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# Jewish Report

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## Four arrested after surge in Joburg kidnapping

NICOLA MILTZ

A spike in violent express kidnappings and hijacking in our community appears to have been halted with the arrest of four suspects believed to be behind a string of recent attacks.

It was swift collaboration between CAP; the South African Police Service (SAPS); Community Security Organisation (CSO); and other stakeholders that led to the suspects' arrest last week.

They were arrested on Friday night, 15 August, and taken to Sandton Police Station. The suspects appeared in the Johannesburg Magistrates' Court this week, and remain in custody. Authorities believe these arrests have effectively shut down the gang.

"We're optimistic this threat has been neutralised," said CAP Deputy Chief Executive Sean Jammy.

"Our priority is always the safe recovery of victims, but dismantling gangs is crucial too. These arrests yielded four suspects, the victim's vehicle, and the firearms used in the crime," he said.

Express kidnappings – short-term abductions during which victims are held while suspects demand cash withdrawals, bank transfers, or PIN numbers – have become an increasingly common feature of Johannesburg's crime landscape.

Victims are often left traumatised, shaken, and fearful long after their release. CAP and the CSO have reported a noticeable surge in such incidents in recent months, with perpetrators targeting residents in familiar neighbourhoods, often close to their own homes. The crimes are swift, unpredictable, and high-risk, which is why speed of response and community vigilance are critical, according to CAP.

The arrest was sparked by the latest

hijacking and kidnapping of Johannesburg attorney Rowan Borach, 53, of Victory Park. He was kidnapped last Friday while collecting food in Glenhazel for Shabbos for him and his 76-year-old mother, Glenda.

Just after 14:30, Borach loaded parcels into his Honda Jazz, when four armed men ambushed him. Dragging him out of the driver's seat, they shoved him onto the floor of the back seat and interrogated him at gunpoint, demanding PIN numbers, banking details, and personal information.

"It happened so fast," Borach recalled. "There were

guns pointed at me. I just did what I was told. They warned me not to lie. At one point, I begged them not to shoot me. They kept saying, 'Don't look at us, just tell us how much money you have.'"

His captors drove him around before eventually stopping at a bricked-up dwelling in an informal settlement in Alexandra. They stripped him of his new multifocal glasses so he couldn't see clearly, shoved him onto the dirty floor, and continued their threats. "They wanted everything – my identity number; my accounts; my cellphone. They even asked if I was married, if I had

children. I told them no, and that I had an unstable income," he said.

At one point, he became nauseous, needing to lie down, so they put him on a mattress on the floor. He was left with two suspects while the other two went on a shopping spree in Sandton City.

All the while, his frantic mother feared the worst. "If something happened to my Rowan, I didn't want to live," Glenda said. "He is my diamond, he is my everything. He looks after me."

It was thanks to a little girl in the area who witnessed the abduction and raised the alarm that CAP and the CSO were alerted quickly. A massive search was launched. "We operationalised teams immediately, drawing on multiple sources of information," said Jammy. "We worked with SAPS, the CSO, shopping mall security, and the banking sector."

The victim's car was located at Sandton City. The vehicle was monitored, and at about 18:15, two suspects were apprehended leaving the mall.

"Further investigation led us to Alexandra, where we found the victim and arrested two more suspects."

Borach was unharmed, and was later reunited with his mother. "What CAP and the CSO did for me – it's a miracle," Glenda said.

Borach was taken to Milpark Hospital for observation.

Jammy confirmed that the suspects are alleged to be linked to other similar cases. "There are markers indicating a link," he said.

He urged community members to remain vigilant. "Maintain situational awareness in public spaces. Ensure vehicles have tracking systems and phones have tracking apps. And if something

Continued on page 2 >>

## Red Cross reckoning



Former hostages Aviva and Keith Siegel lead a bus load of supporters to South Africa's International Red Cross headquarters in Pretoria this week to hand over their demands. See page 3

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Sally Rooney says she'll donate to Palestine Action despite risking terrorism charges

Bestselling Irish author Sally Rooney has pledged to donate the proceeds from BBC productions of her novels to Palestine Action, a pro-Palestinian activist group in the United Kingdom that was designated a terrorist organisation in July.

"I, too, support Palestine Action," wrote Rooney in an OpEd published in *The Irish Times* on Saturday. "If this makes me a 'supporter of terror' under UK law, so be it."

Rooney has long been a fierce critic of Israel. In October 2021, Rooney decided not to publish her novel *Beautiful World, Where Are You?* with an Israeli publishing house because she supports a boycott of Israel, and three years later, she signed a letter accusing Israel of committing genocide and pledging to boycott all Israeli literary institutions.

Now, Rooney is pledging the residual fees from the BBC film adaptations of her novels *Normal People* and *Conversations with Friends* to "supporting Palestine Action and direct action against genocide in whatever way I can".



The announcement follows a government decision to ban Palestine Action under the Terrorism Act last month after its activists broke into a Royal Air Force base and spray-painted two planes to protest against Britain's support for Israel.

The ban made Palestine Action the first direct action protest group to be categorised as a terror group in Britain, a status it shares with organisations such as Hamas and al-Qaeda. A member of the Irish rap group Kneecap was charged under the Terrorism Act in May for displaying a Hezbollah flag at a concert in London last year.

Rooney's pledge to support Palestine Action may open her up to legal trouble in the UK, a legal expert told *The Guardian*.

Rooney said she was prepared for any consequences. "Activists who disrupt the flow of weapons to a genocidal regime may violate petty criminal statutes, but they uphold a far greater law and a more profound human imperative: to protect a people and culture from annihilation," she wrote in the OpEd.

• All briefs supplied by JTA

Four arrested after surge in Joburg kidnapping

>>Continued from page 1

happens, call CAP immediately – speed is critical."

The arrests follow several other incidents, including one three weeks earlier. On 30 July, 22-year-old Kira Scop and a male friend were ambushed outside her father's Sydenham home at about 20:30. They were chatting in his white Audi A3 vehicle, when a Toyota Avanza boxed them in. Three armed men then surrounded their vehicle. The attackers initially tried to separate them into two vehicles, but after the young man protested, they relented and shoved both into the Toyota.

"They hurled me into the Toyota, shouted, swore, and pointed guns," Scop said. "One suspect touched me inappropriately. I was scared and even wet myself, which made him stop. They kept demanding all our banking details, personal information, and PIN numbers."

Scop, who once worked in CAP's call and dispatch centre, drew on her training to stay somewhat composed. "I felt weirdly prepared for this kind of thing, having played out all kinds of scenarios in my head, although the fear is real. I knew how to take note of details. My family is on Life360, and my dad thought something may have been wrong when

he saw me moving towards Alexandra on the app. He called me, but the suspect forced me to answer the call and lie to him, saying that I was fine." She recalls him being shocked that her father even knew where she was.

Eventually, the suspects dropped them near Alexandra Police Station. They walked through dark streets, past shebeens, before finding help. It took her a while to remember family cellphone numbers due to shock. No one knew of their kidnapping until she got hold of her father later that evening, which then led to their swift rescue by CAP and the CSO.

"Trauma is real," Scop said. "Always let someone know where you are, stay alert, and trust your instincts if something feels off. Establish code words with family that can be used over the phone," she advises.

Another Johannesburg businessman, who wishes to remain anonymous, was held up at a red traffic light with his young son on the corner of Arkwright Avenue and 4th Street, Wynberg, at 18:30 on 21 July.

"They pulled my son and me into the back and shoved our heads down, demanding all my banking details which they accessed on my phone, even demanding I change daily withdrawal amounts," he said.

Eventually, they were driven to a cemetery in Alexandra, and left there. The keys were still in the car. It took minutes

before cash was withdrawn.

"They don't want your car, they want your cash, and they are very sophisticated. I don't know what the answer is. Our cellphones leave us massively exposed," he said.

His only advice when stationary at a traffic light is to leave enough space to manoeuvre to make a getaway. Infuriatingly, he said, the

trauma is exacerbated when dealing with banking institutions following such an incident. He's still amazed that he can track his air pods to a place in Alexandra, and police have yet to do anything about it. "The threat has diminished greatly, that's what the data shows," Jammy said.

"However, we need to remain vigilant and be sensible."



Kira Scop



Rowan Borach

Photos: Ilan Ossendryver

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Charity is central to Jewish life

The world rests on kindness. *Tzedakah*, meaning "justice" or "righteousness", teaches that giving to others is the honest and just path. Time, knowledge, or even a smile can all be forms of charity.

Joy helps us carry the load

A Texas teacher recently made headlines with an unusual announcement to parents: no more homework. She explained that homework doesn't significantly improve student performance and should be reserved only for classwork not completed in school. Instead, she wanted her students to use their time at home to be with family, enjoy recreation, and experience life in ways that a classroom can't offer – bonding with parents; seeing real-life applications of learning; and developing responsibility naturally.

The Torah, too, recognises that life's greatest lessons often take place outside the formal *beit medrash*. In this week's parsha, Re'eh, we find such an example with the *mitzvah of ma'aser sheni*.

*Ma'aser sheni* is a tithe that the owner eats, unlike other tithes given to the poor or the Levite. The one condition? It must be eaten in Jerusalem. For a farmer with 10 000 bundles, that meant hauling 1 000 bundles to the holy city – no small task!

The Torah offers a solution: "And if the road will be too long, because you will not be able to carry it, then you may exchange it for money. Take the money to Jerusalem, and spend it on whatever your heart desires – cattle, flocks, wine, or other food – and eat it there before Hashem, rejoicing with your family." (Devarim 14:24-26)

By redeeming the produce for money, the owner avoided the logistical headache and could

still support the merchants of Jerusalem.

But the wording is curious. Shouldn't the verse say, "You can't carry it because the road is too long"? Instead, it says, "The road will be too long because you will not be able to carry it."

This reversal contains a profound insight.

Rav Moshe Feinstein once met an affluent Jew whose father had emigrated to America before Sabbath protections existed in the workplace. His father, unwavering in Shabbat observance, went from job to job after being told not to return if he wouldn't work on Saturdays.

Yet the son was no longer observant. Rav Moshe asked why. The man's reply was telling, "My father never missed Shabbat. But before each *mitzvah*, he would sigh, 'Oy, iz shver tzu zain a frummer Yid' [It's hard to be a religious Jew]. After hearing that all my life, I decided I didn't want the burden."

The Torah's phrasing now makes sense: the road feels long because you've decided the load is too heavy. When *mitzvot* are seen as a joy, the journey shortens. When they're seen as a burden, even a short road feels endless.

Rav Feinstein taught that if we approach *mitzvot* with a smile and enthusiasm, we don't just carry them ourselves, we carry them forward for generations.

As we approach Elul, as we prepare for the Yamim Nora'im, let's take the road with joy and pride, not groans and sighs. That attitude might just make the journey – and the generations – last forever.

Torah Thought

Rabbi Alon Friedman  
Yeshiva Mizrahi



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# Siegels demand urgent action from Red Cross

GILANA LAB

Former hostages, South African-born Aviva Siegel and her husband, Keith, went into the Red Cross South African head office in Pretoria on Monday, 18 August, to demand urgent humanitarian action for the remaining 50 hostages in Gaza.

Red Cross representatives finally acknowledged the plight of those still being held hostage in Gaza, according to South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) National Chairperson Craig Pantanowitz, who was with the Siegels and Bafana Modise from South African Friends of Israel in the meeting with the Red Cross.

They went to deliver a clear message that the world cannot stand by while 50 innocent people remain in Gaza's tunnels, deprived of their most basic humanitarian rights.

The memorandum the Siegels handed over to the Red Cross demanded that it fulfil its mandate under the Geneva Convention to secure access to the hostages; verify their conditions; provide urgent medical assistance; restore family contact; and insist on humane treatment.

"Their representatives were gracious in hosting us and sensitive to what was being said by Keith and Aviva," said Pantanowitz. Keith shared details of fellow hostages he had been with in the tunnels, describing who needed what care and the nature of their injuries.



Keith and Aviva Siegel, and Craig Pantanowitz at the Red Cross South African head office in Pretoria

Photos: Ian Ossendryver

to the ICRC's offices. On the bus were the Siegels, and many from the Jewish community, civil society leaders, faith leaders, and political representatives.

The Siegels' testimony gave the protest its moral force.

Both were abducted from their home in Israel on 7 October 2023. Aviva endured 51 days in Hamas captivity, while Keith was held for an unimaginable 484 days underground. Their voices carried the pain of those still suffering.

The original bus planned for the journey, decorated with "Bring Them Home" posters, Israeli flags, yellow ribbons, and displays tracking the days of captivity, broke down, forcing passengers to use a replacement vehicle. For Keith, however, the

double-decker bus – with its enclosed lower level and small windows – triggered a panic attack, necessitating that he travel in a private car.

The group had to remove all the decorations from the second bus as the owner of the company didn't want any alignment to either side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which delayed the trip.

However, the bus and its passengers carried a clear message: the world cannot remain passive while 50

innocent people remain trapped in Gaza, deprived of their most basic human rights. Despite the Red Cross's acknowledgement in Pretoria this week, more than 683 days have passed since the abductions, and the ICRC has yet to assist, see, or provide medical care to any of the hostages.



While Keith and Aviva were making their voices heard inside, a group of protesters were making their voices heard outside, singing on the street corner, "Am Yisrael Chai"; Hatikva; the South African national anthem; as well as chanting, "Bring them home, now!" in English and Zulu to gain more attention from those driving or walking past.

Waving Israeli flags, holding yellow balloons, wearing t-shirts with captives' faces on the front, and showcasing various posters, the protesters had a lot of interaction with passersby, positive and negative.

People drove past honking their horns to show solidarity with the cause, however some honks were aimed to get the protesters' attention to shouts of, "Free Palestine!" Others held out the middle finger, which urged protesters to sing louder and with more passion.

Political leaders and civil society representatives stood firmly with the Siegel family. Norman Fana Mkhonza, representing Reverend Kenneth Meshoe and the African



In response, the Red Cross gave a clear commitment that it would "do everything in its power to get assistance to these people", Pantanowitz told the SA Jewish Report. The Red Cross also emphasised that while its people in Gaza "absolutely do want to help" and "do not take political sides", the reality is that Hamas makes it "incredibly difficult" to get access to the hostages, Pantanowitz said. "It's not a lack of will, they stressed, but an almost impossible situation created by those in control."

"They took comprehensive notes of what Keith and Aviva had to say, promising to pass their testimony on to the Red Cross head office in Geneva urgently. They conveyed that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is desperate to help, though they didn't provide a timeline or guarantee of a response, acknowledging that Aviva had previously met with the head of the Red Cross in Geneva. At no point were they combative, antagonistic, or dismissive," Pantanowitz said.

The SAZF organised the "Bring the Hostages Home" solidarity bus ride from Johannesburg



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# Jewish teen traumatised by airline clerk's accusations

TALI FEINBERG

A young Jewish woman, Sarah\*, flying to Israel from South Africa on 11 August was left traumatised when a clerk at the Ethiopian Airlines (EA) check-in desk allegedly accused her of going

to Israel to join the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

He also allegedly took photos of her passport with his personal phone, and demanded to see proof of a return flight from Israel to prove that she wasn't travelling there to join the army.

The family of the 18-year-old woman has asked to remain anonymous for fear of negative reprisals following the disturbing incident. The family are originally South African, however Sarah was born in Australia. She had travelled from Australia to Israel to do a 10-month youth programme for Australians and South Africans.

Then, this month, she came to South Africa for a week to celebrate her grandfather's 90th birthday with her extended family. But when she arrived for her early-morning flight back to Tel Aviv to rejoin her programme, she encountered an aggressive response at the check-in counter.

Ethiopian Air Country Manager Bisrat Tedla told the SA Jewish Report that EA values its close relationship with the South African Jewish community, and that such an incident is unacceptable.

"The clerk accused my daughter of being Israeli and hiding this fact," says Sarah's father.

"He asked her where her Israeli passport was, and pressured her to 'confess' that she was going to Israel to join the military." Sarah was flying on her Australian passport, and is not in any way Israeli.

"I truly believe that if we didn't have proof of a return flight to Melbourne, he wouldn't have allowed her to get on that plane," says her dad. "I must add that Sarah has dark hair and an olive complexion, and the clerk may have assumed she was Israeli on that basis."

The family maintains that the clerk demanded to see that Sarah had a future flight out of Israel to prove that she wasn't going there permanently to join the IDF. Sarah became increasingly

distressed, messaging her dad for help. Eventually, airport staff allowed him to join his daughter at the check-in counter.

"I hadn't planned to book Sarah's return flight yet as she wasn't sure if she was going to travel more in Israel or elsewhere after the programme," says her father. "However, I recently saw a good deal on a return ticket to Melbourne, and booked it. Because of that stroke of luck, we were able to prove to the employee that Sarah wasn't going to Israel permanently, and he finally let her board the flight."

passenger normal profiling questions per the standard because she was travelling using an Australian passport, for example, 'What is the purpose of your travel? For how long? Do you have an ETA [estimated time of arrival]?'

"He remembered that she told him that her travel purpose was to participate on a religious programme," said Soobramoney. "After that, he asked her to show him her ETA and her return ticket as per the destination country requirement. She provided him [with these] from her phone,



Sarah's father was highly disturbed to see the employee take photos of his daughter's passport with his personal cellphone, knowing that these photos could now be posted on social media and shared far and wide.

However, because the situation felt so tenuous and the clerk was so aggressive, he decided not to question it at the counter. He plans to raise the entire incident with the airline after he returns to Australia.

After a week of such *simcha* and joy, he said, it broke his heart to see his daughter attacked because of her religion, and the fact that it left her shaken and tearful. Instead of sending his daughter back to Israel in high spirits, they had to part ways under deeply unsettling circumstances.

and for our records, he took a picture of her return ticket from her phone and continued the check-in process.

"As per standard profiling procedures, any foreign national passenger travelling to a country that is not their residence is required to provide a return or onward ticket based on international regulations," said Soobramoney. "This indicates that if you aren't an Israeli passport holder, as a traveller of a different nationality, you are required to have a return/onward ticket if you do not reside in the country. This was the scenario that transpired on the date, and he confirmed that the passenger was asked no other questions."

South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) spokesperson, Rolene Marks, says the SAZF is "deeply concerned by reports of discriminatory treatment of a young Jewish traveller at OR

**No passenger should be subjected to intimidation, unfounded accusations, or inappropriate demands by airline staff.**

"We have made a preliminary investigation, but what has been done is procedural," says Tedla. "If we get additional information, particularly substantiated with evidence that can prove differently, we will further investigate and take appropriate corrective action."

EA's lead customer services representative, Meshech Soobramoney, conducted the investigation. "We had a one-to-one engagement with the staff member who performed the check-in-process for the said pax [passenger]," he said.

"The agent confirmed that he asked the

Tambo International Airport. No passenger should be subjected to intimidation, unfounded accusations, or inappropriate demands by airline staff.

"Such incidents not only cause unnecessary distress, they raise serious questions about professional conduct and respect for travellers' rights," she says. "We call on Ethiopian Airlines and airport authorities to take steps to ensure that all passengers are treated with dignity, fairness, and without prejudice."

\* not her real name.

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# South African Jewish Report

## Compromising times



It is awesome to witness hundreds of Johannesburg Jews descend on the Indaba Hotel for the annual Limmud experience. I looked around me on Friday evening as Shabbat was about to begin, and I saw so many different people, ages, contrasting perspectives, divergent attitudes, varied political leanings, views on Israel, levels of religiosity, and I could go on. It was uplifting and inspiring.

The point is, Limmud is a melting pot of South African Jews, and, in that, it's simply beautiful. What's more is that there is such a variety of fascinating people giving talks and holding panel discussions, that the most difficult decision on the weekend is which talks to choose.

And every year, I suffer from terrible FOMO (fear of missing out) as I choose one talk over another. I generally focus on international guest speakers because I feel like I won't get another chance to hear what they have to say. Also, I assume they are going to give me information I wouldn't otherwise have access to.

The only problem with that way of thinking is that the local speakers are generally experts in their fields, and they have done massive amounts of research before giving these talks. So, missing out on them is seriously missing out! Our own chairperson, Howard Sackstein, fills an auditorium at the same time as the "What the hell is happening in Israeli politics" panel discussion with journalists from the far left to the far right. And those happen to be only two of the eight sessions held at the same time.

I mean, the thought of missing out on hearing the inimitable Gus Silber convincing me how ChatGPT is actually Jewish, or the erudite Dr Jordan Moshe speaking about Agatha Christie and the Jews, is a real tough ask.

Don't think for a moment that the speakers are there to preach to the choir. Nope, many of them challenge the very core of our beliefs and knowledge base. I spent time in therapeutic discussion with the wise journalist, writer, and peacemaker, Ittay Flescher, after listening to *Haaretz* journalist Nir Hasson speaking about Gaza, Jerusalem, and the tough issues Israelis face right now.

It's not easy to get our heads around facts that tamper with the very core of our beliefs about Israel, however important they are. The reality is that however you look at it, tens of thousands of people have died in this war. Gaza has been destroyed, infrastructure and all.

As we all know, nothing is simple or clear in the murk of war. However, no matter who you are, it is not easy to hear about the devastation wrought in Gaza at the hands of Israel. No matter that Israel is faced with so many "choiceless choices" – a term I heard used by South African Jewish Board of Deputies chair Karen Milner in our discussions over this – it's still not easy.

And having access to knowledgeable people to thrash out the issues you are battling with is yet another of the joys of Limmud.

While listening and learning about what was happening in Israel, on Sunday, Israel was brought to a veritable standstill – or so it was apparent in the news – because of a nationwide strike. About one million people got involved in the strike or protests throughout the country. They were calling for an end to the war, and a deal to secure the release of the remaining 50 hostages, at least 20 of whom are still alive.

It's believed to have been the largest protest in Israel in 22 months of war. I



appreciate that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu criticised the protests, saying they could harden Hamas's stance and slow down the release of the hostages. However, Israelis are *gatvol*. They are desperate for the war to end now. They want to be able to recover and find a way back to their old lives. They don't want their sons, husbands, and fathers to go back to Gaza.

Many of them haven't even got to the point of suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder because they are still in the trauma. There's too much death and destruction in this war. Too many people have been killed, lost homes, and are living indefinitely with trauma. It's just too much!

I appreciate that politicians may not have secured all they want in their end-of-war negotiations, but as human beings, most Israelis believe this war has gone on too long. It's enough!

Going back to Limmud, a term that kept coming up for me was "compromise", and how that is the only way we get through so many difficult situations. Compromise isn't easy because it implies that both sides give a little of what they don't want to give in order to reach a worthwhile solution.

Compromise is uncomfortable because it doesn't mean getting all that you want, it means getting a fair amount of it by giving some of it away. It has to come from both sides.

I'm not sitting in the negotiations, and I don't know in truth who is actually holding up the end to this war or why, but I have no doubt that compromise is the way to a real solution. And the time is now!

**Shabbat shalom!**

**Peta Krost**  
Editor

## The general in Iran – strategic or stupid?

OPINION

SARA GON



Given the precarious state of the relationship between South Africa and the United States, the visit to Iran by the chief of the South African National Defence Force, General Rudzani Maphwanya, was seemingly a diplomatic blunder of huge proportions.

Alternatively, it was business as usual for an inept African National Congress (ANC) that is unable to make any of the right decisions for the benefit of its benighted people.

Maphwanya met the new chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi. Mousavi's predecessor was killed in an Israeli airstrike a few days earlier. The position is answerable directly to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Also present was Major General Amir Hatami, who has been appointed chief commander of the army, the position previously held by Mousavi.

Hatami, after acknowledging that the two countries were bound by anti-colonial, anti-arrogance, and justice-driven principles, advised that South Africa had a "prioritised position" in Iran's foreign policy approach.

Apparently, they discussed enhancing joint military co-operation and common goals, and that the political alignment between the two countries had lent South Africa a special position in Iran's strategic outreach to Africa.

Hatami expressed the hope that this would result in "concrete joint [military] projects".

According to Iranian state media, Maphwanya compounded an already ill-advised venture by saying that he conveyed the greetings of South Africa's president and defence minister, affirming that the Republic of South Africa and the Islamic Republic of Iran had "common goals".

"We always stand alongside the oppressed and defenceless people of the world," said Maphwanya. He concluded by saying that there was longstanding mutual respect between Tehran and Pretoria, and called for deeper defence ties. This inversion of truth is truly Orwellian, and it's what should disgust us most.

The key bone of contention for US President Donald Trump is over South Africa's warm relationship with Iran. Iran is the key sponsor of terror globally, and the driving force of support for Hamas in its attack on Israel on 7 October 2023.

In our case, the spearheading of the "genocide" case against Israel at the International Court of Justice is particularly egregious for the Trump administration.

Hezbollah, Iran's main proxy, was also behind the bombings of the US embassy in Beirut, and the marine barracks in 1983, in which more than 300 people died. Hezbollah is a proscribed organisation in the US and many other Western countries.

The meeting between the South Africans and the Iranians, at this particular juncture in our attempts – so far unsuccessful – to reset SA-US relations, has been described as outrageous. The kindest description has been that it was an "unforced error", and this is probably the most accurate.

It's bad enough for our president and the ANC in government to espouse negative views about America at present, but to cosy up to Iran indicating an intent to turn us into a geostrategic enemy of the US at the tip of Africa, is apparently crazy.

However, it's just a reflection of the ANC's policy in its relationship with Iran. All it does is confirm what has been obvious since before 7 October 2023 when Hamas launched its Iran-backed attack on Israel.

The Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco) maintains that, "It's crucial to clarify that the implementation of South Africa's foreign policy is the function of the Presidency, supported by Dirco." It went on to say that "the remarks attributed to General Maphwanya, therefore, do not represent the government's official foreign policy stance". Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Ronald Lamola will seek "further clarification", it said.

The Defence Department said much the same thing. "The Department of Defence and Military Veterans does not make political or policy decisions on international relations." Defence Minister Angie Motshekga took some days to confirm that she had authorised the trip.

It's noteworthy that neither department denied the formal nature of the trip, and when Motshekga did clarify the matter, she made it unabashedly clear that she had approved the trip last year. It had been postponed once, and went ahead now.

"The president didn't know the general was visiting Iran,

nor did he sanction the visit," Motshekga said. "The general's administrative process for travel approval starts and ends with the minister. As much as the president is the appointing authority, he does not get involved in supervising the general's travel. That process sits with the minister."

Motshekga, however, has also said that the general did nothing wrong. "It's a coincidence that it [the trip] coincides with the tensions between Iran and the US, and that we are negotiating on tariffs," she said. "This invitation is from last year. I sanctioned it last year. The event was postponed, and they then communicated back to say, 'Let's continue', but the visit had already been sanctioned."

So, we know that Motshekga sanctioned the trip a while ago, her department organised it, and Ramaphosa may not have known that it was taking place when it did. We can't be sure that he didn't know about it at all.

Ramaphosa's spokesperson said that he vehemently denied knowing anything about the trip, and he described the general's comments as "unhelpful".

"Unhelpful" is probably the most telling description of the general's comments. It did not mean that the comments were incorrect or that he had acted outside of his mandate as representing neither Dirco nor Defence.

This trip became an outrage only when the public came to hear about the details from the Iranians at the very time that the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition was trying to put a further trade proposal to the US to attempt a reset of the very poor relationship with the Trump administration.

Chris Hattingh, the Democratic Alliance's (DA's) defence spokesperson, said, "This is not the role of a military chief. Foreign policy is the domain of the elected Government of National Unity [GNU], and must be conducted through the Department of International Relations and Cooperation, not by an unelected general freelancing on the world stage."

Hattingh said "publicly embracing a sanctioned regime with a track record of regional destabilisation" would only deepen South Africa's "diplomatic isolation, risk retaliatory measures, and worsen our economic vulnerabilities".



South African National Defence Force General Rudzani Maphwanya with chief of staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi

"South Africa cannot afford to have its international standing further sabotaged by political adventurism from the military's top brass," he said.

It may look like "political adventurism" to most of us, but it is at one with the Presidency and Dirco's diplomatic approach to Tehran. What caused the outrage was, first, that it had the misfortune for the government of coinciding with our ongoing tensions with the US – a case of really bad timing.

Second, it gives credence to why the ANC has doggedly kept international relations away from any of its partners in the GNU. It wants to conduct a relationship with a regime that in every respect should be avoided like the plague.

The DA has called for Maphwanya to face court martial, and for Motshekga to be fired. Neither is likely to happen. It probably hadn't occurred to Motshekga that the diplomatic wisdom of the trip at this fraught time should have been canvassed with the president and Dirco.

However, the general will be allowed to stay on until the end of the year to retire officially, and nothing will happen to Motshekga.

The embarrassment of this whole affair is unlikely to cause the Trump administration to take any more serious action against the ANC. It's more likely to confirm its already negative view of South Africa. Strategically, it's likely to give further impetus to anything that may be coming the ANC's way already.

• Sara Gon is an independent political commentator.

# Jewish Agency head cancels SA visit amid tensions

STEVEN GRUZD

Jewish Agency head, Israeli Major General (reserves) Doron Almog, decided at the last minute not to fly to Johannesburg from Israel to attend Limmud last week out of concern about potential harassment from the South African government.

“It was entirely my own decision not to go to South Africa,” Almog told the *SA Jewish Report* from his home in Israel. “I didn’t need the embarrassment of being questioned by the South African administration or the police. I thought this was a very sensitive time,” he said, “as the head of the Jewish Agency while South Africa is pursuing its totally untrue ‘genocide’ case against Israel. It’s no secret I was a major general in the Israel Defense Forces and had command in Gaza previously.”

Almog, who was scheduled to speak at Limmud Johannesburg on Sunday, 17 August, about his journey from the battlefield to healing, said changing his mind about coming was a precaution more than anything. Considering the government’s case against Israel at the International Court of Justice and its general hostility towards Israel, it seemed to him the smart thing to do.

Almog admits that the pall of 7 October 2023 hangs over him, as it does over all Israelis and Jews. He lost two family members, murdered by Hamas on Kibbutz Kfar Aza, a kilometre from the Gaza border. They were among the 1 200 slaughtered and more than 250 captured that day. Agam Goldstein-Almog, aged 17, was taken with her mother, Chen, and her two younger brothers, Gal and Tal. Her father, Nadav, and sister, Yam, were killed in the attack. The surviving hostages were released after 51 days.

Almog was unequivocal about Israel’s

subsequent war against Hamas in Gaza, where more than 60 000 people have been killed. “Our war is justified,” he said. “Who initiated this war? It started with 7 October. They still have our hostages. The people are still in trauma. Hamas has never changed its approach or ideology. For Hamas, there is no place for a Jewish state between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River.”

He pointed out that just four hostages from Gaza were returned by military operation; all the others were freed by negotiation through mediators. “We need a deal and then to fight Hamas. They want an international guarantee that Israel won’t continue fighting. But there’s no guarantee that Hamas stops fighting either.”

He said Hamas had taken billions of aid dollars to build a network of terror tunnels and stockpile deadly weapons rather than feed, clothe, and educate its population. Only 30% of the tunnel network has been destroyed. Israel has been fighting a difficult war in dense urban terrain for almost two years. He argued that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) maintains the highest ethical standards, and does its best to avoid civilian casualties.

Despite the war on seven fronts – Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, Libya Syria, Iraq, and Iran – Almog remarked that more than 47 000 Jews had made aliya since 7 October. “They are coming to live in the world’s most threatened country. It’s not logical or rational. But for 2 000 years, we have prayed every day to Jerusalem.”

He does, however, acknowledge that Israel is “poor at explaining to the world what is happening here”. The global wave of antisemitism and hate against Israel is “totally unjustified”, said Almog. “Israel is showing power and restraint.”

For Almog, it’s the memory and inspiration of two young men – his late brother, Eran, and his late son, named after him – that animate him. This decorated soldier and winner of the Israel Prize is a champion of rights for people with disabilities, and since 2022, has headed the Jewish Agency.

Almog’s first battle was the 1973 Yom Kippur War. At the age of 22, Doron lost his brother, Eran, fighting Syrians in the Golan Heights.

Eran was left bleeding in a field for seven days before his body was recovered. “I swore never to leave any wounded soldier behind. I dedicated my 34 years of service in the IDF to my bleeding brother.

That was the reason for my long military service – not a love of killing or the battlefield.”

Doron was the first soldier to land in the Entebbe Raid in 1976 in Uganda, when 105 Israeli hostages were heroically rescued from Palestinian terrorists who had hijacked their aeroplane. He also worked for years in Sudan to help evacuate Ethiopian Jews to Israel.

Almog gave his deceased brother’s name to his son, Edan, who was born with autism and a severe brain injury. “He never spoke a single word, and died at the age of 23, but he

was the greatest professor in my life. He was stereotyped, stigmatised, and called ‘retarded’.” He believes that his brother’s spirit entered his son’s life for 23 years, living as a wounded person, “shouting in the silence”. It was up to Doron to honour both these young men’s lives.

“My son was badly treated, and I wanted to establish a place for people with disabilities in Israel that would be loving, inclusive, and professional.”

It was the inspiration for him to build such a village in the south, named ADI Negev-Nahalat Eran.

“This, too, was about never leaving the wounded, the weakest, behind,” Almog said.

He has also built a hospital at ADI Negev-Nahalat Eran that treats severely injured soldiers, where the latest medical technologies, prosthetics, and robotics are tested.

Almog urged South African Jews to continue supporting Israel, praying for it, visiting it, and raising funds for it. He pledged to give the utmost assistance to anyone making aliya. “Israel is still the most secure place for Jews despite the brutal aggression of 7 October and the thousands of missiles fired at us by all our enemies,” he said. “We have stamina. We have courage. And we welcome every Jew in these times of growing antisemitism.”



Israeli Major General (reserves) Doron Almog

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# Alcatraz t-shirt inspires intercontinental swimming feat

LEE TANKLE

**W**hen Milton Brest saw a man wearing an "I swam Alcatraz" shirt on a London Tube 22 years ago, it inspired him to follow a path that would lead to him completing his first intercontinental swim series in May this year.

Though his love affair with swimming began back then, his around-the-world series was conducted over the past 12 years, culminating on 3 May 2025 with a combined 42.28km in varying conditions.

Brest was always an active person, however, he was never that interested in swimming. His focus was on karate. But when he saw that man in the t-shirt in London in 2003, he went up to him and heard that there was a race at Alcatraz, and the rest is history.

He started swimming in open water, including doing the Robben Island Crossing four times. At the time, he wasn't aiming for the intercontinental series.

"I never planned for this to be a series. I started with crossing [the Strait of Gibraltar], and then from there, we just wanted to go around the world basically, to go from one continent to the next. I've seen places that we've never been to or dreamed of going to before," Brest told the *SA Jewish Report*. "It's just the most incredible feeling. You can't explain it to anybody. When you start, you think to yourself, this is what I wanted to do, and it's just the most incredible feeling."

His first swim, which sparked the rest of his swims, was the 14.4km Strait of Gibraltar crossing, from Tarifa, Spain, to Almansa Point, Morocco. Brest completed this swim on 9 September 2013 in three hours, 17 minutes. This swim ticked off the Europe to Africa leg of his intercontinental series.

The next swim was from Asia to North America with a 3.8km assisted crossing from Big Diomed Island in Russia to Little Diomed Island in Alaska in the United States, on 30 July 2014 in one hour, nine minutes across the Bering Strait. He and the other swimmers with him completed the 3.8km in cold open water with a wetsuit across strong currents while navigating challenging geopolitical and environmental conditions. He was escorted by a safety vessel and support crew for navigation and emergency readiness.

"It was cold. We started with 3.2 degree waters," Brest said. "We were still in the water when it got to two degrees. There were even walrus there."

Brest said that throughout his intercontinental swims, which have been fairly spread out, sometimes with years in between them, he has always trained with his group. He travels to various open-water lakes around Johannesburg so that he can stay in shape for his next swim, whenever that may be.

"I go to a sports scientist twice a week. And I train four times a week. I have a group of guys that I swim with. We train in Morningside, but it's different swimming in a pool compared to open water. But when it's summer, we'll go to Cradle Moon, and we'll go to some dams outside here," Brest said.

For him, swimming is the last step in the whole process, with the administration needed to do the swims sometimes harder than the swims

themselves.

"We must plan. We've got to get the police to give us clearances, we've got to get home affairs to give us clearances; and only then can we go to these places to swim," he said.

He completed the Samsung Bosphorus Cross-Continental Swimming Race, one of the most iconic open-water swims, on 26 July 2015. The 6.5km crossing from Kanlıca, Anatolia, to Kuruçeşme, Istanbul, in Turkey was swum in one hour, 14 minutes, 52 seconds in 22 to 24-degree water.

"The race is one of the most iconic open water swims globally, drawing thousands of swimmers annually to traverse the natural waterway that links two continents. I competed in the 60 to 69 age group, finishing third under clear skies with optimal water conditions and mild currents for a swift and safe crossing."

Four years later, on 2 August 2019, he completed the Tiran Island Intercontinental Swim, a 10km crossing between Tiran Island in Saudi Arabia to Ras Gamila in Egypt, in one hour, 40 minutes on the first leg, and two hours, two minutes on the second leg.

"The water was clear," he said, "and you saw these little tropical fish. It was warm as



Milton Brest after a swim in Colombia with master diver Juan Carlos Blanco (left) and coast guard Sanguino Reyes Javier

well, so it made it a great swim."

This was the first officially recorded swim on this route across tectonic plates, verified by Captain Kelvin Brian Deacon of Sinai Blues Diving and Water Sports Centre, with an intercontinental swim between Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The swim started at Tiran Island on the Arabian Plate together with Tyrel Manson and Neil Ralphs in a tandem swim. The turnaround point was Ras Gamila in Egypt on the African Plate.

The Panama to Colombia Intercontinental Swim was completed on 18 April 2023, when Brest swam 4.39km from La Miel, Panama, in North America to Sapzurro, Colombia, in South America in one hour, 22 minutes in the Caribbean's 27 to 29-degree water. Brest said that in every country he has been to, he has had to find

someone to guide and swim with them.

"In Colombia, I had a master diver who took me nearly three years to find. The complication of the other swims is that you've got to find somebody who can take you and be with you because you can't go to the sea by yourself. You've got to have support. We had the Coast Guard with us."

The swim which completed this intercontinental series was the Papua New Guinea to Indonesia Intercontinental Swim, a 3.19km crossing from Sandaun in Papua New Guinea to Jalan Skouw in Indonesia. Brest completed this swim on 3 May 2025 in one hour, 13 minutes in 29-degree water.

Once he finished this series, he sent all of his documentation to the World Open Water Swimming Federation so that he could get this series verified, making it easier for any swimmer in the future who wishes to do it.

"It paves the way for other swimmers to do what I've done," he said. "Now it's easy because I can advise others. There was nobody to advise me where to go and what to do, so I can do that for others."

## Israel's proposed tax changes: your days are numbered

OPINION

MICHAEL KRANSDORFF



**S**pending Pesach in Jerusalem; making a few business trips to Tel Aviv; or celebrating the *chaggim* with your Israeli family over Sukkot? Those frequent visits of more than 75 days a year could now make you an Israeli tax resident, whether you planned it or not.

The Israeli Ministry of Finance has put forward sweeping proposals that will fundamentally change how Israeli tax residency is determined. For South African families who regularly visit children living in Israel, travel for business, or maintain vacation homes, these policy changes could have significant financial consequences.

Until now, residency in Israel was assessed using the "centre-of-life" test – a qualitative evaluation of where your family, social, and economic ties are strongest. Time spent in Israel mattered, but it was not decisive. Those days are ending. The proposed legislation removes much of that flexibility, introducing clear numerical thresholds based on days spent in Israel over rolling three-year periods.

Under the draft, Israeli tax residency will automatically apply if an individual spends at least 75 days in Israel in a tax year and has at least 183 weighted days over three years, or spends at least 30 days with 140 weighted days if their spouse is already a resident. Weighted days are calculated by counting each day in the current year in full, one-third of a day in the adjacent year, and one-sixth of a day in the second adjacent year.

This leaves no room for argument. Spend on average more than four months a year in Israel? You're likely to be classified as an Israeli tax resident. Have a spouse who is already an Israeli resident? Three months a year on average could be enough. That's on average, but in some scenarios, depending on how you distribute your time over a three-year period, as few as 75 days in a single year could trigger automatic residency, or just 30 days if your spouse already qualifies.

For South Africans who have formally made aliya, these changes may actually be welcome. *Olim* can now access Israel's generous 10-year tax holiday while spending fewer days in Israel than ever before.

Consider David and Rachel, a retired Cape Town couple who made aliya but retained their Sea Point apartment to remain close to their South African grandchildren. Under the new rules, they could spend just four months a year in Israel yet still qualify for a decade of tax-free treatment on their South African pensions, interest income, and foreign investments.

With proper financial emigration from South Africa, they could effectively earn tax-free income for 10 years. Moreover, their non-South African assets would pass to heirs free of estate duty.

However, to unlock these benefits, it's essential to cease South African tax residency formally by financially emigrating with the South African Revenue Service. Without this step, South Africa continues to tax worldwide income, nullifying the Israeli advantage.

For those who have not made aliya, the situation is far less favourable. Take Moshe, a Johannesburg entrepreneur whose children live in Israel. His wife, Sarah, insisted on buying a small apartment in Netanya so they could visit regularly and help with the grandchildren. Although Sarah spends at least 18 weeks a year in Israel, neither she nor Moshe intends to leave South Africa permanently. Under current rules, Sarah's "centre of life" remains clearly in Johannesburg. Under the proposed rules, however, she risks automatic classification as an Israeli tax resident, liable for tax on her worldwide income without access to any tax holiday.

The double taxation agreement between South Africa and Israel may mitigate some exposure, but navigating it is complex and entails substantial reporting obligations.

While the legislation is still under consultation, the direction is clear: the Israeli tax authority is moving toward a system where every day in Israel is counted, weighted, and potentially decisive for your tax status. South Africans who visit Israel frequently must assess their travel patterns, understand the implications, and, if necessary, restructure their arrangements before the rules take effect.

These proposed changes are more than a technical adjustment; they represent a fundamental shift in how cross-border taxpayers will be treated by Israel. For South Africans with strong ties to Israel, the window to act is now. Proper planning, including making aliya and formal financial emigration from South Africa where appropriate, is essential to ensure that families can continue to maintain their cross-border lives while taking full advantage of Israel's tax incentives and avoiding the costly trap of falling into multiple tax nets.

• Michael Kransdorff is an international tax practitioner writing on behalf of the Institute of International Tax and Finance.

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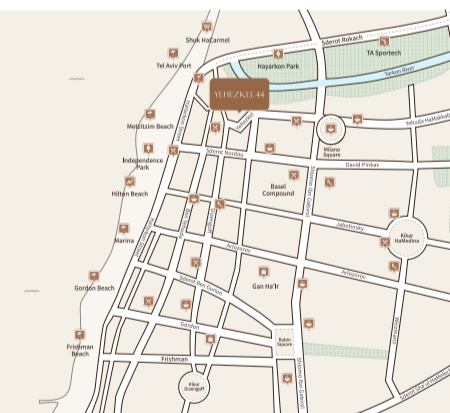
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# Waksman's tragic death saves multiple lives

NICOLA MILTZ

In the darkest hours of their lives, Lauren and Larry Waksman made a decision that would save others. Just days after their beloved 19-year-old son, Gavi, collapsed during a run and never regained consciousness, the devoted Orthodox couple chose to donate his organs, a rare decision in the community where awareness of organ donation is still limited and is often not considered an option.

"We both just knew," said Lauren. "He would have wanted this. Gavi was a giver. It made sense in that moment, even through the pain. It was who he was."

That choice, made in consultation with their rabbi, a social worker close to the family, and Dr Reuven Jacks, the medical director of Hatzolah and the Life2Life organ donation initiative, has already saved multiple lives.

The Beth Din, the office of the chief rabbi, and Life2Life work together to ensure that organ donation in South Africa is done in the best manner. Doctors from Life2Life work with local organ donor authorities to ensure that donation is done in accordance with the guidelines of the chief rabbinate of Israel, which accepts the view that brain-stem death is the true definition of death.

It was Thursday, 10 October 2024, two and a half years after Gavi's near-fatal myocarditis in May 2022. He had steadily rebuilt his life, embracing his passions – running, volleyball, soccer, and Torah learning – despite the lingering challenges of short-term memory loss. That day, he left home for a run, one of his greatest joys. Lauren tracked his route on a livestream WhatsApp location share, as she often did for peace of mind.

When he didn't return, she drove the short distance from home and found Hatzolah already there, working to save him. Another runner had spotted him in distress. He had suffered an arrhythmia with sudden cardiac arrest.

History felt like it was repeating itself. He was rushed to Milpark Hospital. This time, though, the situation became clear: Gavi wasn't going to wake up. It was the day before Yom Kippur.

On Friday, 18 October, their neurologist gently asked if Gavi had a living will or if he had ever spoken about organ donation.

"We looked at each other and knew. He would have wanted this. Gavi lived to give," said Larry.

Dr Jacks, who knew Gavi from Bnei Akiva camp in December 2022 having encouraged the family to send him there despite his medical history, and who kept an eye on him there, said he had quietly considered the possibility of donation, but waited before bringing it up. "It's never an easy thing to discuss at such a traumatic time, especially being close to the family," he said. "But when they approached me, I was relieved."

The urgency was immense. Organ donation is time-sensitive, and *yom tov* (Sukkot) was fast approaching the following Wednesday. Numerous tests were needed to meet strict *halachic* requirements, including extra confirmatory scans to ascertain brain-



Gavi and his parents, Lauren and Larry

stem death in line with the standards of the chief rabbinate of Israel.

Strict *halachic* procedure also required a *shomer* – a *halachically* observant person – in the operating theatre to supervise. Lauren's cousin, Rabbi Leron Bernstein, who lives in Israel and therefore observes only one day of *yom tov*, was trained by Dr Jacks to fulfil this role. There were no days to spare to preserve the organs.

Only their nearest and dearest were told about the decision. "We kept it quiet," said Larry. "We just needed to focus on what had to be done."

The family was asked if they wanted to wheel Gavi into theatre for their final goodbye. "It was the hardest thing in the world," says Lauren. "You don't expect to walk your child into theatre knowing you'll never see them alive again. But we knew this was his last *mitzvah* – his biggest *mitzvah*."

In life, Gavi had shown extraordinary resilience. After his first collapse, he endured a long recovery, even repeating a grade without his friends. "He never complained," said Lauren. "He just accepted it and showed up – always with a smile."

Letters written to him after his first incident told of his kindness. "One girl said she missed him because he was the only person who ever acknowledged and greeted her," Lauren said. "That was who Gavi was – he saw people."

Now, in his death, that kindness lives on – physically through those whose lives he has saved, and spiritually through countless acts in his memory. Family, friends, Bnei Akiva, King David Linksfield High School, Yeshiva Mizrahi, Aish Hatorah, and community members have been running races, playing volleyball, learning Torah, saying *tehillim*, and doing *chesed* and *mitzvot* in his honour.

Gavi leaves behind his younger brother, Benji, 16, and sister, Eliana, 10, who, like their parents, are deeply proud of the impact he has made.

It has taken time, but the Waksmans are now sharing their story in the hope of raising awareness about organ donation within the Jewish community. Larry has already spoken in shuls to Jewish audiences, talks that are deeply emotional but, he hopes, will spark much-needed conversations.

They want people to know that organ donation, when done in accordance with *halacha*, is possible, and that it can save lives.

Though rabbinic opinion on this issue remains divided globally, Life2Life ensures that in South Africa, those who follow the opinion allowing it can donate organs in strict accordance with *halacha*.

It operates under the guidance of the office of the chief rabbi and Johannesburg Beth Din, following the protocols of the chief rabbinate of Israel. A Life2Life doctor is present for the clinical determination of death; oversees an additional confirmatory scan; and remains in theatre to ensure that any unused organs are respectfully returned for burial.

Members of the community can now register as a Life2Life organ donor, and fill out a donor declaration form to ensure *halachic* compliance in line with the chief rabbinate of Israel's principles. For more information, contact Life2Life at 0860 222 234.

"We were so blessed to have him as our son," said Lauren. "We miss him every day. We're in Hashem's hands, and we try to live each day with gratitude because you never know what's going to happen. Gavi taught us that."

In life, Gavi gave his all. In death, he gave even more.

Hatzolah Chairperson Lance Abramson said Life2Life was founded on the Jewish principle that a person who saves a life saves an entire universe.

"Organ donation is one of the most sensitive and debated topics in Jewish law, centring on whether brain-stem death constitutes *halachic* death," he said.

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# ChatGPT's questioning nature – it's distinctly Jewish

LEE TANKLE

What would the Golem, created out of clay in Prague in 1580, and ChatGPT have in common? It may not seem like much, or nothing at all. However, the deeper one delves into the workings of ChatGPT, the more one can see that it resembles Jewish thought.

This, according to journalist, author, media trainer, and early adopter of digital technology Gus Silber, is because at the heart of many Jewish traditions lies the art of not providing answers, but asking more questions.

He told Limmud Johannesburg on 17 August, "When ChatGPT launched in November 2022, not even three years ago, many people focused on its ability to provide answers. But how often does it respond to your questions with more questions? I want to learn about AI (artificial intelligence), you may ask. Well, ChatGPT will respond by asking what specific aspects of AI you want to learn about.

"We live in an age of instant answers. Google can give us 381 million search results in 0.15 seconds. Our AI chatbots, ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, and Copilot, are capable of responding to us almost as soon as we hit send, or as soon as we finish saying what we want to say," he said, "We've built a world that promises immediate, ubiquitous solutions to every question we can think of. But what if I told you that the secret to true learning, human and artificial, isn't in the answers we receive, but in the questions we ask?"

Our modern, answer-obsessed culture has forgotten that it has been shaped by the most profound educational practices, particularly

the Jewish tradition of questioning everything, Silber said.

This tradition began in 399 BCE in ancient Athens, with Socrates, who developed a reputation for approaching people who claimed to be wise and knowledgeable. Rather than learn from these people, he would often ask more questions, making that person ultimately feel that they knew nothing at the end of their conversation.

"Socrates revealed to us a fundamental truth about learning, that real understanding begins not when we have answers, but when we discover better questions," said Silber. "So what we today call the Socratic method isn't just a method of teaching, it's a method of discovery."

This tradition of considering all perspectives didn't stay in study halls or on the pages of the Talmud, it became part of the Jewish community and how we think. "Finding balance in these arguments, holding multiple truths in tension without falling into either extreme – it's a process as delicate and precarious as a fiddler on the roof," said Silber.

"If you've ever watched ChatGPT or Claude work through a complex question, you'll see something strikingly familiar," Silber said. "The AI typically doesn't spit out the definitive answer. It weighs considerations, acknowledges different perspectives, and considers multiple angles before concluding. The AI that feels most natural to us has learned to think like Tevye, carefully weighing, not rushing to judge,



Gus Silber

"Instead of ending our curiosity with a fact, AI is extending our curiosity with a question. But the interesting thing about ChatGPT is that it's not just capable of asking questions. It can be prompted to be very Jewish, to argue with itself," said Silber.

AI tears apart its reasoning, offers counterarguments to its conclusions, and holds multiple truths in tension, just like Tevye. Said Silber, "This isn't a bug, it's a feature. By training on human text that includes debate, disagreement, and self-doubt, and no doubt the technology has been trained on the problem too."

Silber said AI systems have absorbed our capacity for cognitive dissonance. The answers that most engage us are the ones that rabbis discovered thousands of years ago – the fact that the most powerful response to a question isn't an answer, but rather another question.

"The most Jewish thing about ChatGPT isn't that it gives answers, it's that it can be taught to argue with itself," said Silber. "The answers will come, but first we have to learn to fall in love with the questions."

honouring the complexity of real questions."

Silber said the way ChatGPT works is almost like a conversation one would have with one's rabbi, a never-ending sequence of questions that get more specific as they move along.

## The terrible necessity of Israel's dark humour

LEE TANKLE

Saying something is too terrible to laugh at is like a doctor saying that a disease is too terrible to cure, said American-Israeli comedian, educator, and author Benji Lovitt.

Lovitt, who has been living in Israel since making aliya 19 years ago, told the audience at Limmud Johannesburg on 16 August that there was nothing that shouldn't be joked about, because if we don't laugh, we'll cry.

Lovitt, who had a book tour discussing Israel beyond the conflict scheduled to begin in the United States on 12 October 2023, realised that he had to change focus quickly, channel his inner Israeli, and cope using dark humour.

"Seven October was the worst day in Israel's history," he said, "And I thought, what am I going to do? No-one wants to talk about anything but the conflict. It was difficult not to be in Israel. It was awful. The only thing I could compare it to, at least as an American, was 9/11. And I thought, if I'm not in Israel, all I can do is try to raise people's spirits. That's what I do professionally: try to make people feel better."

Lovitt said that throughout Jewish history, we have laughed to keep from crying, and no-one knows that better than Israelis. Even in as dark a time as the Holocaust, some Jewish people sought to make light of their situation and laugh about it, which probably gave them hope and the reason to live another day. This is the Israeli mindset. Israelis have to find something to laugh at, even in the bad times, as it gives them some form of hope.

"Israel is a small country, but it's got a strong army; the start of a nation; it's the centre of innovation; but there are still deep scars. And no matter how

strong we are, when something like 7 October happens, it rips those scars open. And these scars are going to be open for a while."

Israelis, he said, have a dark sense of humour because they always speak their minds, and there are no taboos in society, so the bar for shock value is set higher than anywhere else in the world. This could be the reason why they can get away with making fun of some of the darkest figures in Jewish history such as a sketch mocking the execution of Adolf Eichmann and the inefficiency of Israeli bureaucracy.

"Think about when you drink alcohol. The more you drink, the higher your tolerance gets. It takes more alcohol to feel the same thing. So, if you've not been exposed to in-your-face comedy, it's going to be shocking. But for Israelis, when they're already very blunt and direct, it's going to take that much more of a shock to create great comedy."

Lovitt said that since he didn't grow up with war humour in the US, getting into the mindset of doing it was a lot harder. However, now, he sees it as a way of life.

"I thought, how could war be funny? Believe me, you come to Israel, and you find out real quick."

Ten years ago, when he did a show on the worst day of Operation Protective Edge in 2014, in which 14 soldiers died, he didn't know how to laugh on such a day, yet he did.

"I was the first one on stage, and I thought, what am I going to do? I don't know how I figured it out, but I decided to address the elephant in the room and bare my soul, and I said, 'Good evening, it's been an awful day, there's nothing I can do to undo it, but with your permission, can I just try to make you laugh for a few minutes?' Everyone clapped, we got that out of the way, we moved on,

and it was a great night. Every comedian that night did well, and that's when I learned that we have to laugh. "On the worst day, Israelis were still laughing, because what other choice do we have? If we all stopped laughing until all the bad things in the world went away, we might never laugh again," he said.



Benji Lovitt

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# War of opinion exposes Israel's deep divisions

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

Four informed but disparate views of those on the ground made for a heated panel discussion tackling Israel's political minefield at Limmud Johannesburg this past weekend. From the hostages to genocide accusations, to the future of Israel and Gaza, no topic was off limits.

"A child is a child is a child. Compassion has no borders. Israelis mourn all sides." These words were recently placed on an advert on an Egged bus in Jerusalem. While he touched on the headlines, Ittay Flescher decided to tell this lesser-known story when addressing the question of what South Africans need to understand about what is happening in Israel today.

Flescher, the education director of interfaith movement Kids4Peace Jerusalem, and the Jerusalem correspondent for Australian publication, *The Jewish Independent*, established that most of the audience agreed with the words on the bus. Yet, he revealed that a man wrote a letter to Egged, complaining about the advert. "In the letter he wrote, he said, 'How is a soldier who lost his friends supposed to feel when faced with a sign that portrays his enemies as innocent children? Signs of this nature cross every moral line, comparing

terrorists who use children as human shields to IDF [Israel Defense Forces] soldiers who act with unparalleled morality in a serious moral distortion."

Egged ultimately removed the advert from its buses. Flescher chose to tell this story as it shows how difficult it is right now for Israelis to show empathy for Gaza. "This war can't end," he said, "if we don't end the war on empathy."

issues, including how to bring home the hostages, have become highly politicised, he said.

"If you remember 2005, a very difficult time in Israel, you were either for the disengagement [from Gaza] or you were a pariah. That's why it's important today to be open minded, to hear both sides, but to be aware of who is passing you the information."

Lahav Harkov, a senior political

correspondent for *Jewish Insider* and a former Knesset correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post*, began her argument by declaring something she acknowledged is controversial in Israel – optimism. "I think Israel is winning the war," she said, "and that it's a safer country than it was on 6 October 2023." Backing up her statement, she said that the Iranian nuclear threat had been rolled back years; Hezbollah was doing very badly, and Hamas was significantly weakened. She argued that Israel was close to achieving its goals in Gaza.

Israel's youth also give Harkov hope. She referred to how the country rallied after 7 October 2023, with hundreds of thousands reporting for reserve duty, and tens of thousands still fighting now. While the cost of living is high and political divisions

remain, Israel's broader economy is doing well, Harkov said. "In the past year and a half, I have found so many things inspiring among Israelis, and especially young Israelis, that I look to the future, and I'm so glad to be raising my children there."

"So, where's this country you talk about?" countered Nir Hasson, expressing pessimism for Israel's future. Hasson is a journalist who has been working for *Haaretz* for more than 20 years, and is covering beats including the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

"We are in the darkest days in the history of the state of Israel. We have a leadership from hell," he said. Hasson argued that an overwhelming number of people are leaving the country. He referred to "Qatargate", where people who were close to the Israeli prime minister were on the payroll of Qatar, "the same country that founded Hamas". The Watergate scandal paled in comparison, Hasson said.

Calling the government corrupt, he said that it was responsible for the 7 October massacre. "But the worst thing they've done is to involve all of Israeli society, and all of the IDF in the worst crime one can ever imagine." It doesn't matter if years from now the International Court of Justice concludes that there was no genocide in Gaza, he said. "Just the fact that the word 'genocide' will, from now on, stick to the name of Israel is a disaster that I have no words to describe."

Hasson argued that the way that the war in Gaza had been managed by Netanyahu "destroyed the foundation of the state of Israel". Israel's international legitimacy is lost, he said, and the war is only running in the interest of the political ambitions of Netanyahu and his far-right supporters like

Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir.

In response, Harkov stressed that the foundation of the state of Israel wasn't based on international support. "The reason I live in Israel, and that my ancestors and so many moved to Israel, is not because the United Nations voted to approve it in 1947," she said. "Rather, the foundation of the state of Israel is to be the national home for the Jewish people. It's to ensure that the Jewish people have a place of our own, a place where we can be protected. It's so that the true textbook definition of genocide, the one that happened in the 1940s, doesn't happen to us again."

Yet Hasson believes the current war has destroyed the fabric of Israeli society. "People like me don't want anything to do with such a regime, with such an army. That's why I'm afraid for the future of my kids in this country. This war will not end in the surrendering of Hamas because we don't know what Hamas is anymore."

In response, Spiegelman urged people to remember that the war with Hamas began only on 7 October 2023. "It started after thousands of terrorists butchered, raped, and mutilated children and women at a festival, or in their homes over a holiday." He argued that Israel is doing what it has to in order to protect its residents, who are still constantly under attack. "Obviously, there are political powers in the country but the only thing that moves us, people who like me who did 150 days of reserve duty, is that we're here to protect our people."

Flescher stressed the need for new elections for both the Israelis and Palestinians. "When that happens," he said, "another reality is possible."



Ittay Flescher and Nir Hasson at Limmud

A lot of things we see in the media today are either not true, or are sponsored by those with an agenda, seasoned media and foreign affairs consultant Akiva Spiegelman argued. He questioned who had paid for the advert Flescher referred to. "When we're getting information, we have to make sure we're getting it from a source that's actually accurate," he said. "In Israel today, there's a divide, there's big conflict over issues where there should be a consensus." The biggest

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# Israel's judicial crisis still simmering during war

LEE TANKLE

**D**ays before the 7 October 2023 massacre, Israelis spent months protesting on the streets in their tens of thousands against a judicial overhaul, which is hard to believe nearly two years into the war.

That's according to Ruvy Ziegler, a British Israeli law professor at Reading University, who told Limmud Johannesburg that the biggest strength of those massive weekly demonstrations was they had a sole focus: the legal overhaul.

Ziegler said the perfect storm was created nearly three years ago, with three different parties who didn't want the Israeli High Court of Justice, or Supreme Court, to have the amount of power it has. These were the Religious Zionists; the Haredi community; and Benjamin Netanyahu himself, who, before 7 October 2023 was going through a corruption trial at the Jerusalem District Court.

The overhaul sought to curtail judicial power and increase political control over the courts, shifting Israel toward stronger parliamentary supremacy. Said Ziegler, "I don't call it judicial reform. I don't think these are reformers; these are people who've come to destroy a system rather than improve it."

So, when Israeli Justice Minister Yariv Levin announced a whole set of changes to the way the Israeli system works, more specifically, the Israeli judicial and legal ecosystem, it sparked unprecedented mass demonstrations across Israel, even for people who would identify as right-wing.

"People like Naftali Bennett, who is generally right-wing, they oppose these changes because they see the things that the government is trying to do as things that are undermining the rule of law; the independence of legal advice; and the ability of the courts to stand up to the executive, irrespective of the government or issue of the day," said Ziegler.

None of the judicial overhauls have happened because either the legislation wasn't passed, or it was struck down if it was passed. "Part of the reason for this is the demonstrations, that the government, despite having a majority, didn't feel it could push through all of the legislation it wanted," he said, "The other reason is Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara, who has been steadfast in opposing corruption in government, in ensuring that the trial of Netanyahu goes further."

The attorney general plays two roles, being the head of the prosecution service and legal advisor to the government. Said Ziegler, "The government wants the role to remain; it just wants the person that it wants in the role."

On 4 August 2025, the government chose to fire the attorney general. In response, the Israeli Supreme Court issued a temporary order freezing the dismissal, pending a review of its legality. Ziegler said the justice minister decided to change the locks to her office in Tel Aviv, so she couldn't

get in.

"The sacking of the attorney general is the current test that the High Court of Justice is facing. And it could very much lead to a full-on clash, because if the court said she stays in place, the government is almost certainly not going to accept that," said Ziegler. "What happens next, we don't know, and the reason



During the judicial reform protests

we don't know partly is because a lot of this has been rooted by the war; a lot of the demonstrations have been rooted by the war; a lot of the rhetoric that was very strong has been rooted by the war. This is bound to change because the agenda is still there, and so when the war is over, it will happen."



Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

**Dr Ruvy Ziegler**

"Even right-wing parties or centre-right parties, like the party of Benny Gantz, people who are not to be suspected of being on the left or the centre or centre-right of Israeli politics, say, 'We will not sit with someone who is standing trial for corruption charges.' So Netanyahu wants this coalition; he needs this coalition to remain in power."

## 'Speaking out helped me heal', says abuse survivor

GILANA LAB

**F**or years, Michal Nagen carried the weight of trauma alone, yet she made the choice to break that silence. Her guiding principle became clear: "No more lying, no more secrets." This mantra drove her to speak out, not only publicly but to her family.

Nagen is an educational leader and the founder of HaTarmil, a start-up supporting teenagers as they transition into adult life. Her work weaves together women's empowerment, innovation education, and a passion for Torah learning.

"Six years ago, the memories resurfaced. For those who don't understand, when we experience severe trauma, the brain prioritises survival over feeling or understanding. Depending on our age, some memories are buried. They don't disappear, but they remain unreachable, quietly causing damage. I'm blessed with seven children and a loving husband, and I lead a full, dynamic life as an educator, yet those hidden memories have shaped me in ways I'm still discovering.

"Some memories lingered in the back of my mind. I needed proof that I was normal, that I could do it – raise normal children, have a loving marriage, and be part of a wonderful family. For a while, I never felt relaxed, though I couldn't fully explain why.

"But then the memories began to surface. Up until that moment, I thought I had a normal life. In many ways, I did. I believed I had a wonderful childhood, but still, I felt different, even to myself. For example, I used to have terrible nightmares. My husband would wake me because I would yell in my sleep. There was no clear reason for these dreams, they didn't connect to anything I could explain.

"There were deeper things I couldn't understand. On the surface, I was open to others, but inside, I carried a deep fear of connecting to people, a profound distrust, and intense anger I couldn't place. These feelings were like a constant question for me, something I couldn't quite figure out."

When Nagen was a young girl, she was sexually assaulted by her teacher for more than five years. "I was threatened with my life most of the time. I was sure he was going to kill me. He would say, 'This time, I saved you, but next time, I will kill you.' The thing that I have to explain, when I was five years old, it was a foreign concept to me, and those terrible men or terrible people know how to take advantage of a crisis." Nagen said she didn't realise this wasn't normal, as many students in her class had been experiencing the same thing.

As a result, she didn't understand why she felt so different to the rest of her family and the world. A few years later, when a teacher discussed sexuality, she spoke up instinctively, saying, "Sexuality comes sometimes with violence."

"Now, this is a red light. This is like saying, 'I know something.'" Yet the warning went unheeded. "She had an opportunity to save my life, but she completely missed it. On missing it, she condemned me to years of silence." These early experiences underscored the importance of supportive guidance, something she would later provide to others.

Her turning point came years later, when she witnessed another woman's bravery. Shira Isakov, a

woman brutally attacked by her husband the day she tried to leave him, survived horrific injuries. "She was in a terrible condition. From day one, she allowed the press to take pictures of her, and then she held an interview on the television."

Watching that interview was a transformative moment. "You see her walking into the room still limping, very badly wounded, and sitting on the chair. The interviewer says, 'Shira, are you okay?' She says, 'Yes.' He says, 'Can we start the interview?' She says, 'Yes.' And then the interviewer says, 'Aren't you ashamed of how you look?' The camera goes back to Shira, and she says, 'Why would I be ashamed, I did nothing wrong?'" Nagen said Shira saved her life. For her, those words carried deep meaning. "Being sexually harassed at any age is an embarrassing situation. You feel humiliated, you feel shame, and you feel responsible. Guilty. Now I understood that it wasn't my fault and shame to carry."

This is when her motto, "No secrets no lies," was introduced, as she felt she couldn't hide this traumatic experience anymore.

"I told my husband and three kids over the age of 18 at the time. I didn't tell the younger ones yet as I felt we needed space to work through this."

Her eldest son had just got married, and Nagen believed it was important for her new daughter-in-law to know what was happening so she asked her son to tell his newlywed wife. "I would have never been able to work through this on my own. Knowing I had the strength and support of my family, made everything a lot easier."

Her healing journey was guided by both spiritual and everyday role models. Drawing on Hasidic teachings, she emphasises post-traumatic growth. "This isn't about the concept of trauma, but about the concept of growth after trauma. Post trauma is when the fear is still with you, although you're not threatened. This is a post-traumatic world. This is the post-traumatic growth." She cites the Baal Shem Tov, who rebuilt the Jewish community after pogroms. "He was trying to help people build themselves together. Be the faith, be the strength."

She has transformed her pain into purpose. "If I kept my public figure and kept hiding secrets behind it, I would keep being torn apart. What I'm trying to do is the mission of my lifetime. Trying to put both of my sides together." Her courage not only allows her to heal, but empowers others, opening a door for those trapped in silence. In her story, strength emerges not in spite of trauma, but through it, as a testament to resilience, growth, and the power of speaking out.



Michal Nagen

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# TikTok – a trial for Israel’s PR message

GILANA LAB

**W**hen rockets fall and armies clash, the battlefield isn’t just physical. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, social media has emerged as a frontline all on its own.

For Ambassador David Saranga, a veteran diplomat and Israel’s leading voice on digital strategy, platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram are as consequential as traditional media in shaping how the world understands the war.

“Twitter is the place where the political narrative is shaped,” Saranga told a Limmud Johannesburg audience on Sunday, 17 August. “For us at the foreign ministry, Twitter is an important component of our public diplomacy work.”

He said Israel’s first foray into digital diplomacy came during the 2008 Gaza war, when Saranga, then stationed in New York, organised the world’s first press conference on Twitter.

“It was something new back then. Only people who were technologically savvy were on Twitter,” he said. The combination of a war and a new digital platform caught the media’s attention. Even American news programme host Rachel Maddow marvelled at the experiment, saying, “The Israeli government is trying to explain a conflict that newspapers struggle to explain in 2 000 words in 140 characters at a time.”

That moment established social media as a diplomatic tool, Saranga said. Over the years, Israel’s presence has expanded to more than 800 official accounts in seven languages. These channels, Saranga said, reach “10 million followers and about 200 million impressions a month”.

Yet, he admitted, “It’s not enough.”

The Hamas-led attacks on Israelis on 7 October 2023 thrust Israel into both a military and narrative crisis. Saranga described three urgent priorities for Israel’s digital campaign: “First, to tell the story of the massacre. Second, to push for international legitimacy for Israel’s activity. And third, to bring the story of the hostages.”

Social media became central in amplifying these messages, he said. An example is a tweet by Israel’s official account shared by acclaimed Harry Potter author J.K. Rowling, which gained more than 50 million impressions. This mattered, Saranga said, because, “We live in a kind of an echo chamber because of algorithms. People mostly see content they agree with. But when someone like Rowling shares our post, it reaches audiences far beyond our usual followers.”

Despite that, Israel still faces profound challenges online. The most

pressing, Saranga argues, is scale: “Think about the fact that two billion Muslims are tweeting, posting, and sharing content, while the Jewish world numbers only 16 million. Numbers are crucial.”

He also pointed to pre-7 October digital groundwork done by adversaries. “The demonstrations against Israel started on the very day of the massacre, even before one Israeli soldier entered Gaza. Someone prepared the ground.” According to Saranga, hundreds of millions of dollars, particularly from Qatar and Iran, went into seeding anti-Israel narratives in global activist spaces – from Black Lives Matter to environmental and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning) groups.

If Twitter is where politics plays out, he said, TikTok is where the youth consume their news, and for Israel, it’s the hardest battlefield. “When we as officials post something on TikTok, it’s perceived as propaganda,” Saranga said. “But when someone who has nothing to do with politics posts about Gaza, it’s perceived as authentic.”

The challenge is compounded by TikTok’s opaque system. Unlike Facebook or Twitter, which rely on algorithms, Saranga said TikTok had admitted to Israeli officials that there is “no algorithm” in the traditional sense, content visibility depends on internal decisions. “In other words, TikTok has become a tool in the hands of others to influence the narrative,” he said. He cited cases where hostage families were denied advertising access on TikTok, even as anti-Israel content spread widely.

Another war is being fought against misinformation. “Hamas doesn’t have a problem with lying,” Saranga said. By contrast, Israel’s diplomats are constrained. “We check everything three times before publishing. Sometimes it takes us an hour or two. But by then, the fake news has already gone viral.”

Saranga pointed to a recent *Time* magazine cover on the Gaza famine later shown to rely on a fabricated image. “It’s too late. The narrative was already shaped,” he lamented.

Before the age of Twitter and TikTok, Israeli diplomats had one primary task, he said, to speak to elites: presidents, ministers, academics, and journalists. Now, “With 500 diplomats worldwide, we can’t bring our message to billions.

Social media gives us that tool, but we can’t do it alone.”

Diaspora communities often fill the gap, though sometimes reluctantly. A local university student challenged Saranga, saying, “The lack of media presence that Israel has creates large amounts of antisemitism for diaspora communities because we then are forced to be the voice of Israel.”

Saranga acknowledged the strain. “You’re right. The ministry you mentioned that once trained you no longer exists. We need to work more closely with Jewish communities and influencers. We will do more.”

At its heart, Saranga said he viewed 7 October as a turning point not just militarily, but digitally. “The surprise wasn’t only on the military level,” he said. “It was also on the public diplomacy level. Our enemies prepared the ground. They succeeded in seeding their ideas among different groups, and the rest is history.”



David Saranga in Soweto

The world, he argued, is now divided in starker terms. “You are either with us or with Hamas. That doesn’t mean you must support every Israeli policy. But you cannot identify with Hamas after 7 October and still claim to stand for Western values.”

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long been one of bullets, borders, and bloodshed. But as Saranga’s reflections make clear, it’s now equally fought in the feeds of billions. Israel’s efforts to project its narrative online are sophisticated yet strained, innovative yet outnumbered.

And as he warns, the stakes go beyond Israel. “TikTok has become a tool in undermining Western democracies.” In today’s wars, he warns, who wins the battle of narratives may shape who wins the battle on the ground.

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# Social media not about being right, but being human

GILANA LAB

"It's so important for me to be able to engage with people who disagree with me," Yirmiyahu Danzig told the audience at Limmud Johannesburg on 17 August, talking about the social media battle for Jewish identity. "Not in a performative way, not in a way that's trying to get clout, but in a way that's genuinely trying to build bridges."

Danzig is an educator specialising in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jewish diversity, history, and identity. He regularly speaks at joint Israeli-Palestinian events to navigate competing narratives and aspirations. He also produces educational content for Instagram and TikTok as @that\_semiter, and on YouTube at @unpacked

His emphasis on dialogue with Palestinians framed his discussion on how social media has reshaped the Israel-Palestine conflict. For him, the work isn't about winning debates, but about humanising the other side. "I can disagree with someone intensely, but if I can do that in a way that shows that they're human, that I'm human, then suddenly, the conversation becomes something much more meaningful."

He reflected on his own experience of engaging across divides, even in tense situations. "I've been in rooms where the tension was so thick, you could cut it with a knife, but once you sit down and talk, once you start asking questions instead of shouting slogans, something changes." That same ethos guides his online work. "I'm not interested in entertainment debates. They try to entice me into those things now and then, but I try not to. It's red meat. It doesn't produce anything meaningful. What I'm much more interested in is discussion with people I vehemently disagree with."

The digital battlefield, however, has its unique

challenges. "Social media has become a major battlefield in this war. We know that Hamas is investing a lot of money, a lot of time, and a lot of effort in social media to promote its narrative," Danzig said. "When you go



Yirmiyahu Danzig at Limmud

on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, what you see are videos, stories, and narratives that are very much against Israel." The fight for visibility, he stressed, wasn't just about facts but about framing. "Israel is losing PR, and as long as the rule is around who is right, Israel will never win. My suggestion would be that you change the narrative."

"The posture of going forward and looking for ways to improve the situation is the narrative shift we need. But in every conversation I've had with Palestinian colleagues where we agree that the direction is forward, we end up talking about history. Because this isn't a conflict about land, borders, or resources. This is a conflict about identities. So, reconciliation has to happen there."

Danzig is realistic about the online landscape. "My page has already been identified as a Jewish page, with mostly antagonistic comments. But the authentic comments tend to be a little more mixed - 'I like this, but I hate this'; or 'I support this, but not that.' I never

shut down the comment section. For the algorithm, you want the comments; they help increase engagement and spread the message. And also, I can check, because I'm not always right. Sometimes I don't have all the information I need. It's important to see how people are responding so I can adjust."

Antisemitism, he acknowledged, is pervasive in online and professional spaces. One audience member described doctors posting ideological content out of context in academic forums, leaving Jewish voices silenced. His response is to broaden the conversation by amplifying nuance, even from those on the other side.

"Finding content creators that are perhaps more on the Palestinian side but more nuanced, and maybe platforming them, even though we don't necessarily agree with what they say."

For him, the online fight isn't just about bots or propaganda, but about reaching human beings. "Yes, there's a bot war going on, and the question is, who's got the better bot? The purpose of those bots is to win human hearts and minds, and so we have to also be engaged in that. How many people are they convincing with their thousand Palestinian flags? Not so much. But if we can program bots that speak to human beings, to real experiences, then maybe we can start to shift the tide in this war of ideas on social media."

Still, he saw promise in human-to-human engagement, even online. "We can intensely disagree,

but in a way that fundamentally humanises both of us. And that's what we need more of." Social media, he suggested, could be used as a bridge rather than a weapon. But it required restraint. "Not everything is about winning the argument. Sometimes it's about showing that we are people, and that's what breaks through."

That people-centred approach extends to his content creation. "Most of it is me figuring out what's the problem that needs to be solved, what's the question that needs to be answered, what human beings, what stories, what places can help tell that story in a more meaningful way."

The work is draining, but he remains grounded. "I pray a lot, three times a day. Rooting myself in *mitzvot*, in the Torah, has been what saves me. Of course, there are moments where I think that I need a break, I need to go to some island far away where there are no Israelis and Palestinians. But there's a lot of work to be done, and not a lot of time. One of my favourite quotes from the sages is, 'It's not upon you to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.'"

Ultimately, he reiterated the need for understanding. "Social media can spread lies faster than truth, but it can also spread empathy if we use it right. I can disagree with someone intensely, but if I can do that in a way that shows that they're human, that I'm human, suddenly, the conversation becomes something much more meaningful."

## Jewish identity deeply rooted in Kentridge's art

LEE TANKLE

On the surface, it may not seem that the art of William Kentridge is particularly Jewish; however, the more you delve into his artwork, the more you see that he was influenced by Jewish life in South Africa.

Aviva Dautch, the executive director of *Jewish Renaissance* magazine and the first ever scholar-in-residence for Oxford University's Vera Fine Grodzinski Jewish Women's Voices Programme, told Limmud Johannesburg on 18 August, "We can't throw away his Jewishness because you don't like his politics or because maybe he's not part of the mainstream community."

What Dautch has studied of Kentridge's work and his statements shows her that there's a Jewish consciousness that drives everything he does.

"I'm not saying that Kentridge is by any means religious," she said. "When there are concepts of G-d, he's often either using African proverbs or accidentally using Christian proverbs or Christian conceptions of G-d. But there's a deep root of Jewish language that lies under what he does."

Dautch said Kentridge's political art often uses the inherently Jewish ideas of ambiguity, contradiction, and uncompleted gestures.

Judith Hecker, the co-curator of Kentridge's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2010, *William Kentridge: Five Themes*, said that in this exhibition, there were many themes, one of which was Jewishness. Hecker also alluded to the fact that Kentridge draws on the idea of the oppressor and the oppressed, and guessed that the Holocaust must have something to do with that.

Dautch disagrees with that idea, because if you look at Kentridge's family background, his family immigrated to South Africa from Lithuania long before the Holocaust.

"You can't be a 20th-century Jewish artist without the Holocaust looming somewhere in your mind, experience, work. But with Kentridge, is that what you would say is at the top of his mind? No," she said. "This is a family who emigrated long before the Holocaust. If you were to talk about the oppressed and the oppressor in Kentridge's work, where does that come from? Apartheid."

Furthermore, Dautch argues that though Kentridge used his art as a form of resistance to apartheid, as he gets older, he has realised that all of his family's activism is rooted in his grandfather's experience with Jewish immigration.

"The older he gets, the more he sees his grandfather and his great-grandfather in his face," she said. "He is

more and more beginning to draw his face."

Dautch then focused on Kentridge's animation series, *9 Drawings for Projection*, in which he depicts semi-autobiographical characters Soho Eckstein and artist Felix Teitlebaum. Dautch said that over the films, the characters slowly turn into Kentridge, and in turn, resemble his grandfather.

"He is portraying others, but he's also portraying himself. And he's portraying that kind of debate in the Jewish community about the artists, the businessmen, the privileged, and the workers," she said.

In the film *Tide Table*, Soho Eckstein is depicted wearing a three-piece suit on the beach. Many in the audience said that this was a common experience growing up in South Africa.

"When he was starting his drawings for projection, the character of Eckstein shows how he deals with the fact that so many of the mine owners were Jewish, or the businessmen whom he felt were exploiting the black people were Jewish. At the same time, there were always prominent Jewish people in the anti-apartheid movement. And he tells bell hooks, a black feminist, a political figure in the United States, that

a central irony exists for South African Jews." This is that our Passover ceremony commemorates the Jews as slaves in Egypt, yet Jews in South Africa have had immense privilege, and aren't part of the

most oppressed. Said Dautch, "That remains an uncomfortable irony to live with. The ambiguity, the irony, and the discomfort are something he is living with."

"He's coming out of a Jewish world," said Dautch. "It's a different kind of Jewish world, it's an artistic Jewish world, but that childhood is a Jewish world many people in this room will relate to, and there is his grandfather, his father, and the grandchildren. It's such a typical South African scene. So, an assimilated Jewish world, but that doesn't mean it's not a Jewish world."

He describes the studio as a space where impulse is allowed to expand and find its place. A sound becomes a line; a line becomes a drawing; a drawing becomes a shadow; and a shadow gains the heft of a paperweight. At 70, Kentridge isn't slowing down, eyes firmly fixed on what he cannot yet see.

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Aviva Dautch at Limmud

# From sand showers to safe space



**INNER VOICE**  
Howard Feldman

Not once was her glass of chilled white wine at risk. Which, frankly, was the most – and perhaps only – impressive part of the entire scene. The episode confirmed my longstanding suspicion that “gentle parenting” – along with its evil twin, “pathological people-pleasing” – is responsible for a good portion of the world’s dysfunction.

The cast of characters? Two butt-naked hooligans, roughly five and three, who decided their freshly-bathed, frilly-dressed cousin, or sister, needed a sand exfoliation. Her shrieks pierced the serenity of a Mauritian sunset, summoning a mother, who glided in with the serene authority of someone safeguarding both her offspring and her Sauvignon Blanc.

“Liam, Sebastian,” she cooed, “it appears as though Cressida is saddened by your actions.” A pause. “Of course, this doesn’t make you naughty. It’s just ... not what we expect.” And with that, she whisked away poor Cressida to be re-bathed, while the naked wonders continued to hurl grit like feral Neanderthals.

This isn’t parenting. It’s a sinister campaign designed to ensure that little Liam never encounters the word “no”. The result? A generation of adults who:

- Bring feelings charts to office meetings;
- File human resources (HR) complaints because a colleague’s sigh felt “weaponised”;
- Require “mental-health days” after someone corrected their spelling on Teams; and
- Calls everything from late Ubers to Woolies queues “trauma”.

In short: fragility masquerading as sensitivity.

The products of gentle parenting grow up believing that discomfort is oppression; that failure is abuse; and that a boss with expectations is a dictator. Hence the 30-year-old who needs a kombucha and a group hug after reading a firm email. Or the university student who insists that disagreement equals

violence.

Because if you can throw sand at your sister while your mother rationalises it as “not what we expect”, why wouldn’t you demand the same indulgence from your professor, your boss, or eventually your government?

Still not convinced, or struggling to identify them in the wild? Here’s a quick guide:

- The HR oracle: armed with pastel sticky notes and phrases like “lived experience”, this one believes policy should bend around their anxiety like yoga pants around a midlife crisis;
- The TikTok activist: records performative rants about microaggressions while ignoring the macro-aggressions of actual dictators. Raised on “you’re not naughty, just misunderstood”;
- The barista avenger: collapses when their oat-milk flat white isn’t “exactly 64 degrees”. Blames capitalism. Writes poetry about it; and
- The workplace unicorn: requires applause for simply showing up. Considers deadlines a form of violence. Asks to “circle back when I feel emotionally ready”.

The real danger isn’t just the whining, it’s the entitlement. Gentle parenting trains children to believe that the world will adapt, cushion, and contort itself around them. And if the only thing ever at risk is Mom’s Chardonnay, why on earth would Sebastian ever stop throwing sand?

Because at the end of the day, gentle parenting doesn’t raise gentle people. It raises entitled ones. And while Cressida may recover from her sand bath, society may not recover from an entire workforce of Liams and Sebastians convinced that life itself is supposed to be one big “safe space”.

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

# Limmud – respectful debate



**ABOVE BOARD**  
Karen Milner

Last weekend, I had the privilege of attending and presenting at Limmud, an event that over the years has become a cornerstone of our communal calendar. It stands as the most invigorating platform we have for exploring the rich diversity of Jewish views and topics that shape our community, dealing with issues that simply aren’t addressed with such depth and openness in any other forum.

What makes Limmud so special is the space it creates: one that’s constructive, productive, and profoundly inclusive, guided by a strict code of respect even for the most opposing or controversial perspectives. A shining example of this was the panel on Israeli politics and society, masterfully moderated by South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) Deputy President Charisse Zeifert. Bringing together voices from the far ends of the social and political spectrum, it offered a rare chance for genuine engagement, not just among panellists, but with the audience. As conference Co-Chairperson Rabbi Warren Sher so aptly noted, Limmud might well be one of the few places where such individuals can dive into robust debate while upholding the respect, inclusivity, and openness that define the gathering.

It’s vital for our community to encounter the full spectrum of views that challenge us as a people and as supporters of Israel, and to have a dedicated space where we can grapple with the cultural, religious, social, and political dimensions of Judaism in all their complexity.

Among the many sessions I attended, one that particularly resonated was Aviva Dautch’s fascinating exploration of TS Eliot and antisemitism. She unpacked how Eliot, along with some of his supporters, including,

remarkably, a few Jews, attempted to excuse or downplay his antisemitic leanings. Yet, upon closer reflection, the tropes and imagery in his work are unmistakably clear. Dautch also recounted the backlash against efforts to republish his earlier writings, including poetic responses from Jews that pushed back against any attempts to whitewash his views. The relevance struck me deeply, as this narrative could so easily mirror contemporary examples we see today. It’s a stark reminder that, as the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

True to Limmud’s spirit, we were also treated to lighter moments designed purely to spark joy and offer a bit of respite. This year included a delightful Yiddish music interlude by singer Anthony Izvi Russell, and of course, the legendary Limmud quiz that stretched on until 01:00!

In so many ways, Limmud functions as our community’s annual dialogue, a coming together to confront the challenging, sometimes difficult or uncomfortable topics that will ultimately define us as a people and as a community here in South Africa. The SAJBD was indeed present at the state-run National Dialogue last week, and it’s clear that this government-led initiative still has much to learn from Limmud’s model of respectful, inclusive exchange. That said, we remain committed to engaging in the process, participating actively in the hope that it might yet spark a genuine reimagining of our national project.

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

# Katz celebrates turning 100

STAFF REPORTER

Susan Katz has had many accomplishments, but her latest was to turn 100 on 17 August 2025 surrounded by her family, particularly all her grandchildren.

Katz was born in Regensburg, Germany, as the only child of a well-known opera singer, Rose Fimbacher, and her husband, Julius.

At the age of six, in 1931, she recalls being woken up in the middle of the night by her parents, who gave her a doll, and told her they had to leave for “a while”, and she was to stay with her grandparents.

Two years later, they returned, and moved to Lyon in France, where she went to school.

While living in Lyon, she remembers being sent back to Germany by train on her own to say goodbye to her grandparents. She recalls seeing Nazi soldiers marching with torches, singing and waving flags.

Her grandparents gave her a scooter to take back to Lyon, and her biggest worry was that it would be confiscated by the Germans on the train on her way back to France.

In the mid 1930s, Katz was taken to Marseilles, and



Susan Katz with her family at her 100th birthday party

embarked on a ship bound for South Africa. She recalls winning second place in a dress-up competition, having worn a Hawaiian outfit that a woman on board helped make from wine bottle corks.

She arrived in South Africa at the age of 11, and soon made friends with a girl called Liesel, who became a lifelong friend.

In 1945, she met and fell in love with Issy Katz and his 1940 black Chevy with white rimmed tyres. She told her children it made her feel like a queen riding in that car, which she was told was the last Chevy imported into South Africa before World War II broke out.

She married Issy on 6 October 1946 at the Wanderers View Congregation in Braamfontein, Johannesburg.

They had three children: Helen, in 1947; Eric in 1950; and Julie in 1957, and lived in Brakpan for 10 years where Issy had a bicycle shop. In 1962, they bought a steel brokerage business from a friend who had emigrated to Australia.

Katz’s full life is exemplified by the family legacy that lives on in her journey. She now has 10 grandchildren, and 18 great-grandchildren.

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## Nominations Close

### 12 SEPTEMBER 18:00

# Goggas! flutters from musical stage to children's book

South African-born writer **Gill Katz** is launching her new children's book, *Goggas!* The SA Jewish Report spoke to her about it.

## How would you describe what you do?

I'm happily retired, living with my husband in a 55+ community in a sleepy little city near Fort Lauderdale, Florida. We left South Africa 12 years ago. I spend my time painting and sculpting, which are two hobbies I love. One of our three children, Jonathan, his wife, and our two grandsons live very near, so we delight in spending time with them.

## What inspired you to write *Goggas!*, which you originally wrote as a musical? How did you go about it and why?

I wrote *Goggas!* in the 1980s as a musical for Emmarentia Primary School, after declaring to the headmaster that it was time to put on an original South African musical.

My three children attended Emmarentia Primary, and since I was a dreadful tuckshop mommy and even worse parent-teachers association member, my offering of a school musical was accepted by the brave principal.

I chose the theme of "goggas"/insects because I've always had a fascination with their incredibly organised lives. I spent many hours researching insects at the University of the Witwatersrand's entomology department, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

I named the heroine of my story Lady Caroline – a tribute to my dear best friend, who sadly passed away soon after my husband and I emigrated. It was her very talented brother, Andrew McGibbon, who sadly also

passed away, who invited me into his studio way up in the hills in Krugersdorp to create the many songs we composed. This music was recorded onto cassette tapes and used in the musical for the children to sing to. Great fun!

## How did you turn the musical into a book, and why?

A year before we left South Africa, I ended my career as publisher of Netcare's *Be Patient!* Magazine. It had been a fabulous experience, but I felt I needed to spend more time writing for children. I had mused about writing *Goggas!* the novel, for years, and one day decided just to do it. With the help of two wonderful friends, Bev Goldman and Ivy Hesp, I finished the book and brought it to America with a view to publishing it. I succeeded in doing that this year.

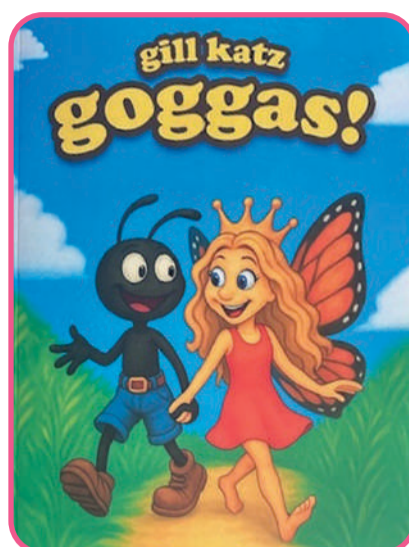
## You have written other books before this. What were they, and how do they differ?

This was my fourth book. My first book was *How did I begin?* which I wrote with music and lyrics. I teamed up with Des and Dawn Lindberg and together, we launched a book with a story, illustrations by Dawn, and attached was an audio cassette, later a CD.

I then wrote *Kids Rule – OK!* which also had an attached CD. This book focused on safety rules for children, and

the audio was read by Bruce Miller in English, and Anneline Kriel in Afrikaans. Miller also sang two songs which I wrote. The book was in a colouring book format. It was produced and recorded by EMI.

The third book is *The Very Greedy Piggy*, which I wrote in 2021. It's a book for three to 10-year-olds. It was published by the same company (Kindle Publishers) as



*Goggas!* It's a rhyming story about a farmer and his badly behaved pig.

## What's the difference in the process of writing a children's book of fiction versus a factual book?

The difference is enormous! I can't even begin to answer that.

## What age group is this book for, and what do you hope your little readers will get from it?

*Goggas!* is suitable for all ages. It can be read to the very young – I would say three-year-olds, and older children can read it on their own. It would appeal mainly to seven to 12-year-olds.

## What's the appeal in writing for children, both music and print?

I believe it has to be a story that grabs the child's attention on page one. The illustrations and music are the decorations, but the story has to be exciting, fun to read, and educational where possible. If *Goggas!* had been written in apartheid-era South Africa, it would probably have been banned, since the hero is a black ant, and the heroine – and love interest – is a white English butterfly from Buckingham Palace gardens.

## What did you love most about writing this book?

I loved it because my three kids were at an age where I could read them the story as I wrote it and get an idea of where I was heading.

## What kind of response have you had?

The book has just been born. So far, I've had wonderful responses, and I'm musing the creation of another *Goggas!* By the way, *Goggas!* the musical was performed by The National Children's Theatre two years running, winning two Naledi awards, and is going to be produced again in 2026.

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