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■ Volume 30 – Number 03 ■ 29 January 2026 ■ 11 Shevat 5786

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south african Jewish Report

Eastern Cape premier condemns Israel's offer

CLAUDIA GROSS

Israel's offer to assist the Eastern Cape with water, healthcare, and agriculture expertise on Friday, 23 January, was flatly condemned by provincial Premier Lubabalo Oscar Mabuyane as soon as he heard about it.

Rather than being grateful for an offer of unconditional help from visiting ambassador David Saranga in areas where the Eastern Cape is battling, Mabuyane has accused Israeli embassy officials and AbaThembu King Buyelekhaya Zwelibanzi Dalindyebo of breaching diplomatic protocol.

Saranga, who is familiar with the AbaThembu king, who recently visited Israel, met him and about 50 traditional leaders to make the offer. When asked what he wanted in return, he said, "The only thing we need is your friendship."

The four-day visit to the Eastern Cape included meetings with hospital management; traditional leaders; development organisations; and local business figures, and focused on water access, healthcare support, and agricultural development.

"My trip was to find ways for cooperation," Saranga told the *SA Jewish Report*. "The king saw what Israel can offer. The question then became how we turn that into something practical."

Mabuyane claimed the engagements were unauthorised and undermined South Africa's constitutional order. In a statement, he said that he had learned "with shock and concern" of reports that Israeli officials had visited provincial institutions, including hospitals and Walter Sisulu University, without the knowledge or consent of the Eastern Cape government.

"The conduct of foreign diplomatic missions engaging provincial institutions outside established diplomatic channels constitutes a clear breach of diplomatic protocol," Mabuyane said, adding that authority over foreign relations rests with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation.

This dispute draws attention to the Eastern Cape's deep and long-standing service delivery crisis. The province

continues to struggle with water shortages, deteriorating infrastructure, and severe pressure on its healthcare system, particularly in rural areas.

Athol Trollip, ActionSA's Eastern Cape chairperson, said the province's water situation was critical. "We are a water-scarce province and our infrastructure maintenance is woeful," Trollip said. "We waste more than 40% of potable water, and wastewater treatment is disastrous, with raw untreated sewerage discharged into most of our water courses."

It was for this reason that the king visited Israel, met leaders, and toured institutions specialising in healthcare, water management, and agriculture.

While in the Eastern Cape, Saranga met senior management at Mthatha General Hospital and Nelson Mandela Academic Hospital. The visits followed the king's meeting with the director of Sheba Medical Center, Israel's largest hospital. "They were to give us a list of what they really need," Saranga said. "After that, we would organise a Zoom meeting with the hospital director in Israel and see how we could move forward."

Saranga said that Israel regularly hosts medical students and healthcare professionals from around the world, often supported by its foreign ministry, but acknowledged that

such exchanges require formal agreements between governments. "This is where politics sometimes blocks things that could really help people," he said.

Water access formed a central part of the visit. Saranga was accompanied by Innovation: Africa, a non-profit organisation that installs solar-powered water and energy systems in remote African villages and is already active in other parts of South Africa. The organisation is exploring potential projects in the Eastern Cape.

A key engagement was a gathering of more than 50

traditional leaders convened by King Dalindyebo. Saranga said water shortages dominated the discussion. "One of the leaders asked me why Israel was coming to one of the poorest provinces in South Africa," Saranga said. "I told him, 'We aren't coming here to make money.'"

Mabuyane claimed the AbaThembu king had no mandate to engage in matters involving foreign assistance or the management of public institutions. He also directed the member of the Executive Council for Health to investigate reports that departmental health officials had accepted donations without following proper procedures.

The Israeli embassy in South Africa rejected claims that it acted outside diplomatic norms. The embassy said it operated in accordance with international conventions and engaged with a wide range of stakeholders as part of standard diplomatic practice.

The embassy said its outreach focused on humanitarian cooperation and development, and that engagements with provincial institutions and traditional leaders were conducted transparently and in good faith.

Trollip said the Eastern Cape could benefit significantly from Israeli expertise, particularly in water management and agriculture. "As a water-scarce and primarily agriculture-orientated province, we could learn a lot from Israel with regard to innovative irrigation technologies, crop and pasture production, soil conservation, and eco-tourism," he said.

He said it was regrettable that national government policy limited such engagement. "We would be better off building international relations that benefit our economy and service delivery," Trollip said.

For Saranga, the visit was framed as a humanitarian, people-centred initiative. "When you talk about water, healthcare, agriculture, these aren't political issues," he said. "These are human issues."

The future of the proposed initiatives is now uncertain as provincial investigation continues. What's clear is that a visit intended to address urgent local needs has instead become a flashpoint for a much larger struggle over diplomacy, authority, and who ultimately pays the price when politics and service delivery collide.

Everyone is home



Levi Froom takes down the final hostage poster outside KosherWorld in Johannesburg on 26 January 2026

See stories on pages 6 and 7

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Party goes on at Castle despite antisemitic hate

TALI FEINBERG

South Africans in Cape Town have once again defied the local hate movement that wants to exclude Jews from society. A music event went ahead at the Castle of Good Hope (the Castle) on Saturday, 24 January, despite extremists trying to have it cancelled because the organiser and main DJ was born in Israel and once hosted an event there.

The Cape Town party, called "Yalla Valhalla" not only went ahead without a hitch, it had its highest-ever number of attendees. Extremists were targeting organiser Dino Ben Tovim, who was born in Israel but grew up in Cape Town and sees himself as South African.

"I'm apolitical; my company is 100% South African; I pay taxes; I support the local market; I provide jobs; and my team is all South African," says Ben Tovim, who goes by the stage name Ben Tov. "I would like to see peace in the Middle East." But for the extremists, his Israeli roots meant he has no place here.

Dino Ben Tovim (Ben Tov), DJing at the party



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ineffective. Most South Africans don't support cultural boycotts or the importation of foreign conflicts, and they reject attempts to police who is allowed to belong."

Ben Tovim says the extremists' accusations are false. His company is in no way Israeli, and the one event he hosted in Israel wasn't backed by him financially. The party at the Castle wasn't an Israeli event in any way. Furthermore, it was completely apolitical.

He says the protest wasn't peaceful. "They harassed people, screaming and swearing at them, leaving some partygoers traumatised."

Ben Tovim says he just wants to give people a good time. "Everything I do is about a love for music and creating connections. Everyone is welcome, and we even have attendees from Middle Eastern countries."

The continuation of the party is yet another failure for local extremists, who in December last year, wanted a Kirstenbosch concert by local musician David Scott, known as The Kiffness, cancelled because Scott criticises radical Islam and terrorism. Both events went ahead at state-run venues.

Earlier in January, South African youth counter-protested outside Cape Union Mart at the V&A Waterfront, confronting the extremists' narrative. After the Kirstenbosch concert and the Cape Union Mart counter-protest, hundreds of South Africans on social media expressed their support for standing up to hate.

Ben Tovim has been hosting Yalla Valhalla at the Castle of Good Hope and other venues in Cape Town since 2023, but this is the first time it has been the object of protest. Extremists also said the event was problematic because the Castle is a heritage site with a history of colonialism and apartheid, and a party shouldn't be held there.

However, the Castle has hosted electronic parties; international DJs; live concerts, LGBTQI+ events; brand launches; fashion shows; corporate functions; private parties; commercial functions; and nightlife, all without protests. This has established it as a regularly hired, multi-purpose events venue, not solely a heritage or ceremonial site. In fact, on its website, the Castle is advertised as being open to all events, including "party revellers".

Continued on page 3>>

Sniff away from the Promised Land

We stand poised at a unique moment in history. We are at the cusp of the final redemption of which the prophets of Israel spoke so voluminously.

We are at the end point of more than a 2 000 year-long exile, and stand at the border of the Promised Land, about to usher in the Messianic age. There is a precedent to this process, albeit micro-cosmically, in the 40-year journey in the harsh desert followed by entering into the Promised Land.

Let's analyse this further. After leaving Egypt before entering the Promised Land, the Jewish people journeyed through 42 encampments. The last encampment before entering the land was "at the Jordan River near Jericho". Jericho, in Hebrew, "Yericho", comes from the word that means "scent"; "odour"; or "smell". This is directly linked to Moshiach because it describes a unique quality he will possess using the term "smell" – that Moshiach's sense of smell is so keen, he will be able to sniff out the soul and inner being of an individual.

Let's now go back to the first movement out of Egypt and the very first encampment that G-d took us to, named "Sukkot". But to preface it, King Solomon established a principle that the beginning and the end are wedged together: "The beginning is wedged in the end."

Question: what's the connection between the last encampment

just preceding entry into Israel, Yericho, that hints at Moshiach, to the first encampment, Sukkot?

As the Jewish people left the bondage of Egypt, they entered the place, Sukkot, which, of course, alludes to the Sukkah that we build and dwell in on the festival of Sukkot.

The Sukkah is the entity that represents the unity of the Jewish people. The Talmud (Sukkah 27b) makes a remarkable claim regarding the Sukkah. Quoting the verse: "For seven days ... all who belong to the people of Israel will live in sukkot," (Lev. 23:42), they say, "This teaches that it is fitting for all of Israel to sit in one Sukkah!"

This statement is unparalleled in scripture. It declares that the Jewish people are fitting to be in one abode together, one home, one space. This is a most profound expression of the unity of a people. It's a utopian concept, and one to be fully realised only in the era of Moshiach, when the oneness of the Jewish people is revealed.

So perhaps the message is this: that the component most needed for us, the Jewish people, to weather the exile and succeed in the mission of getting to the "Promised Land" (Moshiach), is "Sukkot" – unity – to recognise our

Torah Thought

Rav Ilan Herrmann
Soul Workout edu.org



essential connection to one another, and to be keenly aware of the preciousness of each of our fellow Jews.

It is this continued bond of brotherhood of the Jewish people that not only has brought us to the dawn of redemption, but is the catalyst finally to cross over into it.

Thus, the beginning and end are wedged together.

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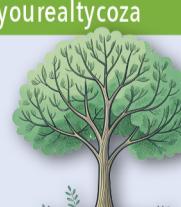
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Jewish Report

Editor Peta Krost – editor@sajewishreport.co.za • Sub-editor Julie Leibowitz • Senior Journalist Claudia Gross

Junior Reporter Lee Tankle • Digital Media Coordinator Gilana Lab • Photographer Ilan Ossendryver

Proofreader Kim Hatchuel/A-Proofed – kim@a-proofed.co.za • Distribution Sandy Furman – admin@sajewishreport.co.za

Design and layout Bryan Maron/Design Bandits – bryan@designbandits.co.za • Advertising Britt Landsman: 082 292 9520 – britt@sajewishreport.co.za

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Protest outside Durban shul 'targets Jewish community'

CLAUDIA GROSS

As worshippers arrived for Friday night Shabbat services at Durban's Beit Emanuel Shul, located in the Holocaust & Genocide Centre campus, they were met by chanting, placards, and amplified sound from a group of protesters gathered just outside the property. Though the demonstration may have been small, its location and timing resulted in heightened apprehension for Durban's already anxious Jewish community.

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies KwaZulu-Natal (SAJBD KZN) condemned the "deliberate targeting of a Jewish house of worship for political protest", saying it was clearly "provocative, antagonistic, and unacceptable".

The protesters' stated aim to "free the world from Zionism" constitutes incitement and hostility and serves as a thinly veiled attack on the Jewish community itself, according to the SAJBD KZN.

The protest last Friday 23 January was the latest in a series held outside the Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centre over recent months.

Although attendance has typically ranged from 15 to 30 people, Jewish communal leaders say the deliberate choice of venue, a site of Holocaust remembrance, Jewish community life, and an active synagogue, has transformed these protests from political expression into something far more troubling.

The Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centre shares its campus with the Durban Jewish Club, a kosher coffee shop, and the Durban Progressive Jewish Community synagogue, Beit Emanuel.

Alana Pugh-Jones Baranov, the president of the SAJBD KwaZulu-Natal Council, said the protests began during the Israel-Hamas war and continued even after a ceasefire came into effect. "They started as regular protests outside the Holocaust & Genocide Centre and later became 'Fridays for Palestine' protests at various locations around Durban," she said. "A few weeks ago, on the first Shabbat after the ceasefire, they returned to the centre."

That return marked a significant escalation. Previous protests had taken place earlier on Friday afternoons when the campus was largely empty. The most recent demonstrations were scheduled for early evening, coinciding with



Protesters across the road from the Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centre

Shabbat services.

"At the previous protest, there was heckling and shouting at members of the congregation as they arrived and left," Pugh-Jones Baranov said. "For the first time, they also brought a large speaker and played loud music, which was disruptive to the service taking place inside the synagogue."

THE PROTESTERS' STATED AIM TO "FREE THE WORLD FROM ZIONISM" CONSTITUTES INCITEMENT AND HOSTILITY AND SERVES AS A THINLY VEILED ATTACK ON THE JEWISH COMMUNITY ITSELF.

The Council maintains that Holocaust centres are memorials to the dead and points out that for many Jewish families, there are no gravesites for relatives murdered in Europe. "It's disgraceful to desecrate the memory of the dead with hate-filled protests," the Board said.

A particular source of concern was the language used on protest posters. One widely circulated poster called to "free the world from Zionism". Pugh-Jones Baranov said this crossed a line. "Internationally and within South Africa, the term 'Zionism' is often used as a code for Jews," she said. "When a protest using that language is held at a Jewish venue unconnected to Israel, it demonstrates that the Jewish community itself is the target."

The KwaZulu-Natal Council described the phrase as a form of incitement, and warned that hostile rhetoric had

historically escalated into violence. The statement referenced the global context in which Jewish communities are facing heightened threats, including documented arson attacks on Jewish places of worship and deadly attacks at Jewish community gatherings abroad.

Lori Goldberg, the president of the Durban Progressive Jewish Community, said the repeated protests had a direct impact on congregants. "We are a small community, and every incident feels magnified," she said. "When people hear there is going to be a protest outside shul, fear sets in quickly."

Goldberg said that following the circulation of information about the protest, several congregants decided not to attend Friday night services. "People who had been given honours that evening phoned to say they weren't coming," she said. "Some are elderly, others have small children. Even if the protest is small, the anxiety it creates is very real."

According to Goldberg, those fears are often disproportionate to what actually happens on the ground. "On that Friday, there were more police officers and security personnel than protesters," she said. "If people came, they would see how controlled it is, but fear doesn't always work rationally."

In response to concerns raised by the community, Pugh-Jones Baranov wrote to Durban Mayor Cyril Xaba requesting intervention. The Council formally asked for an enhanced police presence during protest hours; the establishment of a buffer zone to ensure safe access to the premises; and strict enforcement against harassment or intimidation of

worshippers.

While no formal response was received from the mayor's office, Pugh-Jones Baranov said there was cooperation from law enforcement. "Metro Police and public order policing were deployed and protesters were instructed to move across the street to a grass embankment," she said. "That ensured they weren't directly outside the Holocaust Centre or the synagogue."

Pugh-Jones Baranov said the most recent protest, on 23 January, lasted about two to two and a half hours, and drew a somewhat larger crowd than usual partly because organisers described it as their hundredth protest. She noted the presence of a cameraman and journalists

Party goes on at Castle despite antisemitic hate

>>Continued from page 2

Ben Tovim says that after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Castle was struggling financially. A homeless camp nearby also deterred visitors. But it didn't deter him, and he started hosting events there, which brought in much-needed funds for the site. It also led others to host events there.

A local woman told the SA Jewish Report she attended Yalla Valhalla last year and this year. Speaking anonymously for her own safety, she says that even after a protester tried to convince her not to attend, she simply didn't see what the problem was.

"I don't think the event organiser being Israeli impacts anyone, unless they promoted the war at the party, which they didn't. As a Christian, I have nothing against other people's religions. I just went for the music."

Another partygoer attended the event to support Ben Tovim, who is a friend, and to have a night out. Also speaking anonymously for his own security, he says, "It's unfair to hold a private individual born in Israel responsible for the actions of the Israeli government, just as the Muslim community in Cape Town isn't responsible for the actions of Hamas. As a German [who lives in South Africa], I know that creating concepts of 'the enemy' and building walls between people is dangerous."

He has close friends in both the Jewish and Muslim communities, and believes "we should focus on humanity and kindness rather than deepening divides".

The man runs a popular social media account, "and we had people unfollow us because I attended [the event], which I think illustrates how polarised people have become". Attending a party to support a friend "doesn't mean one supports violence or war", he says, "it just means we refuse to let politics dictate our personal relationships".

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from Muslim media outlets, which hadn't been the case at earlier demonstrations.

Although the protesters framed their message as anti-Zionist rather than anti-Jewish, Pugh-Jones Baranov said the community remained unconvinced. "You cannot separate that claim from the choice of location," she said. "The decision to protest outside a Holocaust centre and a synagogue during a time of Jewish communal prayer is very concerning."

Goldberg said the synagogue was frequently caught in the crossfire. "I don't believe many of the protesters even realise there is a shul on the campus," she said. "They see the words 'Holocaust' and 'genocide', and that's what draws them. Because we are next door, we are affected."

Despite the strain, both leaders stressed that the community was determined not to be intimidated. "There's a core group of congregants who said they would come regardless," Pugh-Jones Baranov said. "They refuse to give in to harassment." Goldberg echoed that resolve while acknowledging the emotional toll. "It's exhausting," she said. "But we cannot allow fear to drive us out of our own spaces."

As the situation continues to be monitored by CSO and law enforcement, Jewish leaders in KwaZulu-Natal say their focus remains on ensuring that places of worship and remembrance are treated with dignity and that constitutional freedoms are exercised without intimidation.

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Amad's return to Joburg leadership causes alarm

CLAUDIA GROSS

Less than a year after former mayor of Johannesburg Thapelo Amad was ordered by the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) to apologise for glorifying Hamas in hate speech, he is back in the city's executive leadership as member of the mayoral committee (MMC) for community development. To date, Amad has not apologised.

The move has triggered alarm within the Jewish community and reignited concerns about accountability, hate speech, and the cost of coalition politics in South Africa's economic hub. "This appointment sends a deeply troubling message to the residents of our city that violence and hate speech are acceptable, and that one need not comply with the findings and remedies of constitutional bodies," said South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) National Director Wendy Kahn.

The South African Zionist Federation described Amad's appointment as incompatible with the responsibilities of his new role. "The appointment of Thapelo Amad as MMC for Community Development is a cruel irony and an insult to the people of Johannesburg," said

Rolene Marks, the organisation's spokesperson. "A man whose political modus operandi has been to inflame tensions, divide communities, and traffic in hateful rhetoric is now being handed a portfolio meant to foster social cohesion."

For less than a month in 2024, Amad, a senior member of Al Jama-ah, was the mayor of Johannesburg. His elevation to the city's highest political office back then triggered alarm within the Jewish community. Now, he is back to deal with community development.

Within days of taking office, attention returned to the SAHRC ruling concerning Amad's social media post made in October 2023, shortly after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. In the post, he appeared holding a firearm and wrote, "We stand with Hamas, Hamas stands with us, together we are Palestine and Palestine will be free. With our souls, with our blood, we will conquer Al-Aqsa."

The commission found that the statement amounted to the propagation of hatred and the incitement of violence. It ruled that the post exceeded the bounds of protected political expression and was particularly harmful given the context of an active armed conflict. The commission

recommended that Amad issue a public apology. He hasn't done so.

His appointment this month has brought those concerns back into sharp focus, particularly for Jewish communal organisations who say the city is now repeating a mistake it has already made.

Advocate Mark Oppenheimer said the significance of Amad's return lay not only in the content of the commission's ruling, but in Amad's refusal to comply with it. "Thapelo Amad, the disgraced former mayor of Johannesburg, was found by the SAHRC to have engaged in unlawful speech," Oppenheimer said. "The commission concluded that the statement amounted to the propagation of hatred and the incitement of violence."

Oppenheimer said Amad's continued defiance of the ruling raised questions about the standards being applied to public office. "Despite this finding, Mr Amad has remained unapologetic," he said. "His subsequent selection as a MMC therefore raises serious concerns."

The SAJBD said the appointment sent a disturbing message to Jewish residents of Johannesburg and the broader public. In a statement issued on 22 January, the organisation said it was "deeply concerned" by



Thapelo Amad

ruled amounted to incitement to violence and propagation of hatred beyond protected political expression."

The Board said it was "wholly unacceptable" for a person with such a record, who has refused to comply with the remedies issued by a Chapter 9 institution, to hold a leadership position within the Johannesburg City Council. It noted that the community development portfolio requires a demonstrated commitment to social cohesion, intercommunal respect, and the protection of all residents.

Amad's political profile has long been shaped by his outspoken positions on Israel and the Middle East. During and after his mayoralty, he was a visible supporter of initiatives that Jewish organisations said imported international conflict into local governance in ways that directly affected minority communities.

One of the most prominent examples was the proposal to rename Sandton Drive after Leila Khaled, a figure associated with plane hijackings carried out on behalf of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Amad was among the leading political advocates for the renaming, framing it as a gesture of solidarity with Palestinians. Jewish organisations, opposition parties, and civil society groups warned that the proposal would legitimise political violence and deepen divisions in one of Johannesburg's most economically significant areas.

These controversies, combined with his SAHRC censure, shaped Jewish communal opposition to Amad's mayoralty and continue to inform reactions to his return. For many, the concern is not symbolic but structural: that coalition politics are repeatedly overriding considerations of social cohesion and minority safety.

Marks said Amad's refusal to comply with the SAHRC ruling was central to the organisation's objection. "He has refused to comply with the ruling, refused to apologise, and refused to take responsibility," she said. "That defiance alone should disqualify him from any position of public leadership."

Oppenheimer said the implications extend beyond Amad himself. "It signals not only a tolerance for extremist rhetoric, but a willingness by the governing coalition to associate with Al Jama-ah," he said.

The SAJBD called for Amad to be removed from his leadership position until he complies with the remedies set out by the SAHRC.

Determination to bust gang robbing businesses

LEE TANKLE

Two members of a criminal gang linked to more than 50 business robberies across Johannesburg were arrested and a crime in progress interrupted in the early hours of 18 January, following a coordinated, intelligence-led operation involving CAP and the South African Police Service (SAPS) Flying Squad.

While the suspects were not charged, as prosecutors claimed there was insufficient evidence, CAP is working with high-level SAPS members to intervene in charging these suspects.

"We and our SAPS colleagues are fully committed to ensuring the perpetrators of these crimes are brought to justice," said Sean Jammy, CAP deputy chief executive.

The gang has been operating across Bramley, Parkhurst, Parkwood, Savoy, Waverley, Saxonwold, Orchards, Oaklands, Orange Grove, Sydenham, Highlands North, Emmarentia, Greenside, Sandringham, and Glenhazel, many of the areas that fall within CAP's core operational footprint.

Jammy said they found out about the gang because CAP analysts process information from

all crimes reported to them daily. When they hear about the crimes, their field collections officers attended crime scenes and assist the SAPS in collecting evidence.

"Our analysts established that the incidents were of a similar nature and were being perpetrated by the same group or criminal crew," Jammy said. He said the gang targeted businesses closed at night. The criminals would enter through the roof and disable the alarm systems to avoid detection.

"The suspects are after electronics, tools, solar panels, computers, and high-value items," he said. "Law firms, accounting firms, doctor's rooms, and any other businesses that close at night were targets. The type of business targeted wasn't specific because these items are available in so many different businesses."

CAP received information in the early hours of 18 January that the gang was intending to commit a crime in one of the CAP areas. CAP teams set off along with members of the SAPS Flying Squad to find the suspects. They were driving around in the Parkhurst area at about 02:00 when they noticed two suspects jumping over a wall and getting into two vehicles. The gang managed to break into one property and

commit a burglary in the neighbouring property in Parkhurst.

"The team pursued the suspects as they drove recklessly and at high speed to Hillbrow. The driver of one vehicle was apprehended, but the three other suspects fled on foot and evaded capture," said Jammy. "The second vehicle was intercepted in Observatory. CAP teams arrested the driver and recovered suspected stolen property. Both suspects, the vehicles, and all recovered items were handed over to the SAPS and booked at the relevant police station."

Jammy said items stolen that night had been recovered. "These items are significant because they link the suspects to the perpetration of the crime and are also of value to the business owner who was happy to get them back," said Jammy.

He said CAP regularly assists the SAPS Flying Squad with crime prevention and plays a supporting role in the arrest of violent criminals. "This coordination is ongoing and part of CAP's commitment to eradicating crime in South Africa."

Though only two suspects were arrested, they weren't placed on the court role as the prosecutor ruled that there was insufficient evidence to link them to the incident.

"While we believe that these are the correct suspects and that they are linked to the 50-plus incidents, further investigation is required to re-arrest the suspects and prosecute them," said Jammy. "We are working with the prosecutor and the SAPS investigating officer to follow up on the outstanding investigations and leads which will hopefully lead to the re-arrest of the suspects and the arrest of the outstanding individuals."



Davos highlights SA's marginalisation, Israel's strategic centrality

STEVEN GRUZD

Neither South African President Cyril Ramaphosa nor Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made it to Davos, Switzerland, for the annual World Economic Forum (WEF) powwow. Nevertheless, both countries featured in the discussions, and the gathering in the Swiss Alps influenced the increasingly complex web of interconnections between Israel, South Africa, and the United States (US).

Whatever the official reasons Pretoria proffered, perhaps with the parlous state of bilateral relations with Washington, Ramaphosa felt he might not be welcome this year.

After all, Ramaphosa wasn't invited to participate in US President Donald Trump's "Board of Peace" unveiled in Davos, underlining how irrelevant South Africa is as regards peace-making in the Middle East.

Analyst Terence Corrigan said, "It seems clear that the breakdown of South Africa's relationship with the US means that – for now – it is being excluded from involvement in the one global issue that South Africa has obsessed over. This will be a bitter pill to swallow."

"I think we can expect South Africa to be very vocal in all the fora available to it to protest Trump's Gaza rebuild plan," Corrigan said. "Expect this to place additional strain on the relationship."

Pretoria has also been blackballed by Trump from all the US-hosted G20 meetings in 2026. At the WEF, Trump again repeated his misguided, delusional notion of a genocide against Afrikaners. The most senior South African official there was Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, Ronald Lamola.

delivered concrete outcomes in the Middle East. Supporters saw it as unconventional but potentially effective; critics saw it as simplistic. Either way, he dominated attention, which remains his defining feature."

Corrigan said of the Board of Peace, "This looks like a pointed sidelining of the United Nations in favour of

shift the broader conversation about South Africa, which remains framed around economic stagnation, infrastructure constraints, and political uncertainty rather than racial narrative."

As for Netanyahu, he must be careful where he travels, as he is still indicted by the International

Criminal Court for his role in the war in Gaza. Local politics is also all-consuming. Israel's president, Isaac Herzog, was waving the blue and white flag instead.

Asked how Israel was discussed, Robinson said, "There was broad recognition that Israel sits at the fault line of many global issues: Middle East stability; terrorism; cyber security; defence technology; and innovation under pressure. While

some criticism surfaced in side conversations, the dominant tone among serious policymakers and investors was that Israel remains a critical Western ally and an indispensable innovation and security partner."

Israeli journalist Rolene Marks said Trump's speech went down well, especially his comments that if Hamas didn't disarm in Gaza it would be "blown away". She said Israel was cautious about the Board of Peace,

and the seats given to Qatar and Türkiye, "two countries that have shielded Hamas".

Former US diplomat and writer J Brooks Spector said, "While Israel may not have benefited much from President Trump's meandering diatribe at Davos – or Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's warnings about a hegemon causing a rupture in the international order – they may be able to take some comfort from the launch of Trump's Board of Peace. That body was originally designed to begin Gaza's reconstruction. The Board, however, has gotten off to a rickety start as major Western nations declined joining in."

"Davos has changed, but it has not faded," Robinson said. "Its value now lies in off-stage conversations, quiet deal-making, and sensing where power, capital, and governments are truly moving. There was realism without despair. A sense that the world is entering a tougher, more fragmented phase, but also that serious actors are adapting. For Israel in particular, there was respect for its resilience and a recognition that strength, clarity, and alliances matter more than popularity. Israel's challenge isn't legitimacy but narrative discipline. In rooms like Davos, calm leadership, technological excellence, and strategic consistency speak louder than outrage. Israel remains firmly embedded in the future-facing conversations that matter."



Secretary General of NATO Mark Rutte speaking to Israel President Isaac Herzog

South African-born Andrew Robinson, the chairperson of the Albanian-based Besa Foundation, was in Davos and told the *SA Jewish Report* that Trump's "presence and messaging were polarising but unmistakably influential. The 'Board of Peace' concept was met with scepticism in form, but interest in substance. Many quietly acknowledged that Trump's transactional, power-based approach to geopolitics had, in the past,

a strange coalition of countries that have agreed to operate on Trump's terms."

Robinson said, "At Davos, South Africa was present but not central. When it came up, discussions focused more on governance, energy transition challenges, and geopolitical alignment than on Trump's rhetoric. His comments about white genocide were widely viewed in Davos as inflammatory and not grounded in accepted data. They didn't materially

An advertisement for Crawford International Sandton. It features two students, a girl and a boy, in school uniforms. The girl is on the left, looking at a tablet, and the boy is on the right, looking directly at the camera. The background is dark with a faint circular logo. A red banner at the top right says "100% PASS RATE". A red banner at the bottom left says "BOOK A PERSONALISED TOUR". The main text "Crawford International Sandton" is at the top, and "BUILDING GLOBAL LEADERS" is in large white letters in the center. Below that is a red banner with "BOOK A PERSONALISED TOUR". At the bottom, there are two large white numbers: "1428 TOTAL DISTINCTIONS" and "3.6 DISTINCTIONS PER STUDENT".

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Jewish Report

Untying the yellow ribbon

Like everyone else this week, we at the *SA Jewish Report* had the cathartic experience of removing our yellow ribbons and took off our “Bring them home” dog tags. The *SA Jewish Report* team has also finally removed the yellow ribbon we have carried on our front page every week since 7 October 2023. We made a commitment to carrying it until the last hostage was home.

So many tears of relief were shed in Israel and around the world when it was confirmed earlier this week that the body of Ran Gvili, the last hostage remaining in Gaza, was coming home. The waiting, the anxiety, the distress and fear for the hostages is finally over.

The war is over ... for now. The proverbial 7 October has finally come to pass, and we have moved on to 8 October and onwards and upwards. The thrust of Israel's ordeal has come to an end!

On Tuesday evening, 27 January, there was an emotional gathering at Hostage Square in Tel Aviv, where the clock that was counting the minutes from when the hostages were taken was finally stopped. It stopped at 843 days: 12 hours: 05 minutes: 59 seconds. As it stopped, there was silence among the throngs of people there. And then the clapping and whooping began.

Other than that, there was little in the way of celebration or joy on the streets of Israel. That's because although everyone is relieved they are all home, there is little cause for rejoicing. The truth is, the pain and anguish of this war doesn't disappear just like that. The damage done to the hostages, those brutalised on 7 October, and the many soldiers, doesn't just go away. Israel is a country with much pain and suffering after 843 days of war.

However, there is a deep sense of gratitude that Israel promised it would not leave any hostages in Gaza – and it fulfilled that commitment to the last.

I believe it would have been tough for Israelis to forgive their leaders if they hadn't fulfilled this commitment. So, it's a massive relief! Today, there is not one Israeli hostage left in Gaza, something that couldn't be said for the past 12 years. Even those who had been taken long before the war in Gaza have been brought home in this long painful process for Israel, Jews, and Palestinians.

Will Israel be able to prevent hostages being taken in the future? It's a tough question because I agree with former Israel government spokesperson Eylon Levy that the ransom we paid for getting our hostages back won't serve us in the long term. Israel freed thousands of Hamas operatives from Israeli prisons in order to get our people back, and it was an extraordinary price to pay as those operatives are back on the streets of Gaza, most probably believing that taking hostages is worthwhile. And although Hamas has taken a serious knock, it is still standing.

As Levy said, Israel is going to have to make securing its citizens from being taken hostage its number-one priority. What will it take to dismantle Hamas to ensure it can never do this kind of damage to Israel again? When in history has a terrorist organisation agreed to disarm and throw in the towel? I guess, I didn't believe all the hostages would be brought home, so I need to have hope and trust.

It is no coincidence that the last hostage was finally brought home on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, 81 years since World War II ended. The hostages will always be a reminder of 7 October 2023 – the very day that Jews around the world were forced to recognise that as much as we say, “Never again,” we now know it can happen again.

And during the 843 days since the 7 October massacre and the hostages were taken, we learnt how easily antisemitism could and did escalate. We recognised that although we believed Jews were very much a part of every country we live in, there were many in those countries that have come out to remind us that we are different.

Having said that, we have also learnt that we have friends where we didn't expect to find them. And there certainly are many people around the world who stand by us.

It has also been driven home to us time and again that the reason we have a sense of security in this world is because Israel – the Jewish state – exists. And yet, it is that same state that our enemies want to destroy. We keep being reminded at every protest and every day on social media of the call, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.” In other words, obliterate the Jewish state and all within it to make it a Palestinian state.

Clearly, as much as our enemies will insist that it's not about Jews, but Israel, the numbers don't lie. There have been 815 severe antisemitic incidents around the world reported just during 2025, according to the latest report by Israel's Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and Antisemitism. This includes the murder of 21 Jews, a significant increase from the one person killed in 2024.

There have been 124 million antisemitic posts on X/Twitter according to the report, and there have been more than 4 000 anti-Israel demonstrations, 365 of which were classified as posing an extreme risk to Jews.

Most incidents were recorded in the United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, and Canada – not South Africa.

An analysis of 10 prominent fake-news cases demonstrates, according to the report, how misinformation, miscaptured imagery, and distorted claims – especially around Gaza – shaped international narratives and fuelled hostility towards Jews and Israel. And obviously, South Africa taking Israel to the International Court of Justice on trumped-up charges of genocide has added to this, as has various United Nations condemnations of Israel.

There are many painful remnants and reminders of 7 October. However, this week, all the hostages are home and Israel and the Jewish world have an opportunity to breathe and look forward.

We don't know what lies ahead, but we know this, as long as we work together, we will survive and thrive. *Am Yisrael Chai!*

Shabbat shalom!
Peta Krost
Editor



Gayton versus Goliath – ANC cultural propaganda

OPINION

In 2024, just a couple of months after becoming minister of sport, arts, and culture, Gayton McKenzie, who is also the leader of Government of National Unity aligned party, the Patriotic Alliance, took to X (previously Twitter) to condemn a statement issued by his own department without his signature or authorisation. The statement expressed support for a campaign to have Israel excluded from the upcoming Paris Olympics. The source of the statement was Peace Mabe, the deputy minister of the department and a member of the African National Congress (ANC). A week earlier, the same deputy minister had hosted a hastily convened event with arts from the Venezuelan embassy of the Maduro regime, where she expressed similar sentiments and made sure to invite a speaker from Africa4Palestine to address the audience on boycotting Israel.

In 2025, McKenzie once again clashed with his department when he intervened to change the composition of a delegation of South African writers to the Havana Book Fair. McKenzie said the problem with the delegation was lack of representation, noting that there were, according to him, no white or coloured authors on the list. Members of the literary community were outraged, claiming that some of the authors McKenzie added were “pro-Israel”, “anti-Palestine”, and “not authors of note”. What's interesting, however, is that the original list contained delegates who had never written a book before and several who supported cultural boycotts against Israel.

Now we have another incident, this time at the Venice Biennale, where support for artist Gabrielle Goliath's work was withdrawn by the

that her team was at least willing to consider in principle funding from Qatar, an authoritarian regime where freedom of expression – not least on LGBTQI themes on which she has derived some of her art – is banned.

It's worth noting that one of the members of the selection committee that approved Goliath's work, Professor Nomusa Makhubu of the University of Cape Town, is a vocal supporter of the boycott of Israel at the institution.

What we are left with, then, is a pattern: several major public controversies, all involving the minister being at odds with his own department of sport, arts, and culture; the topics Cuba, Gaza, and Venezuela; all pet projects of the ANC; all laced with anti-Israel activism. What McKenzie has inherited isn't an arts and culture department working in the interests of South Africans, but an ANC cultural propaganda subcommittee.

In a free country, public representatives must be held to account for their conduct, and artists have the right to criticise the decisions and methods of the minister in the exercise of his portfolio. McKenzie is no exception to this rule. If there are questions to answer, he must do so. However, one cannot help feeling that the squealing we are hearing doesn't have as much to do with lofty concerns about artistic freedom as they would like us to believe. After all, where were these voices of concern when former, now deceased, Arts and Culture Minister Nathi Mthethwa publicly harassed Miss South Africa, Lalela Mswane, for months because she wanted to attend the Miss Universe pageant in Israel? Where were they when a group of extremists tried to prevent

a public venue from hosting The Kiffness last year? No, what we are really hearing are those accustomed to receiving regular dollops of ideologically driven patronage having their cheese being moved.

A reminder that the department of arts and culture is supposed to represent all South Africans. A recent Pew opinion poll noted that 35% of South Africans have a favourable view of Israel. Now take a moment and imagine the South African pavilion at the Biennale displaying an artwork made of hostage posters of Africans kidnapped on 7 October. It's hard to

do, because such an installation would never have been chosen in the first place. We have a department that, until now, seems to be more interested in promoting Gaza than the cultural exports of South Africa.

Those incensed by McKenzie's actions have invoked South Africa's long and sordid history of suppressing the arts and censoring artists. Quite rightly, we cannot afford to return there. But South Africa also has an equally unpleasant history of taxpayer funds being used to pursue ideological cultural projects on behalf of the racist, undemocratic state. Now under the ANC, South Africans have been forced to pay for foreign authoritarian propaganda. The creaking we are hearing is that era coming to an end.

• Benji Shulman hosts the Studio +927 show on 101.9 ChaiFM.



Ran's return closes a painful circle

OPINION

"Blessed are You, L-rd our G-d, king of the universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion."

There were times when we wondered if it would ever happen. Would they all be returned home? For 843 days, we all hoped, prayed, shook the heavens, and bargained with the Almighty and anyone in power. We were brought to our knees, pleading, and breathed the fire of our relentless fight for our brothers and sisters.

After 843 days, only one remained – Staff Sergeant Ran Gvili. He was, as his superhero mother, Talik, said, the first one in and the last one out. For 843 days, Talik,

discovered that our hearts can be both full and broken at the same time. Our hearts are full that our brother, Ran, "the Defender of Alumim" has returned to us, but broken that we are laying him to rest.

Several days ago, the Israel Defense Forces launched "Operation Brave Heart" to search for the remains of Ran – or Rani as he has become known in Israel – and bring him home. The search took them to a cemetery in northern Gaza, and after searching through 250 graves which they are now in the process of returning to their respectful rest, Ran was found.

Hiding the bodies of hostages in graves demonstrates



Itzik, Shira, and Omer fought for their son and brother, Ran, like the Maccabees themselves. With superhuman strength and a tenacity that is awe inspiring, they persevered with all their might until their beloved son, a hero of Israel, was returned.

It is almost impossible to describe what we are feeling in Israel. Over the past two years, we have learnt that it is possible to walk alongside our grief, it is possible to carry both resilience and heartbreak, and yesterday, we

another level of Hamas's depravity. Not content to use their civilian populations as human shields, the terror organisation defiles their dead as well.

The soldiers of the Alexandroni Brigade were joined by 20 forensic dentists who meticulously searched through the remains until they found Ran. He was identified through his fingerprints, and was found still in the clothes he fought in on 7 October.

Operation Brave Heart was the most fitting name

for the mission to recover this hero of Israel. In a tribute written by the Hostages and Missing Families Forum, Ran was described as follows: "Staff Sergeant Ran [Rani] Gvili from Meitar was a Yassam Negev fighter in the Southern District of the Israel Police. Ran took great pride in being a police officer and wearing the blue uniform."

On the morning of the Black Saturday, Ran was at home recovering from a motorcycle accident, suffering from a fractured shoulder. Upon learning of the terrorist infiltration, he immediately put on his uniform, and went out to assist his fellow unit members in the fighting. On his way, he encountered terrorists and fought with courage and determination on the front line at the entrance to Kibbutz Alumim. Members of the kibbutz community later gave him the name "Ran, the Defender of Alumim".

The bravest heart is now home. He will be laid to rest with the dignity he so richly deserves. Kissing his son's coffin, his father, Itzik, told him, "We are proud of you, my son."

Israelis have cried rivers of tears in the past more than two years. We have had days that are more sorrowful than others, and some days that epitomise how we live with *ha'dvash v'oketz* (the honey and the sting). The return of Rani was exactly that. It closes a painful circle. For the first time since 2014, there are no more hostages in Gaza. For the first time in 844 days, perhaps we can think about a day after 7 October. Israel has fulfilled a sacred vow – we leave no-one behind.

Ran Gvili is home. Alumim's defender is home. The bravest heart can now rest in peace. They are all home. May the living hostages start to heal. May Ran's, and all the deceased hostages', memories be an eternal blessing.

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

ROLENE MARKS



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Why ending doesn't mean forgetting

OPINION

This week, for the first time in more than two years, the relentless count of days ended.

The last Israeli hostage – the last body held in Gaza – was brought back to Israel. With that, something shifted.

Not in the way wars usually end, with declarations or ceremonies. But in the realisation that, for the first time in months, there were no names left on the list of people we had been agitating – and praying – to see come home alive.

For a long time, most of us didn't allow ourselves to ask what comes next. Not because we never wanted to face it, but because we couldn't afford to. Waiting required a certain suspension of the future. Now, strangely, we are in the privileged position of being able to ask the question.

For years, we carried yellow ribbons; pins on jackets; and "Bring Them Home Now" necklaces close to our chests. Objects as expressions of our hearts. Posters taped to walls, noticeboards, shul entrances, fridge doors. Some people pinned photographs of the hostages to their bags. Some kept posters folded in wallets or taped above their desks. Others wore the faces themselves on their clothing. These items became part of our daily life, part of how we moved through the world while waiting.

They weren't accessories. They were acts of presence. A way of saying: I see you. I remember you. I am not moving on.

Now that waiting has ended, people are beginning to do something else. Not because everything is healed, but because the state of waiting itself cannot continue in the same way.

In recent days, posters have begun to come down. Quietly. One by one. Not ripped down in anger, but removed with care. In some Jewish communities, yellow ribbons and boards listing names have been intentionally taken down or set aside. Some have used the word "retired" to describe this – not discarded, not erased – but acknowledged and put to rest.

This isn't a movement. There's no campaign. There are no instructions. What is happening is far

more human than that. People are recognising, often privately, that the meaning of these symbols has changed.

I have heard friends talking about wanting a form of closure that matches the intensity of what we all lived through. Not closure in the sense of forgetting, but in the sense of transition. Some have spoken about placing posters somewhere private rather than keeping them on display. Others suggest folding them carefully and keeping them in a box. There are proposals to bury them in a garden or a meaningful place – not as a ritual for those taken captive and murdered, but for the waiting that defined the past two years. This may sound abstract, but psychologically it makes sense. Humans create rituals not only for death, but for endings. Waiting, too, can end. And when it does, it leaves a hollow space behind.

In Jewish thought, there is the idea of *tzava'ah* – a legacy or ethical will. It's the notion that what someone leaves behind isn't only material, but moral. An intention that continues even after the moment has passed. In that sense, the symbols we carried were never only about the hostages themselves. They were about who we chose to be while the world was noisy, cruel, distracted, and often indifferent.

Here in South Africa, I haven't yet seen public ceremonies of removal, and perhaps that's fitting. What I have seen is quieter. People deciding, privately and without urgency, what to do next.



Israel President Isaac Herzog removing his hostage pin

I have heard people talk about how strange it feels to unclasp a necklace that became second nature. How empty that space feels once it is gone. These objects were touched daily, sometimes unconsciously, like worry beads. Letting them go can feel like a loss in itself.

I have chosen to keep my "Bring Them Home Now" necklace hanging from a board above my desk. As I write this, it's there in front of me. A reminder of what we lived through. Of what we cannot allow to happen again. How exactly that translates into the future, I don't yet know.

I find myself touching the Magen David

I now wear permanently around my neck. That, too, is new. I didn't buy it as a statement.

I bought it because something in me needed weight. Continuity.

Identity that does not depend on slogans.

The war changed us. The hostages changed us. The waiting changed us.

We can give these objects a second life. Some will become part of communal memory. Some will rest quietly in drawers or boxes. Some will remain visible, transformed in meaning. What matters is not uniformity, but intention.

Letting go isn't forgetting. It's recognising that a chapter has closed, even if the book is far from finished. And that recognition, difficult as it is, is something we are finally able – and perhaps finally allowed – to face.

• Paula Slier is a veteran journalist and foreign correspondent who has reported from conflict zones across the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. She writes on media, geopolitics, and information warfare.

Museum tells story of Lithuanian Jewry

GILANA LAB

In 1941, Lithuanian Jews were taken from their homes, marched out of their towns or villages mostly by Lithuanians themselves into the forests, forced to dig mass graves, and shot into those graves.

In that short time, about 200 000 Jews were killed, most of the remaining Jews in Lithuania. Had so many of them not left before then – mostly landing up in South Africa and making up most of the local Jewish population – the Litvak community might not have survived.

This horrifying history represents the Holocaust before Auschwitz became its symbol, and it is this history that shaped Lithuania and, by extension, much of South African Jewry.

This is but part of the story told by the new Lost Shtetl Museum in Šeduva, a small town in Lithuania. It is this museum, opened in August 2025, that is one of the only places you can find an honest story about the Jewish community.

"In the summer and autumn of 1941, the Holocaust in Lithuania happened very fast," said Dr Jolanta Mickuté, historian and head of education at the Lost

Shtetl Museum. "There were no extermination camps yet. People were taken to nearby forests and killed there. This is what we call the Holocaust by bullets."

She reiterated that in Lithuania, Jewish life didn't end behind barbed wire or railway gates. It ended in forests, in silence, and in

forced-labour camp. A community that had existed for centuries disappeared almost overnight.

It's because Šeduva's story mirrors what happened across Lithuania that it became the home of the Lost Shtetl Museum. "Šeduva represents the rule, not the exception," Mickuté

and create a small memorial space," Mickuté said. "But the project grew because people realised how much history had been erased, and how urgent it was to bring it back."

Walking through the museum today, visitors encounter that history as lived experience rather than abstraction. The 10-gallery

exhibition begins with Jewish daily life: markets; youth movements; religious practice; political debate; and coexistence with neighbours. "We begin with life," Mickuté said. "We want

and annihilation. By the time visitors reach the Holocaust Gallery, "the Jews of Šeduva are no longer faceless numbers", Mickuté said. "They are people with names, families, and professions."

From South Africa, Dana Lazarus was at the museum's opening and described the exhibition as emotionally devastating but necessary. "The first half shows you what was, how rich and normal life was," she said. "The second half shows you exactly how it ended. The museum names who were involved, what they did, and how the community was destroyed.

It's confronting, but it's honest."

That honesty is deliberate. The museum documents not only Nazi leadership, but also the role of local collaborators, a subject long suppressed during the Soviet era. "For 50 years, this history couldn't be spoken about openly," Mickuté said. "Now, with survivors and witnesses almost gone, education has become urgent."

For South Africans, the museum resonates deeply.

An estimated 80% to 85% of South African Jews are Litvaks, descendants of Jews from present-day Lithuania. "Even if your family wasn't from Šeduva," Mickuté said, "this is very likely how your ancestors lived."

Artefacts donated by South African Jewish families appear throughout the museum: letters, photographs, and objects carried across continents. Lazarus found these moments especially moving. "We know our grandparents came from Lithuania," she said. "But most of us don't really know their stories. This museum gives you a glimpse into the lives they left behind, and into the fate of those who didn't leave."

Like many visitors, I knew about Auschwitz. What I didn't know was how many Lithuanian Jews were murdered before camps became central to the Nazi system. "Most people associate the Holocaust with Auschwitz," Mickuté said. "But for provincial Jews in Lithuania, the Holocaust happened earlier, and it happened near their homes."

Since opening, the response has been overwhelming. In its first four months, the museum welcomed more than 26 000 visitors despite opening outside peak tourist season. "People leave crying," Mickuté said. "They thank us for telling a story they were never taught."

For Lazarus, the museum represents something larger than remembrance. "For the first time, there's a real reckoning," she said. "A new generation in Lithuania is willing to face what happened. That matters, especially now."

Through the story of one ordinary town, the Lost Shtetl Museum tells the story of Lithuanian Jewry, and in doing so, tells the story of most South African Jews. It's not only a memorial to what was lost, but a reminder of how easily life can be erased and how urgently it must be remembered.

The Lost Shtetl Museum in Šeduva



full view of neighbours. Families were taken from their homes, marched to mass graves, and shot, often over the course of a single day.

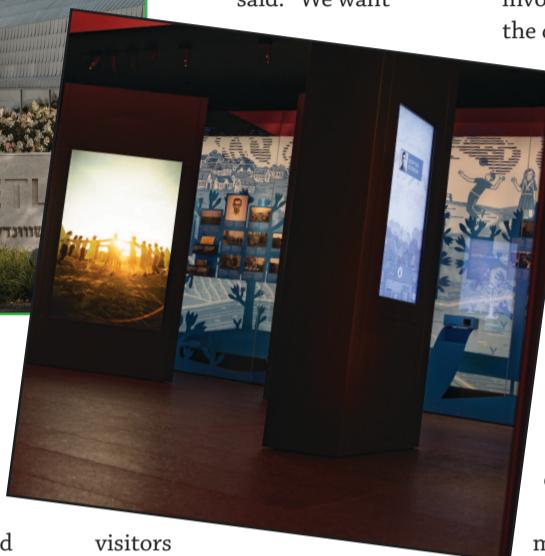
In Šeduva, she said, that destruction took place at the end of August 1941. Within two days, the town's entire Jewish population was murdered after being held briefly in a

said. "About a third of its population was Jewish in interwar Lithuania. Using Šeduva allows us to tell the story of shtetl life across the country."

The museum, which opened next door to the restored Šeduva Jewish Cemetery, grew out of a far smaller idea. "At first, there was just a plan to restore the cemetery

visitors to meet real people first, not statistics."

Only then does the narrative move toward occupation, violence,



Holocaust exhibition runs more than skin deep

LEE TANKLE

Walking through *Beneath the Skin*, an exhibition at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC), part of its week of international Holocaust remembrance, visitors are confronted with history and the lingering echoes of lives lost.

Artist Mark Fisher, whose work will be exhibited there until 25 March, explores the Holocaust through sculpture and installation that speak to loss, dignity, and moral rupture. Rather than illustrating events, the exhibition asks viewers to pause, reflect, and consider what remains when humanity is stripped away, especially at a time when antisemitism is at an all-time high.

"I became interested in bringing that side of myself into the conversation – the part of me that is serious, committed, and determined never to forget," Fisher said. "Thematically, that commitment lies at the heart of this exhibition. While I'm not particularly religious, I was born a Jew, I will die a Jew, and I'm proud of that identity. In a world facing profound moral challenges, exhibitions like this are fundamental, not only to this work, but to my role as an artist."

It was, however, a trip to Budapest that crystallised this focus. There, Fisher met a renowned Hungarian ceramic artist whose parents had survived the war by working as Jewish artists and forging documents to save lives. "When I saw his first piece, a monumental work that took him three years to make, it hit me in the heart. It just blew me away," Fisher recalled. That encounter inspired him to create art that delves into the history of the Holocaust, making his work deeply personal and a meaningful reflection of the experiences of his people.

"This work is not about representing the Holocaust, it's about standing in its shadow," he said. "I want viewers to feel the weight of what was taken, what was erased, and what still demands responsibility from us today. Art for me is a form of moral witnessing."

Fisher spent a lot of time at the JHGC carefully planning how his exhibition would be given full effect.

It starts with the death march, in which many individuals in the camps were forced to walk many kilometres from one camp to another, most notably from Auschwitz to Birkenau (Auschwitz II). During these marches, thousands dropped at the side of the road. Those who did survive the journey were either sent to the gas chambers or to work.

Fisher depicts these haunting scenes using hordes of faceless figures on canvas



At the *Beneath the Skin* exhibition

using bleach, ink, and salt, representing the bleach used to remove the smell of death; the ink of the tattoos of the prisoners; and the salt of the tears.

He wanted to showcase birth and death. He does this through the use of white boxes with white stones to symbolise coffins.

In two white coffins, along with the stones, there are small ceramic pieces of body parts; the yellow star stained with blood; and the remnants of machine guns, evoking the violence of the mass killing of Jews. Victims were executed by being shot in the back of the head, and their bodies were stacked in mass graves that they had dug themselves, with lime used between layers to speed up decomposition. Thousands of people were killed this way, contributing to enormous burial mounds that are still visible today.

"This is really representing and honouring a very undignified death in a dignified way," he said. "There is a number, and there's a name. There's barbed wire; there's the protector of the evil eye; there are pieces that represent the machine gun firing; and then, of course, the Star of David that they would wear on their arm, which was bright orange or yellow, and of course here it's just blood."

Said Fisher, "It's just an impression of what that must have been like. But at the same time, what I'm hoping is that it touches people in the way that I was historically touched. And it's not as explicit as the last series I did."

The other three boxes are simply filled with white stones and barbed wire. "I think it says it all. And I don't know how many I'd have, but I'd love to be able to do a show with at least maybe 50 or 60 of these," he said. "However, this is part of linking into what I call a transcendence. So, here we have the remains, and here we have the spirit, and here we have the ascension going up to heaven."

One of the focal points of the exhibition is the Tree of Life, or "Tree of Lies". These are three trees made from material that was used by Jews in concentration camps to build the barracks – the wood.

"If you look outside, this is where the inspiration came. I want to bring the outside inside. So, if you look at those trees, if you go to many of the Holocaust concentration camps, around those concentration camps are the most beautiful, beautiful trees. And it's interesting because the trees were meant to hide who was living from the outside, seeing what was going on inside."

The first tree is square with hard edges, where the other is thinner, painted black, and uses Polyurethane, which represents the burning human flesh.

"I call them the 'Tree of Lies' rather than the Tree of Life. And that comes out of an interesting quote that, in terms of my research, doesn't say that it was specifically Auschwitz, but there was graffiti that was scratched into the walls saying, 'There's only one person that is responsible or was responsible, [which] is G-d.' Which I just found extraordinary."

Finally, the last tree is filled with ceramic butterflies, symbolising that even after all the violence, there's still hope. Butterflies, Fisher said, signal rebirth and hope, but also a lot of Jewish children started drawing butterflies during the Holocaust.

Beckham family drama spotlights narcissistic parenting

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

"I have been controlled by my parents for most of my life," Brooklyn Beckham recently wrote in his now infamous Instagram post addressing his well-publicised feud with his celebrity parents. "I grew up with overwhelming anxiety. For the first time in my life since stepping away from my family, that anxiety has disappeared."

While not many people can relate to living their entire lives in the public eye, some deeply identify with navigating damaging parent-child relationships. This is especially true for Mandi Gold* who strongly relates to Beckham's post. Gold says that while being part of a big Jewish family was naturally chaotic, she grew up living in fear.

"My earliest and most vivid memories of my childhood are being scared of my mom and not knowing what would happen," she says. "From one second to the next, she could go into a massive rage and hit or hurt us, say cruel things, or scream at us or punish us. It was unpredictable and volatile."

From the outside though, she says, they looked like a happy family. "We had everything we needed. But it's all part of the illusion. There was this continuous fear. I was a sensitive and lonely kid, and I never had my mom to lean on, in fact, she made everything harder for me. I had no way of managing, defending myself, or coping. My dad tried his best with my mom, but she didn't want to get help or change."

Gold says gaslighting was also

common. "There were subtle things that made me feel like maybe I was imagining it, or maybe it wasn't so bad because it was never acknowledged. To this day, we've never got an apology."

The lack of apology also makes one feel like maybe things aren't so bad, she says. "You think, she's moving on, maybe I should do the same. My mom would go from being evil and cruel to being nice and kind, and then I felt, 'What must I do with what just happened?' It was never dealt with, so I felt like we had to gloss over it too."

When she was a teenager, her parents divorced and Gold chose to stay with her mother even though not all of her siblings did. "I was too under her control, and moving out wasn't something I felt I could do. You're scared of this person, but you're also scared to leave them."

Though she knew that her mother's behaviour wasn't normal, it was only when Gold moved in with her now husband that she understood the gravity of what she'd experienced. "You don't

fully realise it until someone else sees it," she says. Yet her mother remained part of her and her husband's lives, trying to exert control wherever possible.

While Gold leaned on her mother when she had children, as they grew

Gold blocked her on the platform but still maintained some contact. It was during therapy that she finally examined her childhood. "My therapist confirmed that I was abused, and said that my mom was a narcissist. She encouraged me to cut ties

with her, because she said, 'She's never going to change, she doesn't want to.' She said it was like carrying around something toxic in your body. It's not healthy, and it's not going to get better."

After her mother continuously attacked her and her husband's parenting decisions and questioned their children's needs, she decided to end the relationship. "I kept putting up boundaries, and she kept breaking them, and so finally, I had to lay the final boundary, literally say, 'We don't want you in our lives.'"

"I know people might say, 'She's your mom, she's your kids' grandparent!' Gold says. "But no person who is abused is ever told to maintain a relationship with their abuser. I feel free and at peace. I'm giving my child self the gift that she never had – to finally not be scared and to be free of this abusive person. And I've given my children that gift too."

Narcissistic parents are inherently

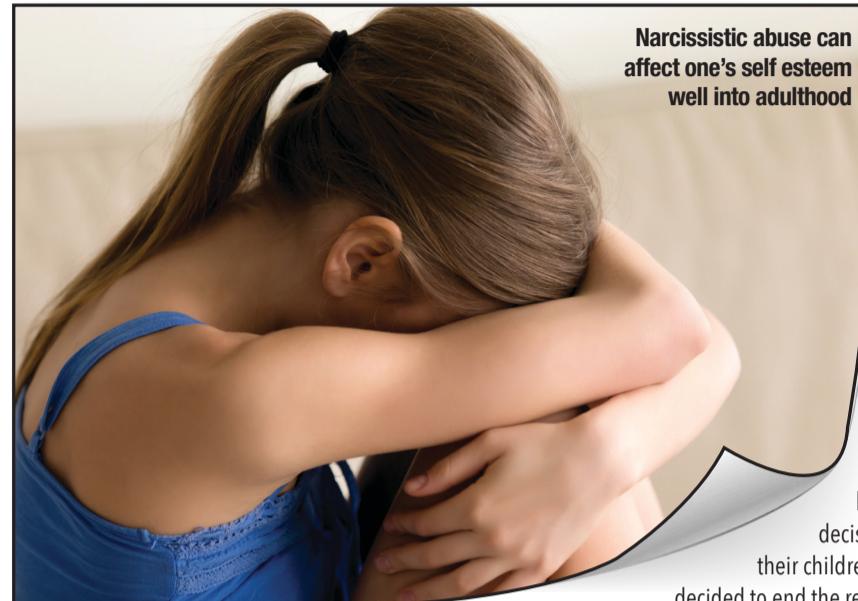
abusive, says clinical psychologist Lana Levin. "Because they are so selfish, the child is simply seen as a representation or extension of them, so when the child is performing well, they will 'love' the child. When the child is regarded as not performing well, they will be punished."

Talia-Jade Magnes, a psychotherapist and child protection advocate, says that this is damaging because children develop their sense of self through their relationship with their primary caregivers. "When a parent is consistently critical, emotionally unavailable, or focused on their own needs, as is often the case with narcissistic parenting, the child learns that love is conditional. Over time, this can lead to chronic shame, low self-worth, anxiety, and a persistent belief that they are fundamentally 'not enough'." This can affect self-esteem well into adulthood.

Narcissism goes beyond selfishness, says Levin. "True narcissism and narcissistic abuse is insidious," she says, "and is often not seen or acknowledged. It's difficult to escape because it's like a cult. The victim is brainwashed into believing everything the narcissist says is 'the truth', and they become dependent on the narcissist as a source of affirmation."

This is why severing ties is such a difficult process as self-perception is so deeply engrained in this relationship. "To escape, people not only have to leave physically, they have to develop the inner resources to disconnect from the umbilical cord tying them to the narcissist."

* Name has been changed to protect her family.



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MASSACRES & REVOLUTION IN IRAN



As many as 30 000 protesters may have been killed and 330 000 injured on the streets of Iran on 8 and 9 January alone, two senior Iranian Health officials told *TIME Magazine*. President Trump has promised "help is on its way" with an armada of American military assets having flooded into the region. Are we heading to war?

On Monday evening, Iranian expert Arash Azizi joins us from Washington, D.C. to explain what's actually happening in Tehran and whether the Ayatollah will fall.

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Israeli compassion warms Zimbabwe family's heart

LEE TANKLE

An Israeli entrepreneur saved the life of his former Zimbabwean employee, Chance Chitima's, baby son, Takudzwa, by connecting the family with Save a Child's Heart, an Israeli humanitarian organisation specialising in paediatric cardiac care.

When all other options to save Takudzwa's life were out of the family's reach, Chitima reached out to his former boss for help, and the 21-month-old baby was flown to Israel for life-saving surgery.

Chitima had worked for Eran Tal installing irrigation systems in Zimbabwe 13 years before his son was born, but they had maintained a connection despite Tal having returned to Israel.

Now, Takudzwa has just returned to Israel for the replacement of his pacemaker's battery, and met the doctor who saved his life.



Fortunate Chitima, Dr Lior Sasson, and Takudzwa Chitima in Israel

"I was emotional seeing the doctor who saved my son's life 14 years ago," said Fortunate, Takudzwa's mother. "I was so happy because he was literally my son's lifesaver. So, I pray that that man be blessed abundantly because he restored our home, our happiness."

Takudzwa was three months old when he was diagnosed with congenitally corrected transposition of the great arteries (ccTGA), an exceptionally rare heart defect in which the heart's ventricles are completely inverted. This life-threatening diagnosis affects fewer than 1% of children born with congenital heart disease worldwide, with an estimated incidence of one in 30 000 to 50 000 live births.

Fortunate recalls that she knew something was wrong with her baby because "he wasn't growing properly; he wasn't eating well; he sweated a lot; and he was so tiny", she said.

When they heard the diagnosis, she recalls her and her husband "getting stressed and depressed because this was a massive issue and our baby was so small". She said they were worried about how they were going to help their son, where they would get the money to do it, as it was obvious that it was going to be expensive to save his life.

Feeling desperate to save their child, Fortunate would travel to Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital in Johannesburg every few months in search of a solution. He was treated in South Africa because it was accepted that there were very few cardiologists and resources locally that had the capacity to help the baby.

Initially, the hospital in South Africa they went to worked for them because it didn't charge for patients under five years old, Fortunate said. "We paid only a small amount, I think about \$10

[R160], because Takudzwa was a foreign child."

She said travelling to South Africa all the time was challenging because they would be on buses for 18 hours at a time as they couldn't afford plane tickets. "The journey was very stressful with a sick child."

Things got infinitely more complicated when the Chitima family were told that Takudzwa was going to need life-saving surgery that would cost more than \$20 000 (R320 600). This put the treatment to save him literally out of their reach.

It was then that they reached out to Chitima's employer, Tal, to ask for help. Tal began searching for alternatives for Takudzwa and reached out to Save a Child's Heart. A few months later, through the organisation, the Chitima family was flown to Israel for Takudzwa's life-saving treatment.

At 21 months old, the baby underwent a technologically demanding double-switch open heart surgery at the

Wolfson Medical Center in Holon, Tel Aviv, performed by Dr Lior Sasson, the director of paediatric cardiac surgery.

This procedure ranks among the most technically demanding surgeries in paediatric cardiac care and requires exceptional surgical expertise.

The surgery saved his life, though it resulted in complete heart block, requiring the implantation of a permanent pacemaker. This meant that Takudzwa would need to return to Israel to replace the battery every few years. His first return was in the past few weeks.

Takudzwa had a simple message for the surgeon who saved his life. "I want to thank you. Because of you, I am alive. I live my life as a grateful person because of you."

Save a Child's Heart has just celebrated 30 years of saving children's lives around the world. "Since 1995, we have treated more than 8 000 children from 75 countries, bringing advanced cardiac care to families who would otherwise have no access to it," said Simon Fisher, the executive director of Save a Child's Heart. "We have also trained hundreds of doctors and medical professionals, building a global chain of healing that extends far beyond Israel's borders. Our deep and enduring relationship with Africa is central to this mission – saving lives today while building sustainable local medical capacity for tomorrow through our South-to-South initiative."

Takudzwa, despite everything he endured over the years, lives an ordinary life with his parents in Harare, and is hoping to write his O-levels next year. He said he now simply wants to change lives. His mother said he is constantly telling his parents that "by using my life to make a difference, I can volunteer, share my story and have a skill that can help others in teaching, mentoring, and just being there for other people at Save a Child's Heart".

And still, we have not lost hope

OPINION

I found myself alone in Naryshkin Park, in Žagarė, a tiny village in Lithuania on a misty October morning, carrying a backpack heavy with stones and candles.

There were signposts for the alley of Linden trees and the chestnut tree grove, but not a single one for the "pit" as the locals call it, the mass grave on the edge of the estate which is where I was headed.

It was my second day in this village from which my father's parents immigrated to South Africa in 1926. In the weeks leading up to my trip, I delved into historical research, the unbearable details of which still clung to me.

My plan was to stay no longer than was absolutely necessary to do right by my ancestors. I would make a clinical visit to say Kaddish at two murder sites – the park and town square.

I couldn't gauge the protocol for such a trip. Was it appropriate to stay in a lovely hotel inclusive of breakfast? Have a massage or a moment's frivolous retail splurge? Would I cope alone with the weight of what I was about to witness? When I fretted to my husband he'd said, 'Just take it one pogrom at a time.'

I'd already been to Rumbula Forest near Riga, where on 30 November and 8 December 1941, 25 000 Jews were shot and buried in a mass grave; and the concentration camp, Salaspils, near Riga, now the site of enormous, moving sculptures.

This was my third stop – different, because my grandmother's parents, sister, brothers, and nephews lie buried here with about 3 000 others. My father's mother, Chaya, was the sole survivor of her family. After she'd left Lithuania in 1926, she'd never returned. She grieved afar from the shores of Africa.

Despite the absence of signage in the park, the village of Žagarė itself, with its ramshackle houses, and bridges over the river Svete, had unexpectedly, against all my instincts, enchanted me. The day before, I had located the little blue house my grandmother had lived in, with a well in the unkempt garden and goldenberries and grapes growing on a vine along the fence. Here was a relic of where life had happened before death stormed in; and my heart had opened like a lotus flower. I wanted to not love the place. But my felt sense, this is where my people come from, claimed me.

Eventually, Google Maps led me to a cordoned off spot at the edge of the park. I approached the single memorial headstone with Hebrew writing with slow steps as if entering a holy place. How benign this morning was, with me and my backpack, and yellow autumn leaves lying everywhere. I fell to my knees and rested my hands on the headstone. I tried to imagine the fear and terror of those who were rounded up, not by Nazis, but by their Lithuanian neighbours and herded to this spot where an enormous pit had been dug in preparation for what was to follow.

It was erev Yom Kippur, 1941. The reports are that they walked to their deaths, singing *Kol Nidrei*. Non-Jewish neighbours had turned on their Jewish ones, families they'd traded with at weekly markets and lived besides for generations. Ordinary Lithuanians drove their fellow Jewish citizens whom they blamed for aligning with the despised Russian Empire to this shadowland and opened fire on women, children, the elderly. They covered the writhing bodies with lime and soil. The pit, it is said, heaved for days afterwards. The townspeople continued to live in Žagarė as before, except *Judenrein* (Jew-free).

Before 7 October 2023, this might have all seemed incomprehensible to me. Now, not so much.

I wept, lit candles, said Kaddish, placed stones,

JOANNE FEDLER



and read Psalm 23, winding the words around myself like a shielding cloak. I looked up into the innocent trees and sang *Hatikvah* to them, my voice breaking on the words, "Od lo avdah tikvateinu" (and still, we have not lost hope).

The next day, the young mayor of Žagarė opened the old synagogue for me, which is now used as a concert hall, as well as the mikvah, still used as a public bath house.

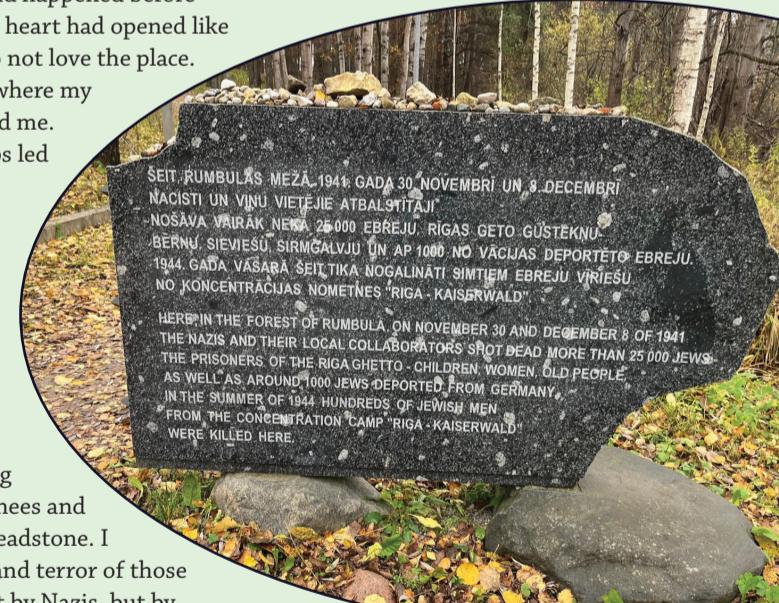
I asked him how it is possible to build a new future in a place with such a dark past. "I don't know," he responded, "but having people like you, with ancestral ties, return here, is part of the story of reconsecration."

Not a single Jew remains in Žagarė when once, there were thousands. The last one died in 2014. I guess it's a hard sell, Žagarė, whose town square once ran crimson with Jewish blood. There, I did the same ritual as I'd done in the park.

My next stop was Liepāja, a town on the coast of Latvia, where a cousin flew from London to meet me. Here members of our family on my grandfather's side had tried to flee, but were murdered, likely shot on Skede beach or in Rainis Park. These slaughters took place in December 1941 by local Nazi collaborators. Photos were recovered, which you need to brace yourself to see. Tourists came to watch as Jews were made to strip, stand, six at a time, on planks over the mass grave, and shot. I love the ocean, but this godforsaken beach shrieked with silent despair.

A week later, I was at the Nova festival grounds in Israel, where thousands of tourists wove in and among the memorial banners of those who were gunned down by Hamas terrorists. Fortified with remote history deep inside my bones, I once again walked through the valley of the shadow of death, strengthened, not weakened with each Kaddish I recited, each repetition of Psalm 23.

Yet none of this prepared me for what was to come when four weeks later, I was standing on Bondi Beach in Sydney, my new tattoo still too fresh for me to swim with. My friend, Jessy, had narrowly escaped the Chanukah massacre on 14 December with her five-year-old daughter.



On my right forearm in Hebrew, the words from Psalm 23 are inked, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

As Jews, we are fated to traverse this valley in every generation. When we march, it's not in performative protest across harbour bridges, but to our mass deaths. Perhaps the most compelling defiance of evil is to die singing G-d's name. For whenever Jews are murdered, something holy at the heart of humanity is destroyed and the light of the world dims.

'Od lo avdah tikvateinu...' (And still, we have not lost hope.)

• Joanne Fedler is the internationally bestselling author of 16 books. She is a writing mentor and open water ocean swimmer. www.joannefedler.com. Her Substack is Angels in the Architecture.

Save yourself the trouble – say sorry in advance

We had just finished dinner, when my wife asked if I wanted her to make me a chicken salad to take for lunch the next day. It was a kind, thoughtful offer. I said yes. I thanked her. Normal marital exchange. End of scene.

Except it wasn't.

"Howard," she said, in a tone that suggested a legal proceeding was about to begin, "I will be very upset if you don't eat it."

I looked at her, slightly confused, trying to work out what had happened in the last 12 seconds that had turned lunch into a binding emotional contract.

"Um ... okay," I replied. Cautiously. Diplomatically.

Incorrectly.

"I am serious," she said. And she was. Very.

This wasn't a threat. It was a pre-emptive strike. I had not yet done anything wrong, but I was already being warned about the consequences when I inevitably would.

I was reminded of a moment a few days earlier while standing at a chuppah with a friend. Mid-ceremony, he received a message. He opened WhatsApp, read it, and without a word handed me the phone.

"Jason," it read [his name is not Jason], "I am begging you to be decent to Uncle Walter [his name is not Uncle Walter] when we see him at the wedding reception later."

Jason does not like Uncle Walter. And it apparently shows.

This, clearly, wasn't a casual suggestion. It was a pre-emptive apology in waiting. A warning shot fired not because Jason had misbehaved, but because history suggested he was about to. He was being judged for prior convictions.

In recent days, Kanye West – or Ye, formerly no prince – took out a full-page newspaper apology for antisemitic remarks. His prior behaviour was, by any measure, reprehensible. And yet, oddly, it was the apology that caught my attention. Not because it erased anything, but because it acknowledged something men are deeply uncomfortable admitting: awareness of failure.

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



Which raises an obvious question. Why do we wait? Why do married men insist on apologising only after the offence, when the evidence is overwhelming that we are going to say the wrong thing, forget the thing, eat the chicken salad last, or make a face at Uncle Walter?

What if we embraced the pre-emptive apology? Imagine the freedom.

"I'd like to apologise in advance for my tone tomorrow morning."

"I'm sorry now for whatever I'm about to say about the traffic."

"I regret, ahead of time, my reaction to that comment you haven't yet made."

In fact, the SA Jewish Report or ChaiFM could perform a genuine public service here. A dedicated weekly page or segment on a show. Pre-emptive apologies. Sponsored, naturally perhaps, by a Glenhazel florist, already well-positioned in the apology economy.

Names could be listed. Brief descriptions provided.

"David M – apologising in advance for being 'honest' at a family dinner."

"Mark S – pre-emptively sorry for how he will react to 'what he thinks of the dress!'"

"Jason K – deeply regrets whatever is about to happen with Uncle Walter."

No explanations. No justifications.

Because the truth is, most marital conflict is sparked by the irritation of predictability. Our wives aren't psychic. They're just experienced.

So yes, I ate the chicken salad. Every bite. Not because I was hungry, or because I remembered – I didn't until just before the closing bell – but because somewhere between lunch and my drive home, I realised this had little to do with food.

It was about knowing who you are ... and apologising before you prove it.

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

We held firm, now they are home



ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner

For the first time since 2014, there are no Israeli hostages in Gaza.

This is a momentous inflection point, marked by emotions as complex as they are profound. While the instinct might be to celebrate, we carry with us the sobering reality that so many of those returned came home as mortal remains, their lives brutally cut short, their families forever incomplete. Yet there is undeniably relief and definitely a measure of joy at the conclusion of Israel's longest war and the final release from the torment of knowing that families were counting each excruciating second as their loved ones endured the most horrendous conditions of captivity. As is our way, always carrying a touch of salt with our joy!

This week, as we take off our yellow ribbons and our dog tags, the paraphernalia of a community in pain, we shed the weight of 843 days of collective anguish. As one commentator put it, from now, empty chairs will revert to waiting for late guests, missing signs will be for cats and dogs. The monsters will return to children's closets, where they belong. Parents will know where their children are. Yellow will go back to being yellow again ... the colour of the hopeful rising sun.

The date 7 October represents the greatest tragedy to befall Jewish life since the Holocaust, a shocking reminder of the callous brutality of our enemies. Then came 8 October, the immediate surge in antisemitism and hatred that followed the horrors of that black Sabbath. It shocked world Jewry and continues to

alter fundamentally how we operate; how we see ourselves; how we navigate public space. My hope is that with the recovery of the remains of Ran Gvili, we may now enter a period we might call 9 October, one marked by the possibility of healing.

I am so proud of our people, who, in spite of overwhelming hatred, aggression, and bigotry, held firm. We wore our ribbons, T-shirts, and dog tags. We ran every week in solidarity. We reserved places at parking lots and Shabbat tables. We included their names in our liturgy. For two years, we advocated – on Nelson Mandela Bridge; on the promenade in Cape Town; on Durban Beach; at Great Park Synagogue; with teddy bears outside the South African Broadcasting Corporation; and at the Constitutional Court. We refused for a single moment to allow the world to forget that these hostages remained in captivity. It is this sustained effort in unity, across the globe, that ensured that the pressure remained on those who could make a difference, and who, I believe, are ultimately responsible for the return of these bodies. We brought them home. Now we pray that the return of the hostages will lead to sustainable peace.

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

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



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Teen Padel prodigy in Spain

GILANA LAB

At just 16, Cape Town-born Padel player Max Bendel is making huge waves on the international Padel circuit, having achieved a double title win in the Under-16 and Under-18 categories at the FIP Promises Tour in Fourways in December 2025.

Bendel took a leap of faith in the sport that few athletes his age would dare to make, literally leaving home, school, and family in South Africa to focus on Padel training full-time in Alicante, southeastern Spain, where he has been based since March 2024.

Bendel is training full-time at the Juan Carlos Ferrero Tennis and Padel Academy, one of Europe's most respected high-performance training centres. "It's quite a famous academy," he says. "You can really feel the level here."

His days, he told the SA Jewish Report this week, are intense and highly structured. "I start at 09:15 and finish the first session at around 13:00," Bendel said. "Then I eat, shower, relax a bit, and train again from about 15:00 until 17:30."

In total, he trains up to six hours a day. "It's Padel and gym," he says. "Padel and fitness training, every day." Alongside his training, Bendel does school online. "I'm doing the Cambridge IGCSE [the International General Certificate of Secondary Education]. I've got a teacher who checks up on me and helps if I need anything."

Bendel started playing Padel only in March 2023, when a family friend gave him a Padel racket as a gift. "At the time, I didn't really know what the sport was," he said.

But sport has always been a part of him. "I've been playing sport my whole life. From when I was three or four years old, my dad used to throw a tennis ball at me and I'd play cricket. From about three years old, I was playing cricket seriously. I also played soccer at school and at club level. Cricket was the priority – I was always active and competing."

As he grew older, tennis entered the mix, and for a time, Bendel juggled all three sports. "I was playing cricket, soccer, tennis – everything," he said. "But then Padel came into my life."

What began casually soon turned into something more serious. "At first, I was playing maybe once a week, if that. Then slowly, I started building up. I played more, trained more, and started playing with higher-level guys."

While still attending Herzlia High School in Cape Town, Bendel's commitment intensified. "I was playing intense matches three or four times a week while still at school. That's when I realised this could actually become something."

His first formal coaching came under Chevaan Davids. "He was my first coach," Bendel said. "That was really where things started becoming more structured."

At the end of 2023, his father asked him if he wanted to go to Spain for two weeks. "The idea was to go to two

different Padel academies and see what it was like, what the sport was like there, and what coaches in Europe had to say," Bendel said.

The experience proved pivotal. "After that December trip, the academy I'm at now got back to us and said it would be great if I could come back in March 2024," he says. "That's when everything changed."

Living alone in Spain with his family in Cape Town hasn't been easy, Bendel said. "My family is still back home, and I'm here on my own. My family are supportive and were super keen for me to come here and try."

That support, and the leap of faith has clearly delivered remarkable results. In 2023, Bendel competed in the FIP Promises Tour, an international junior Padel circuit for players aged under 12 to under 18. "South Africa started hosting the tournaments last year," Bendel said. "It hosted three, and the last one was in December."

Bendel entered two age categories. "Because I was under 16, I played Under-16 and Under-18." He won all three tournaments in both age groups. "I won six tournaments – six out of six," he said, incredulous.

Padel, unlike tennis, is strictly a doubles sport, making the achievement even more impressive. "For the Under-16 tournament, I didn't even know my partner," Bendel said. "I met him when I arrived at the



Max Bendel

tournament."

Bendel is doing Grade 11 through Cambridge online, and has lessons every day. "I try do it in most of the breaks I get and after dinner. I try to do the best I can in school with the amount that I can do. If Padel doesn't work out as

my career, I would want to be in the business world and do entrepreneurial stuff."

Despite his rapid sporting success, Bendel remains grounded. "My Padel career hasn't been long, but it's been good," he said. But he's realistic about the journey ahead. "I just took it to the next level really quickly. Now it's about training hard and trusting the process."

With elite European training, a strong support system, and early international success behind him, Bendel's trajectory is one to watch closely. As he puts it, "If you train hard, the results come."

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