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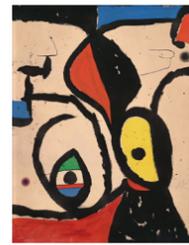


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south african Jewish Report

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South Africans scramble for flights amid air travel chaos

NICOLA MILTZ

As the Middle East conflict disrupts global travel, thousands of flights have been cancelled, creating the most significant aviation disruption since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The airspace closure over Israel and restrictions affecting neighbouring countries have forced airlines to cancel flights or reroute services, leaving travellers scrambling to find alternative ways home. With limited repatriation flights and disrupted schedules across major Middle Eastern hubs, many are attempting complicated, multi-country journeys in order to reach their destinations.

For Tel Aviv resident Adam Marks, 25, the travel uncertainty wasn't going to stop him attending his sister's wedding in South Africa.

After learning that Israeli airspace had closed, Marks began searching for alternative routes. "I'm prepared to try anything to make it to my sister's wedding in Johannesburg," he told the *SA Jewish Report*.

Travel coordinators Shana Chrysler and Debbie Ogus, together with Israeli tour guide Rabbi Gary Rogoff, put together an unconventional route out of the country for Marks and 45 Yeshiva students from the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Europe.

The intricate plan involves buses, border crossings, exit and entry visas, cash in multiple currencies, taxis, and multiple flights across several countries.

Marks began his journey by bus on Wednesday, 4 March, from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, before boarding another bus heading south through the night towards the Egyptian Taba (Menachem Begin) border near Eilat.

After crossing into Egypt, Marks is expected to be met by a taxi driver who will drive him about two hours to Taba International Airport.

From there, he's scheduled to board a repatriation flight operated by Arkia Airlines to Athens, Greece. From there, he plans to connect to an Ethiopian Airlines flight

to Addis Ababa, later departing for Johannesburg.

If the itinerary proceeds as scheduled, he's expected to arrive in Johannesburg on Friday morning at about 05:00 after travelling for almost two days.

Marks said the complicated trip was worth it if it meant attending his sister's wedding, where he is to be the master of ceremonies. "I would literally go through multiple countries to be at Tammy's wedding," he said.

The route through Egypt carries a symbolic twist as Passover approaches, he said.

"It's crazy going back into Egypt just weeks before Pesach where we spent 40 years wandering in the desert," he said.

Lily Fisher, 75, and her partner, Tony Newman, 78, of Johannesburg are stranded in Thailand after their flight from Bangkok to Johannesburg via Doha was cancelled.

The elderly couple had been holidaying in Phuket, "a trip of a lifetime", when the Middle East crisis escalated and airspace closures began affecting international flight paths.

Their connecting flight from Doha to Johannesburg was cancelled, leaving them unable to complete their journey home, essentially leaving them stranded in a foreign country with limited funds.

"They are afraid, anxious, and extremely worried," said Fisher's daughter, Amanda Garber, speaking from Los Angeles. "They literally have no place to stay, and the few available flights are prohibitively expensive as so many travellers are stuck, desperate to get onto any flight," she said.

"Right now they need to find an affordable place to stay; it's very scary for them," she said.

Travel organisers and tour operators have been coordinating border transfers and airport connections for those willing to undertake long journeys. South Africans leaving Israel can also go through Jordan. This involves travelling north to the Jordan River crossing near Beit She'an, before continuing by road to Queen Alia International Airport in Amman.



President Isaac Herzog and his wife Michal at the Hadassah Medical Center, visiting those wounded in the Beit Shemesh attack
See page 3

Border processing can take between 90 minutes and two hours, after which travellers are met on the Jordanian side by a bus or driver. From there, the journey to the airport in Amman takes approximately two hours.

The total journey usually takes between five and seven hours.

The costs of going through Egypt and Jordan are considerable.

"In these extraordinary times, people are willing to go to great lengths to get themselves or their loved ones home," said Rogoff.

Another traveller caught in the disruption was Noah Greenhill, a South African who lives in Israel and was attempting to return there when the conflict erupted.

Greenhill had boarded Ethiopian Airlines flight ET414 from OR Tambo International Airport early on Saturday, 28 February.

"While we were on the runway about to take off, my kids in Israel messaged to say they were going into the *mamad* (safe room). There were sirens," he said.

With no connectivity during the flight, he was unable

to contact his family.

"It was the most anxious flight I've ever had. The nightmares of what might or could happen to my kids. I wasn't worried about me but about Israel and specifically my children being safe," he said.

When he landed in Addis Ababa and connected to Wi-Fi, his phone filled with messages and he discovered the war had broken out and flights to Tel Aviv had been cancelled.

Greenhill returned to South Africa, where he is waiting for information on when flights to Israel will resume.

Kim Kur, founder of Community Circle SA, said she has been receiving countless messages from anxious travellers seeking assistance.

One woman who travelled to Dubai to visit her husband found herself unable to return to her young children in South Africa as planned. According to Kur, the woman faced an additional challenge when her psychiatric medication began running low. "Because such prescriptions must be issued by a doctor in the

Continued on page 3>>

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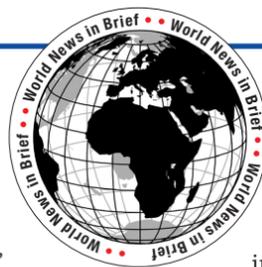
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Toronto synagogue shot at hours after Purim event

A Toronto synagogue was hit by gunfire late on Monday night, just hours after a Purim celebration was held there.

No injuries were reported in the shooting at the Reform synagogue Temple Emanu-El at around 22:49. The Purim event, billed as a "singalong shpiel" and costume contest, had run until 21:00.

Rabbi Debra Landsberg told reporters she was still inside the building when the shooting occurred, and heard the gunshots. "I'm a bit shaken up," she said. "It's devastating that there are those in this society who want to shatter what we have here."

Police didn't confirm how many shell casings were found outside the building, but the synagogue wrote on Instagram that "20 shots were fired".

"We're working closely with law enforcement and security

partners," the post read. "We remain united and resilient. Our building is damaged; our congregation is not. *Chag sameach*, everyone."

Toronto police's hate crime unit as well as the gun and gang task force are investigating the shooting;

the suspect is currently unknown.

Police have upped their presence in Toronto's Jewish neighbourhoods, as well as around houses of worship and other Jewish institutions, since the war in Iran broke out on Saturday, deputy chief Robert Johnson said.

The shooting is the latest in a string of crimes targeting Jewish institutions and residents in Toronto. A Jewish girls' elementary school was hit by gunfire three times in 2024 alone. This past December, mezuzahs were ripped from residents' doorposts in

multiple buildings, including a seniors' residence. A month before, police said a suspect had "damaged the outer glass windows" of Kehilath Shaarei Torah, a synagogue near Temple Emanu-El.

"This is the fourth time a Jewish institution has been targeted for gunfire in Toronto over the past two years, in addition to countless threats and acts of vandalism," said Adam Minsky, president of UJA Federation of Greater Toronto. "Every day, families across our community carry deep concerns for the safety of their children. But we are resilient and refuse to be intimidated. We will continue to proudly celebrate Jewish life."

Trump denies Israel drew US into war

US President Donald Trump has rejected claims that Israel pulled the United States into the war with Iran, instead suggesting that he had "forced their hands".

Trump's comments came after Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters the US entered the conflict because officials "knew that there was going to be an Israeli action" and expected to become embroiled as a result. Rubio's comments ignited questions about whether Trump was taking his cues from the Israelis.

"Based on the way the negotiation was going, I think they were going to attack first and I didn't want that to happen," Trump told reporters at the White House on Tuesday during a press conference with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz. "So, if anything, I might have forced Israel's hand, but Israel was ready and we were ready."

The president's claims appeared to contradict reports from the Pentagon to Congress on Sunday that there was no intelligence suggesting Iran planned to attack US forces first.

"If we didn't do what we're doing right now, you would have had a nuclear war and they would have taken out many countries because you know what? They're sick people," Trump told reporters. "They're mentally ill, sick people. They're angry, they're crazy, they're sick."

• All briefs supplied by JTA



POLICE INVESTIGATING OVERNIGHT SHOOTING AT A NORTH YORK SYNAGOGUE

Police did not confirm how many shell casings were found outside the building, but the synagogue wrote on Instagram that "20 shots were fired at our synagogue."

Do we believe in G-d because it works?

Torah Thought

Standing at Mount Sinai, overwhelmed by the sounds and sights just experienced, awed by the voice of G-d; we have just been freed from Egypt, carried on the wings of miracles. But now Moshe ascends the mountain, and the days stretch on. He's not back yet... The Erev Rav begins to foment anxiety - and from that anxiety emerges the Golden Calf.

When G-d spoke the Ten Commandments, He said, "I am the One who took you out of Egypt."

When the Erev Rav - the mixed multitude - proclaim their idol, they say, "This is your g-d, Israel, who brought you up from Egypt."

For G-d, the exodus was not an end in itself; it was a beginning, a prelude to the giving (and accepting) of the Torah. For the Erev Rav, freedom in and of itself was the goal. But when Torah imposed responsibility, they recoiled. Their faith was functional, not covenantal.

Do we believe in G-d because prayers are answered, promises fulfilled, miracles delivered? Or do we believe even when nothing seems to work at all?

Rabbi Kenneth Brander asks why is the order of the Torah in *parshiyot Terumah*

through *Pekudei* structured as Mishkan, Shabbat, Golden Calf, Shabbat, Mishkan? He suggests that without the integrity of sacred "relationship" moments with G-d, there is no difference between the golden structure of the Mishkan and the golden structure of the calf.

Shabbat, a sacred moment to rendezvous with G-d, serves as the buffer to separate the Mishkan from the Egel.

Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach sharpened the point. "Whoever says their religion works is simply involved in pagan worship." Paganism is about utility, using the divine to achieve results. Judaism, by contrast, is about relationship. Faith is not transactional.

Moshe prayed 515 times with all his soul to enter the Land, and G-d said no. Yet Moshe kept praying. He taught us that prayer is not about results; it is about standing before G-d, even when the answer is silence. The test of faith is not when prayers are answered, but when they are not.

One of the last things the Rishiner said before he passed away was that everyone will have to go through three hours when even G-d doesn't work and everything is falling apart, and that during those three hours it will be so hard to believe in G-d, it will literally be like walking up a wall.

How can you walk up a wall? There is nothing to hold on to. In that

Rabbi Kalman Green
Constantia Shul
Cape Town

moment, he urged, we must hold onto each other. Alone, the wall is impossible. Together, supporting and uplifting each other, we can ascend.

The Golden Calf is not just a story of ancient failure. It is a mirror held up to each of us in every generation. Do we seek a G-d who "works", or do we seek the One who simply is - whose presence sanctifies even silence?

To believe means to stand with nothing in hand, yet everything in heart; and to climb the wall - together.

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Beit Shemesh blast hits too close to home

TALI FEINBERG

Three hundred South African families living in the city of Beit Shemesh narrowly escaped death and injury when a missile sent by the Islamic Republic of Iran struck a communal shelter on Sunday, killing nine people and injuring many more.



Photographs taken when President Isaac and Michal Herzog visited the site of the Iranian missile attack in Beit Shemesh

The name Beit Shemesh translates to “house of sun”, but this city near Jerusalem became a place of darkness in the war that broke out on 28 February, when Israel and the United States targeted Iran in pre-emptive strikes aimed at ending its regime once and for all.

South African expat Cliff Giesenow says “the force and speed of impact was indescribable” as the missile landed close to where he was sheltering on the roadside as sirens wailed. Never had he imagined this would be a scenario he would face so soon after making aliya from South Africa in December. Yet, he says, he is “grateful to have made aliya and to be here at this time, as intense as it is”.

Giesenow said he and his brother-in-law were on their way back to Beit Shemesh from Modi'in when the missile closed in. “We stopped on the side of the highway, close to where it hit, because sirens had gone off. We moved away from the car as protocol dictates, and heard a very loud and earth-shaking boom.”

Being in Israel right now, “I feel much more of a sense of a collective nationhood,” says Giesenow. “My heart breaks for those who were hurt, for the families whose worlds were turned upside down, and for both of our nations [Israel and Iran] and the wasteful loss of life.”

Giesenow chose Beit Shemesh as a

“soft landing” and temporary home because his mother and sister live there, and he thought it would be a good central place to base himself. Except for when the missile hit, “I haven’t been scared [since the war started], trust the IDF [Israel Defense Forces], and I’m proud that the Lion of Zion is roaring.”

A longtime Beit Shemesh resident

and South African *oleh*, David Fenster, says, “As the missile exploded, I saw a flash of light. But was it really from the missile? I think my brain went into overload and I imagined things in an intensified way. It was my instinct, finding a way of alerting me to move, fast. I heard the blast and felt the shockwaves. It was the first time I saw a child crying in the *miklat* [communal shelter] that I go to.

“I was scared, but that emotional energy then shifted to the broader picture – about what this meant for my neighbourhood,” says Fenster. “I’ve lived in Beit Shemesh for close to 35 years. We’ve remained in the older, smaller part, where everyone pretty



much knows each other. So I thought I might know some of the victims. To quote Rav Doron Perez, father of fallen soldier Daniel Perez, ‘We are the smallest nation on earth. But we are the largest family on earth.’”

Fellow South African *oleh* and Beit Shemesh resident, Ariel Gluch, says this was brought home for him when he heard that one of the victims of the strike was the mother of a child in his daughter’s age group at elementary school. “It makes me realise how connected we all are.” He will now have to explain to his daughter that her friend’s mother is gone.

“It’s what it means to live here,” he reflects. “She is aware that this is part of the larger picture: that Israel is doing amazing things, and that we are shaping Jewish people’s future. This is not what we had 80 years ago. We are seeing miraculous success following the darkness of 7 October.”

Fenster emerged to see ambulances speeding past, sirens wailing. The missile landed about a 10-minute walk from where he lives.

Before 1 March, “hearing the booms was like a balloon burst next to you. You get a fright, but you know that there is nothing to be afraid of,” says Fenster. “But Sunday was different. As that boom resounded, I sensed ‘this is bad.’” It was at that moment that he “saw” a flash of light, his body instinctively knowing this was an emergency.

He had moved to Beit Shemesh when it was a small development town. “It has subsequently grown enormously, but a lot of that expansion is in the newer Ramat Beit Shemesh area,” he says. Living in the older part of town means one is more likely to head to a communal *miklat* than a private safe room.

“Practically, it’s far more difficult, and it’s really upsetting to see exhausted little children being brought down in their pyjamas at all hours of the night,” he says. “On the other hand, it’s nice to be together with your neighbours, giving each other support.”

Even South African *olim* living further away felt the effects of the blast. Colin Lotzof lives on Kibbutz Tzora, which sits in the valley below Beit Shemesh. It’s known as the “South African kibbutz” because it was partly founded by South African *olim* and has many South African residents.

“We felt the blast and heard

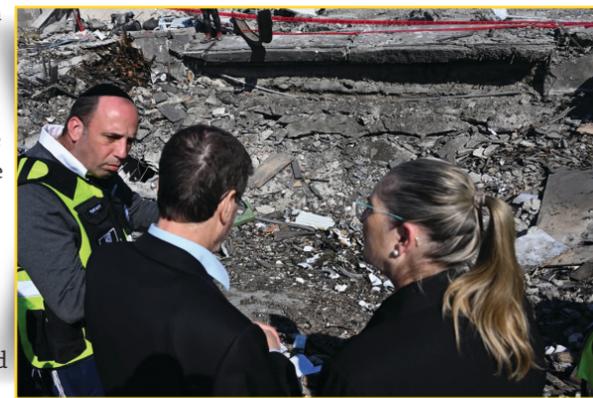
the explosion, we were sure it was very close,” says Lotzof, who was in the *mamad* (safe room) at home when the missile hit Beit Shemesh. “Most people [on Tzora] go to the community bomb shelters. We are very organised on Tzora, and the shelters are way underground.”

His attitude remains calm and resolute. “What will it help to be nervous?” he asks. “As long as we stay disciplined and go into the shelters in time, we have every reason to stay safe.”

The chief executive of Telfed, Dorron Kline, lives about a kilometre from where the blast occurred. “We heard it and felt it,” he says. “Our whole building shook. It was a very loud boom.”

He says that Iran targeted the centre of Beit Shemesh, “which is only a civilian area”, while the Israeli Air Force is hitting military targets in Iran, not attacking civilians.

Telfed supports South African and Australian *olim*, and Kline says Telfed’s staff and volunteers contacted South African and Australian families in Beit Shemesh telephonically and by email to check on them after the blast.



“The South Africans mainly live in Ramat Beit Shemesh and in the newer Sheinfeld neighbourhood, so not in the older part of Beit Shemesh where the missile struck,” he says. However, the organisation reached out to them all.

“At times like this, phrases like ‘you are not alone’ or ‘we are here for you’ can sound hollow. Yet we say it because it’s true, and because it matters,” says Kline. “We direct *olim* to organisations that provide counselling, in English, for those who are experiencing trauma. Those who require any other kind of assistance, we direct to our social workers.”

He emphasises that “although the price that we in Israel are paying in this war is very high, it’s a price we’re

paying so that future generations will be able to live in peace and tranquillity, in the State of Israel and the entire region”.

South Africans scramble for flights amid air travel chaos

>>Continued from page 1

country where they are dispensed, arrangements had to be made for her to obtain a new prescription locally,” she said.

In another case, two young South African travellers in Dubai found themselves running short of funds while waiting for flights. “Because they were staying in an Airbnb rather than a hotel, they didn’t qualify for a Dubai government programme offering extended accommodation to stranded travellers,” said Kur.

One traveller wrote to Kur. “I feel as though I am back in COVID-19, just with a higher anxiety. Do you have a contact in Dirco [Department of International Relations and Cooperation]? I’m stuck in Dubai and, as you know, I depend on my meds. I have enough for a few days, but need to get back.”

National director of the South African

Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) Wendy Kahn said the uncertainty about the duration of the war has been particularly difficult for community members.

She said that during the previous conflict between Israel and Iran there were more options available for travellers to leave Israel. “This time, in addition to Israeli airspace being closed and neighbouring countries restricting flights, land routes have also become more difficult,” she said.

The SAJBD has urged South Africans currently in Israel to follow the guidance of the Israel Home Front Command, including adhering to alerts and remaining aware of shelters.

The government has put out security and travel readiness guidance for its citizens in Israel, including numbers for consular services. The SAJBD will assist if needed.

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Nothing to celebrate as Durban debacle turns 25

STEVEN GRUZZ

It has been 25 years since the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR), held in Durban, unleashed antisemitic vitriol as the aggressive anti-Israel lobby hijacked proceedings.

As the United Nations gears up to commemorate the conference's anniversary, the Jewish world looks back on it as the event that "introduced the demonisation of Jewry and Israel through the apartheid analogy", according to South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) national director Wendy Kahn.

At that gathering, Jewish delegates were harassed and required police protection, antisemitic writing

– including grotesque Nazi-like caricatures and the notorious forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* – was distributed, and huge marches proceeded.

This hate fest normalised the delegitimisation of Israel, drove odious comparisons with apartheid South Africa, and sowed the seeds of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions campaign.

Marc Posniak a first-year student at the time, says that in a session on new forms of colonialism and imperialism, "there was wave after wave of people slamming Israel. Intimidated, I walked out. The hotel lobby had been transformed into a market of hatred. They were handing out anti-Israel T-shirts, tearing apart Israeli flags, and screaming."

Posniak then joined the World



Union of Jewish Students group. "I got attacked physically, they were going to flip the kombi we were travelling in. We handed out flowers and sang peace songs, behind a police cordon. A woman in a hijab spat at me, yelling that my flowers were drenched in the blood of Palestinian

children. It was brutal."

Joëlle Fiss is a human rights researcher and member of the Geneva Parliament in Switzerland. Her *Durban Diaries* record her experiences as chair of the European Union of Jewish Students. "The conference took place at a tense time internationally, during the Second Intifada, and just days before 9/11. In Durban, Israel was already accused of committing genocide of the Palestinian people. Many participants, for example the Arab Lawyers Union and the [anti-Zionist haredi] sect Neturei Karta, promoted that message. The narrative spread across the conference like wildfire.

"That I am still interviewed about this conference, 25 years later, shows how symbolic this event is, to understand the Jewish experience since 2001," said Fiss. "Today, we recognise many things that happened there. For example, a narrative of genocide accusing Jews of the worst crimes against humanity. Fake information disseminated to people until they believed it. Peer pressure, where participants turned against us in the name of moral integrity or fear of being isolated."

Fiss says Jews around the world instinctively knew that Durban was an important moment. "Since 7 October 2023, I have realised that Durban affected me more than I thought. Aggressive protests that don't aim to support the Palestinian people, but simply to wage hate against Israelis, bring me directly back to the conference, as if I'm in a flashback."

Yehuda Kay was the director of the SAJBD in 2001. He recalls how Jewish delegations were blocked from booking rooms, erecting information booths and barred from meetings. "It was vicious. Durban gave permission for rampant attacks against Jews. You didn't have to be polite or diplomatic anymore. It was taken for granted that Israel is a racist, apartheid state in the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) world, and therefore it is the duty of anyone who holds liberal views to speak up against it, and against Jews."

In 2001, Mary Kluk, national vice-president of the SAJBD, was a new executive member of its KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) council. "We were completely ambushed as a community, as a people. We were so unprepared, floundering. Then we had to strategise and organise," says Kluk.

Kluk says the NGO forum "was more toxic and more hateful but less significant than the main event. I remember saying at our KZN council meeting the following Monday that I had a terrible sense of foreboding. On the Tuesday, 9/11 happened. It made hate feel even more real. Durban was the genesis of the world that we're

living in today."

Veteran anti-apartheid journalist living in Israel Benjamin Pogrund was asked by Israel's ambassador to South Africa at the time to join the official Israeli delegation. "The most terrible resolutions came out of that conference. I felt I had to help in this fight. But we were betrayed by the UN on this one," said Pogrund. "They assured us that those resolutions would be wiped out or watered down by the time the major conference came, and it didn't happen." Eventually, the US and Israel walked out.

Pogrund says, "We haven't paid enough heed to what was going on in the world, to the movements burrowing away and building up strength and which exploded after 7 October."

Milton Shain, emeritus professor of historical studies at the University of Cape Town and an antisemitism expert, traced the history of this, saying that after the 1967 Six-Day War, "the foundations were laid for a 'settler colonialist' paradigm that stamped Israel as both uniquely evil and an outpost of European ['white'] colonialism. Such thinking soon informed the Soviet-driven 1975 UN Resolution 3379, which equated Zionism with racism. Although overturned in 1991, this paradigm was vividly on display in Durban. It turned into an extension of the Arab-Israeli conflict and portrayed Israel and Zionism as racist. Jewish suffering and antisemitism were effectively ignored."

Dan Diker, president of the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs, says, "Durban was the first time Israel was considered an illegitimate, genocidal, and apartheid state on the international stage. In mainstream Western discourse today, we see Israel being accused of being the same genocidal apartheid war criminal, not an actor in a territorial conflict. Anti-Zionism as collective antisemitism against the Jewish State was born in Durban."

Pogrund says the conference "was one of the UN's great failures. What has it got to celebrate? It was an enormous disappointment for South Africa because this conference on its own soil was meant to mark internationally the end of apartheid. But the anti-Israel stuff became the dominant theme."

Posniak says, "The UN is at the lowest point of its legitimacy and credibility. Unless its intention is to commemorate just how wrong they got it, it's a farce."

And Kay says, "I think it's disgusting that the UN is memorialising one of the most traumatic events for Jews and Israelis."

SA is off the starting block but still not in the race

OPINION

DAVID SHAPIRO



Five years ago, South Africa's fiscal outlook was bleak. Warning lights were flashing red: widening deficits, rising debt, and eroding confidence. In this year's Budget, the minister reminded us of that moment, and pointed to the progress since. Stabilisation is now visible. Deficits are narrowing, debt ratios are contained, and reforms are beginning to deliver tangible results. In short, South Africa is moving from a debt-heavy, consumption-orientated fiscal stance towards a more investment-led framework, with infrastructure spend at the heart of this growth strategy.

neglect has resulted in Eskom's unmanageable debt, Transnet bottlenecks, and municipal water failures, issues that will weigh on the economy for years. Crime and corruption continue to sap confidence. And while the world races ahead with artificial intelligence (AI), South Africa has no coherent strategy. This is perhaps the greatest danger. In the 21st century, competitiveness will be defined not by mineral wealth but by digital infrastructure, innovation, and the ability to harness AI. Without a plan, South Africa – and Africa – more broadly, risks falling further behind.

What is needed is clear: a national AI and

digital strategy that aligns education and skills with the demands of the future; infrastructure partnerships that invite private capital rather than rely solely on the state; decisive action against crime and corruption to restore confidence; and policies that open markets, reward

innovation, and attract global investment. Without these reforms, stabilisation will remain a pause, not a pivot.

Since the end of apartheid in 1990, South Africa's gross domestic product (GDP) has grown from about \$115 billion (R1.8 trillion) to more than \$400 billion (R6.4 trillion) in 2024 – a fourfold increase. Yet compare this with China, which grew nearly fiftyfold in the same period, or the United States, which expanded from \$6 trillion (R96.5 trillion) to \$27 trillion (R434.4 trillion). Eastern Europe, once poorer than South Africa, surged ahead after European Union (EU) accession, with Poland a star performer.

GDP per capita tells a sterner story. South Africans earned on average \$6 300 (R101 363) in 2024 compared with Americans' \$83 000 (R1.3 million), Chinese citizens' \$12 000 (R193 073), and Brazilians' \$9 000 (R144 805). The promise of democracy has not yet translated into broad prosperity.

Peers have raced ahead by embracing technology and innovation. Singapore

invested in education, broadband, and digital infrastructure, positioning itself as a hub for fintech, biotech, and AI research. South Korea backed industrial policy with research and development (R&D) subsidies, nurturing Samsung, LG, and SK Hynix into global leaders in semiconductors – the hardware backbone of AI. Israel linked military R&D with venture capital, creating one of the densest start-up ecosystems, with global exports in AI and cybersecurity. Ireland leveraged EU integration and tax incentives to attract tech giants like Google, Apple, and Meta, embedding itself in the digital economy.

South Africa had gold and diamonds, while Singapore had a port, and Korea determination. Ireland had emigration and debt, yet today it is richer than Britain. The difference lies not in resources, but in policy choices.

South Africa's Human Development Index has improved, but inequality in pay scales remains extreme. Unemployment hovers around 30%, compared with 5%-7% in most developed countries. Three in 10 South Africans remain unemployed. Inflation has been contained and reforms initiated, but decaying infrastructure has hobbled industry and eroded confidence.

South Africa's economic story cannot be told without acknowledging the drag of crime, corruption, and misguided policy. Violent crime remains among the highest in the world, corruption scandals have hollowed out institutions, while policies like black economic empowerment, intended to redress apartheid's injustices, have too often entrenched inefficiency and patronage rather than broad-based empowerment. The African National Congress's instinct to own and control everything reflects 1960s dogma in a 21st-century economy. Without opening space for private enterprise, innovation, and global capital, stabilisation will remain a holding pattern rather than a springboard.

South Africa's democratic miracle remains intact, and fiscal stabilisation is a welcome step. But the economic miracle will arrive only when growth is unlocked – through jobs, openness, and a strategy that embraces the future. That means building for an AI economy, investing in digital infrastructure, and creating policies that reward innovation rather than control. Without this, stabilisation will buy time, but the future will belong to others.

• David Shapiro is a veteran stockbroker and market commentator.



Minister of Finance Enoch Godongwana delivering the latest Budget Speech

The Johannesburg Stock Exchange has also shown strong performance, easily beating that of the S&P500, a gauge of the US market. With international inflation still above target and global budget deficits widening, investors are turning to metals that "central banks cannot print" as a hedge. Gold and platinum shares led the rally, but a weaker dollar also supported gains in large cap international stocks. Lower interest rates, bond inflows, softer inflation, a stronger rand, and a rating upgrade stirred banks and the property sector. Yet these gains have not filtered through to the majority of local stocks. Consumer and manufacturing companies still complain of householders under pressure, high unemployment, rising costs, and structural impediments.

We are entering a period of stabilisation, and that is a positive. But stabilisation is not growth. Projected growth of around 1%-1.5% a year is far too low to absorb the unemployed, reduce inequality, or keep South Africa globally competitive.

Repairing 36 years of administrative

Sirens, shelters, and separation: South African *olim* endure Israel's war with Iran

CLAUDIA GROSS

For South African *olim*, the war has been experienced not through headlines, but in reinforced rooms, hurried phone calls, and interrupted routines. In one central Israeli apartment block, amid the sound of interceptions overhead, a one-year-old boy took his first steps on the concrete floor of a bomb shelter.

His parents, both South African-born, had rushed downstairs with neighbours when the first alert sounded on Saturday. Like many families in older buildings without in-unit reinforced rooms, they gathered in the communal shelter. As the adults checked news updates and counted the seconds between booms, their son steadied himself against a plastic chair and let go. In the middle of an air-raid alert, he walked for the first time.

"It wasn't how we'd imagined it," his mother said later. "But in that moment, everyone in the shelter clapped." The juxtaposition of milestone and missile captures the surreal rhythm of the past few days for many South Africans in Israel.

In Tel Aviv, Carol*, a Johannesburg-born mother of three who has lived in Israel for several years, spent most of Saturday in the *mamad* (safe room) of her apartment with her youngest daughter. Her husband is in South Africa on business and unable to return because of flight cancellations.



In Rishon LeZion, another South African *oleh*, Jonathan*, described hours of repeated alerts in his neighbourhood of Ramat Eliyahu. "From 08:00 to 14:00, from 15:30 all the way to 03:00 we were pretty much in and out of the shelters," he said. Sirens were going off "two to three times every hour".

The only pause came mid-afternoon. "The only time we got to really just sit and relax for a bit and gather supplies, cook food, take a shower was about one and a half hours in the afternoon and then they started up again."

Jonathan has since relocated north to stay with friends in Haifa, where the frequency of sirens has been lower. "There's less stress on that side, just in terms of the frequency of sirens," he said.

For Gavin*,

who made aliya from South Africa in the 1980s and lives in Netanya, the current conflict revives memories of earlier wars in which he served in the Israel Defense Forces. Now, his concern is his wife, Rolene*, who has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, a progressive neurodegenerative disease that has left her wheelchair-bound and dependent on constant care.

Although their building has a shelter, each alert brings anxiety. Rolene fears she will not be able to reach the shelter in time, and the stress aggravates her condition. Neighbours assist where they can, and Gavin remains by her side during every siren.

The urgency of moving to safety is a shared concern, particularly for families without reinforced rooms inside their apartments. Carol says her family is fortunate to have a *mamad*. In earlier conflicts, they sheltered in a stairwell. "This is definitely a lot more civilised, less scary," she said. Still, the psychological strain is evident. "You do come here for freedom and you're cooped inside a bomb shelter for hours on end," she said.

For many South African *olim*, the comparison with life back home is complex. Carol said that while South Africa has its own security challenges, the nature of the threat feels different. "It's a very different sense," she said, contrasting crime-related insecurity with missile attacks. Yet amid the fear and fatigue, life continues. Babies

programme, its feverish pursuit of severely dangerous ballistic missiles capable of mass destruction, and its relentless state sponsorship of terrorism".

Referring to Iran's regional alliances, Pantanowitz described what he called a "decades-long campaign of aggression" through the funding and arming of proxy groups targeting Israel. He said the threat had become "intolerable and unacceptable" and could no longer be contained "through patience or diplomacy alone".

"Israel has no choice but to act decisively to safeguard her people, secure her survival, and defend the free world from this fanatical regime's genocidal ambitions," Pantanowitz said, adding that the SAZF "fully and unreservedly supports these necessary measures to end Iran's nuclear ambitions, ballistic terror arsenal, and

sponsorship of murderous proxies once and for all".

On the ground, however, the war is measured less in strategic objectives than in the number of times a family must move to safety in a single night. For the parents who watched their son take his first steps on a shelter floor, the memory will always be tied to sirens. "We didn't choose the timing," his mother said. "But we'll remember that even there, in the shelter, life carries on."

*Sources have asked to remain anonymous for security reasons.



"We spent pretty much the whole day on Saturday in the *mamad*, just not knowing really what the coming days would bring," she said. Her middle daughter had been at a friend for Shabbat when the alerts began. "I did say to her, though, if something did happen that she must contact me and break Shabbat, which she did do."

Tel Aviv, particularly its northern neighbourhoods, has been among the areas targeted. Although Carol and her family have not been physically harmed, the noise has been constant. "There have been a lot of interceptions, a lot of noises, a lot of booms, bangs, the windows shake," she said. "My daughter's friend's apartment building, which is in Tel Aviv, got struck and his home is destroyed. But thank goodness we are all intact."

Daily life has narrowed to essentials. Schools have closed and Purim celebrations were cancelled. Carol's eldest daughter is in her final year of school. "All the Purim celebrations have been cancelled, which was quite devastating because under all these circumstances you really look forward to the small celebrations," she said.

The uncertainty stretches beyond Israel's borders. With airspace periodically closed, families are separated. Some South Africans have attempted complex routes through other countries to return home. Carol said her husband has decided to remain in South Africa until more direct flights resume. "He's just going to stay put until the sky starts opening," she said.

learn to walk. Teenagers revise for exams between alerts. Neighbours share snacks and updates in underground rooms.

The South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) has publicly aligned itself with Israel's military response. In a statement shared with the *SA Jewish Report*, national chairperson Craig Pantanowitz said the organisation "unequivocally affirms Israel's sacred and inalienable right to self-defence against existential threats".

Pantanowitz said the SAZF stands "resolutely with Israel in its decisive actions to dismantle Iran's illicit nuclear

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South African Jewish Report

The true human rights abuser

There is something surreal about Israel being under attack and seeing visuals of the horrific destruction in the Jewish State, knowing it is our people being bombarded by the Iranian regime.

My family and friends are in and out of their safe rooms and shelters. Every time I know the sirens are going off, I go cold with fear, frustrated at being helpless and so far away.

Yet here in South Africa, life goes on seemingly as usual. And to get a sense of what's happening, you need to keep in contact with loved ones in Israel or stay close to the news on your devices or television screens.

The only problem with the latter is that you get two very different, generally divergent, pictures, depending on what you follow. For example, when Hezbollah joined the war from Lebanon and began firing missiles into Israel, most media houses blamed Israel for firing first, which was blatantly untrue. I guess the narrative fits better if Israel is once again seen as the evil aggressor.

It has seemed so easy for many in the world to join the South African government in lambasting Israel for committing so-called "genocide" against Palestinians or Gazans. However, doesn't anyone think it strange that this accusation first emerged within days of the Israel Defense Forces going into Gaza? More than that, it isn't the first time Israel has been accused of "genocide". In fact, this accusation, much like Israel being called an apartheid state, has been thrown about by our haters and their supporters for many years. In the case of the "apartheid state" label, it's been 25 years – since the United Nations racism conference in Durban (see page 4).

So, considering the war in Gaza, it is true thousands of Gazans – including children – did get killed in the crossfire. This was made easier by Hamas, which purposely dug its underground tunnels under schools, hospitals, and places where ordinary people congregate. Hamas uses people as cannon fodder to achieve its aim of getting the world to hate Israel and Jews as much as it does. As many as 60 000 people, including at least 17 000 Hamas operatives, were killed in the war with Hamas.

And the point is that people believe they can take a moral stand when civilians get killed in a war. Okay, so let's move on to the war right now against Iran. Here, it seems people feel they can again take a moral stand against Israel, but I don't get why.

Yes, many believe US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu broke international laws by starting this war. That isn't a moral issue, but political.

However, in terms of morality, Israel and the US have taken on a megalomaniacal regime that for 36 long years was under the rule of recently assassinated Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Before becoming Iran's supreme leader, he had been president of the country for eight years. His rule included severe violations of international human rights law, and some amounting to crimes against humanity.

Under Khamenei, any dissent or public protest was outlawed. Tens of thousands of civilians have been arbitrarily detained. There's no freedom of expression or association. Women and girls, LGBTQI people, and ethnic and religious minorities have faced inhumane treatment, with an intense crackdown on women who don't abide fully by veiling laws.

So, where are the people who took a moral standpoint against Israel over Gaza? Why are they not fighting for the innocent lives taken by the Iranian regime? In just 48 hours from 8 January, the Iranian regime murdered more than 30 000 Iranian civilians on the streets. Around 220 000 civilians were detained without trial. They are in detention centres around Iran, and their families are prevented from knowing where they are. Their crimes are wanting their human rights to be respected and for a new government to come in.

As Dr Iraj Abedian, the Iranian-born former chief Standard Bank economist and former professor of Economics at the University of Cape Town, makes clear, the crimes the Iranian regime has committed, and will continue to commit if allowed, are truly crimes against humanity.

However, as we sit, the South African government has yet to condemn what the Iranian regime has done. Instead, in an interview this week with Zane Dangor, the department of international relations and cooperation director general, he spoke of South Africa wanting an independent investigation into the protests because there was a report that protesters may have had weapons. Sure!

So much for being so committed to human rights that our government took Israel to the International Court of Justice for "genocide" in December 2023 and has still not let up on that.

You would imagine that if our government and its followers are so clear on right and wrong that they would be fighting tooth and nail to protect and help innocent Iranians. Only, they haven't even attempted to help them.

Instead, all over South Africa this week there were memorial services for the Iranian supreme leader, Khamenei, who was killed when Israel and the US took on the Islamic regime in Iran. Apparently, many tears are being shed for the loss of this man who held his own people hostage and who saw Iran's resources as bounty to use to promote ideology.

So many of these same people condemned Israel and Jews for "genocide".

As for our government, it is running out of time to recognise the truth about the Iranian regime that it has aligned itself with. As Abedian says, "Silence is complicity in a massacre."

Those who denigrate Israel for human rights abuses should seriously consider their commitment to the Iranian regime rather than the Iranian people. Let's not so easily champion this devastating regime.

May our loved ones, friends, and family in Israel be safe and the war come to a peaceful end soon.

Shabbat Shalom!

Peta Krost
Editor



Heat of the war is far-reaching

OPINION

PAULA SLIER



For years the confrontation between Iran and Israel played out in the shadows. Drones over Syria. Cyberattacks no-one claimed. Proxies doing the dirty work.

That era is over.

The direct targeting of Iranian leadership, culminating in the killing of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has detonated whatever fragile equilibrium remained in the Middle East. What was once a "ring of fire" encircling Israel, through Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, has collapsed inwards. The furnace is now central. Tehran and Jerusalem are no longer sparring through intermediaries; they are striking directly. And the missiles hitting Gulf hubs like Dubai and Doha signal something even more destabilising: the war has gone regional, in the most literal sense.

For decades Iran perfected the art of plausible deniability. Hezbollah would fire, Hamas would strike, militias in Syria or Iraq would harass. Tehran could deny, deflect, and retreat into diplomatic ambiguity. That strategy has imploded. Direct confrontation changes the calculus not only for Israel and Iran, but for the Gulf states who quietly hoped the fire would remain contained.

The Gulf now finds itself in a brutal dilemma. Some of its leadership may not mourn the clipping of Iran's wings; the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has long cast a shadow over regional stability. But when missiles land near civilian airports and luxury hotels, geopolitical chess becomes domestic crisis management.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at a site of one of the Iranian missile hits

The Abraham Accords, once heralded as the region's new architecture, are under their sternest stress test. Although built as a collective deterrent against Iran, they were often framed publicly in terms of "regional stability" and "modernisation". But behind them there was a significant divergence in strategic priorities between Israel and the Gulf monarchies. While Jerusalem pursued a more aggressive military posture, the Gulf states have historically prioritised regional stability and even sought de-escalation with Tehran to protect their infrastructure.

The current strikes, however, have "vaporised" the possibility of maintaining a neutral middle ground, forcing the Gulf states into involuntary defensive alignment. This shift, combined with high levels of domestic public opposition to normalisation, threatens to turn what was once seen as a strategic security asset into a major national liability. Security cooperation with Israel may quietly deepen.

And then there is energy.

With restricted passage through the Strait of Hormuz, oil markets have responded predictably. Prices have spiked, insurance premiums have soared, and shipping routes have shifted. For South Africa, already limping under economic fragility, this is not an abstract Middle Eastern drama. Higher fuel prices translate into food inflation, transport costs, and social tension. Inevitably, resentment will search for a narrative.

Which brings us home.

Pretoria's swift condemnation of Israel's "pre-emptive" strikes as illegal was predictable. The African National Congress's historical affinity with Tehran, and its posture as a leader of the Global South against what it terms Western imperialism, have long shaped its foreign policy. In the language of sovereignty and anti-colonial solidarity, South Africa positions itself as morally consistent.

But consistency can look selective.

When leaders in Tehran suppress their own people, as we saw during protests earlier this year, the language from Pretoria softens. When the same regime funds armed proxies that openly call for Israel's destruction, nuance evaporates. The South African government speaks fluently about sovereignty abroad, yet seems less inclined to interrogate what sovereignty means for citizens living under clerical authoritarianism.

As the Department of International Relations and Cooperation urges South Africans in Israel to evacuate, the South African Jewish community again faces a narrative that suggests our support for Israel is at odds with South African national interests. Yet one can argue, quite reasonably, that preventing a nuclear-armed rogue state in the Middle East aligns with global security, and therefore South Africa's interests too. Regional stability is not a parochial Jewish concern; it is an economic and geopolitical necessity.

Current events, and history, teach us something

else. Middle Eastern wars do not remain geographically confined in their social consequences. They reverberate. We've seen how conflicts abroad, most notably the recent war with Hamas, correlate with spikes in antisemitic incidents globally. The attack at Bondi Beach was a chilling reminder that narratives cross borders faster than missiles.

And yet, amid the noise, there's a strategic question we're not asking loudly enough: what does the "day after" look like?

If regime change becomes a reality, if the leadership that has exported instability across the region is replaced, what possibilities emerge? Could a post-Khamenei Iran recalibrate its posture? Could a Middle

East less entangled in IRGC influence open trade corridors, stabilise energy markets, and reduce proxy warfare? For South Africa, which trades across continents and depends on maritime routes, that outcome wouldn't be ideological; it would be practical.

Instead, our government clings to "strategic non-alignment", a phrase that increasingly reads as alignment with autocracies so long as they share anti-Western rhetoric. Non-alignment, in its truest sense, demands moral clarity applied evenly, not selectively.

As South African Jews, we live at the intersection of two homes. Pretoria looks at the map and sees imperial overreach. We look at the map and see existential threat. Those perspectives don't have to cancel each other out. But they do require honesty.

The task before us isn't simply to defend Israel reflexively. Nor is it to abandon critical thought. It is to remind our fellow South Africans that a world in which Tehran's proxies are silenced, in which energy routes are secure and in which authoritarian regimes are held accountable, is a safer world for everyone, from Tel Aviv to Johannesburg.

We cannot pretend this war is distant. The flames may burn thousands of kilometres away, but the heat is already here.

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

The Hague Group gets tough on Israel and its supporters

CLAUDIA GROSS

An “emergency” meeting of The Hague Group, an anti-Israel coalition of states led partially by South Africa, that convened on Wednesday, 4 March, made an official statement that it aims to ensure that there will be “no safe haven” for “perpetrators of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and the crime of aggression.”

The statement made it clear that this only applies to Israel. It said that The Hague Group aims to implement “a disclosure requirement [in Hague Group countries] regarding service in the Israeli military, subjecting travellers with Israeli travel documents or arriving from an origin of Tel Aviv Airport to potential secondary screening at ports of entry.”

The statement said that this would be “under domestic war-crimes inadmissibility rules, or adjusted visa policies, in compliance with the obligation to ensure accountability for the most serious crimes under international law through robust, impartial, and independent investigations and prosecutions at national or international levels, and ensure justice for all victims and the prevention of future crimes.” The Hague Group is led by the governments of Belize, Colombia, Cuba, Malaysia, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa. Forty states took part in the meeting on 4 March, but it is unclear if all will adopt anti-Israel measures. Bolivia and Honduras withdrew from the group on 4 March.

The statement was signed by representatives from South Africa and Colombia – the co-chairs of The Hague Group. It was released by South Africa’s Department of International Relations and Cooperation late on 4 March, the day of the emergency meeting.

The statement also said Hague Group members would “refuse to recognise settlements as legally valid, and prohibit the import of settlement goods and prevent domestic companies from operating in settlements,” and “prevent the transfer, transit, or carriage of arms, munitions, military fuel, and dual-use items to Israel.”

They would also conduct “urgent reviews of public procurement and contracts to ensure that no public institution or public funds sustain Israel’s unlawful occupation”.

Analysts and Jewish organisations are also questioning the timing and relevance of the “emergency” meeting.

The Hague Group describes itself as a forum for governments seeking to coordinate state action in response to Israel’s policies in the Palestinian territories.

Their reason for this urgent meeting in The Hague, just three days into a war between the United States-Israel and Iran, was to coordinate international action against Israel over the war in Gaza and the status of the Palestinian territories.

Critics say the meeting appears clearly detached from developments on the ground and reflects South Africa’s long-standing campaign against Israel, rather than a meaningful diplomatic intervention.

A political analyst and professor at the University of Cambridge, Glen Segell questioned why the group was convening an emergency session at a moment when separate international efforts are focused on stabilising Gaza and advancing a possible peace framework. “What are they on? There is only one stumbling block to moving forward on Trump’s 20-point peace for Gaza,” Segell said.

“Washington is expected to issue a 60-day ultimatum for Hamas to disarm and fully demilitarise Gaza. Billions of dollars of aid have been pledged, and an international force is about to be deployed.”

Other analysts say the initiative reflects a broader pattern in South African foreign policy.

“If there is one issue that South Africa’s foreign affairs bureaucracy is consistent on, and in its own frame of reference principled on, it is Israel and Palestine,” said Terence Corrigan of the Institute of Race Relations. “I don’t think I’m suggesting anything too controversial when I say that South Africa has identified Israel as an enemy, and one towards which it harbours unique

enmity. The Hague Group is a mechanism through which it hopes to prosecute this agenda along with like-minded states.”

Corrigan said the initiative appears aimed at keeping international condemnation focused on Israel at a time when geopolitical dynamics in the region are shifting. “My sense is that The Hague Group is trying to refocus condemnation on Israel at this time. Call this an attempt to prevent Israel from being seen as anything other than the irredeemable oppressor of the Palestinians,” he said.

South African Jewish organisations have also criticised

just when it suits ANC geopolitics.”

In announcing the meeting, the group said it would focus on implementing legal obligations identified in the International Court of Justice’s advisory opinion of July 2024 concerning Israel’s presence in the occupied Palestinian territories.

Varsha Gandikota-Nellutla, executive secretary of The Hague Group, said the meeting aims to translate legal rulings into concrete action. “The focus of the 4 March 2026 meeting is simple: How do we give international law teeth?” she said. South Africa’s minister

of international relations and cooperation, Ronald Lamola, who is co-chairing the initiative, said the meeting reflects a broader effort to ensure international law is applied consistently.

“The application of international law can no longer be selective: punitive for some and totally disregarded by others,” Lamola said.

Some analysts say the initiative also raises broader questions about South Africa’s foreign policy priorities. Political analyst Frans Cronje told the SA Jewish Report that countries generally structure foreign policy around economic and strategic interests.

“South Africa is of course free to pursue whatever foreign policy it wishes. It’s a democracy and if people object to the policies of the government they are able to set that right via elections,” Cronje said. “The question is therefore whether South Africa’s foreign policy is prudent and in the interests of not just the country but the state.”

Cronje argued that foreign policy institutions are typically directed toward expanding trade and investment relationships. “A prudent policy would see South Africa strike vast new trade and investment deals with the United States, Europe, India, and China. That is what the foreign policy infrastructure of the country should be directed at, the ruthless pursuit of national interest. It is hard to see how its present foreign policy comes close to qualifying as that.”



The Hague Group

Photo: The Hague Group website

the government’s role in convening the meeting. Rolene Marks, national spokesperson for the South African Zionist Federation, said the country’s claims to be acting in defence of international law ring hollow when compared with its responses to other global crises.

“South Africa’s role in convening this Hague meeting would carry far more weight if its application of international law were not so blatantly selective and hypocritical,” Marks said. She pointed to South Africa’s response to the Iranian government’s crackdown on protests earlier this year.

“You cannot pose as champions of human rights while staying silent, or worse, when the perpetrator is a BRICS ally,” she said. “Civilian lives are sacred everywhere, not

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From the eye of the storm

OPINION

ROLENE MARKS



I knew something was up on Saturday morning. It wasn't the warnings from US Ambassador Mike Huckabee for non-essential staff to fly out of Israel while they still could, or the US military parked on Iran's doorstep. It was that familiar low roar. The sound made only by fighter jets. Racing to my balcony, I saw the magnificent flying beasts, the air alive, crackling with the roar of engines, and I knew. Within a short while that other sound we are now too familiar with. The blare of air-raid sirens, coupled with the squawking messages telling us to get to shelter. Israel had launched a pre-emptive strike on the Iranian regime. Operation Roaring Lion had begun in tandem with our US allies. The US has called its operation Epic Fury. Furious it has been.

Israelis were ready for it. For weeks we have been anticipating this – now it is here, with all the stresses and travails that come with living in a war situation.

On Saturday, I lost count of how many sirens we had. Israelis decamped to shelters, stoic and resilient, but always with that slight fear that we are not 100% protected. At the time of writing this, 10 have died as a result of direct strikes and one from a medical incident in a shelter. Hundreds have been wounded.

We knew we would bear the brunt of Iranian aggression and while Gulf states are also enduring attack after attack, we know that we are in the eye of the storm.

We know that for our brothers and sisters in Iran, who have shown the world what it means to stand up bravely to tyranny, this is our part in the fight for their freedom.

Israel is now on an emergency war footing and this means that gatherings, educational activities, and workplace operations are prohibited, with the exception of essential sectors.

The routine is the same. From the minute we get that ominous early warning drone that missiles are headed in our direction with the intent to kill as many of us as possible, to the booms, we know exactly what to do. Make sure all family members, including pets, are in the shelter, wherever it may be. Not all Israelis have shelters as part of their homes – many have to go to communal shelters. Keep everyone calm – the booms can be really frightening for many, especially children. Try and keep busy – and make sure whenever you can to do a loo dash or fuel up on coffee.

Israelis are living our lives in increments, in between warnings of incoming missiles. We know it must be done so are drawing on our secret sauce – our indomitable spirit. It is at times like this that we suspend all that divides us, to stand behind our government and the

Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The time for *kibitzing* will come later.

Something has fundamentally changed in the Israeli DNA in the past two and a half years. The atrocities of 7 October were a devastating blow. We have internalised the lesson and live with the pain, but we have also rediscovered how much we revere life, freedom, and our values. We have developed a strength and resolve of steel to win. We are fighting for our survival and that entails removing the regime that has sworn itself to our extermination. If you thought we were a tough people before, we are now even tougher. That is not to say we don't feel grief and trauma. We do, which is why we will fight like hell to prevent that happening again to us, and to the noble Iranian people who have stood with us in our darkest hours. It is our time to fight for them.

While writing this, we have had three sirens in Modi'in. This is something that you never get used to, no matter how many times it happens.

For now we will follow the safety guidelines, we will do whatever it takes to weather the storm. We are indebted to the service men and women of the IDF, Israeli Air Force, US, Home Front Command, Israel Police, and first responders. The storm will pass. The region will look different. The only question that will remain is will this be the end of storms?

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



In a bomb shelter

Joburg city kids get a direct line to space

LEE TANKLE

While the International Space Station was over the United States last week, pupils at CityKidz, a school in the inner city of Johannesburg, were able to ask astronaut Chris Williams their most burning questions.

CityKidz – a primary school started as a housing project and whose academic performance has since surpassed many top private schools – was the only school in Africa that took part in this exciting experience.

"There was the link-up, and then each kid had a chance to come up and ask a question of the astronaut, and then the astronaut would reply and explain it to them", said one of the founders of CityKidz, Renney Plit.

He explained that this experience brought tears to his eyes as the pupils asked such genuine and innocent questions. They would go up to the microphone and ask their questions and get their answers from the astronaut. For example, one girl called Dudu asked what happens when Williams cries in space. The astronaut explained that when he cries, his tears stay on the eye, but because of zero gravity, they will shake off when he shakes his head.

"Another child, Tshepo, asked how astronauts exercise while in space, and the astronaut explained that they use rubber bands because of zero gravity," said Plit.

"When you think about it, CityKidz was the only school in the whole of Africa that was selected to speak to these astronauts in space. And watching all the other kids sitting there in awe, that kind of thing is spectacular," he said.

CityKidz was started by Plit and his brother Wayne through their former company AFHCO, after they started developing the inner city of Johannesburg due to the rapid influx and the growing need for affordable housing in 1996.

In 2007, AFHCO was offered the opportunity to purchase a building on Mooi Street in Johannesburg to turn into an apartment block. Originally constructed in the 1920s as an Indian school under the apartheid-era system, the property was modest but full of potential. The company decided to turn this old school in Mooi Street not into apartments, but rather a not-for-profit school for disadvantaged children living in buildings owned by AFHCO. At the time, it consisted of just nine classrooms, a small hall, a tiny administration block, and two toilets – a far cry from what it would eventually become, a space with 35 state-of-the-art classrooms.

"We decided to try to address the lack of educational facilities in the inner city for disadvantaged children. So basically at that point, the private sector, ourselves leading the way, had developed maybe 40 000 new housing units in the inner city," Plit said. "If you take 40 000 housing units, you put one child in each apartment; some have no children, some have three children, which means you've got 40 000 new kids in the inner city. Which means you need 40 new schools. Then you say how many schools the department or educational government has established in the city to date, zero? So they haven't addressed the change in the demographics of the inner city at all. They haven't adjusted, or they haven't done anything about it." CityKidz opened in 2008 with only 85 pupils, and has grown into one of the top primary schools in Johannesburg, with more than 900 pupils walking through the doors of its Early Childhood Development (Grade

RR) and pre-primary and primary school (Grades 0-7), with a high school planned to open next year.

"It's the absolute centre of excellence in the inter-school competitions," said Plit. "In all the inter-school competitions, we are typically coming first or in the top three, and we'd include beating the likes of King David, St David's Marist Inanda, St John's, Redham, and Curro. We beat all these very expensive private schools in our academic achievements."

CityKidz pupils have consistently distinguished themselves in maths, science, literacy, and general knowledge competitions at district, provincial, and national levels. The school has placed third in the ANA external maths assessment, won the Mathematics Cluster Challenge, achieved top-three provincial results in the Gauteng Science Olympiad, and produced national top achievers in the SAASTA Science Olympiad. More recently, its pupils secured consecutive third-place finishes in the Matific Olympiad across southern Africa.

In literacy, CityKidz pupils have excelled in the Wits Spelling Bee and Gauteng South District competitions, earning finalist positions and multiple wins. The school's strength extends to general knowledge and academic Olympiads, with first and second-place finishes in inter-school quizzes, provincial recognition in the Astro Quiz, top district placements in the Technology Olympiad and Life Skills competition, and platinum and diamond results in the Conquesta Olympiad.

One of the major successes of CityKidz has been its extremely low school fees. Parents pay only R1 500 per month, which covers not only the school fees but all their stationery, textbooks, and any outings they may go on.

"In addition, we receive a government subsidy of about R500 per pupil. When we sold AFHCO to the listed property fund SA Corporate, it continued as a major financial supporter of the school, particularly assisting with capital projects and expansion. A great deal of credit for our growth goes to its sustained backing," Plit said.

"We keep classes to about 28 pupils and operate a dedicated bursary fund. A small portion of the monthly school fees, not the government subsidy, is set aside in a separate account to assist families who cannot afford the full amount. This allows us to offer partial and full bursaries, especially in cases of hardship or sudden tragedy. The R1 500 fee is comprehensive, covering textbooks, stationery, and annual school trips, so aside from uniforms, there are no additional costs to parents."

He said that school fees are intentionally kept this low because "we established the school specifically to address the need for decent, well-disciplined education in a nurturing environment for inner-city children. That's what the whole school was set up for. Trying to keep the fees as low as we possibly can is fundamental," said Plit.

He said that there are several children who come to school from Soweto every day because of the level of education. "The school is there to address poor pupils coming out of the inner city. Having said that, we're not selective in who we take. About 20% of our kids are being taxed every day from Soweto by their parents," said Plit. "So parents spend probably R1 200 or R1 500 a month to send the kids all the way to town every day. And it's because every parent wants their kids to be well-educated and in a good environment. It doesn't matter what race or what colour you are."

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Brotman visits the remains of a diverse world Jewry

LEE TANKLE

The more that avid traveller and global citizen Dan Brotman visits Jewish communities off the beaten path, the more he feels connected to his Jewish identity.

"As I started to see Jewish communities in other countries, I said, 'Wow, these people look different and sound different, but my story is part of their story and vice versa,'" said Brotman in conversation with ChaiFM radio host Simon Anstey on Sunday 1 March at the Rabbi Cyril Harris Community Centre at the Great Park Shul in Johannesburg.

"And it just wasn't part of my Jewish education. So for me, the more I see Jewish communities in other countries, the more I learn about my own Jewish identity," he said.

Brotman grew up in a typical, assimilated American Jewish home, but after experiencing bullying in suburban Boston, he was eager to leave. As a child, he was captivated by books about the Rainbow Nation and Nelson Mandela, so in 2001, while in Grade 7, he persuaded his father to take him and his brother to Cape Town. During a visit to Herzlia, the principal jokingly said he would be welcome to attend the school. Brotman didn't take it as a joke; he saw it as his way out.

Brotman then moved to Cape Town and lived in South Africa. While in the country, he saw the beauty of the Jewish community and wanted to expand his horizons and see more Jewish communities around the globe.

He said that what keeps him interested in seeing and documenting different Jewish communities is that much of the diversity of Jews around the world has been lost, as 85% of Jews in the world live in only two places.

"Linguistically, the Jewish world is essentially becoming only a Hebrew- and English-speaking community. A lot of traditions, like biblically old traditions from these communities, are getting watered down because when people emigrate to other countries, the language gets lost and the traditions get mixed up," he said.



Dan Brotman in conversation with Simon Anstey

When Brotman got his South African passport after naturalising in 2018, he wanted to go somewhere that he couldn't have travelled with his American and Israeli passports. Iran was the first place on his list.

"I found myself in Esfahan, Iran on a Friday night and when I heard that there was a shul there, I knew I had to go. My guide and I stopped a young boy in the street and asked where the synagogue was. Miraculously, he said he was on his way there, and we went," he said. "It was the first time I'd ever had to take off my shoes before entering a synagogue as they'd adopted local customs, with beautiful Persian carpets. The women sat upstairs with their hair covered; the men sat downstairs. The community was terrified to speak to me. They didn't know who I was, and Jews in Iran live under heavy government surveillance."

Halfway through the service, one man gathered the courage to sit beside him. "He spoke English, and for the first time, I could ask direct questions about what it's like to be Jewish in Iran today." The man told Brotman that almost everyone in the synagogue had secretly visited Israel, but when the government discovers such visits, it imposes collective punishment on the community; what that means, Brotman doesn't know.

What Brotman found fascinating about Jews in Iran is that one would think

that there was no way that Jewish life could continue in this environment, as Jews aren't allowed to practise openly and aren't allowed to own businesses, yet the shul was full. He explained that the Jews in Iran are always aware that they are being watched and are constantly having to show allegiance to the regime. Similarly, they aren't allowed to acknowledge the existence of Israel.

However, for other Jewish communities, it's not as black and white. For the six Jews left in Syria, there seems to be an openness to Israel and Judaism, particularly since the collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime between 27 November and 8 December 2024.

"The government in Syria very much wants international recognition, and their treatment of Jews is a way to signal that they're ready to join the West. So they've set up a special liaison for Jewish affairs within the foreign ministry. And they're in the process of returning Jewish property to Syrians who left in 1992. It isn't finalised, but it's an ongoing discussion. They've also been welcoming back groups of former Jewish Syrians to Damascus. They're opening up synagogues and sites that really haven't been touched since 1992. They're basically saying that they welcome any Syrian Jew back into the country," he said.

Similarly, he's seen communities that were once thought to be dead and dying are now being reinvigorated. In Slovenia, the Jewish population had dwindled to about 100 people, but since 7 October, hundreds of Russian-speaking Jews from Israel have moved there, helping to breathe new life into a once-fragile community.

"My big mantra is that we're not living at the end of history. Israel and the US aren't it. It's not the end. History is dynamic. We don't know what's going to happen in the world. We're not at our final destination," he said. "Some people write off South African Jewry. It's going to continue shrinking, and you don't know what's going to happen. We don't know what's going to happen in the world. You could have World War III, and people want to get out of the Middle East and Europe. You don't know what's going to happen in the US, and maybe people want to live in very far away destinations, and this is very far away."

Declined medical benefits under scrutiny in new book

CLAUDIA GROSS

Johannesburg medical orthotist and prosthetist Roger Wolfson claims medical aid members aren't always getting the Prescribed Minimum Benefits (PMBs) the schemes are required to give them by law.

So strong are his views, he has written a book about it, *The PMB Coach*, published as an eBook at the end of 2025.

"Ninety percent of patients don't know they are due PMBs," says Wolfson. "Medical aids don't necessarily tell them, and so the law is effectively hidden. Patients often discover PMBs only after serious financial loss, usually through word of mouth or crisis."

Medical aids dispute Wolfson's claim.

PMBs are a feature of medical aids that cover the costs related to the diagnosis, treatment, and care of emergency care conditions, a list of 271 medical conditions, and 26 chronic conditions, according to the Council for Medical Schemes. They are intended to ensure that members have cover for life-threatening emergencies and certain chronic illnesses, regardless of their benefit option.

When deciding whether it is a PMB, the doctor is meant to look at the symptoms and no other factor, such as how the injury or condition was contracted, according to the council.

"My book explains PMBs in plain language," Wolfson says, "and gives patients practical tools: call-centre scripts, so agents can't deflect; appeal and complaint templates to the medical aid; then the Council for Medical Schemes; and finally escalation to the Parliamentary Health Portfolio Committee. It is about empowering patients to enforce a law that already exists."

Wolfson says it is one of the most contested areas of private healthcare. He draws on decades of clinical practice to argue that patients are frequently left with unexpected bills for treatment that should be covered. His interest in the subject grew out of repeated funding disputes involving orthotic devices, post-operative care, and rehabilitation.

His argument is that many members don't know when their condition qualifies for these benefits and therefore don't challenge funding decisions. "The patient signs the forms and is liable, so the patient needs the tools to deal with the system," he says.

His book is structured as a practical manual that explains how to check diagnostic codes; confirm whether a condition qualifies as a PMB; and follow formal dispute processes when claims are rejected or paid from savings.

Wolfson believes funding disputes arise most often on lower-cost hospital plans, where members assume

that hospitalisation automatically means full cover. In his experience, the initial procedure is often paid for, but related treatment such as follow-up consultations, rehabilitation, or assistive devices are contested.

He says this additional care forms part of the original treatment episode and should therefore be funded. He also argues that authorisation processes place the burden on patients and their families at a time when they are least equipped to manage it. "Often the member is in hospital and someone else has to deal with the administration. That person needs to know what to

ask and what to check," he says.

The *SA Jewish Report* asked a number of medical schemes to respond to this issue. GEMS, Bonitas, Momentum, and Fedhealth said they would respond, but didn't by the time of publication. They did however deny claims of not paying PMBs. The only scheme that made a real effort to respond in detail was Discovery Health, which rejected the suggestion that valid PMB claims were routinely not paid. The scheme said it funded PMBs in line with the Medical Schemes Act and the regulations governing PMB level of care. Payment depended on whether treatment met the defined clinical criteria and whether scheme rules, including the use of designated service providers where required, had been followed.

Discovery also disputed allegations that South African medical schemes in 2024 rejected a total of R40 billion worth of PMB claims, saying these included a range of categories and claims that fall outside scheme rules and couldn't automatically be attributed to PMB funding.

Wolfson acknowledges that schemes do pay many claims but says disputes are often resolved only after members challenge the initial outcome. "Most of the time, after a bit of a fight, they do get their money," he says.

Discovery Health says members who believe a PMB hasn't been funded correctly should first query the decision with the scheme and, if necessary, use the internal complaints and appeal process. Unresolved disputes can be referred to the Council for Medical Schemes.

After years spent fitting prosthetic limbs and orthotic devices to restore mobility, Wolfson now views access to funding as another stage of a patient's recovery. "This is about understanding your rights and being able to use them."



Roger Wolfson making a prosthetic

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Women to remember proudly

GILLIAN KLAWSKY

From standing by Mahatma Gandhi's side, to being one of the first female Members of Parliament (MPs), to bringing IBM personal computers (PCs) to the country, South African Jewish women have long made their mark. As International Women's Day approaches, we look at women who significantly impacted politics, human rights, and business but whose stories may be overlooked in mainstream history.

While many of us are familiar with Jewish liberation struggle stalwarts like Helen Suzman and Ruth First, there are many lesser-known pioneering women who came before and after them.

Sonja Schlesin is one example. Born in Russia in 1888, Schlesin came to South Africa as a child and later became a close associate of Gandhi. Alongside him, she became a key figure in the early Satyagraha, the Indian passive resistance movement.

As a young woman, Schlesin ran Gandhi's law office, managed his finances, and was instrumental in organising strikes and protests, often defying the colonial government in her fight for justice. "She was basically running his movement when Gandhi was away or in prison," says Dr Veronica Belling, who did her doctorate in historical studies on South African Jewish women.

Working in a similar era, Bertha Solomon was known as one of South Africa's first champions of women's rights. One of the first women to qualify for the Bar in 1923, she became one of the first female MPs. After Solomon waged a 27-year fight, the Matrimonial Affairs Act – called Bertha's Bill by then Prime Minister DF Malan – was passed, giving women legal rights to their property, income, and children.



Born in 1913 in Varaklan, Latvia, Ray Alexander Simons became a committed communist at the age of 13, influenced by a teacher at school.

Simons moved to Cape Town in 1929, where she began to organise black workers' unions and joined the Communist Party at the age of 16. She was one of the founders of the Federation of South African Women, which fought for women's rights and helped to draft the Women's Charter. She later went into exile in Zambia with her husband, a lecturer.

"Quite a few of the female Jewish activists in South Africa were communists," says Belling. "They were generally influenced by their

Eastern European parents, who were interested in communism and Bundism." Bundism was a secular Jewish socialist movement that emerged at the end of the 19th century and championed workers' rights, Yiddish culture, and Jewish autonomy within Eastern Europe.



Born in 1924 in Lithuania, Esther Barsel dedicated her life to the liberation struggle, joining the Young Communist League in Johannesburg at just 14. She advocated for workers' rights and was active in the underground, serving as a link between banned liberation movements and activists.

Barsel and her husband Hymie were among the 15 accused in the Bram Fischer trial, and she served three years' hard labour at Barberton Women's Prison, known for its brutal treatment of inmates. While most other Jewish female activists of her time went into exile, Barsel remained in the country. She later became political activist Chris Hani's private secretary until his 1993 assassination. "Barsel was the only one of all these women who was still alive when Nelson Mandela had his 80th birthday. She was one of 25 people he invited," says Belling.

South African Jewish women have also had a profound business impact. A ground breaker in the information technology (IT) sector, Joan Joffe brought the first IBM PCs into the country in 1982. After completing her Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1959, she met someone who introduced her to the world of computers, largely unknown at the time. "It was intriguing and suited me precisely because my undergraduate degree was around maths and logic," she says. She later studied computer science at Stanford University and, back in South Africa, started her own successful computer company, Joffe Associates.

When Joffe heard about IBM's plans to launch a small computer, she identified an opportunity. She made an appointment with the South African chief executive of IBM and asked to become an agent for IBM PCs. "He stood up in his chair and glowered over me, and said, 'Madam, IBM is a mainframe computer company, we will not be launching a small computer at all', and he showed me the door."

Undeterred, Joffe travelled to her brother in the United States, found a female IBM PC supplier in Los Angeles, and became the sole

importer in South Africa for a year. "IBM South Africa was horrified," she says. "A few months later, IBM called me and asked to buy the PCs from me to train their staff. It was my best ever sale."

Joffe says that being a woman has, in fact, been a distinct advantage in her career. "Business is about differentiating yourself from competitors, and there were no other women in the IT sector," she says. "I stood out, and people knew me, and I never had a problem getting an appointment."

She later became marketing director at Vodacom and a founding member of broad-based women's empowerment group Nozala Investments. Today, she is a proud member of the South African branch of the International Women's Forum



and believes it's critically important for women to support one another.

Reeve Forman, who in the 1970s established her own cosmetics manufacturing business, was the first woman in South Africa to be invited to join the Young Presidents

Organisation. While she experienced challenges along the way, losing and then reviving her business REEVA Beauty & Health, she's always been driven by hope and faith. She maintains Temple Israel in Hillbrow for the few remaining Jews in the area, is the interfaith liaison for the South African Jewish Board of Deputies, and is an honorary life vice-chair of the SA Zionist Federation.

Forman says learning from women in every age is vital. In South Africa, the spirit of *ubuntu* aligns deeply with Jewish ethics, which is why women in the community have always played such a massive role. "We must speak of our women in history, not only for their memory, but to inspire the young woman of today. If we don't go back and examine our roots, we won't have a future."

Academy is teaching the teachers

LEE TANKLE

A cohort of five new Jewish Studies teachers graduated from the Academy of Jewish Thought and Learning in February, bringing the total number of such graduates to 39 in the past five years.

Close on another 40 also have a Master's degree in Jewish Education or Hebrew Teaching from the institution in Johannesburg.

A brand new group began their initial one-year undergraduate course this week.

The academy took on educating Hebrew and Jewish Studies teachers five years ago because universities had stopped offering relevant courses for Jewish educators.

"In the past, the only way that you could become accredited as a teacher in South Africa was by doing a four-year

Bachelor of Education, or you finished your undergraduate degree and then you did a postgraduate certificate in education," says Rabbi Ramon Widmonte, dean of the Academy of Jewish Thought and Learning.

"However, South African universities have closed their Jewish Studies and Hebrew faculties. There are no departments, which means that there is no way for a Jewish Studies or Hebrew teacher to qualify in their subjects in South Africa anymore."

This is why the academy stepped in.

"We did this because so many of our Jewish Studies and Hebrew teachers have never been able to qualify. They need it, our schools need it, and our kids need it. And without the training, the output from our Jewish education system is nowhere near what it could be," says Widmonte.

He says that there's been a shortage of trained Hebrew and Jewish Studies teachers.

"This is an international problem shared by our country. We have a very low number of trained *Kodesh* (Jewish Studies) and Hebrew teachers. And it really is placing us in a terrible bind because it means, especially in the Hebrew space, we have the teachers retiring or unable to teach, and there's simply no-one to fill their shoes."

"Many of the educators trained at the academy were already teaching, but without significant training or any training sometimes," says Widmonte.

Two different programmes are offered: Jewish Studies and Hebrew, with 10 teachers graduating from the Jewish Studies course and 29 graduating from the Hebrew course over the past five years. With many teachers of Jewish Studies being rabbis, a major part of the syllabus is key educational jargon and educational psychology concepts.

Sheila Valentini, head of the *Kodesh* Teacher's Certificate at the academy, says, "Most people who come to teaching have natural skills; they're amazing, they

reflect on what they currently 'govern' in their own lives, and what they might take responsibility for in the future. They will never forget it. He reported that it was a huge success."

In terms of the Hebrew course, Widmonte says they are aiming to get teachers to teach Hebrew the same way in which any second language is taught.

"Most of our Hebrew teachers in South Africa, and indeed in the world, are Israelis. And most of them have never had

the opportunity to train properly," says Widmonte. "The big shift that we've also introduced is that we're training teachers to teach Hebrew proficiency. That is the term: proficiency is how second languages are taught worldwide."

Widmonte explains that these teachers then get students to use the language straight away. They do so by using the framework set out by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign

Languages, which has four components: comprehending the language, speaking in the language, reading in the language, and writing the language.

"All of those are viewed as a unit, not one over the other, so that you're able to use the language from the beginning, and that is what we're training teachers to assist the students to do in Hebrew as a second language," says Widmonte.

"We spend a significant amount of time teaching Hebrew in our schools (we still need more), yet many students can't use the language confidently or at all. The key lies especially in the pre-primary and primary school years. If Hebrew is taught properly at that stage, children can achieve fluency that is appropriate for their age and level of development. But this depends on four critical factors: the amount of time invested, the curriculum, the way teachers are trained to teach, and the teachers themselves," he says.

"The real question is whether the system and the educators are teaching for proficiency, for students to actively speak, understand, read, and write Hebrew, rather than primarily aiming to pass exams. When sufficient hours are devoted to the language, and skilled teachers are properly trained in proficiency-based methods, students can emerge with meaningful, functional Hebrew."



Rabbi Ramon Widmonte, the five graduates (Rabbi Chryler, Rabbi Teller, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Raff, Rabbi Weinfass, Rabbi Rubin) and Sheila Valentini

shine in the classroom. But having never studied the profession formally, they lack the professional terminology or exposure to educational ideologies. This course provides the professional 'lingo' and an opportunity to reflect on scientific research. This knowledge will give them the terms for what they have been doing instinctively. Being able to converse in the profession's lingo puts everybody on the same page and enhances both teacher collaboration and parent-teacher meetings."

Valentini explains that one of the units in the Jewish Studies course focuses on enabling teachers to move from being solely "the sage on the stage" to also being "the guide on the side".

"A sage on the stage stands at the front of the classroom day after day, delivers a mind-blowing *shiur* to 12-year-olds, and then hands out a worksheet. We're trying to move beyond that model by exploring lessons that are differentiated and experiential," says Valentini. "One rabbi found this method challenging, insisting this approach could never work for Gemara. Not being familiar with the content, I asked him to give me a topic. He said he was teaching the *halachot* of time, not exactly thrilling material. So, we workshopped it. I suggested sending students outside with a paper plate and a pencil to build a sundial. Teach them how to read the time using the sundial and then

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

Not what Helen Suzman stood for

How swiftly the world can shift. Just last week, as we prepared to welcome Purim, I reflected on the festival's powerful examples of women's leadership. I drew strength too from the extraordinary women of Iran who, at immense personal risk, continue to take to the streets demanding dignity and freedom. Like Esther, they embody what becomes possible when individuals choose to speak truth to power, refusing to be silenced.

Now, as the world becomes engulfed in horrific conflict, and our brethren in Israel are once again sent to shelters, we must comprehend yet another moment of deep uncertainty. In times like these, we are reminded that when conflict escalates, innocent civilians always bear the heaviest burden, and every civilian life lost, on all sides, is a tragedy that must be mourned.

Yet if we pause to draw from one of Purim's deeper teachings, we are reminded that regimes rooted in oppression and hatred do not endure forever. History shows us time and again that authoritarian power, no matter how entrenched, can be challenged. The arc of Jewish experience bends towards resilience, towards hope, towards the stubborn insistence that light will ultimately prevail.

Closer to home, in yet another attempt to reshape the narrative surrounding the King David and Roedean tennis incident, the chairperson of the Helen Suzman Foundation, Kalim Rajab, wrote an inciteful article in a prominent, if not intrinsically biased, South African news source. In the article Rajab bemoans the capitulation of Roedean, and muses that potentially in the future schoolchildren could better evade censorship in their protest against Jewish opponents by wearing armbands or pins.

The meaning of armbands in this context is not abstract. For Jews, it summons the most grotesque example in our history when armbands were used so effectively to mark us as Jews by those whose purpose it was to exterminate us. For the chairperson of any human rights organisation

ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner



to invoke this practice and imagery, however unwittingly, in the context of targeting Jewish children at a school sporting event is shocking beyond measure.

The Helen Suzman Foundation exists to honour a woman who dedicated her life to fighting discrimination in all its forms. Suzman was not only a towering figure in the struggle against apartheid, she was a proud member of the Jewish community, deeply committed to its welfare and values. It is a profound betrayal of her legacy for the foundation's chairperson to lend his platform and authority to the targeting of Jewish pupils. Discrimination is not whitewashed when it is cloaked in the language of political protest, no matter how desperate our detractors are to label the incident as anything other than antisemitism.

In the wake of this and similar incidents, we have seen a troubling surge in antisemitic content online. The South African Jewish Board of Deputies continues to respond firmly and methodically. Just last week, we secured a full and unconditional apology from an individual who posted about the need to "fumigate" our offices. This follows another retraction and apology from someone who refused to do business with "Zionists", accusing them of infanticide. We will not stand idly by while hate speech proliferates in our democracy. There is no excuse for hate crime, there is no exemption from the law, and we will continue to hold those accountable wherever possible.

As your communal leadership, we want you to know that our organisations are working together and are carefully monitoring developments both in the Middle East and at home. We remain engaged, vigilant, and united in safeguarding our community. At the same time, our greatest response is to live proudly and visibly as Jews. May this conflict end soon and decisively, and usher in a lasting peace.

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

Missing the joke

Ideas for a Purim shpiel on ChaiFM are debated weeks before the festival. What is too real? Too close to the bone? Too sensitive? Too dated? And most importantly, what feels mischievous enough to work this year without triggering a finger-wagging WhatsApp response beginning with "With respect...?"

A Purim shpiel is the Jewish version of April Fool's. Except it generally produces more outrage, a hint of guilt, and very little applause. A regular Shabbat, I imagine, for a community rabbi.

For a genetically humorous people, we are astonishingly sensitive.

Like the time, during COVID-19, when we announced on air that King David School would be used as a quarantine centre for South Africans returning from abroad. It was apparently "too soon", "too upsetting", "too anxiety-provoking", and insensitive to those who were... well... anxious.

Which, at the time, was pretty much everyone.

We knew this year would be no different. After intense consultation, we narrowed it down to two finalists.

Option one: that the new Galliot Park would begin operating on a paid, tiered membership system. Shade and benches allocated according to status. Basic membership: partial tree coverage. Premium: guaranteed bench. Platinum: breeze. Essentially a slow lounge for people who aren't travelling.

Option two: that street parking across greater Glenhazel would now be charged for. In the interests of employment equity, current car guards would be upgraded with point-of-sale devices and reflective bibs reading "Revenue Enhancement Officer". Tap. Smile. "Would you like to add a donation?"

Both were dangerously plausible. Which is always the risk.

But then Israel and the US decided to attack Iran. News reports veered dangerously in all directions, disinformation became the standard on X, and truth became a precious and rare commodity.

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



In a week of war, anxiety, real headlines, and misinformation, it didn't feel responsible to add theatrical confusion to the mix.

Besides which, in South Africa, a country that produces breaking news that reads like curated stand-up material, I began to worry no-one would even realise it was a joke.

If we announced Eskom was launching "Loadshedding Plus" – uninterrupted power for premium subscribers – would anyone question it? If we claimed the municipality had awarded a R48 million tender to study why potholes form in circular shapes, would it feel exaggerated? If we said a new compliance unit would regulate hamantaschen filling ratios under Section 17B of the Pastry Accountability Act, would anyone blink?

I worry that they wouldn't.

And that is the unique Purim problem of 2026. When reality is already wearing a costume, parody struggles to compete.

So this year, we chose restraint. Not because we lack material. On the contrary. We are drowning in it. But because sometimes the most radical thing you can do in a world that is so noisy is to refuse to manufacture more of it.

Purim may be loud, but it is less about the noise and more about the quiet hand behind the chaos. The insomnia that changes policy. The overlooked detail that flips the script. The courage that operates behind the scenes.

That we can still tell the difference between comedy and crisis.

Which is why instead of a shpiel that blurs the line between joke and headline, we made the choice to sit this one out. After all, when the world is absurd, clarity is the most powerful punchline.

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Scientist credits Namibian childhood for Africa Planet Prize

CLAUDIA GROSS

Namibian-born Jessica Thorn, assistant professor in global food security and environmental change at Imperial College London and Namibia University researcher, was recently named a winner of the inaugural African Planet Prize.

"This reflects not only my personal journey as a Namibian environmental scientist," she said, "but the countless voices, communities, mentors, and colleagues who shape the work that I do and have opened their worlds to me."

The prize, created this year by the African Academy of Sciences in partnership with the Frontiers Research Foundation of Switzerland, recognises outstanding peer-reviewed scientific work that contributes to safeguarding the earth's nine planetary boundaries.

Growing up in Namibia, Thorn and her family spent long periods camping in the desert and travelling through remote landscapes. That environment, defined by low rainfall and wide distances, got her questioning natural resources and dependence on them.

Her work now focuses on the links between climate change, land use, biodiversity, and human well-being across

several African countries.

Her academic training began with a PhD in zoology at University of Oxford, and later expanded into climate adaptation and human geography. She leads the African Nature Futures Lab, an interdisciplinary programme working in countries including Namibia, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, and Kenya. Its research examines how climate change interacts with land use, infrastructure, and urban growth, and how ecosystems provide benefits that support livelihoods.

Namibia continues to shape her scientific perspective. It is, she says, "a water-scarce environment", which makes the limits of resources tangible, and its cultural diversity contributed to her understanding of the continent's complexity. "It allows me to recognise the importance of individual action and planning and policy."

Thorn says recognition for her work, including ranking among Namibia's leading scientists, is an acknowledgement of research that crosses disciplinary boundaries and is directly linked to implementation. "You need to work with decision makers who are directly framing the problem that you research and not divorcing it from the actual implementation of solutions.

"A lot of my work is empirical," she says, "so I get to see what the impact has been

in climate change for people who are on the front lines of heat, drought, plastic and water pollution, and especially, widening inequality," she says. That experience has informed her focus on approaches that connect conservation, development, and social conditions, and on recognising informal settlements as a central part of African urbanisation rather than a temporary phenomenon.

Her research feeds into policy. She has been a contributing author to the Africa chapter of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and worked on the African Union climate strategy.

Training is a central component of her work. Through participatory scenario planning, she has trained more than 1 400 practitioners across 11 countries. This helps people "think more imaginatively about what's possible, what would be the trade-offs, and who would be the losers" and

"builds legitimacy, trust, and innovation in engagement with people one normally wouldn't engage with".

Alongside her scientific work, Thorn speaks about the influence of her Jewish upbringing on her approach to leadership and collaboration. "In Judaism, egalitarianism has been really important in my education and that women have an equal role. That was an important part of my Jewish education in the progressive community in Cape Town," she says.

In fields where senior positions are still dominated by men, this has shaped her commitment to mentorship. "I'm always trying to be a mentor for women, and often I'm the only woman in the spaces in which I work and constantly have to tackle those biases."

She also connects her Jewish identity to the experience of belonging to a small community with a strong sense of continuity. Her grandmother came from Lithuania to southern Africa, and she grew up in a small

Namibian Jewish population before moving to Cape Town.

Tikkun olam is another influence. She describes it as "our responsibility to leave the world in a better condition", linked to "the value of education and knowledge". That outlook, she says, informed her decision to work in the public sector and emphasis on diversity in research teams.

She also identifies reasons for optimism in her field. There is more funding; more African leadership; and greater recognition by governments of the need to plan for climate impacts.

"The conversation in the past 30 years has changed hugely," she says, pointing to the growth of nature-based solutions, urban greening targets, and programmes that support African researchers to remain on the continent. The democratisation of knowledge and promotion of women in science are also important developments.

Thorn dedicated the Africa Planet Prize to her family and the landscapes of her childhood, recalling being taken into the desert to camp under the stars and swim in rivers after the rains. Those experiences, she said, taught her "reverence for nature, a sense of wonder, and the understanding that our world is a delicate tapestry of interconnected life".



Jessica Thorn

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