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# South African Jewish Report

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## Expulsion of Israeli diplomat sparks backlash

NICOLA MILTZ

South Africa's decision to expel Israel's chargé d'affaires has escalated into a full-blown diplomatic crisis, drawing condemnation from the United States (US) State Department, sharp rebukes from multiple domestic political parties, and expressions of shock from Jewish communal organisations.

Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein publicly accused the African National Congress (ANC) and the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco) of allowing ideology to override the national interest.

This follows Dirco's decision on Friday, 30 January, to declare Israel's chargé d'affaires to South Africa, Ariel Seidman, persona non grata, giving him 72 hours to get out the country. Israel responded by expelling South Africa's ambassador in Ramallah, Shaun Bynevelde, in what officials on both sides acknowledge as a further deterioration in bilateral relations.

On Tuesday, Tommy Pigott, the deputy spokesperson for the US State Department, issued a blunt condemnation of Pretoria's decision. "South Africa's recent decision to expel Israel's top diplomat is another example of its poor foreign policy choices," Pigott said. "Expelling a diplomat for calling out the African National Congress party's ties to Hamas and other antisemitic radicals prioritises grievance politics over the good of South Africa and its citizens."

Dirco accused Seidman of "unacceptable violations of diplomatic norms and practice which pose a direct challenge to South Africa's sovereignty", including insulting President Cyril Ramaphosa. It accused Seidman of using official social media platforms to attack Ramaphosa, and inviting Israeli officials to the country without

permission.

Dirco spokesperson Chrispin Phiri said this week that the department was assessing the impact of the decision on South Africa's diplomatic presence in the region, including its services in Palestinian territories, and was considering the facilitation of a potential new ambassador.

He said Israel could also facilitate the appointment of a new chargé d'affaires to South Africa "if it is interested in correcting the conduct of Mr Seidman".

The reciprocal expulsions point to a freezing of relations rather than a complete severing of diplomatic ties, according to analysts who warn

that it marks a clear escalation in hostilities between the two countries.

The dispute partially centres on the Israeli embassy's public communication, particularly on social media. Its more recent posts adopted a forthright and at times "cheeky", though measured, tone. This is described by insiders as a broader embrace of so-called "Twitter diplomacy".

Supporters of the Israeli mission argue that though the tone was occasionally sharp, it didn't cross diplomatic red lines and remained within accepted international norms.

One post that drew attention was from 6 October 2025, amid the Global Sumud Flotilla saga.

Responding to a *Mail & Guardian* article headlined, "Cyril to Israel: Release Them Now", the embassy posted, "Mr President @CyrilRamaphosa: We trust DIRCO\_ZA has informed you that all South Africans who tried to enter illegally will be expelled tomorrow via Jordan. As always, it's the South African taxpayers who get the honour of paying for their fellow citizens' deportation tickets."

Diplomatic sources caution against reducing the saga to social media alone, noting that much of the engagement under scrutiny involved humanitarian outreach and development cooperation facilitated by visiting Ambassador David Saranga, the director of the digital diplomacy bureau at Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, working in coordination with the Israeli mission in South Africa.

Saranga facilitated engagement between Israeli representatives, abaNthembu King Buyelekhaya Zwelibanzi Dalindyebo, and civil institutions including hospitals and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the beleaguered Eastern Cape. The aim was to address severe challenges such as water scarcity, healthcare delivery, and to support infrastructure.

Sources say it was the visibility of these engagements – particularly photographs, videos, and posts shared publicly following visits to the Eastern Cape – that ultimately triggered concern within Dirco. "It was the straw that broke the camel's back," said one insider. According to sources, the outreach was perceived as bypassing national government structures, despite its humanitarian focus.

Two days after the widely publicised visit to the Eastern Cape involving Israeli representatives, Seidman was declared persona non grata.

Saranga described the expulsion as sudden and extreme. "It was surprising,"

Continued on page 5>>>

## Spreading goodness, not pain



Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

Ofri Bibas-Levy on a visit to Johannesburg this week. She lost her sister-in-law, Shiri, and her nephews, Ariel and Kfir Bibas, after they were taken hostage on 7 October 2023 and later murdered. See story on page 3.

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# Posters depicting Bondi attacker as ‘Aussie’ outrages community

CLAUDIA GROSS

Posters depicting the man accused of carrying out the deadly Bondi Beach attack have been plastered across parts of Melbourne’s central business district, triggering widespread distress and anger within Australia’s Jewish community. It has also raised renewed concerns about the normalisation of extremist imagery in public spaces.

Dr Vic Alhadeff, the former chief executive of the New South Wales Jewish Board of Deputies, described the posters as “beneath contempt”.

“Those behind the image of the terrorist had one of two motives,” Alhadeff said. “Either they intended to glorify the horrendous actions of the terrorist and his father at Bondi Beach, or their aim was a racist message designed to say that not all those who are described as Aussie adhere to Australia’s democratic values.”

“At a time when Jewish Australians are reeling

from the devastation of the massacre of 14 December, it’s a chilling and reprehensible image to put on display and with which to be confronted,” he said.

The posters, which mimic the widely recognised Aussie poster series created by artist Peter Drew, feature the face of the Bondi Beach attacker alongside the word “Aussie”. Images of the posters circulated rapidly on social media after they were spotted on walls and street infrastructure in the city centre, prompting condemnation from Jewish leaders, educators, and community members who say the imagery glorifies terrorism and deliberately weaponises Australian identity.

The Bondi Beach attack in December 2025 claimed 15 lives at one of Australia’s most iconic public locations. The accused attacker has been widely described by authorities as having targeted Jews. The placement of the posters in Melbourne, home to Australia’s largest Jewish population, has been experienced by many as a calculated act of intimidation rather than random vandalism.

The imagery closely mirrors Drew’s original Aussie poster campaign, which was launched in 2017 and featured historical figures who were immigrants to Australia. The series was apparently intended to challenge narrow definitions of national identity and promote inclusion. Drew has previously criticised attempts to repurpose his work for extremist or exclusionary causes, describing such actions as a distortion of its original intent.

For many in the Jewish community, the use of the “Aussie” branding to depict a mass killer represents a deliberate inversion of the campaign’s message and an attempt to normalise violence through familiar cultural symbols.

Shana Upiter, Early Learning Centre Director at Mount Scopus Memorial College in Melbourne, said



Poster of the alleged Bondi Beach shooter

the posters reflected a profound shift in how safe Jewish Australians felt in public spaces. “Australia used to be known as the lucky country where people lived in harmony and with freedom,” Upiter said. “Now that has all changed, and we don’t know where to go.”

“It’s crazy that people can feel emboldened to glorify a terrorist who took 15 Australian lives at one of the nation’s most iconic places and call him an Aussie,” she said. “That’s definitely not what being an Aussie is about.” Upiter noted that Australia had long been seen as a destination for Jewish migrants seeking safety, including many South Africans.

“Australia was once hailed as a safe place, and many South Africans who moved here did so because of safety concerns,” she said. “In recent years, we have felt more and more unsafe as antisemitism has been rising along with the general crime rate.”

The posters have appeared against the backdrop of a documented surge in antisemitic incidents across Australia since 7 October 2023, when Hamas carried out its attack in Israel. Jewish organisations have recorded increases in harassment, vandalism, threatening behaviour, and the use of extremist slogans at protests in major cities.

For younger members of the community, the Bondi posters have reinforced a sense that hostility toward Jews has become increasingly visible and tolerated. Tom Raviv, a 23-year-old Melbourne resident, said, “I came across the poster on a morning run, and it absolutely shook me. An image of a terrorist who has committed the worst atrocity seen on Australian soil.”

Raviv said that though the poster deeply disturbed him, it didn’t come as a surprise. “Over the past two and a half years, we have endured countless acts of antisemitism. Often, my friends and I will go out on weekends to progressive suburbs only to be met with stickers on nearly every traffic post with ‘Boycott Israel’ or Nazi symbols instead of the Magen David, and hurtful sentiments.”

Raviv also pointed out the regular weekend protests that have taken place in Australian cities since October 2023. “Australians have become accustomed to mass protests every weekend with chants like ‘Intifada Revolution’, and what has been done? Nothing,” he said.

“We want this behaviour, and any member of society who praises the Bondi Beach killer through posters like the one pictured to be dealt with by

Continued on page 3>>

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## Conquering Mount Sinai: a spiritual roadmap

Torah Thought

The Ohr HaChaim, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, teaches that Torah isn’t something a person simply inherits. It’s something one must be ready to receive. Remarkably, he derives three foundational ingredients for a life of Torah and spirituality from a single verse describing the Jewish people’s journey to Mount Sinai: “They journeyed from Rephidim and came to the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert; and Israel encamped there opposite the mountain.” (Exodus 19:2)

At first glance, the verse appears to be a simple description of travel. Yet the Ohr HaChaim reads it as a spiritual roadmap, not only for the generation that stood at Sinai, but for every generation that seeks meaning, growth, and connection.

The first step, he said, is leaving Rephidim. The sages note that the name Rephidim can be read as “rifyon yadayim” (weakness of the hands). Spiritually, this represents laziness, complacency, or a lack of commitment. Before Torah can truly enter a person’s life, one must be willing to move away from spiritual inertia. Growth requires effort, consistency, and dedication – showing up even when motivation is low. Torah life is not built on fleeting inspiration, but on the quiet decision to keep growing and to become a source of blessing in the world.

down, simplifying, and cultivating gratitude. A humble person doesn’t need to compare themselves to others; they focus on becoming the best version of themselves and recognise each blessing as a gift rather than an entitlement.

Finally, the verse shifts in an unexpected way. Until this point, the Torah speaks in the plural – “they encamped” – but suddenly, it moves to the singular, “and Israel encamped there”. Rashi famously explains that the Jewish people stood at Sinai “as one person with one heart”. The Ohr HaChaim reveals that this moment points to the ultimate purpose of spiritual life: connection.

Connection doesn’t mean sameness. It means learning to sense that beneath our differences, we’re profoundly bound to one another. It’s the ability to look at the people around us – family, friends, community, even strangers – and recognise that we are part of a shared story. When that awareness emerges, separation begins to dissolve.

On a deeper level, this sense of unity extends beyond people alone. To feel truly connected is to recognise that Hashem’s presence is not confined to a place or a moment, but flows through all of existence. When we learn to see the divine spark within others, within the world, and within ourselves, our perspective changes. Life becomes less about “me” and more about meaning, responsibility, and relationship.

It was only once the Jewish people reached this state – effort without

Rabbi Shmuel Ozhekh  
Ohr Somayach  
Cape Town



laziness; humility without self-negation; and unity without loss of individuality – that they were ready to receive the Torah. Sinai wasn’t merely a mountain they stood before; it was a level of awareness they entered together.

This teaching feels especially relevant today. In a world that often pulls us toward distraction, ego, and fragmentation, the Torah reminds us that true spiritual growth isn’t about withdrawal from life, but deeper engagement with it. When we commit to effort, cultivate humility, and strengthen our sense of connection – to one another, the world, and to the divine presence within all – we recreate Sinai in our own lives, here and now.

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The Ten Commandments are recorded twice in the Torah. A notable difference is found in the fourth commandment, which begins with “Remember the Sabbath” in one account and “Keep the Sabbath” in another.

## Jewish Report

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# Remembering Ariel and Kfir through acts of kindness

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

“At the funeral, I promised that I would do everything so that the memory of Shiri, Ariel, and Kfir wouldn’t be defined only by their tragic and painful end. Rather, it would spread goodness as a symbol of who they were and how they lived their lives.”

So said Ofri Bibas-Levy, who lost her sister-in-law, Shiri, and her nephews, Ariel and Kfir Bibas, after they were taken hostage on 7 October 2023 and later murdered. Her brother, Yarden Bibas, also a hostage, was freed after 484 days in captivity and buried his family just more than three weeks later. Throughout the ordeal, Bibas-Levy tirelessly advocated for their release.

She spoke at King David High School on Friday, 30 January, at the launch of The Bibas Children Youth Impact Challenge, to be rolled out at Jewish schools across the country. “Your choice to commemorate Ariel and Kfir through an initiative led by children and youth, whose goal is to spread light, generosity, unity, courage, and Jewish pride is exactly what I hoped for,” Bibas-Levy said.

In her address, she said though her brother is a big, strong man, “inside he’s like a teddy bear, a sensitive and emotional person”. Shiri, she said, was creative, sensitive to other people, and an amazing mother, partner, and friend. Though the two met years before they became a couple, things turned romantic when their friends, David and Sharon Cunio – also kidnapped on 7 October – made the match at a party. Shiri knew early on that they would get married, while Yarden took a bit longer, Bibas-Levy laughed.

When Shiri fell pregnant about a year after their joyful wedding, no-one asked how she was feeling, Bibas-Levy recalled. “The only thing we talked about was whether Ariel was going to come out a redhead,” she said. “And when he was born, he was as redheaded as he could be.” Describing Ariel, Bibas-Levy spoke of his shy smile, energetic and active nature, and his now well-known love of Batman. “Yarden and Shiri were always worried about their kids,” she said. “I used to tell Yarden with Ariel, “Take it easy. It’s okay. He will climb; he will be fine.”

When Kfir was born in January

2023, he was just as redheaded as his brother, and was always laughing and cuddling, she said. “They were an amazing family just starting their life, just starting to build their future.”

Bibas-Levy said she and Yarden

In her safe room that day, Yarden’s mother was horrified when a neighbour showed her a picture on Telegram of Shiri and the boys with the terrorists. “She sent me that photo, and it was like the

have moved to Tel Aviv next to Hostage Square and blocked the streets.”

When Hamas initially claimed that Shiri and the boys had been killed in captivity, Bibas-Levy and her family had no proof. “So, we kept on hoping and fighting for them. The support we got in Israel and all around the world, and the way that my family’s story touched everybody so deeply – and still does – has moved us so much. I realised that even if I’m just a small person in Israel, my voice and my fight matters. I have the obligation to fight for what I believe is true.”

She draws strength from Yarden, who “says his purpose

Bibas-Levy said the recent return of the remains of the final hostage, Ran Gvili, had closed a chapter of the 7 October story, but the next chapter was just beginning.

“There are many questions still left unanswered. I know in the case of some of them, I will never get answers, but my fight now is for the government to take responsibility. It could have been prevented.”

In the meantime, initiatives like The Bibas Children Youth Impact Challenge can help build a better future, Bibas-Levy said. A joint initiative of The Base Shul and the Jewish National Fund (JNF), the challenge, also driven by Saul Jassinowsky, is an extension of the organisations’ Hostage Respite and Healing programme.



became particularly close after they got married months apart and had their first children at similar times. Together with her family, Bibas-Levy lived on Kibbutz Re'im, minutes from Yarden’s home on Kibbutz Nir Oz, but moved north to the Golan Heights shortly before 7 October 2023.

That day, as the missiles fell and alarms sounded, Yarden messaged his family, saying that he, Shiri, and the boys were in their safe room with their dog. As the situation escalated, he exchanged frantic messages with his sister only, not wanting to panic their mother.

“He told me he could hear gunfire and the terrorists outside the house, screaming in Arabic. He told me he was terrified.” A while later, he messaged his sister and his parents to tell them that he loved them. “At 09:43, he texted me that they were coming inside the house. That was the last message I got from him.”

When Yarden returned from captivity, he said that he’d asked Shiri whether he should fight or surrender, and she told him to fight. After exchanging gunfire with the terrorists, he realised it was too dangerous and surrendered. “Before the terrorists took him, he asked to say goodbye to Shiri and the boys. He kissed them goodbye, and they took him away.”

blood drained from my body,” Bibas-Levy said.

Though uncertain about what to do after Yarden and his family were taken, Bibas-Levy and her family began to fight.

Two weeks after 7 October, Bibas-Levy discovered she was pregnant with her third child. “In some ways, the pregnancy and my children kept me balanced,” she said. “Otherwise, I would probably

now is to live so his family can be remembered”.

good deed – we become partners in creating a better world.”

## Posters depicting Bondi attacker as ‘Aussie’ outrages community

>>>Continued from page 2

the full force of the law,” Raviv said. “Australian Jewry are struggling to feel comfortable among a ‘progressive’ society that has been indoctrinated to see us as the devil.”

Greig Rabinowitz, who emigrated from Johannesburg to Melbourne nearly four decades ago, said the posters struck at the heart of what many Jewish Australians believed their country represented. “I am – or was – immensely proud of my adopted Australian heritage,” Rabinowitz said. “This was always a country that prided itself on its multiculturalism.”

Though he experienced antisemitism growing up and through sport, it was balanced historically by a broader culture of inclusion. “The majority of Australians were less worried about what religion you were and more interested if you were a good bloke,” he said.

Rabinowitz pointed to the extensive contribution of Jews to Australian society, from public service and philanthropy to sport, law, and education, and noted that Melbourne has one of the highest per-capita populations of Holocaust survivors in the world. “That should have led to a community-wide dedication to fighting racism and antisemitism,” he said.

Instead, he said, there has been a fundamental shift in recent years. “Since the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Australia has experienced an unprecedented surge in antisemitic attacks that have fundamentally altered our prior sense of safety for the Jewish community,” he said.

He described the Bondi posters as “psychological terrorism” that deliberately retraumatised a community still mourning the victims of the attack. “The posters were deliberately designed to mimic and misuse the original artist’s work,” he said. “The spirit of his original series was created to promote unity rather than hatred and division.”

According to Rabinowitz, the use of the “Aussie” campaign to glorify someone who murdered Australians specifically for their Jewish faith reinforces fears that living an openly Jewish life in Australia is becoming increasingly unsafe.

Authorities have removed several of the posters, and are investigating who was responsible for placing them. For many Jewish Australians, however, the incident has already left a lasting mark, serving as a stark reminder that public expressions of hatred and intimidation have become harder to dismiss as fringe or isolated.

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# Australia blocks Jewish influencer as visa cancellations widen

CLAUDIA GROSS

When Sammy Yahood arrived at Ben Gurion Airport in late January, his bags were packed, his itinerary confirmed, and his Australian visa approved. By the time boarding was called, his visit was over before it had begun. “I got to the airport, sat down at the gate, and checked my emails,” Yahood said. “A cancellation had come through in that past hour.”

Yahood, a British-Israeli Jewish influencer, had been scheduled to travel to Australia to speak to Jewish community groups and teach self-defence workshops. Instead, while still seated at the

departure gate, he learned that the Australian Department of Home Affairs had cancelled his visa with immediate effect.

The official reason given to Yahood was that he intended to conduct business activities on a tourist visa. Yahood disputes this, saying the only documentation cited consisted of flyers circulated by Jewish non-profit organisations promoting his speaking engagements. He wouldn’t be paid for these engagements and therefore shouldn’t require a work visa.

Within hours, the explanation appeared to shift publicly. Tony Burke, Australia’s Home Affairs Minister, told *The Guardian* that

“hatred is not a valid reason to come to Australia”, a justification that didn’t appear in Yahood’s formal cancellation notice.

Yahood said the statement directly contradicted the official grounds provided to him and reframed his exclusion in ideological terms rather than administrative ones. “He contradicted the decision notice I received,” Yahood said. “And he labelled me, incorrectly I believe, as hateful.”

The cancellation of Yahood’s visa comes amid heightened scrutiny of foreign speakers seeking entry to Australia, particularly those associated with Israel advocacy, Jewish identity, or commentary following the 7 October 2023

Hamas attacks and ensuing war in Gaza.

Yahood isn’t the first Jewish or pro-Israel influencer to be barred from entering Australia under the current government. In November 2024, Israeli technology entrepreneur and activist Hillel Fuld had his visa cancelled shortly before his planned visit, triggering diplomatic backlash and concern within Jewish communities both in Australia and abroad.

In Fuld’s case, the Australian government cited concerns that his presence could “import hatred”. The language echoed Burke’s later remarks in Yahood’s case, suggesting a developing pattern in how authorities frame decisions involving Jewish speakers critical of antisemitism, Islamist extremism, or anti-Israel activism.

Australian Jewish leaders have expressed alarm at what they see as an uneven application of standards, particularly as individuals associated with anti-Israel activism continue to receive visas and platform access.

Yahood’s planned programme in Australia focused on community safety rather than political advocacy. He has spent the past two years teaching self-defence, primarily to Jewish communities in the United Kingdom and Europe. He previously worked in construction, and volunteered as a Krav Maga instructor before shifting to full-time community work after 7 October. “After the war started, I felt my purpose was in what I’m doing now,” he said. “So, I decided to go all in.”

According to Yahood, his workshops are open to the wider community and focus on situational awareness and personal safety amid rising antisemitic incidents globally. Jewish organisations in Australia that invited him reportedly sought clarity from authorities, but received no formal explanation beyond the minister’s public comments.

The visa cancellation occurred against a backdrop of rising antisemitism in Australia, including synagogue vandalism; harassment on university campuses; and threats against Jewish institutions. Jewish advocacy groups have repeatedly warned that restrictions on Jewish speakers risk compounding a climate of fear and marginalisation.

Yahood believes the decision reflects broader political trends. “Unfortunately, I’m ashamed to see Western societies once based on Judeo Christian values forgetting their moral compass,” he said. “They are labelling those who stand up for those values as hateful.”

He drew parallels between Australia and the United Kingdom,

where debates about free speech, immigration controls, and political activism have intensified. “We’re seeing government overreach like we haven’t seen in either Australia or the UK for the past century,” Yahood said.

The Department of Home Affairs hasn’t publicly released further details about Yahood’s case beyond the minister’s statement. Under Australian law, the home affairs minister holds broad discretionary powers to cancel visas on character or public interest grounds, often without judicial review.

Legal advocacy groups argue that this discretion has increasingly been used to restrict speech rather than address concrete security risks. Yahood has since engaged the Free Speech Union to explore possible legal avenues, though he says a return to Australia in the near future is unlikely. “I would still like to go,” he said. “But realistically, it’s not going to happen soon.”

For Jewish communities watching from afar, the case raises pressing questions about who gets to define hatred and whose voices are deemed acceptable. The comparison with Fuld’s earlier exclusion has sharpened concern that Jewish perspectives on antisemitism and Israel are being treated as uniquely suspect.

Though Australian officials maintain that visa decisions are made on a case-by-case basis, the clustering of similar cases has prompted calls for greater transparency. Community leaders have warned that opaque decision-making risks undermining trust at a time when Jewish communities already feel increasingly vulnerable. Yahood said the issue extended beyond his own situation. “Rather than having the difficult conversation, politicians would rather shut it down entirely.”

As Australia continues to navigate the balance between border control, social cohesion, and free expression, the growing list of Jewish speakers denied entry has become part of a broader international debate. For Yahood, the personal impact was immediate and stark, experienced alone at an airport gate, watching a journey dissolve in real time. “I was already there,” he said. “And suddenly, I wasn’t going anywhere.”

The *SA Jewish Report* reached out to the Australian authorities for comment or an interview but received no response at the time of going to print.

## Survival guide to Joburg’s wettest drought

OPINION

ERIN BERMAN-LEVY



The rule of thumb was simple – if the Vaal Dam was full, we were safe. Today, the Vaal and Sterkfontein dams are sitting with enough water theoretically to get us through to the end of 2027. Yet, here we are, watching summer storms turn our gardens into wetlands while our kitchen taps deliver nothing but a dry, rattling cough.

The problem isn’t nature, it’s the hardware and politics governing it. Johannesburg is trying to push modern water volumes through a geriatric network of pipes, some of which date back eight decades. We are living through a “drought of political will” rather than a drought of rainfall. While the city “sweeps” revenue from water bills into a central pot to plug other financial holes, the actual pipes are bursting at a rate of more than 20 000 incidents in just six months. The water is there, waiting in the dams, but the connection between the source and your shower is being severed by a perfect storm of infrastructure decay and questionable financial governance.

First, our problem isn’t a lack of raw water. The Vaal and Sterkfontein dams, our primary reservoirs, are chock-a-block full. The issue isn’t the source, it’s the delivery service and municipal infrastructure.

Imagine trying to fill a swimming pool with a colander. That’s essentially what Johannesburg Water is doing. The city’s water distribution network is a 12 364km labyrinth of pipes, many of which are pushing 80 years old. These geriatric pipes are tired, fragile, and bursting at a rate that would make a firework display look tame. Between July and December 2025 alone, the city reported a staggering 20 915 leaks and burst pipes.

The result is that we are losing nearly half of the treated water we buy from Rand Water before it even reaches a tap. In technical speak, it’s called “non-revenue water”, and in Johannesburg, it sits at an astronomically high 46.2%. By comparison, Cape Town loses only about 29.4%.

To make matters worse, our demand is insatiable. The average Johannesburger uses 279 litres of water a day. That’s nearly double the 164 litres used by our cousins in the Western Cape. So, we have a leaky

bucket and we’re drinking from it like we have just run a marathon. It’s a recipe for disaster that no amount of rain can fix.

Now, for the question that most Johannesburgers are too nervous to ask out loud. Is it safe?

Historically, Johannesburg has boasted some of the cleanest tap water in the world, treating it to the impeccable SANS 241:2015 standard. Generally speaking, yes, the water is safe. Johannesburg Water scored 98.1% in the latest Blue Drop report, which is technically excellent.

demand an end to the creative accounting known as “sweeping”, a municipal habit where revenue generated by water is siphoned off into a central pot to pay for everything but the pipes. This financial sleight of hand has left Johannesburg Water clutching a pitiable R1.7 billion capital budget to tackle a staggering R27 billion infrastructure backlog. We simply must demand that cash paid for water is ring-fenced for water.

Simultaneously, the pace of repairs must shift from a leisurely stroll to a sprint

because replacing a meagre 17km of pipes annually in a network spanning over 12 000km isn’t maintenance, it’s a statistical rounding error that ensures that the decay will outpace the cure for centuries to come. While we pressure officials to accelerate this renewal, residents must also adapt by installing rainwater harvesting systems and low-flow fixtures to stretch every drop – viewing backup tanks not as luxury items, but as essential suburban survival gear. We simply cannot afford to use potable water like it’s an infinite resource anymore.

Finally, we must embrace active citizenry. Movements like No Water, No Vote and organisations like WaterCAN have proven that organised, relentless pressure is the only way to stop the powers that be from fiddling

while our reservoirs run dry. Residents need to report leaks the moment they spot them, and hold their councillors accountable if the repair teams don’t show up. It’s time to treat water security with the same urgency as loadshedding.

It’s a strange time to be a Johannesburger. In a city built on gold, water has ironically become our scarcest currency. The dams are full, but our patience is running on empty. It’s the ultimate logistical failure for Africa’s economic hub. It’s time to fix the bucket before the bottom falls out completely.

• *Erin Berman-Levy is a renewable energy entrepreneur who has founded and leads multiple clean energy ventures. With deep expertise in large-scale infrastructure, he also acts as a strategic consultant to major developers, specialising in energy wheeling and innovative business strategies.*



A burst water pipe in a suburban street



# Christian Zionists call for ‘pro-jihadi’ Pandor’s axing

LEE TANKLE

“We are Christians, we’ve been quiet for too long, and we’ve made South Africa a new Palestine.”

These words were shouted loud and clear on 30 January outside the Nelson Mandela Foundation when more than 600 Christian Zionists, hosted by the South African Friends of Israel (SAFI), gathered to protest the chairpersonship of the organisation by Dr Naledi Pandor.

“We want to make a statement that the ANC [African National Congress] does not speak for Christians,” said SAFI spokesperson Bafana Modise. “We are here to make it clear that South Africa isn’t the ANC. That South Africa isn’t Naledi Pandor. We are here to declare that Nelson Mandela wasn’t a jihadist. Mandela was a friend of Israel.”

While people gathered peacefully outside the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Houghton, a tiny crowd of pro-Palestinian activists gathered across the street, holding a sign reading “Kensington stands with Palestine”, and waving Palestinian flags.

Dingane Sithole, representing South African Church Defenders, asked police at the protest to ask the anti-Israel protesters to leave as unlike SAFI, they weren’t there legally. “We don’t like to be provoked. We might look like a lamb, but sometimes we become a lion,” said Sithole.

“People are taking advantage of Christians, they don’t know us,” he said. “Please, send them home. We never disrespected their rights. We never *dissed* their marches.”

The protesters handed over a memorandum on behalf of SAFI to Dr Mbongiseni Buthelezi, the chief executive of the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

Modise said they were calling on Pandor to cease abusing the name and legacy of Mandela to advance her personal ideological agenda through the Nelson Mandela Foundation.

“Under Naledi Pandor’s chairmanship, the Nelson Mandela Foundation has veered into a radical ideological agenda antithetical to Nelson Mandela’s values of positivity, reconciliation, and respect for diverse beliefs,” said Modise. “Now, Naledi Pandor’s

tenure has weaponised the Nelson Mandela Foundation against Christian Zionism, a biblical cornerstone of more than 80% of South Africa’s Christians, alienating millions and branding Zionism as a proxy for genocide, the selection of US sanctioned activists.”

Modise said the decision to select Francesca Albanese, a United Nations Special Rapporteur who has repeatedly trafficked in antisemitic rhetoric and whitewashed Hamas’s crimes against humanity, as keynote speaker for the 2025 Nelson Mandela Lecture was in stark contradiction with Mandela’s moral clarity. He said it echoed Pandor’s prior record as minister of international relations in praising Hamas’s 7 October 2023 massacre of Israeli civilians, and spearheading the costly International Court of Justice case against Israel on genocide claims.

“Pandor’s failures further include initially rightfully condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022, only to retract that condemnation under political pressure, demonstrating a lack of moral consistency and principled leadership. These contradictions were compounded by her demonstrably cordial relations with senior figures of Iran’s violently oppressive clerical regime,” he said.

“Such moral ambiguity erodes South Africa’s common standing and pervades Madiba’s legacy of truth and human rights. Neither Pandor nor the Nelson Mandela Foundation owns Mandela’s identity. Mandela belongs to all South Africans who cherish his struggle for a democratic and non-racial nation. Mandela wasn’t a friend of Hamas. Mandela wasn’t an Islamic jihadist. Mandela wasn’t an Iranian puppet. We will defend Mandela’s name; we will protect Mandela’s legacy.”

Pastor Tom Mofokeng, a councillor in Ekurhuleni, didn’t mince his words, saying, “This foundation no longer represents the views of Nelson Mandela. Naledi Pandor is using it for her own political agenda. As international relations minister, she took Israel to the International Court of Justice but has nothing to say about Iran or people in Africa being killed by Islamists.”

Members of the protests were in high spirits, singing songs, saying they were ready for Jerusalem, waving both South African and Israeli flags and signs that read “Defending Madiba’s Legacy”; “Mandela was a Zionist”; “Iran murders its people,

and Pandor is silent”; “Unite against radical Islam”; “Pandor silent on Nigeria, Sudan, and DRC Christian slaughter”; “Hamas = Boko Haram”; among others.

Modise said, “Pandor’s conduct as chairperson of the Nelson Mandela Foundation has been just as alarming. Under her leadership, the Nelson Mandela Foundation has been restructured as a platform to attack Christian Zionism, a belief system with deep biblical roots and inherent importance to Christian identity. In doing so, Pandor and the Nelson Mandela Foundation have alienated and insulted more than 80% of South Africans who identify as Christian.”

“We say today, the lion of Judah is in South Africa. That’s not the Republic of Iran,” said Sithole, “This is the Republic of South Africa.”

Wayne Thring, deputy president of the



## Expulsion of Israeli diplomat sparks backlash

>>>Continued from page 1

he told the *SA Jewish Report*. “To declare a diplomat persona non grata is an extreme measure. Countries usually try to refrain from this.”

He rejected the notion that the activities cited were unusual. “Over my entire career as a diplomat, I have never had to ask permission to visit places,” Saranga said. “This is the job of a diplomat – not to sit behind a desk. Israeli diplomats are active. It’s in our DNA. We reach out, build bridges, and find ways to cooperate.”

He said Israel would continue its humanitarian engagement in South Africa.

Former Israeli ambassador to South Africa, Arthur Lenk, echoed this view. “I spent four years in South Africa, and I never asked permission to go anywhere,” he said this week.

For South Africa’s Jewish community, the expulsion has been deeply unsettling.

Wendy Kahn, national director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), said it wasn’t clear what had justified such an extreme response. “Bringing NGOs into the Eastern Cape to assist with a devastating water crisis shouldn’t be controversial,” she said.

Kahn warned of practical consequences. “This has a direct impact on South Africans living in Israel, visiting Israel, and on Christian pilgrimages,” she said. “Suddenly people find themselves in a

African Christian Democratic Party and a Member of Parliament, emphasised the constitutional rights of Christians. “Christians have a constitutional right to their religion and political opinions. We will not be told what to believe by the Nelson Mandela Foundation. Radical Islamists are killing people all over the world. We must stand up and defend Israel, otherwise we will be next.

“There’s no nation in the world that can be convinced to stand by idly while their citizens are massacred, murdered, killed on their soil by their enemies, while rockets are being fired into the earth. There’s no nation on this earth that, in terms of United Nations laws and decrees, must stand by silently while they are being violated,” said Thring.

“Just as Pandor proved damaging to South Africa’s interests on the international stage, she has now become a liability to the Nelson Mandela Foundation itself. The foundation must urgently reconsider the destructive path it has taken,” Modise said. “However, if the board and senior leadership of the Nelson Mandela Foundation refuse to halt this campaign that imperils Nelson Mandela’s legacy, then the people of South Africa will be compelled to stand up and defend it themselves.”

country with no consular services.”

She said the community felt betrayed, and that South Africa had applied “a completely different set of rules when it comes to the Jewish state”.

Professor Karen Milner, the national chairperson of the SAJBD, said, “At a time of great global turmoil, Dirco finds the time and energy to expel a member of the Israeli diplomatic corps while ignoring human rights abuses elsewhere. This didn’t happen in response to a few tweets.”

In a scathing address this week, the chief rabbi said the expulsion of Seidman showed how much Ramaphosa and his government “hate Israel and the Jews – that the government is prepared to let its own people die rather than concede that its foreign policy on Israel is misguided”.

“The Israeli embassy was working with local communities to help address a devastating water crisis in the Eastern Cape. Millions of South Africans lack reliable access to clean water. Children fall ill from preventable disease. Families queue for hours or share contaminated water with livestock,” Goldstein said.

“When Israel offered help, the programme was halted,” he said. “The diplomat was expelled. Because allowing Israel to alleviate human suffering threatened the optics of the ANC’s anti-Israel agenda.”

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south african

# Jewish Report

## Sending home a diplomat who would help

Last Friday morning started with a sense of calm, celebrating the warm reaction that our community got on the Nelson Mandela Bridge in Johannesburg, when its members went back after two years to commemorate all the hostages being back home. Commuters and other ordinary folk engaged with care and compassion regarding the plight of the hostages in Gaza.

I have no doubt that Ariel Seidman, the fabulous deputy Israeli ambassador or chargé d'affaires, like the rest of us, was looking forward to a peaceful and calm family Shabbat.

However, our sense of calm disappeared so fast around lunchtime on learning that the South African government was kicking Seidman out the country, giving him just 72 hours to get out. Before even considering the politics of this, imagine the logistics of a father of a young family having to evacuate his home in three days that included Shabbat. What on earth did the government think he was going to do that they gave him such a short time to get out? I mean, the man is the furthest thing from a criminal. What was the urgency?

My first thoughts on hearing this, other than we needed to get the story out to our community, was about Seidman, who I have come to know a bit.

He is a humble man of such integrity and honesty. His values are entrenched in engaging across cultures and uplifting those with less. So much so, he held a Chanukah/Christmas interfaith ceremony to include different faiths and cultures in our celebration. Just that alone gives one a clear understanding of the man.

Seidman's social media message at the beginning of 2026 was, "Strong relationships are built on respect, dialogue, and shared values. As we start 2026, we remain committed to open engagement, cultural exchange, and positive connections with South African society, across communities, sectors, and generations. May it be a wonderful year of cooperation and friendship."

Unfortunately, the South African government didn't get the memo about him, and made sure that it wasn't going to be such a year, at least not in regards to Israel or the South African Jewish community.

Seidman is a man who loves to salsa dance with his beloved wife, and to live a clean, fit, and healthy lifestyle. More than anything, he enjoys the simple things in life and spending time with his daughters and wife.

In December, he visited Eswatini – more commonly known as Swaziland to us old timers – where as part of the embassy's outreach, he donated new school shoes to children who needed them.

"Watching their joy and excitement was deeply moving and special," he wrote of his visit. "Diplomacy is often about policy, negotiations, and long documents. But it's also about people. Moments like this, give a special meaning to what we do."

Sadly, Seidman won't be able to do good in South Africa again ... for now at least.

This whole saga reeks of double standards and pure nastiness.

I do get that the Israeli embassy's social media posts had become cheeky and perhaps challenging to the government. However, they could have been a whole lot worse than they were. And if you look at what goes onto social media these days, those posts were comparatively tame. I also get that perhaps it's not diplomatic protocol, but how are cheeky tweets so outrageous that they compel the expulsion of a diplomat?

The timing of this clearly has a whole lot more to do with Israel's visiting ambassador, David Saranga, going to the Eastern Cape and offering to help uplift the province's beleaguered infrastructure. It was all about assisting the population to access running water, improved healthcare, and using technology to assist in agriculture.

Now, I acknowledge the Eastern Cape premier saw this as insulting because Saranga went in with traditional leaders and was going ahead without provincial government's stamp of approval.

However, since when is genuine help meant to be an insult?

We know that the infrastructure in the Eastern Cape is dire. For example, in Makhandla, the town in which my alma mater, Rhodes University, is located, there is a severe, long-term water crisis. Citizens are generally rationed to 50 litres of water a day because of chronic shortages and dry taps lasting weeks. This problem is apparently driven by drought, ageing infrastructure, and mismanagement.

Now, imagine if Israeli technology was allowed to turn that around, which we know it could? Would that be insulting or a brilliant feat that would help Makhandans, university students, and scholars at all the schools in the town?

This whole situation is so ugly and unnecessary.

The African National Congress (ANC) has created an enemy out of Israel allegedly because of its age-old relationship with the Palestinians and more recently the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran. So, is the enemy of my friend also my enemy?

Instead of being open to finding out about the country, what it stands for, its values and morals, the ANC sees everything Israel does as bad.

Israel has helped so many African countries with dire needs, but try as it might in South Africa, the government won't accept its offers of assistance.

This is so distressing because Israel has the potential to really help South Africa and until this week, still seemed willing to help just for the sake of helping.

But somehow, this offer of help got twisted into being an insult to the government. And that resulted in Seidman being sent home before he could even begin to have a real impact on this country or community.

Realistically, South Africa's standoff with Israel won't harm or have a significant impact on the Jewish state. It will only really hurt the South African Jewish community.

The embassy is important to us for maintaining our deep emotional, religious, and familial bonds with Israel, among other reasons.

So, in essence, the South African government is punishing us for something we had nothing to do with, and which wasn't meant to harm but to help.

I guess politics is a dirty game, but come on!

**Shabbat shalom!**

**Peta Krost**  
**Editor**



# ‘War of Redemption’ far from over



OPINION

PROFESSOR GLEN SEGELL

The return of both living and deceased hostages to Israel marks a crucial turning point in the conflict that began on 7 October 2023, when Hamas invaded Israel from Gaza. This development brings closure to a profoundly traumatic chapter in Israel's history, but the adversaries and all related threats remain. It is still uncertain whether this indicates the conclusion of the "War of Redemption" also referred to as "Operation Iron Swords". Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Yemeni Houthi, and others continue to preach the destruction of Israel.

Whether the war has ended also varies depending on who you ask. United States President Donald Trump is convinced it has ended, whereas Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei disagrees. For the Israel Defense Forces, the battle is far from over. It frequently conducts strikes in Gaza and Lebanon targeting terrorist leaders, munitions storage facilities, and retaliates against the aggressions of Hamas and Hezbollah. This situation raises a host of unresolved questions

election period for the Knesset, which is required to take place before November. The far-right groups within Netanyahu's governing coalition, whose support is crucial for the government's stability, have vehemently opposed any proposals for a withdrawal from Gaza. Additionally, they have previously promoted initiatives aimed at encouraging Palestinian inhabitants to leave, thereby facilitating the re-creation of Jewish settlements in Gaza.

One more significant hurdle is the worldwide call for a Palestinian state encompassing both Gaza and the West Bank. In both, there is a lack of cohesive Palestinian leadership willing to recognise Israel's right to exist and refrain from pursuing its annihilation.

Even if a sovereign Palestinian state were established and even if it consented to coexist peacefully with Israel, there are still other adversaries. These include Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthi. While they, along with Hamas and groups like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, chase

their individual goals, it is crucial to consider them in the broader strategic framework as proxies of Iran, alongside the roles of Qatar and Turkey, for example, who have their own interests and agendas.

At the broader scale, the conflict against Israel's adversaries will persist until a solution is reached concerning Iran's meddling in the region, Qatar's support for terrorist groups, and the



Family and friends at the grave of Ran Gvili, the last hostage to be brought home from Gaza

about the genuineness of the Lebanon ceasefire agreement from November 2024 and the Gaza peace accord that began in October 2025.

Israel has committed to a phased withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and has accepted Trump's proposal, which asserts that it will not "occupy or annex Gaza". Nevertheless, Israeli officials stress that this withdrawal is contingent upon Hamas fulfilling its obligations, including disarmament and the demilitarisation of Gaza.

Nonetheless, only the first stage of the plan has been implemented, and merely a few of the 20 points detailed in Trump's proposal have been achieved. Many of the most difficult issues, like whether Hamas will disarm and who will govern Gaza, are still unresolved.

Hamas has steered clear of tackling inquiries regarding disarmament. This disarmament involves the dismantling of all military, terror, and offensive structures, which includes tunnels and facilities for weapon production. Its reluctance stems in part from internal Palestinian disputes. Following the implementation of the ceasefire, armed members of the group have already shifted their positions across different regions of the Gaza Strip, clashing with other factions and clans that stand against them.

This volatile situation has led the Israeli military to retreat a mere few kilometres, while still holding onto half of the enclave. A larger withdrawal was intended to coincide with the deployment of a multinational force in Gaza. However, the major countries earmarked as potential contributors have yet to make any commitments as there is no definitive timeline for the withdrawal. As a result, numerous Israelis remain mobilised for reserve duty across this and other fronts, prepared to re-engage in intense combat.

Israel's circumstances aren't shaped only by its opponents, particularly as this year marks an

blatant hostility shown by Turkish leaders towards Israel. The establishment of a Palestinian state will not bring an end to these issues.

At the micro-level, it is recognised that Hamas represents an ideology firmly rooted in a religion that can be subdued only through its suppression. This blend of unyielding violence and extremist Islamic beliefs led to the horrific events and hostage situations that emerged on and after 7 October.

Evidently then, Gaza represents just one of the 10 battlefronts that Israel is fighting a war in. This situation has prompted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to assert that the "military campaign is far from finished" and that the nation's adversaries are "attempting to regroup in order to launch another attack against us". Consequently, the war will persist.

Israel's goal is peace, however, it will take necessary military measures to guarantee its security, even if that involves escalating fighting in both the north and the south, and potentially extending operations into Iran and Yemen. For Israel, if all adversaries accountable for firing missiles and drones, along with those who have captured hostages, aren't fully neutralised promptly, history indicates that subsequent conflicts could be even more catastrophic and severe.

A clearer picture may emerge regarding the conclusion of the "War of Redemption", along with a deeper understanding of Israel's future borders and its relationships with neighbouring countries. This will depend on various factors: whether the US decides to intervene militarily in Iran; if a revolution or regime change occurs there; if Hamas and Hezbollah choose to disarm; and certainly, the outcomes of Israel's general elections later this year.

• *Glen Segell is a professor at the University of Cambridge.*



Ariel Seidman at a school in Eswatini where he and the embassy gave new school shoes to children who needed them



# Seidman sent packing – diplomacy is war by other means

OPINION

HOWARD SACKSTEIN



This past Friday, 30 January, the South African government unceremoniously booted out the acting Israeli ambassador to Pretoria, Ariel Seidman and, in a tit-for-tat reprisal, Israel gave the South African “ambassador to Palestine” 72 hours to vacate Ramallah, effectively ending our nation’s representation to the Palestinian Authority.

Prussian military strategist Carl von Clausewitz famously observed that “War is a continuation of politics by other means.” There’s a lesser-known corollary: “Diplomacy is war by other means,” and South Africa is the clear aggressor.

Israel stands accused of offering to provide clean drinking water and boreholes to the parched people of the Eastern Cape, and offering to repair their collapsed healthcare system using the expertise of the Sheba Medical Center in Tel Aviv, consistently rated one of the top 10 hospitals in the world.

For decades, Israel has provided agricultural seeds, drip irrigation, medical know-how, water recycling technology, and clean drinking water directly to the people of South Africa. Today, more than one million South Africans receive potable drinking water from an Israeli nongovernmental organisation, and the water from these Israeli solar-powered boreholes is used to irrigate land and provide people with sustainable income.

Last week, the Israeli embassy was working on flood relief for Limpopo, a scandalous crime!

What Israel does is no different to that of many other embassies in South Africa, albeit on a much grander and more effective scale. For the crime of assisting the people of South Africa, Israel must plead guilty.

The South African government, one of the most corrupt regimes in the world, is no moral beacon. It behaves as the vassal puppet of the Iranian regime, beholden to its paymasters and acting as the agent of the jihadist mullahs in Tehran.

South Africa claimed the moral mantle by dragging Israel to the International Court of Justice in The Hague, accusing it of genocide. However, the thin facade of South Africa as a protector of human rights fractured on the country’s failure to condemn

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; shattered at the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) failure to condemn the Hamas invasion of Israel on 7 October 2023, with its massacre of 1 200 Israelis; and was buried by the government’s lack of concern over the reported slaughtering of 30 000 Iranian protesters on 8 and 9 January 2026.

When South Africa abstained from voting in favour of a United Nations inquiry into the Iranian carnage, the final nail was driven into the coffin of South African credibility.

Since the start of the war sparked by Hamas’s invasion of Israel, nearly double the number of civilians have been killed in South Africa than Gaza and about 10 times the number of children have died of malnutrition in South Africa than Gaza itself. On raw numbers alone, South Africa looks like a war zone.

South Africa hasn’t had an ambassador in Israel since 2018, and Israel recalled its

ambassador to Pretoria for consultations in 2023.

Judging by the Israeli embassy’s X (formerly Twitter) account, Israel simply got “*gatvol*” of the South African government’s double standards and hypocrisy.

When President Cyril Ramaphosa, who supports sanctions on Israel, stated that “boycott politics doesn’t work”, a remark he made in reaction to United States President Donald Trump’s decision not to attend the G20 Summit in Johannesburg, the Israeli embassy tweeted that this was a “rare moment of wisdom and diplomatic clarity from President Ramaphosa”. The president didn’t appreciate the compliment.

Ramaphosa is the only democratically elected leader in the world who has chanted the genocidal slogan, “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free”, a call for the destruction of Israel.

Multiple delegations visited Israel to see what was happening for themselves. Two grandchildren of former President Nelson Mandela visited Israel and Gaza and gave an honest account of what they saw, diametrically opposite to the South African government’s perspective.

A multiparty parliamentary delegation visited Israel in April 2025; in October, 120 pastors visited; in November, Christian Church leaders visited the holy land; and in January 2026, National Pentecostal Forum leaders visited Jerusalem, all of them reporting contrary to the ANC’s jaundiced position.

But the straw that broke the camel’s back was the visit to Israel by King Buyelekhaya Dalindyebo KaSabata, king of the abaThembu people. The king is a powerful figure in the Eastern Cape, the ANC’s own heartland, where theft, corruption, and incompetence by government has impoverished the local inhabitants of the area. The king’s support for

Israel and his request that Israel assist the people of the Eastern Cape was just too much for the ANC to endure.

ANC Secretary General Fikile Mbalula spoke of the betrayal of the abaThembu king, a stalwart of the liberation struggle, who spent years in exile. For the ANC, it had to extract revenge on Israel. At the same news conference, Mbalula also announced a robust anti-American campaign announcing that the ANC and its allies would mobilise to oppose what they describe as “US imperialist aggression”.

Polls by both the Social Research Foundation

and the Brenthurst Foundation indicate that the ANC’s approach to Israel doesn’t have the backing of South African voters who are less likely to vote for the ANC as a result. The ANC now polls at only 37%.

But the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco) is more interested in theatre than diplomacy. Before Seidman was even informed by Dirco that he had 72 hours to vacate South Africa, media houses with television cameras were camping at the door of the Israeli embassy, a flagrant breach of diplomatic protocol.

It’s unclear if Ramaphosa was even aware that Israel would have its envoy expelled. In a world where the army generals ignore the direct instructions of the president, it’s unclear if Ramaphosa has an inside track on what’s happening in the country.

Over the past few months, Israel’s Foreign Ministry dispatched numerous “roving

ambassadors” to South Africa to deepen ties with the South African population. Dirco viewed this as an attempt to impose a de facto ambassador in the country without its consent.

However, under an agreement between the two countries, holders of diplomatic passports are exempt from visa requirements, allowing Israeli diplomats to enter and move around South Africa without approval. The refusal of Israeli roving ambassador David Saranga to operate “in the closet” appears to have angered the South African authorities. Dirco stated that Saranga had visited government hospitals without permission, mistakenly believing that it was running the East German Stasi.

The apartheid regime expelled Israeli journalist and national director of the South African Union of Jewish Students, Dan Sagir, in 1985, and attempted, but failed, to expel Israeli/American head of the World Union of Jewish Students, Yosef Abramowitz, in 1986. Dirco’s actions are disturbingly reminiscent of the dark days of apartheid oppression.

Some suspect Seidman’s expulsion was a proxy jab at Washington following the removal of Ebrahim Rasool as South Africa’s ambassador to the US. The jihadist-leaning cabal within Dirco may believe that targeting Israel indirectly

strikes at Donald Trump.

Pretoria’s decision has backfired on South Africa.

Under an agreement from the 1990s, South African diplomats to “Palestine” are listed and accredited as embassy staff in Israel. Although South Africa refers to expelled diplomat Shaun Bynevelde as “ambassador to Palestine”, he is, in law, a representative in a representative office in Ramallah. He is accredited to and works through

the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and accordingly, is subject to the Israeli ministry’s jurisdiction.

Losing that representation is a devastating, self-inflicted blow that serves neither South Africa nor any coherent foreign-policy objective.

As a result of this spat, ordinary South Africans may lose access to healthcare and clean drinking water. But politics, after all, is war, and South Africa appears willing to absorb many civilian casualties to achieve its ideological aims.

• Howard Sackstein is a human rights activist; founder of the Jewish anti-apartheid movement; former executive director of South Africa’s Independent Electoral Commission; a member of Cyril Ramaphosa’s CR17 election campaign, and chairperson of the SA Jewish Report. He writes in his personal capacity.



Photo: Facebook

Ariel Seidman heading for South Africa at the end of July 2025



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# Could we go from Gaza’s last hostage to coexistence?

OPINION

STEVEN GRUZD



Now that the body of the last hostage in Gaza has been returned to Israel, there is a deep hope that the Jewish state can move on.

Jewish and Muslim communities around the world estranged because of the Middle East conflict, and especially after the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks on Israel and ensuing war in Gaza, also need to heal.

Now 14.5 million Israelis and Palestinians must figure out how to live together in the tiny sliver of land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. The communities in the diaspora must also seek common ground. This is not going to be easy in the current climate of hate and we shouldn’t be naïve, but understanding the long, complex relationship between Judaism and Islam, which began in the 7th century, offers important insights.

Muslim Spain. But life got worse again for Jews when more extremist Muslims from North Africa invaded the Iberian Peninsula, as seen in the writings of the Rambam and Yehuda Halevi.

Jewish life again flourished under the tolerance prevalent in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries. Jews and Muslims had lived side by side for hundreds of years. They spoke the same language, dressed the same, and exhibited similar social and political values. But as European influences and colonialism accelerated, bringing new and radical ideas, this distanced Jews and Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. The rise of Zionism and Arab nationalism widened the rift between the two communities. By the 1920s, after the 1917 Balfour Declaration and the growth of Jewish emigration to the British Mandate of Palestine, Arab intellectuals increasingly characterised Zionism as a form of European imperialism. Tensions over competing claims for the holy land have infused Muslim-Jewish relations ever since.

The communities have nevertheless lived and worked together, often by skirting issues related to politics and the Middle East. The practice of “Don’t mention the war” prevails.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are dubbed “Abrahamic” religions, because of the centrality of the common biblical ancestor Avraham/Abraham/Ibrahim. While Jews believe that it was Avraham’s son, Yitzchak, that his father was going to sacrifice, the Muslims believe it was his other son, Ishmael (Ismā’il). Both fathered great religions. The Tanach – the collection of Jewish texts including the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings – forms an integral part of all three faiths. Many biblical figures, including Noah (Nuh); Moses (Musa); David (Dāwūd); and Jesus (Isa) from the Christian tradition are considered prophets in Islam, superseded in importance by Mohammed, whom Muslims believe received G-d’s final revelation.

Mohammed had many encounters with Jews in his life in the 600s CE – and not always negative ones. From the teachings of the Qu’ran – Islam’s holiest text – and the Hadith, later interpretations of the Qu’ran, emerged the concept of Jews as *dhimmi*, literally meaning “protected people”. These are non-Muslims living in an Islamic country. They are granted some rights, legal protection, and the ability to practise their religion in exchange for paying a tax called the *Jizya*. While Jews underwent verbal and physical humiliations when paying the *Jizya* in Muslim lands, and were certainly second-class citizens, they generally fared better than under oppressive, murderous Christian rule over the centuries.

In the early Middle Ages, Arabic writings and society had marked influence on rabbinic culture, literature, and learning, especially on Jewish poetry and philosophy.

The *Convivencia* (“coexistence”) refers to the positive relationships between Jews, Christians, and Muslims that emerged after the latter conquered southern Spain in 711 CE from the Christian Visigoths. Life improved considerably for Jews in the area. Jewish figures like Hasdai Ibn Shaprut and Samuel Ibn Nagrela rose to become royal advisers as well as community leaders in

There are many similarities between Judaism and Islam. Both are monotheistic religions believing a single, indivisible G-d. They believe the divine plan was revealed to human beings. Halacha and shari’a govern religious law and practice. Both encourage daily prayer, and follow the lunar calendar. There are fasts and feasts in the annual cycle. The words and concepts of charity – *tzedakah* and *zakat* – are similar.

And there are concrete examples that offer hope. The common ancestor, Avraham/Ibrahim, has inspired agreements between Israel and Muslim states and an enormous interfaith compound in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020, normalised relations between Israel, Bahrain, and the UAE. They later incorporated Morocco, but civil war in Sudan derailed the improvement of its ties with Israel. It is hoped that Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Muslim world will eventually join the Abraham Accords.

The Abrahamic Family House in Abu Dhabi in the UAE incorporates a mosque, a church, and a synagogue side by side. Opened in February 2023, this magnificent complex aims to promote unity and interfaith dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. The design reflects architectural elements of each religion, making it a unique symbol of tolerance and coexistence.

Like human beings sharing 98.8% of their DNA with chimpanzees, there is more that ultimately unites Jews and Muslims. The communities need to recapture the coexistence and tolerance that characterised large swathes of their common history. And there is no more important time than now.

• Steven Gruzd is teaching a 10-week online course titled “*The Star and the Crescent: The Long Relationship of Judaism and Islam*” from 18 February. To enrol, visit [www.meltoncapetown.org](http://www.meltoncapetown.org)

# From Freedom Charter to principled life, saluting Leon Levy

CLAUDIA GROSS

Leon Levy, the last surviving signatory of the Freedom Charter and a veteran of South Africa’s liberation struggle, died this week at the age of 96. His political life spanned anti-apartheid activism, exile, imprisonment, and democratic transition.

Levy stood trial and was ultimately found not guilty alongside Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu during the 1956 Treason Trial. He later became the first person detained under apartheid’s 90-day detention law, allowing a person to be detained for three months without trial or access to a lawyer.

Levy died in Cape Town following a period of frailty, according to his family. Tributes from across the political spectrum have described him as a principled freedom fighter, trade unionist, and moral voice whose commitment to justice never wavered.

Born in 1929 in Johannesburg to Jewish immigrant parents from Lithuania, Leon and his identical twin brother, Norman, became politically active while still schoolboys in Yeoville. Raised in a home shaped by the legacy of antisemitism and displacement, the twin brothers were drawn to socialist ideals and to the fight against racial injustice in South Africa.

Author and journalist Jonathan Ancer, in his book *Mensches in the Trenches*, writes that Levy belonged to a generation of Jewish activists whose contributions were decisive yet often overlooked. He notes that Jews were disproportionately represented among those accused in the Treason Trial and in underground resistance structures, including the Rivonia headquarters of the African National Congress (ANC).

Levy joined the ANC and became deeply involved in the trade union movement. As president of the South African Congress of Trade Unions, the forerunner of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), he played a central role in organising workers and mobilising opposition to apartheid legislation. He was involved in all the major Congress campaigns of the 1950s, including the Congress of the People in Kliptown in 1955.

At that gathering, Levy was one of six trade union representatives who signed the Freedom Charter on behalf of the labour movement. The charter would become the ideological foundation of South Africa’s democratic Constitution.

In 1956, Levy was arrested with 155 others and charged with high treason. The Treason Trial, which lasted more than four years, placed him in the dock alongside some of the most prominent leaders of the liberation movement. The accused were ultimately acquitted in 1961.

Soon afterwards, Levy was arrested again and became the first person detained under the apartheid government’s 90-day detention law. He was held at Marshall Square Prison in Johannesburg, much of the time in solitary confinement. He later recalled the profound isolation of detention and the psychological toll it took.

Following his release, increasing repression caused Levy to take an exit visa and leave South Africa. He settled in the United Kingdom (UK), where he built a new life while continuing his political work. He became a specialist in labour relations, and remained engaged with the struggle from abroad.

Levy returned to South Africa in 1997, choosing to settle in Cape Town. In his late 60s, he began a new chapter, joining the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) as a senior commissioner. He served for more than two decades, retiring only at the age of 89.

His daughter, Emma Levy, described him as a deeply principled and compassionate man whose

public courage was matched by private kindness. “He was an amazing father,” she said. “Incredibly kind, understanding, patient, loyal, courageous, principled, brave, compassionate, very generous in spirit, and extremely wise.”

An only child, Emma grew up with her parents in exile in the UK. She said her father lived by simple guiding principles which he passed on throughout her life. “He used to say, ‘Nothing’s your business unless you make it your business,’” she recalled. “Another was, ‘If you don’t succeed at first, try, try again.’ And one that annoyed me when I was younger, but I understand now, was that bad moods are expensive luxuries.”

Levy was known among colleagues for his calm authority and ability to defuse conflict. At the CCMA, where he was affectionately known as “uncle”, he was respected for his patience, insight, and generosity with younger commissioners. He was also known for keeping fruit in his office for times when he had to rush between hearings, which he often shared with colleagues.

Emma said her father’s greatest strength lay in his capacity to help people find their own solutions. “He always believed in keeping your head in a crisis,” she said. “That ability to calm people down and help them resolve conflict was his real skill.”

In 2021, Levy published his memoir, *Back to the Front*, in which he reflected on his years in the struggle. Writing the book, he later acknowledged, helped him confront the emotional cost of a life spent in resistance.

Family friend and fellow activist Peta Wolpe, whose late father, lawyer and anti-apartheid activist Harold Wolpe worked closely with Levy and his twin brother, said Levy’s contribution had never been about recognition. “They acted because it was the right thing to do,” she said. “There was a moral compassion there that shaped their lives and affected everything they did.”

Wolpe said Levy belonged to a generation whose youth was consumed by political commitment. “They were half youth and half adult,” she said. “They didn’t have an ordinary youth. Their lives were dominated by politics, organising, distributing leaflets, going into townships, and attending meetings.”

The South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) paid tribute to Levy as a stalwart of the resistance and a figure of deep moral authority. SAJBD National Director, Professor Karen Milner said Levy’s association with the Jewish community remained strong throughout his life, and that he had spoken at Jewish schools, sharing his experiences with students and staff.

In 2015, the Board awarded Levy the Rabbi Cyril and Ann Harris Human Rights Award in recognition of his lifelong commitment to justice and human dignity. President Cyril Ramaphosa, Cosatu, and leaders across the liberation movement also issued statements mourning his death, describing him as a freedom fighter whose sacrifices helped lay the foundations for a non-racial democracy.

Levy was predeceased by his wife, Lorna, who passed away last November, and his identical twin brother, Norman, who died during the COVID-19 pandemic. Emma said the loss of his wife had affected him deeply, and that his final years were marked by physical decline but mental clarity.

“He lived a full life,” she said. “He did everything he wanted to do. He had friends, culture, music, books, and purpose right until the end.” Levy is remembered as a man whose life bridged Jewish ethical tradition and South Africa’s struggle for freedom, and whose quiet integrity left an enduring mark on the country’s history. He is survived by his daughter, Emma, and grandchildren, Daisy and Jonny.



Photo: Amos Ben-Gershom GPO







# Rebbetzin supports dancers from street to stardom

LEE TANKLE

When Rebbetzin Aviva Rabinowitz approached a group of street dancers on the corner of Oxford Road and Jan Smuts Avenue four years ago, she never imagined that she would help take them to a professional stage, where they would be the main attraction.

The Imbumba Dance Group will be performing at the Imbumba Ye Mzansi Dance Festival on 8 February at The Lesedi at the Joburg Theatre.

The festival describes itself as a vibrant cultural celebration showcasing South Africa’s rich heritage through dance, music, and storytelling. It opened on 24 January, with a showcase featuring 100 township-based performers.

However, the main attraction will be on

8 February, when the Imbumba Dance Group will be performing a dance musical featuring culturally diverse artists, predominantly women and youth, in an immersive production that celebrates Mzansi’s cultural diversity through expressive choreography, live music, and storytelling.

“Imbumba Ye Mzansi is more than a festival, it’s a statement of unity, pride, and artistic excellence, highlighting the role of the performing arts in social cohesion, youth development, and cultural preservation in South Africa,” said Mojalefa Mogagabe, one of the organisers of this show along with Rabinowitz.

Rabinowitz frequently drove past the Oxford Road intersection towards Jan Smuts Avenue, and these dancers, sometimes with Coca-Cola crates and other times just dancing, caught her attention in 2022.



Left to right: Scelo Khumalo, Sboniso Motaung, Rebbetzin Aviva Rabinowitz, Anesipho Magushana, Sphiwe Gumede, and Mojalefa Mogagabe

“Something spoke to my soul,” she said. “I was so inspired by their talent, and I envisaged better opportunities for them.”

Rabinowitz would constantly talk about these dancers to her daughter, and she eventually suggested that Rabinowitz stop and get their contact details.

One day, she did so, much to the surprise of the dancers. Sboniso Motaung, one of the dancers in the group, said they thought it was a shallow offer as other people had taken their contact details and done nothing more.

“We felt like she wouldn’t come back to us because a lot of people were taking our contact details, and didn’t come back to us, but we saw she was serious when she called us for our first meeting,” he said.

Rabinowitz not only came through on her promise, but after seeing their enthusiasm and desire to succeed, she knew that she had made the right decision to stop that day.

“After meeting them on several occasions, I was inspired by their strong desire to succeed in life,” said Rabinowitz.

Initially, she intended to arrange for them to perform at gigs for companies at different venues, but it turned into something far bigger. That eventually led to them formally creating the Imbumba Dance Group after Rabinowitz met Mogagabe, a creative entrepreneur with experience in the world of arts and culture.

“She helped us with transport money; opened the website for us; registered our company; gets us gigs, and she’s always there for us,” said Motaung.

Rabinowitz said the dance group receives support from the Mzansi Golden Economy grant given to them by the Department of Sport, Arts, and Culture. This is what ultimately allowed them to put on this show at The Lesedi.

“It has been exhilarating and heartwarming to see the group hard at work practising for the upcoming show. The original group of four dancers will be complemented by musicians, singers, and dancers, all of whom have been professionally trained,” said Rabinowitz.

Performing at this level was something Motaung and the other dancers never thought possible, and now that they are getting ready to do so, the excitement is palpable.

“It’s a big experience because we have never been hosted in such a big theatre,” said Motaung, “It’s going to be a great experience, and it feels like we are approaching another level since we are going to be performing with artists who are big in the art industry.”

Rabinowitz said this show was only the first step for these dancers to superstardom.

“We hope this will be the beginning of a new and successful chapter for the Imbumba Dance Group with performances on many stages, locally and abroad,” she said.

## Holocaust play is close to home for European director

LEE TANKLE

When second-generation Holocaust survivor Luc Albinski approached Belgian director Ilina Perianova to direct the play he wrote about his family’s experience, she jumped at the chance because she felt personally connected to the history the play deals with.

Albinski, who wrote the play, approached Perianova, a Belgian film and theatre director, screenwriter, and actress, a year ago in Bulgaria to help him adapt his script of *Nobody Told Me*, which is about his mother and grandmother, into a theatrical production.

With deep roots in a family shaped by Holocaust survival, Perianova’s involvement adds a powerful personal dimension to the production, underscoring the play’s exploration of memory, silence, and inherited trauma across generations.

She said she was initially drawn to the material because of her own family history. Her grandmother, Jevgenia Nogina, was a Jewish doctor during the Holocaust.

“When Luc gave me the script, and I read that it was about a group of doctors, I believed it didn’t just come to me by chance or coincidence, it was divine providence. It felt really close to home,” she said.

“I will always remember my grandmother as a strong and compassionate woman, a doctor who had lost all her closest relatives, who had stomach ulcers because of hunger during war, who had seen far too much death and escaped its clutches. At family gatherings, she would toast again and again with only one sentence, ‘May there never be war! May there never be war again!’”

Perianova connected with the material on another level. While growing up in Soviet Russia, she had little to no knowledge of Jewish traditions.

“My mom grew up in Russia, where there was so much denial of religion. We grew up with zero knowledge of what being Jewish means. I was lucky because later, I met a lot of Jewish communities in Bulgaria, and started to learn about Jewish traditions and things, but it didn’t come from my mom.”

She said when her mother was growing up, she and her family still had to keep their religion secret, as hatred for Jews never went away.



Ilina Perianova near the theatre in Nelson Mandela Square

“When I first read the play last year, I was deeply moved because I thought about my grandmother Jevgenia Nogina, my grandfather, Vasiliy, and all those unsung heroes of World War II like her. I grew up with my grandmother’s stories from the frontline, and they were absolutely terrifying,” she told the *SA Jewish Report*.

Nogina came from Ukraine, and her whole family was killed in the Holocaust while she was studying medicine in Kazakhstan.

“She was a doctor during World War II, and actively involved in fighting the Nazis,” said Perianova, “It was during the war, on the front, that she met my grandfather, who was Russian. He was one of the highest-ranking officers in the army, holding a rank such as lieutenant or captain, and was highly decorated for his service. He received the Suvorov Medal, one of Russia’s most prestigious military honours and among the highest awards to come out of the war.”

So, when she saw that the play revolved around a group of mostly Jewish doctors in and around the Warsaw Ghetto, she saw her grandmother in these characters.

the story to be told from a deeply personal place while still resonating on a universal level.”

Even though it has been a cathartic experience bringing this story to life, Perianova said she felt a sense of pressure because of the heavy subject matter.

“It’s a heavy project with so much trauma, pain, and mass murder. It hits close to home,” she said. “I’ve had two weeks when I couldn’t sleep. I broke down in the last two weeks before we premiered. It wasn’t just the anxiety of coming out with the show. It was more than that. When we started putting the show together, I saw what we had created, and there was this deep pain that I can’t even describe. It’s a universal pain. It’s so enveloping, and so beyond you. It’s been a hard process. It’s been emotionally and physically draining.”

However, the anxiety diminished as soon as the curtain went up at Theatre on the Square on 28 January. Said Perianova, “It was an honour to work on this play because it was also so close to home. It was as if I was telling my family story. That’s why I joined the project.”



# Some Jewish festivals are more Jewish than others

There are Jewish festivals. And then there are Jewish Jewish festivals. And even at the risk of angering global-warming enthusiasts everywhere, I remain of the firm belief that Tu B'Shvat is the least Jewish of all our festivals. I would even go further and say that it's about as Jewish as Greta Thunberg isn't.

This isn't a theological statement. It's a sociological one. Because while the calendar insists that everything from Tu B'Shvat to Tzom Gedalia counts equally, lived Jewish experience tells a very different story.

Some festivals are Jewish by definition. The food, the memories, the arguments, and the guilt leave little doubt as to their nature. Others are suspiciously polite, even requiring WhatsApp reminders on family and shul groups.

Take Tu B'Shvat. I know. Technically, it's a Jewish festival. The New Year for trees. Important. Symbolic. Deeply meaningful if you are a tree. Or a forestry official. Possibly even a dried date farmer.

But culturally? Tu B'Shvat is botanical. Tu B'Shvat exists almost entirely in theory, school assemblies, and bowls of slightly tired dried fruit that no-one actually wants. No-one, apart from maybe the Jewish National Fund, has ever said, "We're going big for Tu B'Shvat this year," and meant it.

Contrast that with Shavuot. Shavuot doesn't try to impress. Lacking a strong public relations department, it simply assumes its place in the calendar quietly and confidently. And because of that, it may be the most Jewish festival of the lot.

It's about study. Staying up too late. Cheesecake-related reminders that Jewish stomachs were not built for lactose. And it carries the smug satisfaction of knowing what it is: revelation; text; argument; dairy intolerance. All very on brand.

Chanukah, meanwhile, is a fascinating case study. Once upon a time, Chanukah was minor. Candles,

**INNER VOICE**  
Howard Feldman



yes. But modest. Almost shy. Then something happened. Possibly Chabad. Possibly Bondi. Possibly Los Angeles and Hollywood.

After spending a few centuries as the step-sibling or "Jewish Christmas", Chanukah now delivers *shiurim* from the pulpit as though its grandfather was a "gadol". Yom Kippur, oddly, has a distinctly non-Jewish vibe.

Don't misunderstand me: it's central, sacred, and profoundly important. But it's also universal. Everyone fasts. Everyone reflects. Everyone suddenly becomes very serious. There's very little food, very little talking, and almost no complaining.

Suspiciously gentle. Rosh Hashanah, on the other hand, is Judaism in its purest form. Apples. Honey. Long services. Louder opinions. Food that carries meaning and argument in equal measure. The shofar is blown repeatedly, as if to say, "Pay attention. This matters."

And then there are fast days. Tisha B'Av is unquestionably the most Jewish fast. It's heavy with history, layered with catastrophe, and observed with a sense that even sitting comfortably feels vaguely inappropriate.

Tzom Gedalia, by contrast, feels like an administrative error.

None of this is criticism. Jewish life has always operated on two tracks: what the calendar says, and what the community feels. Some days carry memory, weight, food, noise, and argument. Others exist politely, waiting to be acknowledged.

And if you're reading this thinking, "He's wrong about Tu B'Shvat," I apologise.

But the fact that you feel compelled to argue about it makes this discussion far more Jewish than a bowl of dried figs will ever be.

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

# South Africans defy extremist anti-Israel minority



**ABOVE BOARD**  
Karen Milner

This has been a difficult week for South African Jewry. On Friday, 30 January, the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco) announced via social media that Ariel Seidman, Israel's chargé d'affaires in Pretoria, had been declared persona non grata and given 72 hours to leave the country. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies immediately mobilised, advocating its position across television, radio, and print media.

This latest action represents an escalation in the government's troubling obsession with Israel, a hostility that has intensified since October 2023. What concerns me most isn't the diplomatic posturing, but the practical harm. Dirco is actively obstructing assistance to South African citizens in Israel while undermining opportunities that could benefit our own people. I've been heartened by the response from ordinary South Africans who are outraged that their government would jeopardise access to Israeli innovation that could transform countless lives here.

That said, there's a truth that bears repeating: mainstream South Africans are neither as extreme nor as uniformly anti-Israel as vocal minority activists in government, labour movements, and pro-Palestinian organisations would have us believe. Three events this week powerfully demonstrate this.

Our community gathered at the iconic Nelson Mandela Bridge last Thursday to mark the return of the hostages from Israel. Representatives from the South African Union of Jewish Students (SAUJS), South African Zionist Federation, The Base, Bnei Akiva, Habonim Dror, King David schools, and others joined us in an activation that mirrored our November 2023 gathering at the same location when we were still to learn the full scope of that crisis. We displayed balloons and photographs, creating a poignant visual

statement. What moved me most was the warmth of Johannesburg commuters. People engaged with our posters and representatives. That we could hold such an event safely in downtown Johannesburg, without hostility, speaks volumes. There are precious few cities in the world where this would be possible. I'm grateful we call one of them home.

The following day, South African Friends of Israel organised a protest outside the Nelson Mandela Foundation, opposing Dr Naledi Pandor's policies. More than 1 000 proud Zionists attended, a powerful reminder that we are far from alone in our convictions.

Then on Sunday, the Board hosted an inspiring morning at the University of Johannesburg's Centre for Ecological Intelligence ahead of Tu B'Shvat. Our schools, SAUJS, youth movements, and Vice-Chancellor Professor Letlhokwa Mpedi joined us.

Tu B'Shvat is too often reduced to "the new year for trees", a simplification of this festival's significance. Engagement by our community with the university's leadership, directed by community member Professor Michael Rudolph, embodied the festival's deeper themes: investment in our future; in nature; and in our community's continued prosperity.

Together, these events give a sense of perspective regarding feelings of isolation as a result of the expulsion of the chargé d'affaires.

Finally, this week, we mourned Leon Levy, anti-apartheid resistance leader, Congress of South African Trade Unions founder, and one of six original signatories to the Freedom Charter. His legacy in South Africa's liberation struggle remains an enduring inspiration.

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





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# Avishai Eilim powers up to global competition

LEE TANKLE

At just 21, South African-born powerlifter Avishai Eilim has already claimed national and African titles, broken multiple records, and placed among the world's elite. Now, instead of chasing constant competition, he is making a calculated decision to step back, training patiently toward a singular ambition: to become world champion.

Eilim, born in South Africa, made aliya with his family when he was just a baby, and returned to South Africa about 10 years ago. He said when he first walked into the gym, he was immediately drawn to the sport of powerlifting.

He was approached by his coach, Dan Oppenheim, one of the best South African powerlifters, and he realised he had talent in the sport.

In fact, it was after only four or five months of training that Eilim and Oppenheim realised that he had the capacity to be one of the best powerlifters in the country, specialising in bench press. His bench press is currently 192.5kg, and he competes in the -83kg weight class.

Oppenheim, in his 80s, still competes at a global level. He has shown Eilim that powerlifting is more than competitions and lifting, it's about consistency.

"He's been training since he was about 15 years old. But powerlifting, and competing at that level, has always been about far more than lifting weights. It's about discipline, consistency, and mindset," said Eilim. "The lessons I've learned through powerlifting have shaped every part of my life, my business, my relationships, and how I approach challenges. Competing internationally isn't just about winning, it's about testing myself and doing the work that builds discipline and mental strength, qualities that carry into every other area of life."

Eilim said dedication was another crucial factor. Many people say they want to succeed, but few are willing to be disciplined and consistent enough

to reach international level. "Concentration also matters. Athletes often try to do too much at once, spreading themselves across multiple sports or commitments instead of focusing their energy where it truly counts," he said.

"Determination, meanwhile, is refusal to give up," said Eilim. "In powerlifting, there are wins and losses, but real determination comes from understanding that success is a long journey. It's about keeping an eventual goal in mind and continuing to work toward it, regardless of setbacks. That mindset, Dan says, is the foundation of his entire approach."

Eilim said he enjoys the bench press because it's not dependent on raw strength alone, there's a mental game involved.

"Everything plays a role, but mindset is what ultimately separates athletes," he said. "There's a sports psychologist, Bill Beswick, who once spoke about talent in a way that really stuck with me. He said everyone is born with some level of ability, but someone with enormous talent who doesn't apply themselves will often lose to someone with far less talent who works relentlessly."

Using basketball as an example, Beswick said some athletes competed only to be the best in their school, others aim to succeed at provincial level, then at national and continental level. But only a very small group push all the way to the top of the world stage, and they don't just want to win, they want to dominate, to be so far ahead, that future generations measure themselves against them.

"What separates those athletes isn't talent alone, but mentality and determination. Technique matters, training every day matters, and consistency is crucial. But mindset is the foundation, because from the right mentality, everything else follows," Eilim said.



Though Eilim has won South African and African championships and set multiple national and continental records, he sees them rather as points along the journey to the end goal of being world champion.

"Obviously, goals motivate you, but it's a stepping stone towards where you want to be eventually. You have to enjoy all the steps along the way. It's important to be able to lose, to be able to win, and still train."

At just 19 years old, Eilim placed seventh in the world at the World Championships in Sun City, where he broke another African record.

"I proved to myself that, with years to come, I have the ability to stand with the absolute best in the world, to be among the top competitors in the world."

He has now decided to step back from frequent competition so that he can build towards one goal: to become world champion at the 2026-2027 World Championships in Istanbul.

He said that in powerlifting, you go through a training cycle of gaining size, strength, and then competing. "When you're competing, it's definitely possible to do all three, but we've chosen to step back to focus on the areas that we need to improve."

He has chosen to build the fundamentals from the ground up to a much stronger position.

"For example, in 2024, if I had competed, I would have placed fourth in the world. The numbers and weight that I've hit in the gym – even more than that – but we're going to focus a lot more heavily on training rather than competition," he said.

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420G EACH

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SAUCE ASSTD  
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