations of the Israeli women taken hostage on 7 October. We, like others, are unsettled and disappointed by the silence of the world against the GBV experienced by innocent Israeli women.

In feminist movements throughout our life, whether it relates to Mrwetyana or the #MeToo movement, we’ve been told to believe the victim. Imagine our shock that on 7 October, not only were the victims villainised, but their perpetrators were praised.

On that horrific day, we were watching our worst nightmare unfold on social media – young girls our age being taken away in vans with men. We all knew what that meant for those girls, and yet when we looked to the world for support, it just shouted back at us.

Comments flooded the social media posts supporting Hamas, celebrating a naked body being paraded around Gaza. The new reality became: believe the victim, unless they’re Israeli.

After the initial shock and trauma, we were left with extreme disappointment. Disappointment in the groups that led GBV protests to Parliament and endorsed the

#MeToo movement. Disappointment that the very movements built on supporting and uplifting women had standards about which women they supported. This disappointment culminated in an abandonment by the feminist movement. Ultimately, we sensed that even the most liberal spaces fell short of acknowledging the violence against Israeli women. It made us question whether as young Zionist women we would be granted the same protection and support as other women.

There should be nothing hard about condemning rape, but the world is finding it difficult to condemn rape on the basis that the victims are Israeli and Jewish. How can the United Nations (UN) Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women not explicitly condemn Hamas for its acts of violence against women? The UN, which is supposed to protect people, doesn’t think that Israeli women are worthy of its protection.

Already it has become difficult to be a South African Jew. However, considering how little the government does to tackle GBV here, it stings so much more seeing the endorsement of it in Israel.

The lack of condemnation is an attack on all women, and it cannot be accepted. October 7 was a brutal day for many. We’re so heartbroken to see communities ravaged and hostages taken.

We have focused on GBV to shed light on such an atrocious element of the attacks. We want to support the victims, and ensure that they receive the justice and support they so desperately need. We hope the hostages return home, and all this pain comes to an end soon.

• *Lula Pencharz is Habonim Dror mazkira klalit. Ava Cohen is Habonim Dror sganit mazkira.*

genocide. The fundamental request of the South African government was to tie Israel’s hands. Yet every judge unanimously made it clear that Israel had the right to defend itself.

“I hope that somebody in South Africa is asking, ‘Has this helped the Palestinian people of Gaza?’ because from the outside, it looks like it’s just putting wind in the sails of the terrorist organisations destroying Palestinians’ lives. And if South African leadership has such respect for the court, where is its voice calling for the unconditional release of the hostages in line with the ICJ’s ruling?”

“It’s clear that the leadership in South Africa has a close relationship with Iran,” he said.

Regarding “the day after the war”, Taub said, “The less that Hamas is seen to have had any kind of success, the more likely it is that we’ll be able to create a sustainable, secure relationship between Israel and Gaza.”

He feels that the unprecedented situation of having hostages in captivity means that “mentally and emotionally, we’re still locked in 7 October. It’s sometimes portrayed that two of the core goals of this war – defeating Hamas and releasing the hostages – are in opposition to each other. But if we look at the previous release of hostages, we’ve seen that it was military pressure on Hamas that created

an environment in which that deal was possible.”

Turning to Israel’s northern border, he said, “In many ways, the northern border is a greater security threat to Israel. Hezbollah is better armed and it’s ‘war tested’. It has 150 000 missiles that are far more precise than Hamas missiles.”

As for the possibility of a two-state solution, he said, “A state isn’t just a title, it’s a set of responsibilities – like educating your kids not to aspire to jihad; and exerting responsibility over rogue terrorist groups. How does creating a state address those core issues?”

“There’s one thing worse than not having a solution and that’s thinking that you have a solution when you don’t,” he said. “Peace is the work of a generation, and we’re not doing anybody a favour by thinking that there’s a shortcut. That doesn’t mean that we can’t start. It’s a long, painful project, and we need the help of the international community.”

He emphasised that the younger generation in the diaspora is growing up in a world that hates Israel, and it needs to be given all the support it can get in dealing with it.

Finally, he expressed his appreciation for the South Africa Jewish community, which is known for being very close to Israel. “It’s something that we feel, particularly at this time,” he said.



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Returning soldiers ‘like Vietnam vets’, says trauma counsellor

PETA KROST

While Israel's war is raging in Gaza, the psychological injuries inside the country are creating gaping wounds throughout society that will take a long time to heal.

“Our reserve soldiers went off to defend their country, thinking they would be gone a week. Now, almost five months later, some of them are returning, having experienced horrors nobody should live through. And many will have to go back,” says American-born Israeli marriage, relationship, and trauma therapist Micki Lavin-Pell.

Lavin-Pell is one of many therapists working around the clock trying to help returning soldiers reconnect to their partners and families, a task which has proved extraordinarily difficult. She compares the situation to returning Vietnam war veterans.

“In many cases, a soldier left as one person and returned quite changed due to their scars, both physical and psychological, and it's not easy for their wives, children, and family to understand or give them what they need to heal,” she said.

“Our soldiers are returning, having spent months not sleeping in a bed, not having washed, being constantly on guard in case of an attack, having seen death and destruction, in many cases of their own friends. And now they return to a reality of life having gone on back home.

“They're reluctant to speak about what they witnessed, the horrors they faced. Who would want to put those images in someone else's head? Why would they want to burden someone else with that hellish nightmare? They believe that only those who were there, who experienced it with them, can understand,” said Lavin-Pell.

However, they need to express their emotions and fears on returning, she said. It isn't about recounting the details; it's about the feelings – pain, anger, confusion, fear, and the haunting “what ifs”. Keeping these feelings bottled up only makes the burden heavier and it will prevent them from breaking down barriers with their wives and family, she said.

However, the Israeli government is offering only three session for couples and three individual trauma therapy sessions to soldiers. “It's a joke! Three sessions gets people comfortable, but can't even begin to help them,” she said. However, she understands that no matter how desperately therapy is needed, “Israel is a war-ravaged country, and we are scrimping and begging to get money for our boys to have basic helmets, breast plates, and other equipment to safeguard them.”

Nevertheless, the situation is dire. She recalled one returned soldier whose job in Gaza was to clean up the bodies of people of all ages. He had seen so many little Palestinian children. “When he came home, he attended an event at his child's *gan* (nursery school), and just started sobbing because the images flooded back of all the little bodies.”

Another soldier returned from Gaza and went to friends for Shabbos. Everyone was laughing and just having a good time, and he lost it, shouting, “How

dare you have a good time? Do you understand what's going on just 10km south of here?” He was just so angry about the fact that the rest of Israel had moved on but his head was still in the war,” Lavin-Pell said.

Not all situations are as explosive, but so many family relationships have floundered on the soldiers' return.

Many left their wives to go on *miluim* (reserve duty), came back months later, and they haven't been able to communicate properly or understand each other since.

Some men came to speak to her after she gave a talk about this situation, Lavin-Pell said, and they all

said that although they dreamt of being home with their wives and families while in Gaza, now all they wanted was to be alone.

“They spoke of having been surrounded by a bunch of smelly men for so long, and having experienced horrific things, and all they wanted was to be on a beach on their own for a month or so,” she said. “They were clear that being with their wives and children and back at work was far too overwhelming for them. But, of course, life doesn't offer them that luxury as there's an economy to rebuild.”

She said the men were traumatised, and wanted to share it with their wives, but don't know how. “They need a lot of patience from their wives to be able to do so, but so often, life is so busy, wives and husbands don't have the time for that.”

Some of these returning soldiers had “eyes wide and unblinking, looking like they had been through hell”, she said. “They need time to decompress and deal with what they have experienced.”

Lavin-Pell tells of how women had no choice but to take on all the responsibilities back home and step up to all the tasks. Now, after months, their partner is back, but they have learnt to navigate it all alone. They are afraid to let their partner in because he might have to leave again. Alternatively, they have developed their own style of dealing with everything, and it's not the same style that works for their husband or partner.

“Some of the children may be used to sleeping in the bed with their mothers while their dads weren't home, and it's not easy getting them to change habits, not least of all because of fear,” Lavin-Pell said. “Some don't want their dads taking them to school because they got used to having someone else do it, or they are scared to let him in because he may be leaving again. It's tough for children having their fathers home for two days and then gone again for ages.”

Since the beginning of the war, Lavin-Pell – whose



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son is soon to be conscripted into the Israel Defense Forces – has also been holding support groups for the parents of soldiers. “They aren't sleeping at night, and they get up every morning to check the media to see if their sons' names are there. They are constantly checking their children's WhatsApp groups, and those for parents or partners of soldiers,” she said.

Knocks on doors have become their biggest fear as it represents being told by the army that their sons have been killed or wounded. “They all pray they don't get that knock, and they absolutely

jump if anyone is foolish enough to knock on their front doors,” she said.

“There are some parents who won't even leave their homes, not even to go for Shabbos, in case they miss that knock on the door, which they dread.”

Lavin-Pell said that though they live with pride, they also live with terror while their sons are in Gaza. They aren't alone in their trauma. There's also the trauma of the 7 October survivors from the south, who were moved from their homes after the massacre. There are those in intelligence who feel guilty because they weren't fighting in Gaza, but perhaps had friends who were killed there. And the list goes on.

“Don't stop praying for us and remembering who we are and what our *chayalim* are doing,” she said. “Our *chayalim* are fighting an honourable war for the Jewish world.”

Israeli soldiers face long journey of recovery

ELIYAHU FREEDMAN – JTA

In December, Nechemia, a combat engineer, was serving in Gaza alongside his close friend when a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) exploded next to them.

Nechemia suffered severe shrapnel injuries on one side of his body, one of four soldiers injured in the incident. His friend, just feet away from him, was dead.

Now, Nechemia is recovering in Sheba Medical Center, a massive hospital complex in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan, in a ward for seriously wounded soldiers. He appreciates the camaraderie of his fellow injured troops, and feels grateful to have come out with life and limb intact.

But the hardest part, he said, has been survivor's guilt. “My mentality after coming out alive, after getting hit by an RPG used against tanks, a meter from me, and not losing any limbs, and no mental damage, just being alive, was that it was a miracle,” said Nechemia. “And suddenly, my friend who died, his family came and it just all went down. It was, F-like, they'd lost their son! I was talking to them and explaining what happened. It was very tough.”

Nechemia's challenges encapsulate those faced by the almost 6 000 Israeli security personnel who have been injured since the launch of the Israel-Hamas war on 7 October. Now, the defense ministry estimates that in addition to the hundreds of Israeli soldiers who have been killed in action, the number of wounded soldiers could rise to as many as 20 000 by the end of 2024. If that number bears out, it would be the highest number of Israeli soldiers wounded in any war in the country's 75 years of existence – topping the 1948 War of Independence's count of 15 000 wounded, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War total of 9 000.

Israel's health and defense ministries say their system is equipped to tend to the needs of so many injured soldiers. But in the long term, the prognosis is unclear.

How will Israel deal with the high number of injuries? And how will the thousands of wounded soldiers cope with the physical and mental trauma they experienced?

“Rehabilitation will be the biggest national challenge in the state of Israel in coming decades, and the journey of the injured and their families has only just begun,” said Amitai Ziv, the director of the Sheba Integrated Rehabilitation Hospital in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan.



Since 7 October, Ziv's facility has provided physical and psychological care for about 70% of the seriously wounded in-patient soldiers after they leave emergency care, including Nechemia. Many are amputees. During that time, the centre has grown from 140 beds to 262. Ziv sees no end in sight, especially as war threatens to erupt on Israel's northern border with Lebanon.

About 20% of the newly wounded soldiers are being treated for mental injuries, but it's still too early for them to be formally diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), per the defense ministry's guidelines. The ministry typically waits one year following injury to make a PTSD diagnosis.

But there are informal ways soldiers are working to maintain their mental health. One of the benefits of treating so many wounded soldiers in just a few locations – with rooms containing as many as six beds – is the camaraderie that forms among them.

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No winners in war

There are no winners in war, especially not a war that’s still being waged five months later with no end in sight.

Though so many denigrate Israel and its army for what’s being done in Gaza in what seems like an endless war, Israelis are also suffering because of this war.

Israelis aren’t in this war because they want to be, they are in it because they believe they have no choice. It’s about Israel’s survival. It’s about ensuring that nobody will come across the border again and massacre Jews like Hamas did on 7 October. It’s about making it clear that never again will terrorists be able to inflict the “sexual torture” that Hamas systematically did to humiliate and degrade Israeli society. (see page 3)

However, because of this, hundreds of thousands of soldiers are paying a massive price in serving their country.

I don’t believe there’s one Israeli who wants the war to continue. It’s destroying the soul of the people. And though it may look to the outsider visiting the country like Israelis continue as normal despite the war, this isn’t the case.

Talking to trauma therapist Micki Lavin-Pell this week, my eyes were opened to the true price Israelis are having to pay for this war. It feels like way too much!

I’ve read the stories and watched the movies of soldiers who went to Vietnam to fight a war far from home that seemed endless. They fought a war in someone else’s backyard. They saw their own men mutilated, and they saw way too many civilian deaths. This caused much damage to the soldiers themselves. The longer they were in Vietnam, the more damage it did.

Unlike Vietnam, Israeli soldiers are heroes back home. But much like in the United States at the time, when the soldiers come home, they are expected to slot with ease back into the life they haven’t lived for a while, a life that doesn’t fit as easily as it had before they left.

This might sound melodramatic, but according to Lavin-Pell, returning soldiers are seriously traumatised and are battling – as are their loved ones. In the past, Israelis fought short wars, nothing like what they are dealing with now. So, integrating back home isn’t just like slotting back in after a holiday or a business trip, or *miluim* (reserve duty) of old.

It’s having an impact on the relationships between men and women; between the soldiers who have survived Gaza and those who weren’t there; between soldiers and their children; soldiers and their spouses; and *chayalim* and the society that did its best to keep moving forward while they were stuck fighting for Israel in Gaza.

There’s so much psychological pain and damage in Israel right now despite the war being carried out in Gaza; and not on the home front.

Parents and the families of soldiers have developed a fear of the knock on their front door. This is something that to us, on the southern tip of Africa, seems strange. But imagine that fear of being told by two army messengers that something terrible has happened to your loved one. And it always begins with a knock on your front door.

So, in Israel now, nobody purposefully knocks on someone’s door if they are going visiting. They send a WhatsApp message or they call from outside because of the fear surrounding that knock.

Many people in Israel right now are suffering another trauma, that of survivor’s guilt. They include soldiers who didn’t serve in Gaza; those who survived Gaza; those who survived 7 October in the south of Israel; and those who survived the Nova music festival.

The truth is that no matter how much we’re able to explain away any guilt on their part, they are experiencing a psychological scarring that takes a lot more than an explanation to get over. We know they have nothing to feel guilty for, but it’s not so easy for them to absorb.

The trauma of the families and friends of the 132 hostages still being held in Gaza five months after being abducted by Hamas terrorists, is extreme. For many of them, life stopped when their loved ones were taken, and it hasn’t resumed since and potentially won’t until they come home. I know little about their trauma, but can imagine the depth of it and the fear that they live with all the time.

Those hundreds of thousands of people who were forced to leave their homes in the south and the north because of the threat of war are also living with trauma and in limbo. They are far from their homes, their jobs, schools, and lives. Many had lives on kibbutzim with a lot of space and an outdoor lifestyle, while they now live in hotels or tiny apartments in concrete jungles. This isn’t easy!

Couples are battling to reconnect after Gaza. And many soldiers who may come home now will potentially have to go back to Gaza. If not, they may have to fight against Hezbollah up north as there’s no clear indication that the end of the war is near.

So, while I’m fully aware of the devastation of the life of Palestinians in Gaza, and I won’t undermine how devastating it is, it’s clear that Israelis aren’t in this war for self-gratification or pleasure.

This is a painful war all round, and no matter what happens or is happening, there are definitely no winners.

While we in South Africa and the diaspora must deal with antisemitism and the fallout from the anti-Israel lobby in our government and our country, we’re not actually living through the war.

Things aren’t easy here for us, that’s for sure, but we send strength and pray for our Israeli family to survive this and get all the help they can to get through this awful war.

Shabbat Shalom!
Peta Krost
Editor



Rebuilding life amidst the ashes

OPINION

WENDY KAHN



“We choose to live,” Michal Uziyahu from the Eshkol Regional Council, told our group in the south of Israel witnessing the horrors of 7 October.

I was travelling with a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organisations to the communities that had been brutalised by Hamas on that horrific day. The courage of the people still living in this devastated area is inspiring. We met Naor Yiftach Gefner from Kibbutz Be’eri, the chief operating officer of the printing factory, who returned within a week to make sure that the business continued. Where we volunteered to pick strawberries, the farmer told us how he had returned, but his wife was still too fearful, what with the continuing rockets coming from Gaza. Our group assisted in the preparation of classrooms for children returning to the area. It’s inspiring to hear of the courage and resilience of people, who for so many years, have endured continuous attacks from Hamas culminating in the horror of 7 October.

Michal’s words were deeply moving in the wake of the scenes of death and destruction we witnessed earlier that day.

Our group visited Kibbutz Nir Oz, one of several kibbutzim on the border of Israel where Hamas militants arrived in the early hours of that horrific day to torture and murder the families who lived in this formerly peaceful agricultural area. The humble homes, with their pretty gardens and loving art hanging from the trees, showed a close-knit community. The invaders didn’t just want to murder these innocents; they wanted them to suffer.

A member of the community, Nir Metzger, showed us around. He managed to save his family, but his parents were taken hostage. His mother was freed alongside some of the other hostages released in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners, but his father remains in captivity. The refusal of Hamas to allow visits by the Red Cross or to share any details of their status, coupled with the horrific experiences his mother endured during her time as a hostage in Gaza, has made him fearful for his life.

Walking among the charred homes, I saw scribbles on the walls indicating the number of bodies that had been recovered in each house. It has literally taken months for some of the burnt bodies to be identified by forensic teams. Posters on some of the homes show family members who had been taken hostage.

As I approached one of the burnt homes, I saw the familiar faces of the Bibas family – mother, father, and the two children – baby Kfir, who was abducted at nine months, and his four-year-old brother, Ariel. Their toys are still strewn around the patio, and there are two garden gnomes with the red hair that have become familiar to all of us around the world. Later that day, a video was released showing the terrified face of mother, Shiri, clutching her little red headed sons surrounded by Hamas gunman in Khan Younis. It was recorded the day after they were kidnapped from their home in Nir Oz. Nothing further is known about the Bibas family.

Seeing the charred remains of the Siman Tov house was harrowing. Hamas terrorists shot through the door of the safe room, firing on parents Jonny and Tamar in front of their four-year-old son and six-year-old twin daughters. They then burned the family alive. Their charred bodies were found clinging together. One could make out the burnt fridge and stove in what was once a kitchen where this loving family had, four months ago, sat around the dinner table.

And it continued in every home we passed. Ofer Calderan (53) and his two children, Sahar (16) and Erez (12), were taken hostage. Sahar and Erez were released in November, but Ofer is still in captivity. The bodies of their grandmother, Carmella Dan, and autistic cousin, Noya Dan, were found on 19 October. Next, the home of 83-year-old Oded Lifshitz, a poster stuck on the wall shows that he, too, was one of the hostages. Burnt home after home, each with its own horror story.

We entered the communal dining hall where kibbutz members would gather for meals. I imagined the chatter of community members catching up with one another, discussing work issues, parenting concerns, or just a good gossip. Today, the building is empty with burn marks on the walls. At each seat are photographs of kibbutz members who have been killed or taken hostage. In a side room

are the post boxes with the names of every household on the kibbutz. Some had red stickers to indicate they were abducted and are being held in captivity. Others had black stickers to indicate that the occupants of that home were murdered. One in four members of the kibbutz fall into one of those categories – murdered or taken captive. Their residents form part of the 51 000 displaced people from the south who are living as refugees.

We visited the ANU Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv and saw the newly launched exhibit on 7 October. For the first time, I saw the photographs of the day – the terrified faces of civilians being rescued; the traumatised faces of the soldiers and rescue teams. I have in my head the little boy cowering in a corner with his rabbit, soldiers helping frightened mothers and their children out of their homes as they walked past murdered neighbours.

And this tells only part of the story. The following day, I met South African hostage Aviva Segal, who was held hostage for 51 days before being released during the swap. Her husband, Keith, is still being held hostage, and she struggles to deal with it. She has personal experience of the horrific conditions in which they were held. She described the lack of food and water. She spoke of three days they were abandoned in the terror tunnels where they were gasping for breath with limited oxygen. She witnessed the sexual violence, the forced nudity, and the humiliation meted out to hostages.

The report on sexual violence by the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel told of harrowing accounts of sexual violence not only on 7 October, but also against those still in captivity. Released hostages have told of the ongoing sexual assaults that women and men are experiencing in Gaza. Survivors of the Nova festival, backed up by forensic evidence and video recordings by Hamas themselves, show mass rapes often perpetrated in front of family members or loved ones. We still remember the images of the women being dragged away on motorbikes or cars by Hamas gunmen.



The home of the Bibas family

We met Shelley Shemtov, whose 21-year-old son was abducted at the Nova festival. He had activated his live location on his phone, and she watched as his phone and her precious son were seized. She later saw a video of him handcuffed on a truck and being taken to Gaza. Two of his friends, siblings Maya and Itay Regev were released. He’s still a prisoner. Looking at this brave mother, I now know what sunken eyes look like. She’s living a nightmare and is fighting together with other survivor families for the urgent release of her loved ones. She and the other families of hostages pleaded with us to go back to our communities and make sure they remain on the agenda.

One of the speakers we met used an apt expression. The horror of 7 October brought out in global Jewry, a “synchronised heartbeat”. We all grieve, mourn, and call desperately for the release of the hostages. But we also rebuild, strengthen, and support our sisters and brothers as we recover from this ordeal and bring our people safely home.

- Wendy Kahn is national director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies.

War turns mental health into a battle zone

OPINION

NIKKI TEMKIN



It's one of those days when you'll always remember where you were when it happened, like the release of Nelson Mandela or the day you heard about the COVID-19 lockdown. Since Israel was brutally infiltrated on 7 October 2023 by bloodthirsty Hamas terrorists intent on killing every Jew they could find – sorry, not just killing, but mutilating, raping, maiming, burning, torturing, and murdering Jewish civilians and children and kidnapping hostages, Jews globally have been struggling with their mental health.

I was in Cape Town on holiday with my family when I heard, and my first thought was, "How could this possibly happen? Israel has excellent defence systems in place; the top army in the world. This simply can't be true!" As a Jew married to an Israeli whose nephews and nieces are serving in the Israel Defense Forces, this news hit brutally hard. Not to mention how my other teen nephew at boarding school in Israel would get home safely during a war.

But my story isn't unique. We all have ties. And as such a tiny population group, we're all in this together, experiencing collective – and individual – trauma to greater or lesser degrees. Disbelief soon gave way to sadness, grief, and anger. A noxious mixture of shock, disgust, and absolute abhorrence at humankind settled over me and every Jew I know, like a layer of black, heavy soot, clouding every day since then.

Feelings that have surfaced include fear, sadness, despair, depression, and rage. Friends whose mental health was teetering on the edge before 7 October had fully fledged breakdowns. In my own life, on some days, it's been difficult even to have the resources to converse with others and interact with the world with a clear perspective. Suffering surrounds us. Grief is exhausting. Fear is energy-draining.

On Maslow's hierarchy of needs, personal safety is paramount to mental health. Our sense of safety as a people has vanished. If we're not safe in our spiritual



homeland established post-Holocaust, then where, indeed, can we be safe? In South Africa, a country where Jews have been an integral and important part of society, the anti-apartheid movement, and in building our democracy, the betrayal of the South African government, which unashamedly consorts with and openly supports Hamas, is a bloody knife in the heart.

Unfortunately, much of the world's damnation, disparaging, criticising, and judging of Israel's defensive actions, leads us again as a tribe to feel persecuted, misunderstood, vilified as perpetrators and not the victims of heinous crimes against humanity. The messaging that somehow, Jews deserve what's happened is very damaging to the psyche. It triggers the overwhelming epigenetic trauma that we carry, being expelled so many times in history and of course, most recently during the Holocaust, when Hitler tried to exterminate us completely – the same as Hamas's caliphate. For my friend's mother, a Holocaust survivor who always keeps a small suitcase packed – just in case – this is utterly agonising.

What's happening across the world leaves us incredulous. It rocks the very foundation of our mental

stability. Good and evil have been subverted. It's topsy turvy, reminiscent of being trapped in the upside-down world of *Stranger Things*. Except, the horrifying alien to be defeated is the belief that the world and its people are inherently haters of Jews – this can torment and cripple us psychologically. Is it even safe to wear our Magen David in public? What kind of world do we live in where we need to hide our religion for fear of recrimination ... or worse?

The increase in antisemitic incidents, violence, riots, protests, and marches against Israel and Jews is frightening. It feels like those who were always latently antisemitic have been given full permission to voice their prejudice without consequence. All the trolls have come out with vitriolic glee to play on social media. Everywhere you turn, there's an echo chamber of hatred. The oversaturation of information is self-defeating: the need to know everything isn't necessary. It simply overwhelms and in real terms, changes absolutely nothing.

How can we make a tangible difference? By looking after our mental health, regulating our trauma response downwards, supporting each other, reducing stress – however you choose to do that – and regulating ourselves so that we can act and respond to life from a sage perspective, our higher nature, not from the primitive brain where we fear for our lives, are in chronic fight-and-flight mode, and are simply trying to survive.

If we allow our emotional health to be vanquished, then the haters, the terrorists, and the antisemites win. The Jewish people will triumph. We need to continue to raise our vibrations, spiritual and otherwise. Our light mustn't be extinguished, it must shine brighter so it can illuminate the darkness.

Top tips for mental health

- Limit social media with discipline: confine yourself to a few reliable sources to look at once or twice a day;
- Donate to those in need and perform acts of charity.

- Taking action makes us feel less disempowered;
- Take space from people who perhaps don't understand where you're at;
- Process your painful emotions but don't get stuck in them;
- Set boundaries in place for conversations, memes, and messages about the war and Israel. Avoid known triggers;
- Locate a sense of peace and centredness within: whether it's through prayer, meditation, kindness, or faith, seek serenity;
- Practice self-care with gentleness and compassion towards yourself and others;
- Support and check in with each other through actions, words, and gestures – reach out;
- Get enough quality sleep of at least eight hours per night;
- Do things that make you happy each day;
- Relieve stress through exercise and creative hobbies;
- Engage in life and work with meaning and purpose;
- Look for glimmers: small moments that spark joy or peace, which can help cue our nervous system to feel safe or calm;
- Practice gratitude. There's always much to be thankful for;
- Avoid allowing anger and sadness to detract from happy events and the beauty in your life;
- Learn to let go of worries and anxiety. There are many tools for this such as breathwork; and
- Seek professional help from therapists and coaches if needed.

Nikki Temkin is a prolific editor, author, and journalist. She's also an accredited functional life and wellness coach offering private and workplace talks, workshops, and coaching around stress management and optimal mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

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Mozambique jihadis bring terrorism to SA's doorstep

STEVEN GRUZZ

While the South African government is fixated on Gaza and accusing Israel of genocide at the International Court of Justice, it's largely indifferent to the murder and mayhem perpetrated by terrorists on our eastern border.

Once a haven of stability in a turbulent continent, southern Africa has been reeling from an Islamist insurgency in Mozambique since 2017. In recent weeks, the jihadist rebels al-Sunna wal-Jamma (ASWJ), also known as the Islamic State Mozambique, have burned churches, killed Christians, and displaced thousands in the Macomia, Chiure, and Mecufi districts in the troubled northernmost province of Cabo Delgado.

It poses a significant if indirect threat to South Africa, analysts agree.

Professor Hussein Solomon at the University of the Free State said, "Back in 2017, the violence [in northern Mozambique] came from a tiny group of Salafists [fanatical Islamists] and the local community – fellow Muslims – asked the government to get involved. These rebels use Islam as a vehicle for political mobilisation."

Tomás Queface, an analyst based in Mozambique, said, "The attacks on churches in Cabo Delgado aren't a new feature of the conflict. Insurgents from the north burned churches in Nampula province in 2022. This time, the insurgents began what they called a 'preaching campaign' in the predominantly Christian southern district headquarters, which led them to kill, and burn churches situated there. Mozambican troops didn't engage them, and we can question the capacity of Mozambican forces to respond to this Islamic State threat."

"Attacks on Christians aren't a new thing," said Professor Theo Neethling from the department of political studies and governance at the University of the Free State. "Many locals, including Christians and Muslims, didn't welcome the ASWJ movement's views in the past, and this resulted in conflict. It tried to force locals to follow its radical beliefs, and prevented villagers from attending hospitals and schools, which the movement interpreted as secular and un-Islamic. Efforts to repress the conflict failed."

Jasmine Opperman, an expert on extremism in Africa, said the latest attacks demonstrated a well-co-ordinated strategy, estimating about 500 to 800 insurgents to be active in Cabo Delgado. "The push down south was

clearly directed at specific targets," she said. "More than 12 churches have been destroyed, and the N1, the main road linking Cabo Delgado to the rest of Mozambique, has been targeted."

"The Cabo Delgado insurgency has evolved into a full-blown Islamist extremist presence that's linked up with Islamic State," Opperman said, "but we still have people trying to deny this reality. We have seen beheadings – this is part of the Islamic State propaganda machine sending a message. The insurgents have been born and bred in these communities, hence their interaction with communities is much easier." However, Opperman said there were no known links between ASWJ and Iran or Hamas.

Jihadist rebels from al-Sunna wal-Jamma or Islamic State Mozambique



Neethling said it was almost impossible to tell what connections ASWJ had with the outside world, "because we actually know little about this movement. There's no documentation, and it won't openly declare it, but the fact is that very much like Boko Haram in Nigeria for many years, porous borders have opened the way for young immigrant foreigners from countries in the region, specifically Tanzania, Somalia, and the Great Lakes region. So there's been regional support for ASWJ from other Islamists."

There are reports that Samim (the Southern African Development Community – SADC – mission in Mozambique) – in place since 2021 – is considering

withdrawing. Opperman contended that without Samim and Rwandan forces in Mozambique, the situation would be far worse. But she cited lack of intelligence sharing and other co-ordination between the various forces in Mozambique as problematic.

So, is South Africa at significant risk? And is the country doing enough to counter extremists?

Said Neethling, "The threat to South Africa is indirect. For the very first time, we have an insurgency in southern Africa," long the most stable African subregion. "What's more, the SADC force isn't capable of getting a grip on the issue in northern Mozambique, and the conflict is ongoing. An investigative journalist has exposed the support insurgents receive from areas around Mbombela [formerly Nelspruit]. That's also a concern."

Said Queface, "This is a complicated question because the insurgents have been mostly confined to northern Mozambique. But Islamic State is an international organisation and it has links with South Africa, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The potential threat is having some South African citizens involved in the insurgency in Mozambique. These people might potentially go back to South Africa. But I don't think there's a real possibility of this insurgency spreading to countries in the region, except for Tanzania, which borders Cabo Delgado."

"As for threats to South Africa, if we're talking about the direct spillover of violence – no," concurs Opperman. "For now, the Cabo Delgado insurgency remains localised in its presence and objectives. But if you're talking about it finding sympathy among

Islamic State supporters in South Africa – most definitely. Financial streams to Mozambique from South Africa have been happening for years, but they are minimal."

Said Solomon, "South Africa is part of Samim, and the insurgents have threatened consequences for South Africa. There are Islamic State cells in South Africa. Whether they are talking to the ones in Mozambique, we don't know. There's always that danger, especially as South African security services are so inept."

It's clear that Islamist terrorists not dissimilar to Hamas in Mozambique haven't disappeared, and continue to threaten surrounding communities, Christian and Muslim alike. South Africa neglects this threat at its peril.

Mind the gap: youngsters adjust to Israel at war

JESSICA CONNÉ

How strange it is to feel safe on the streets of a country at war! How uncomfortable it is to feel ashamed of our government while in Israel! These are the sentiments of South African matriculants who have recently embarked on a gap-year educational programme in Israel and are doing their best to adjust to their new situation.

Before leaving home, these individuals envisaged going to a country at war to be something quite different. Benni Dorfman, on Bnei Akiva's Limmud programme, says, "I thought people would be running to bomb shelters constantly. But I was reassured by many Israelis that life was relatively normal and safe even with the war, so then I felt I had nothing to worry about."

Sara Ress, on Bnei Akiva's MTA programme, says, "I was concerned about all the dangers that accompany war. I assumed there would be a sombre energy, with many restrictions and broken families and individuals. And it's true that there's a sentiment of sorrow and longing for the safe return of the hostages. However, there exists a remarkable resilience among Israelis. I've witnessed an unwavering spirit of unity and hope."

Since arriving in Israel, the matriculants have had some unexpected experiences. Alannah Laden, attending Habonim's Shnat programme, says, "Life in Israel is different to life in South Africa – public transport is safe here and you can walk in the street on your own. In South Africa, you can't really do either of those."

Says Dorfman, "Something that did surprise me was how many feral cats there are in Israel. It's weird to see a house pet basically be the rat of Israel."

Rafi Midzuk, attending Bnei Akiva's MTA programme, says, "Normally, the yeshiva has pupils from first up to seventh year. But the majority of people above second year are all in the army. The yeshiva is half the size it normally is. So, there hasn't been someone older who can teach you or give guidance."

Since the war broke out, there have been high levels of anti-Israel rhetoric from the South African government. The International Court of Justice proceedings by South Africa against Israel, which caught international attention, is one example. These proceedings have been at the forefront of many Jewish South Africans' minds.

The anti-Israel rhetoric from our government has left South Africans abroad feeling conflicted. Says Midzuk, "It's been difficult to be a South African. It's frustrating to see everything that's going on because on the one hand, South Africa is my home, and on the other, South Africa is attacking the country I love." Another matriculant says, "The anti-Israel rhetoric in South Africa has been really painful to see. It has definitely made me see my country in a worse light, and made me question if I want to be in the country in the future."

In spite of the disparity between heart and home, these gap-year students have still had an incredible time in Israel. "So far, I'd say that the highlight of my programme has been simply being in Israel and being exposed to the culture here," says Alannah Laden. Says Midzuk, "My first Shabbos in Israel has been the highlight. The entire yeshiva singing Kabbalat Shabbat, *tisch* [gathering] during supper, and a final informal *tisch* on the stairs to the balcony. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever experienced."

Says Ress, "Experiencing Israel for the first time has been an unparalleled highlight of my journey. The opportunity to immerse myself in a culture rich with Jewish history and spirituality has been transformative. Connecting with fellow gap-year students who share my passion for personal and Torah growth has been incredibly rewarding."



Sarah Conné, Sara Lapiner, Sarah Schewitz, and Eliana Hepple clearing weeds on Bnei Akiva's Limmud programme

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How to escape history’s two crushing boulders

OPINION

MOSHE TARAGIN



Four years ago, the world shifted. Beginning in March 2020, humanity suffered a worldwide pandemic which took close to seven million lives. The COVID-19 outbreak upended our routines and disrupted our lives, our professional careers, our education, our social interactions, and our travel.

We all assumed that this devastating pandemic would be the life-altering episode of our generation, the stories we would convey to incredulous grandchildren. Little did we know that just more than three years later, an even greater earth-shattering event would rock the foundations of Jewish identity. The tragedy of 7 October dwarfs the shock of coronavirus. After 7 October, who even mentions the COVID-19 pandemic? This date and our responses to this catastrophe will shape our generation’s identity. Of course, only Hashem knows what else is in store for us in the future.

During a short, four-year interval, we experienced two overwhelming upheavals, each of which inflicted tragic loss of life. Understandably, during the past few months, we were more attuned to our own losses but, unfortunately, there’s too much unnecessary death on both sides. It’s almost impossible to discriminate between innocent Gazan civilians and the overwhelming majority of Gazans who collaborated with Hamas. Our soldiers discovered Hamas paraphernalia and munitions in almost every civilian home. Yet, there are many totally innocent people who have been caught in the crossfire of this just and moral war.

Both of these cataclysms have left us with questions of faith. Why does Hashem allow a pandemic to take innocent lives? How could He allow such widespread suffering? How could He have permitted 7 October to unfold? Isn’t life in Israel meant to be different, immune to the suffering and persecution we endured in exile?

Faith provides certainty and hope, especially during dark times.

Religious people respond to a crisis with faith, prayer, and good deeds. We respond to aggression and genocidal violence with greater unity of spirit and of action. In the wake of these two overpowering moments, however, we must also adjust our religious voices. These two mega events taught us that we don’t possess all the answers, and we must articulate our faith, religion, and hope for Israel in a more unpretentious and humble voice.

Under a boulder

Moshe Rabeinu (Moses) thought that he completely understood Hashem. He had a front-row seat to a series of 10 awe-inspiring miracles which liberated a nation of slaves. He had split the seas, and ascended the heavens. After the terrible debacle of the golden calf, he fervently prayed for our forgiveness, and rescued an entire people from possible extinction. When Moshe’s request for penitence was granted, it all seemed to make sense. During these heady months of revelation, he had discovered that Hashem, the G-d of creation, was also the G-d of history, G-d of law, and G-d of mercy and compassion.

Having discovered these basic tenets of monotheism, Moshe lodged an ambitious request of G-d, “Show me Your essence and teach me Your ways.” Moshe wanted to study the deeper essence of Hashem.

Hashem signalled to Moshe that his request was impossible to grant. The human imagination cannot possibly comprehend divine mystery. Hashem is fundamentally different from human experience, and His wisdom and motives lie beyond human reach. As Moshe sheltered under a large boulder, Hashem passed before him and cautioned Moshe that man could never “see” G-d, nor could he completely grasp Him. From his obscured view “under the boulder”, Moshe could only peek at Hashem’s “back” not His essence.

Of course, as G-d doesn’t have a back, this phrase is merely a metaphor. The Hebrew word for back is *achorai*, which alludes to the conclusion of a process rather than its inception. By declaring that man can only glimpse His “back”, Hashem assured Moshe that ultimately, when history concludes, divine actions will make logical sense. Until then, they will remain mysterious and cryptic.

Under two boulders

Over the past four years, we have lived under two boulders: coronavirus and 7 October. Each of these catastrophes has taught us to speak less boldly and less confidently. We need to discover a voice of uncertainty and humility.

Life in the modern world has infused us with too much confidence. Technology, democracy, capitalism, and science all empowered us with greater optimism and confidence. The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a crushing reminder about the limits of modern culture. It helped us replace our voice of confidence with a voice of vulnerability.

Life in Israel over the past 20 years was even more empowering and confidence-infusing. During this period of euphoric success, our population soared, our economy boomed, and we formed strategic peace alliances with numerous Arab neighbours. Dubbed the “start-up nation”, we became the envy of the world. Israeli know-how and technology enabled us to desalinate sea water, and made us naively assume that we could build an impenetrable wall to protect us from our murderous neighbours.

Our confidence has now been shattered. The Arab world isn’t ready to embrace us, and the world at large is still not ready to allow us to live peacefully in our homeland.


Viewing our presence in Israel through a religious lens provided a further boost of confidence. Redemption is an essential tenet of Jewish belief. History has a predetermined endpoint, pivoted upon the restoration of our people to their ancient homeland. So much of the past 75 years in Israel appeared to sync with our prophetic expectations. It was obvious that Jewish history was veering toward its pre-programmed endpoint. Everything seemed to be humming along, until 7 October.

In Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), Shlomo Hamelech writes, “Don’t speak impetuously and don’t be rash with your feelings, because G-d inhabits heaven and you live below on earth. Therefore, your words should be few.” Over the past four years, heaven and the ways of Hashem have seemed more distant than ever. Under these conditions, we must speak less, and when we do speak, we should voice our opinions with greater humility and less certainty.

Of course, faith outlasts any event, as tragic and horrific as it may be. My revered mentor, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, remarked that faith should be so sturdy that you are capable of being the last Jew to walk out of Auschwitz and still maintain your faith. Faith provides certainty and hope, especially during dark times. However, just because we’re faithful doesn’t mean we have all the answers. If anything, faith enables us to live under the weight of unanswerable questions. Faith allows us to embrace the unknown, but not to assume that we know everything.


We must learn to calibrate our voices better between faith and uncertainty. We don’t have all the answers. We know the general trajectory of history, but cannot guarantee every step of the process. More humility and less conviction. More modesty and less confidence. After four years and two heavy boulders, our voice must be less presumptuous. Hopefully, this chaotic four-year revolution will bring us all a more measured and mature voice.

• *Moshe Taragin is a rabbi at Yeshivat Har Etzion/Gush, a hesder yeshiva. He has smicha and a BA in computer science from Yeshiva University as well as a Master’s degree in English literature from the City University of New York.*



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Scars of a modern-day pogrom

SA Jewish Report photojournalist **Ilan Ossendryver** was in Israel recently documenting the scars of a modern-day pogrom in the south. Here is a photo essay of his most recent work.



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Giant leap forward for celebrations

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

Having a birthday or anniversary that comes around only every four years not only adds flavour to routine celebrations, it also impacts people in different ways.

“I tell everybody that this year, I’m turning 22,” laughs Sandringham Gardens resident Ann Kopelowitz. “It’s great to have a birthday every fourth year.” For Kopelowitz, who in fact turns 88 on 29 February this year, having a leap-year birthday has always enhanced her celebration. “From the time I was about eight, I always knew that I had an extra special birthday every four years. It was really fun,” she says.

“Every celebration was so lovely, and was first spent with my parents when I was growing up and then with my own children, who always

thought it was funny. I just think it’s nice to have such an original birthday.”

One of Kopelowitz’s daughters, who lives in the United States, has in fact timed a trip to South Africa this year to coincide with her mother’s first “real” birthday in four years. The family plans to spend two nights at Toadbury Hall in Muldersdrift to mark the occasion. On other years, Kopelowitz chooses to celebrate on 28 February, as it’s the last day of the month.

Yossi Montrose, who marks his 44th birthday on 29 February, has more mixed feelings about his birth date, which has always set him apart. “Growing up, I felt left

out as I didn’t have a date to celebrate but I also felt empowered by it as I was different,” he says. “I got bullied a lot during school, but sometimes I would use my birthday as a weapon, saying when I was 16 to younger kids who would tease me about it, ‘You can’t even beat up a four-year-old’, and that would often stop them. I also felt special at times as people would be amazed, saying they hadn’t met a leap-year baby before, and they would make a big deal out of it.”

As an adult, Montrose says he always felt different and that he didn’t fit in, until he met his wife. Yet, some aspects of his unique personality linger, which he feels might have something to do with having an unusual birth date. “For example, I’m a ‘fitness dude’, but I’m the completely opposite of what’s expected in the fitness industry. I make my own path with my unique training methodology through the use of an exercise ball,” he says. “I’m always swimming upstream and doing what’s right for me, not what’s popular. This can be isolating at times.” This is also true of his Judaism, he says, where though he considers himself religious, he



Ann Kopelowitz

Photo: Estelle Zawatzky



Stephen and Janice Shapiro

doesn’t come across as “typically” so, which can be confusing to others.

When he was growing up, his parents chose to celebrate on his Hebrew birthday, but later in life, Montrose faced a conundrum when considering when to mark his Gregorian birthday. “I would wait until 23:59 on 28 February, and my mates would message me at midnight to wish me,” he says. “I wasn’t technically alive on 28 February 1980, and I like to keep February as my month, so 1 March isn’t great for me either. My wife started saying “happy life day” as opposed to “happy birthday”. This year will be only the third time being with me on 29 February, so it’s special for her too.”

Ultimately, regardless of when your birthday is, growing older is all about your attitude, says Montrose. “Age is just a number, and whether I’m 44 or 92 on 29 February, it doesn’t really matter as I still want to grow in every area. I try to make wise choices every day to have even more reason to celebrate next time round.”



Yossi and Justine Montrose

Marking a special date on a leap year isn’t always left up to chance. For some, it’s a deliberate choice. Such is the case with Janice Shapiro, who married her husband, Stephen, on 29 February 2004. “We got engaged in 2003 when my British husband used the rouse of the Cricket World Cup to travel to South Africa, where I’m from, when in fact it wasn’t about the cricket, he was planning to propose,” says Shapiro. Though the couple were thrilled when they got engaged on the day they arrived in the country, they were immediately pressured to set a wedding date.

“He’d literally proposed an hour before, and people were asking when the wedding would be,” she says. “As a joke, we said, ‘Let’s see if 29 February 2004 is a Sunday’ and it was, so joking, we told people that’s when we’d be getting married.” Soon the joke turned into reality when the couple decided that since it was a Sunday, it was a unique and fun date, and the venue they wanted was available, it would in fact be the perfect day to have their wedding.

“My birthday is actually on 28 February, so we got married the day afterwards,” says Shapiro. “Every year, regardless of whether it’s a leap year or not, we always celebrate our anniversary one day after my birthday.” On leap years, says Shapiro, their celebration is a bit more special, and this year, which marks 20 years of marriage – or five years as the couple likes to tell people – will be even more so as they head to Iceland for a holiday.

“Telling people we’ll soon be celebrating five years of marriage when our oldest child is 13 always gets them a bit,” she laughs. “People who know us know that we have a quirky sense of humour, we like doing things a bit differently, which is also why we chose 29 February. ‘Add a bit of fun and spice into your life,’ is what I always say.”



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No moral fibre or memory – ANC off a Cliff

LEE TANKLE

Radio and media personality Gareth Cliff says the Jewish community needs to recognise that the African National Congress (ANC) is as “unimportant as a drugged-up meth-head on the street shouting at you as you drive past”.

He was speaking at a Jewish Women's Benevolent Society event at the Linksfield Shul Community Centre on 25 February.

“I stopped believing anything they [the ANC] said a long time ago,” he said. “I’m completely disinterested in what the ANC calls Hamas. Hamas has killed enough people to declare it a terrorist organisation. They [the ANC] can call it their best friend and it wouldn’t make a difference. They have lost all credibility. I don’t care what they say from now on. And neither should you.”

Cliff waxed lyrical on Israel, South Africa, and everything in between.

“I’ve had a long, interesting, and sometimes controversial career in the media. I’m not scared to say what I think. I know that there are many here who aren’t scared to say what they think. I’m proud of not shutting up about Israel,” Cliff said. “Every death threat is confirmation that I’m on the right side.

“Israel is doing just about the best job of creating the least amount of collateral damage that any army in human history has achieved,” said Cliff.

“We should justifiably be worried about the political right, the fascists, the Nazis,” Cliff said, “But now, we’re facing the kind of thing that I never thought we’d see



Gareth Cliff

again in my lifetime, but it’s coming from the left, and to pretend that that doesn’t serve you is kind of putting your head in the sand. None of those people who are gone – who were alive on 6 October – had the privilege of hiding in the sand.

“I don’t think being afraid is necessarily helpful,” Cliff said. “I do think that we’re at a stage now in history thanks to the explosion of digital media where we can have a pretty good barometer of what’s going on, and I don’t see most of my Jewish and non-Jewish friends who are on [Israel’s] side, I don’t see them hiding, I don’t see them being cowed into silence, and I don’t see them saying, ‘We’ll just sit this one out until we hear better.’

“I know that people are doing a lot of good work, and there are a lot of people who are apathetic because they think the Middle East is an ongoing thing and they don’t realise the significance of what happened on 7 October, and that’s dangerous too.

“Unfortunately for [my Christian friends], Jews are the vanguard of this fight, because don’t for a minute think that mad militant Islamists who have nothing but hatred and death on their minds will stop if they’ve taken out the Jews. Who do you think is next? The rest of us cannot just sit it out and wait and see what happens,” Cliff said.

“Hate of Israel is blatant antisemitism,” he said. “Antisemitism is the fountain from which all other kinds of bigotry come. They’ll hate you because you’re secular; they’ll hate you because you’re religious; they’ll hate you because you assimilate too well; they’ll hate you because you don’t assimilate enough; they’ll hate you because

you’re successful; and then they’ll hate you because you’re not successful. This is the kind of hatred that goes beyond what most people seem to understand.

“It’s a great time to be in South Africa in spite of all the madness that you see around you. This could be our most important election since 1994. There’s an opportunity for all of us to make a big difference. If you haven’t realised that the governing party isn’t our friend, it has proven it now once and for all. There are shoots of hope, growth, and opportunity on the horizon, and it’s up to us to make the future of this country.

“We must remember that Twitter isn’t the real South Africa,” he said. “Most South Africans just want to live in peace. They want to be able to look after what’s theirs,

put their kids in school, and have a kind of prospect for the future. And the kind of radical responses you get from the internet don’t resonate with the people in this country.

“Don’t expect the ANC to remember anything. [The ANC] can’t even remember who the president was before Mbeki. [The politicians] don’t care about history, they don’t care about character, they don’t care about what happened, they only care about the narrative.

“We used to have a lot of moral clout under Nelson Mandela. He was the kind of guy who could have Yasser Arafat at his inauguration. And most of us would have gone, ‘Well, it’s Nelson Mandela.’ We had moral capital to spend. We spent it all. Now we’re in moral debt.”

Unpacking Islamist Jew-hatred behind Hamas

SAUL KAMIONSKY

The barbarity of the attack by Hamas in Israel may have been shocking to many observers, but it wasn’t a surprise to those familiar with the ideology of the perpetrators, says Jeffrey Herf, distinguished university professor emeritus in the history department at the University of Maryland.

The worst instance of mass murder of Jewish civilians since the Holocaust is the logical outcome of the Jew-hatred that Hamas has openly expressed since 1988, says Herf, the curator of a YIVO Institute for Jewish Research three-part webinar series on the origins and ideology of Hamas.

“That hatred rests on a strand of Islamic antisemitism that emerged in the early 20th century and fuelled the Arab war of rejection in 1948,” he says.

Herf says Hamas’s decision to launch the attack in Israel “calls to mind the efforts of previous terrorist actors who sought to sabotage diplomatic efforts that could lead to negotiated settlements of longstanding conflict”.

“Yet, the cruelty of this latest operation – murdering young people at a music event, executing whole families in their homes, seizing hostages – demonstrates that Jew-hatred has deranged the minds of the killers. The history of Islamist antisemitism is critical to understanding the genocidal racism that supports Hamas’s long-term eliminationist goals.”

During the first episode of the series aired on 26 February, Herf said, “The Hamas Charter of 1988 stated, ‘Our struggle against the Jews’ – not Zionists, imperialists, or colonialists. It declared that it adopted Islam as its way of life.” He said that when the charter mentioned Palestine, “It was referring not to the West

the killed person a privileged place in paradise. Since the Quran is known to always be right, this results in a win-win situation for jihadists.

“For Islamists, however, not only do their own lives have little value, so do the lives of other Muslims. They are abused and sacrificed as mass human shields. Without these human shields, Hamas would be weak in the current war and would probably already be defeated.

“Weapons are supposed to protect people. In the war, it’s people who are supposed to protect the weapons. The more Arab civilians are killed, the better for the Hamas propaganda that Israel is out to kill civilians, especially children.

“For Israel, this is a lose-lose situation. Either it loses the rocket war because it cannot defend itself, or it defends itself, kills civilians, and loses the propaganda war.”

Jonathan Brent, YIVO executive director and chief executive, says, “When an Arabic translation of *Mein Kampf* was discovered in a kindergarten in Gaza last year, I realised that the powerful current in the antisemitism in the genocidal destructive action of Hamas on 7 October was being fuelled by Nazi propaganda.

“The actions of 7 October represented the continuation of precisely the genocidal thinking of the Nazis into the present day. Thinking of the Holocaust and the antisemitism toward the Jews in the 1920s and 1930s as simply occurring in a geographical area circumscribed by Eastern and Western Europe as well as Russia is an obsolete way of understanding the nature of antisemitic thinking in the world today.”

Herf says the ideology of Hamas isn’t understood by the global left in South Africa and elsewhere that celebrates Hamas or believes its propaganda.



Photo courtesy of the State of Israel's official X account

Arabic copy of Mein Kampf found in Gaza

Hamas, he says, is “an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, one of the after effects of the collaboration between Islamists and the Nazi regime during World War II and the Holocaust”.

Hamas should be understood as a movement of the extreme right. “That’s as a reactionary attack on the values of the Enlightenment, modern liberalism, and above all, as a movement waging a war of religion against the Jews.”

The YIVO series has been developed by the United States-based YIVO, which has the

largest collection of materials pertaining to the Holocaust aside from Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. All three episodes will be screened live on Zoom through yivo.org.

Herf describes South Africa’s case against Israel at the International Court of Justice as a “travesty”. “The legal reasoning and use of evidence were woefully beneath the standards one expects from well-trained lawyers. It was an example of politics overcoming law, facts, and scholarship.”

He encourages people to read historical scholarship and give less attention to opinions on social media. “If governments, the press, non-governmental organisations, and academia had focused attention on the issues we’ll address, this war either wouldn’t have happened at all or would have happened many years ago with far fewer casualties.”

Social Worker

Jewish Community Services, Cape Town



Jewish community Services is a Jewish welfare organisation offering a full range of welfare services to people across all age groups within the Jewish community. They are looking to recruit a field social worker to join their team to render a full range of preventative, supportive and statutory services.

KEY ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES

Duties would include a full range of statutory services, counselling services and the ability to work as part of a multi-disciplinary team.

REQUIRED SKILLS & EXPERIENCE

- Relevant social work degree
- Registration as a Social worker with the South African Council of Social Service Professionals (SACSSP)
- 5-10 years' previous experience as a Social Worker
- Experience with Child Protection and Statutory work, advantageous
- Excellent verbal and written communication skills with the ability to communicate well with a wide variety of people of all ages and at all stages of life
- High emotional intelligence with the ability to communicate clearly with challenging personalities and manage difficult situations in a sensitive and discrete way.
- Excellent counselling skills with the ability to maintain high standards of professionalism with clients
- Highly organised and efficient individual with attention to detail who can multitask and work well under pressure
- Ability to work effectively in a team and independently is essential
- Passionate about working in and for the community with experience or knowledge of the Jewish Community and Jewish way of life.
- Driver's licence and own car is essential.

Interested?

Email Loren for a link to the online advert and application form:
recruitment@staffwise.org
Closing date for applications: 8 March 2024

If you have not been contacted within 2 weeks of submitting your application, kindly consider your application to have been unsuccessful



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Tackling the Jerusalem Marathon for a cause

SAUL KAMIONSKY

Johannesburg teacher Shireen Saacks will bear the flags of South Africa and Israel in the half marathon of the 13th Jerusalem Winner Marathon on 8 March to raise funds for cancer-support organisation DL Link.

Cape Town-born Saacks, who will run in the memory of a dear friend who passed away from cancer about a year ago, is the only South African-based runner doing the race in support of DL Link’s cancer warriors this year. The other 18 DL Link runners, each with a warrior on the back of their shirt, are Americans and South Africans who live in Israel.

DL Link usually takes a huge group of about 60 to 100 runners to the race for what is its flagship fundraiser, but it’s taking only 19 runners this year, and didn’t organise a formal group because of the situation in Israel.

Johannesburg-based Sean Drishner, the owner of Mezuzah Security, will be running the full marathon in support of soldiers in the war and as part of his preparation for his second Comrades Marathon. He has concerns about terrorism in Israel, but he’s going there to attend his wife’s nephew’s Barmitzvah.

“It’s important to connect to your homeland, especially when it’s going through a tough time,” he says, “to show support for people who live in Israel, and to show that we’re not scared to come to Israel. We can’t be deterred because that’s exactly what terrorism tries to do to us.”

In the marathon, Drishner and thousands of other runners will run through exquisite landscapes and historical sites that shed light on 3 000 years of history in Jerusalem, Israel’s capital. Starting at the junction between Israel’s parliament – the Knesset – and the Israel Museum, the course takes runners past places like Yehuda Marketplace, Mount Scopus, the Old City, David’s Tower, and Haas Promenade. They will finish at the southern end of Sacher Park, having gone through the tunnel at the entrance to the city.

“It’s important to connect to your homeland, especially when it’s going through a tough time.”

Aside from the marathon (42.2km) and half marathon (21.1km), runners can also do a 10km race; 5km race; family race (1.7km); and community race (800m).

South African Rafi Midzuk, who is in Israel on the MTA (Midreshet Torah Va’Avodah) programme, is running the 10km race for Bnei Akiva, just like all the other runners on MTA and Limmud programmes. “Bnei Akiva has been a crucial part of my upbringing, and has a huge role in who I am today. I want to do something to give back and contribute to its continuation,” he says.

Johannesburg-based Pinni Goodman, the director of GeeWiz, is running the 5km race in memory of a friend who passed away a few months ago. Not a regular runner, he’s going to Israel on a solidarity trip, and while there, will partake in the Jerusalem Marathon. “I also ran the 5km last year, and it was great. There was an

amazing vibe, unbelievable energy, and excitement.

“Now that I’m going during an active war, I don’t really know what to expect as opposed to other times I’ve been there with a different feeling. I’m not going to *jo!* and enjoy the culture of Israel. I’m going to give strength to the soldiers, and we’re going to see the unfortunate horrors.”

For Midzuk, doing the race while Israel is at war emphasises the responsibility 18 and 19-year-olds coming from outside of Israel have “to show that everything that’s happening won’t keep us from coming to Israel and spending a year connecting to Judaism and our roots. All other 18 and 19-year-olds are in the army. Yeshivot aren’t full like before, so our coming to Israel during the war to volunteer, learn Torah, and pray for Israel – like we do at MTA, my programme’s main focus – helps uplift many others in Israeli culture and fill a gap left behind by all those fighting for Israel.”

Midzuk will run as a proud South African Jew. “Note, not a Jewish South African. My identity is being Jewish, and though I can’t look at what’s happening in South Africa proudly, I won’t run away from South Africa. My hope is that South Africa will amend its behaviour and stand with Israel.”



Shireen Saacks



Sean Drishner

DL Link does. In the past six weeks, I’ve run two half marathons. Now I’m going to run my third 21km.

“I’m not at all worried about going to Israel now,” she says. “Of all the times I’ve visited, this is going to be the most profound.”

Shmukler hits high note in *Mamma Mia*

Gina Shmukler, Johannesburg-based actress, director, and producer, will be taking the role of Donna in the international hit musical *Mamma Mia* first in Cape Town and then Johannesburg. The *SA Jewish Report* caught up with her between rehearsals.

Playing Donna in *Mamma Mia* is a plum role. How do you feel about playing it for a second time?

A couple of years ago, I saw the United Kingdom’s touring production in Singapore, and I thought I would never do the show again. It seemed very old. It was created 25 years ago. However, when producer Hazel Feldman called me to discuss Donna and shared that we would be creating a new version with an all-South African creative team, I was excited and said yes. But I did have to go through the audition process.

What does *Mamma Mia* and the music of Abba represent to you as a child of the 80s?

The 80s for me were Boy George, Simply Red, and Duran Duran. Abba didn’t really feature. Is that terrible to admit?

How would you describe Donna in *Mamma Mia*? What’s her message?

Donna is hard shelled in some ways. She fell pregnant at a time when as she says she couldn’t go home an unmarried mom. She has built a life and a home for herself and her daughter, Sophie, on an island in Greece. She’s strong and vulnerable, wants love and denies it, but her message is, “I can do this on my own.”

What did it take to get into the role once again?

Phew! I haven’t done a big role like Donna for many, many years. I’ve been in vocal boot camp since July last year with my coach in New York. The vocal track of Donna is no joke.

I had to get my body fit again – rehabilitate my knee – and thankfully, I have a wonderful team, both amazing young Jewish therapists who have worked with me to get here.

Has it been different playing her in 2024 than it was when you were nominated for two awards for your role?

I’m 14 years older than when I played Donna, and these bones feel it too, but I bring 14 more years of life experience to the role. I’m at a much better age for Donna. I’m now a mother too, not playing a mother. For me, as I have aged, my friendships, my soul friends, are so key in my life. They are a form of family, and this story is about the friendship of three women – Donna, Rosie, and Tanya – lifelong friends and “aunties” to Sophie.

Israeli-born Drishner, who has lived in South Africa for the past 25 years and will be doing the Jerusalem Marathon for the first time, says, “South Africa has quite a negative name in the Jewish world. That’s the feedback I’ve been given from some people who have been to Israel over the past couple of months following the government’s anti-Israel stance and decision to take the country to the ICJ [International Court of Justice].”

Saacks, who like Drishner took up running only a few years ago, will take the opportunity of being in Israel for the half marathon to visit her son who is in a yeshiva, and other family members. While there, she’s also going to look at options for her planned aliya, to volunteer, visit the Brothers for Life organisation, and join a group packing supplies for soldiers. “I’m staying with a friend, and I’ll be travelling through Jerusalem almost every day,” she says.

Saacks ran the 10km race of the Jerusalem Marathon last year for DL Link in support of two cancer warriors and her dear friend who had passed away just before that race. “I said last year that I had to do the Jerusalem half marathon for the amazing work

You’ve acted and directed many in strong female roles. Which have resonated with you and why?

For now, Shirley Valentine remains my favourite female role. Funnily, she went to Greece too. She muses over losses and life, and ultimately finds herself there, accepting who she is, embracing life and living.

Gina Shmukler rehearsing for *Mamma Mia*



Photo: Lance Peterson

It was also the most wonderful experience directing actress Natasha Sutherland, and witnessing the audience’s response to an old play with an evergreen story.

What were the best and most challenging parts about playing Donna?

I love Donna – she’s so human and unaffected, but the technical demands of the role are challenging. Singing *The winner takes it all* – as we call the “nine o’clock number” – meaning it’s the climax of the show after an exhausting two hours, is intensely challenging.

What was it like being on stage again with old friends/colleagues and some new stars?

It’s been wonderful to work with Kate Normington and Ilse Klink again. We know each other, we trust each other, and we laugh. A lot!

I’m working with creative friends on our team

too – the extraordinary director Janice Honeyman; musical director Charl-Johan Lingenfelder; and choreographer Duane Alexander – we’re all growing up and older together.

The younger members of the cast are phenomenally good. Our industry is birthing amazing new talent. I hope our country can retain them as our industry needs investment.

You’re an actress, director, producer, teacher, and have written theatrical productions. Which is your favourite role/job and why?

The stage is my home. It’s my first love, but with a family, one has to make choices, and that has been one of the primary reasons why I’ve not done a big show in a long time as the demands of being away are huge. I will have been in Cape Town for more than eight weeks. I never thought I would say this, but I miss Jozi!

As far as my work goes and the different hats I wear, they all do feed off each other, helping me to remain oiled and muscled in my work as I move between spaces.

You’ve performed all over the world. What are the Cape Town and Johannesburg audiences like, and how do they compare to international audiences?

We haven’t started performing yet, but people are people. South African audiences are pretty generous, and Lord knows, we need timeout and escape from the chaos we live in, and that’s *Mamma Mia*, great music with a heartfelt story and a happy ending.

What do you want *Mamma Mia* audiences to take home?

I hope they leave feeling light and joyous, and proud of this all-South African production.

• “*Mamma Mia*” opens on 7 March at the Artscape Opera House in Cape Town and on 13 April at Montecasino in Johannesburg. Tickets are available at www.ticketmaster.co.za

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

International expert sheds light

This week featured a visit by eminent Israeli diplomat, lawyer, and writer Daniel Taub. An expert in international law with specialisations in counterterrorism and the laws of war, as well as a former Israeli ambassador to the United Kingdom, Taub was brought out to speak on matters pertaining to the war against Hamas and more specifically the outcomes and implications of the case against Israel lodged by South Africa at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

In light of the one-sided, politically driven narrative around that case in this country, the presence of an internationally renowned legal expert of Taub's calibre was an invaluable opportunity for us to present a different perspective. To this end, we put together a packed programme including meetings with most of the main opposition parties in Parliament; sessions with lawyers in Johannesburg and Cape Town; meetings with Jewish leaders in both centres; and media interviews including on eNCA. It was extremely important both for our own community and for those who have loyally stood by us during these trying times to engage with someone thoroughly versed in the issues and who has been at the coalface of dealing with them. We're grateful to Taub for his valuable time and expertise, and for his encouragement and support.

Delegation to Israel

South African Jewish Board of Deputies President Zev Krengel and National Director Wendy Kahn, together with the leadership of the South African Zionist Federation, recently visited Israel to engage with political leadership and brief it on the situation in South Africa. One of the things stressed during the various meetings was that difficult though these times are for our community, there are many people from across the board who strenuously oppose the African National Congress (ANC) government's stance on Israel and are fighting back in various ways. Mention was made of the Christian community and of the

ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner

stance taken by most of the opposition in Parliament. It was important for the Israeli leadership to understand that what was being declared by government spokespeople on political platforms wasn't necessarily the view of people on the street. When speaking on the subject, Kahn always describes how the reaction from ordinary members of the public to the events we have organised on behalf of the hostages has been overwhelmingly one of genuine concern and empathy. This, as we well know, has been signally absent in the stance taken by the ANC government even though the ICJ explicitly included the immediate release of all the hostages in its judgment. Notably, South Africa's most recent approach to the ICJ, in which it unsuccessfully asked the court to rule against Israel's military operations in Rafah, included no mention whatever of this critical issue. During her visit, Kahn travelled with a delegation from the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations to visit communities in southern Israel devastated by the 7 October attacks. She also met the families of hostages and Aviva Siegel, the South African hostage who was freed but whose husband is still being held in Gaza. A particularly harrowing aspect of the hostages' plight that has come to light is the sexual abuse that is continually taking place against men and women. It further underlines the urgency of obtaining their release, as a critical humanitarian issue in itself, quite aside from its being essential to ending the conflict. As a party that has been so involved in trying to bring about a ceasefire, one can only wonder why the ANC government has been so consistently passive on this front.

- 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



Jewish matriarch honoured 100 years after her death

DIANE WOLFSON

Honour thy father and thy mother is one of the ten commandments, yet what a special *neshoma* it must take for a non-Jewish man to honour his late Jewish grandmother 100 years after her passing.

A few years ago, Eugene Couzyn flew Rabbis Suchard and Klein with a new Torah donated by David Nathan and Howard Shankman from Grand Central Airport to Sandton Shul in Morningside. One of the letters in this Torah was dedicated to Couzyn's late father, who was Jewish. This had an enormous impact on him.

In spite of three Jewish grandparents – just missing the one which would have made him Jewish as well – and a Jewish father, Couzyn was brought up without any knowledge of his Jewish heritage.

His paternal grandparents emigrated to South Africa from Holland in 1894/5 and although both were Jewish by birth, they didn't practice Judaism in this country. "I don't know the reason for this, but I was brought up without any knowledge of my heritage" he says. It was only in his 20s that he learned from cousins that, in fact, his father and his father's five siblings were Jewish.

Growing up in Waverley, Johannesburg, as a youngster, Couzyn had always had an affinity towards his Jewish friends without any knowledge of his heritage.

"I learned from one of my cousins – we were 16 in total – that our grandfather had forbidden our grandmother to practise as a Jew and that on her deathbed in 1924, my grandmother had requested that her third son, Paul, bury her in the Jewish cemetery in Pretoria where they lived. He did this, but the grave was unmarked."

In 2015, Couzyn set out to trace his grandmother's grave, and through the Pretoria Chevrah Kadisha, was able to obtain an extract from the burial records confirming that she had, indeed, been buried in the Jewish section of the Rebecca Street Cemetery on 16 April 1924, and that the grave number was 278. Together with his sister and a cousin, they were able to locate the grave and proceeded to commission a gravestone.

The process was hampered by the difficulty of establishing his late grandmother's Hebrew name, and it was only after the COVID-19 pandemic had subsided that Jewish genealogist Dr Naomi Rapeport was able to discover it.

Rabbis Uzvolk and Fox assisted with the requisite Hebrew transcripts, and the gravestone was completed.

The unveiling of the tombstone of the late Suze De Levita Couzyn was finally held at Rebecca Street Cemetery in Pretoria on 28 February 2024, marking the centenary of her passing on 16 April 1924.



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Schay shows ties that bind

Councillor Daniel Schay addressing the Yeshiva College boys

the school's families and learn through fun, progressive activities. The event was held on the back of last year's hugely successful Super STEM Sunday. Kids and parents made their way through various stations, including a mindful eating room, a fragrance room, and a sensory room. There were yoga sessions, opportunities to make Zen gardens, and performances of the interactive play *The Power of Me*. Parents had the chance to see how their children interact with educational toys such as Beebots, Spheros, and iPads, all while immersing themselves in important conversations about feelings, emotions, and self-regulation.

[illegible]