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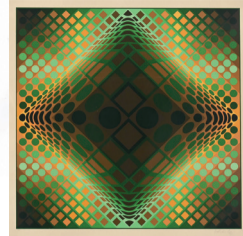
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# south african Jewish Report

Volume 30 - Number 12 ■ 16 April 2026 ■ 29 Nisan 5786

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## EFF leader apologises for antisemitic comments

LEE TANKLE

In an unprecedented victory for the community, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) KwaZulu-Natal Chairperson, Mongezi Wellbeloved Twala, has apologised for antisemitic remarks he made outside the Durban Magistrate's Court in June 2024.

"For a provincial leader of the EFF to issue such an unequivocal apology sends an important and powerful message to South African Jewry and to South Africa that, irrespective of the circumstances, hate speech is dangerous and unacceptable," said Wendy Kahn, National Director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD).

"At a time when we see Jewish people being attacked around the world, Twala's apology is essential in understanding that words carry significance and the SAJBD takes all forms of hate and incitement seriously," she said.

"Let us mobilise," Twala had urged outside the court. "We are mobilising our young battalions, our fire eaters, the fighters – they are coming and flocking to this court in numbers. You also do the same. It is going to start today when we cut the ugly throats of the Jews. We must cut the head of the snake today."

He made the statements outside the court in which Grayson Beare was making his first court appearance for the murder of Halima Hoosen-Preston, and the

stabbing of her husband, Shaun, and son, Adam, in her home in Glenmore, Durban. Beare is the estranged son of Jewish philanthropist Julian Beare.

Twala said he wanted his message that "Palestine will be free" to go to "all the Jewish murderers".

In his apology, he wrote, "Upon reflection, I recognise that the language used in those statements was inappropriate and hurtful. I sincerely regret that my words caused pain and distress to members of the Jewish community and to others who value dignity, respect, and peaceful coexistence in our country. This experience has reminded me of the deep historical pain associated with antisemitism and the importance of speaking about such matters

with care and responsibility, regardless of one's political views."

Kahn explained, "Twala's inflammatory statements were made to an already agitated crowd outside the courtroom following the murder of a Muslim woman in Durban. At this very sensitive time, threatening words like these, by a senior political figure, are irresponsible and dangerous. It had the potential to ignite not only an act of violence but also to exacerbate tensions between fellow South African communities."

Kahn said the SAJBD had initially decided to delay instituting proceedings against Twala because of the volatile time, especially for the KwaZulu-Natal Jewish community and the hyped political tensions at the time, and the spike in antisemitism following 7 October.

In 2025, the SAJBD proceeded with a claim of hate speech against Twala in the High Court in KwaZulu-Natal. "In our founding affidavit, we demonstrated how Twala's antisemitic rhetoric incited hatred against Jewish people in South Africa. It was important to pursue this

case," said Kahn.

She said that, though antisemitism rates in South Africa are low compared with other diaspora communities, the SAJBD monitors, assesses, and responds to each incident, together with experts and legal teams. "The hate speech legislation, together with constitutional bodies tasked with implementing these regulations, provides excellent mediums for the SAJBD

to address issues of this nature. We have seen some disturbing language of incitement from certain political parties in the past years and are pleased that this politician acknowledged how problematic these statements were and apologised publicly for these comments," she said. "We believe that a full apology by a political leader in our country is important, as it provides a message that hate speech is never acceptable and it can potentially have dangerous consequences."

It was initially very difficult for the SAJBD legal team to locate Twala to serve him the notice of the application. The legal team had even gone so far as to approach the legislature offices in Pietermaritzburg for assistance, but it could not facilitate service on Twala. The legal team then applied to the court with an Application for Substituted Service, which was heard in January this year, and Twala was eventually served via email, WhatsApp, and at the EFF's Amajuba regional office.

"In March, we were approached by Twala's legal representatives with a settlement proposal,

Continued on page 3>>



Mongezi Twala outside the Durban Magistrate's Court when he made the original remarks in 2024



### Keeping the flame alight

Photo: Neil McCartney

Holocaust survivor Wanda Albinska lighting a candle at the Yom HaShoah commemoration in Johannesburg this week See stories on pages 2 and 8.

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# Soon there won't be any Holocaust survivors to tell the story

LEE TANKLE

Ninety percent of the remaining Holocaust survivors globally will be gone within 15 years. While there are still almost 200 000 Holocaust survivors, nearly half of them will pass away within the next six years, and 70% within 10 years, according to a population projection report recently published by the Claims Conference, an international organisation that represents Jewish victims of Nazi persecution and negotiates compensation and restitution on their behalf.

The report, *Vanishing Witnesses: An Urgent Analysis of the Declining Population of Holocaust Survivors*, made it clear that in 15 years, only 21 300 Holocaust survivors will be left globally, which means we will soon be living in a world where there is no one to give a first-hand account of the Holocaust.

As we commemorated Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day) on Tuesday, 14 April, Tali Nates, founder and executive director of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre (JHGC), reiterated that

there are fewer than 20 survivors still alive in South Africa.

She said many are in their late 80s and 90s, the oldest being Ella Blumenthal, who survived the Warsaw ghetto, and the Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps. The younger survivors were babies at the end of the war, and are now in their early 80s.

The remaining population of survivors is between 78 and more than 100 years of age, born between 1912 and 1946, with a median age of 87. This includes a small number who were in utero in 1945 and born in early 1946. The majority (96%) of those alive today are child survivors born between 1928 and 1946.

"Depending on age and health, which varies significantly among survivors, some in South Africa are still active in survivors' groups such as the one offered by the JHGC, speak to schools and other groups, are involved with family and community affairs, and keep themselves busy with hobbies and volunteering activities," said Nates. "Some still work or consult in their professional capacities. "Others who aren't in good health any longer, sadly, are cared for by family, friends, community organisations, and individuals in the most dignified way. There are places around the world where survivors live below the poverty line and are struggling in their older age."

Nates stressed that it is now more important than ever to listen to their stories and interact with them, to ensure that their stories don't die with them.

The Claims Conference report gives the example of survivor Israel "Izzy" Arbeiter, who spent decades talking about the murders of his parents and seven-year-old brother in the Treblinka concentration camp, and his own time at a series of camps, including Auschwitz. He arrived



Israeli President Isaac Herzog laying a wreath on Yom HaShoah at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem

in the United States in 1949 and later founded what became the American Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors of Greater Boston.

Seventy years later, Arbeiter told a packed audience on Boston University's International Holocaust Remembrance Day, "The sad thing is the number of Holocaust survivors who used to go to schools and speak there is getting smaller and smaller. And the question is, who is going to tell the story after us?" Arbeiter died three years later, in 2021, at the age of 96.

The report also indicated that mortality rates for survivors vary depending on geographical location. For example, in Israel, which is home to about half the population of Holocaust survivors, there were 110 100 survivors in 2024 and 106 000 in 2026. This number, according to the report, is estimated to drop to 62 900 by 2030, a 43% decrease in only six years.

The United States had 34 600 survivors in 2024, but is projected to lose 39% by 2030, dropping to 21 100 survivors. There were 25 500 survivors in former Soviet Union countries in 2024, expected to drop to 11 800 in five years, and down 54% by the start of 2030.

Gideon Taylor, President of the Claims Conference, said, "This report provides clear urgency to our Holocaust education efforts; now is the time to hear first-hand

testimonies from survivors, invite them to speak in our classrooms, places of worship, and institutions. It is critical, not only for our youth but for people of all generations, to hear and learn directly from Holocaust survivors. This report is a stark reminder that our time is almost up, our survivors are leaving us, and this is the moment to hear their voices."

Greg Schneider, executive vice-president of the Claims Conference, said, "We have known that this population of survivors would be the last, our final opportunity to hear their

first-hand testimonies, to spend time with them, our last chance to meet a survivor. These are our final years to honour them, ensure they live with dignity, care for them, and provide for their needs. The work we do negotiating with European governments on behalf of survivors is critical to their survival. Nothing could be more important, more urgent, as we see what little time we have left to ensure their well-being."

Nates explained that due to the reality of the ageing population of Holocaust survivors, museums, education centres, and memorials around the world are preparing for "the end of the era of the survivor", through recorded testimonies, books, lesson plans, and exhibitions. The University of Southern California Shoah Foundation's innovative "New Dimensions in Testimony" uses digital technology to allow survivors to answer as many as 100 pre-recorded questions.

"Second- and third-generation groups also contribute to sharing testimonies around the world. Like every history, this one is moving from a phase of being a 'living memory' to the phase of 'historical memory,'" said Nates. "I believe that this history is one of the key defining moments in global history, like the Roman Empire or the French Revolution, and it will continue to be taught and reflected on in the future."

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## When was your last spiritual?

In this week's Torah reading we read all about the *kohen* examining people to determine whether they were afflicted by *tzaraat*, the leprosy curse. It was a physical inspection that had spiritual implications. The person might be pronounced *tahor* (pure) or, G-d forbid, *tamei* (impure), all depending on the results of the *kohen's* examination.

I couldn't help thinking about going to the doctor for the requisite annual medical examination, or "physical". We go through the routine checkup – height, weight, blood pressure, cholesterol, and stress tests on the treadmill and up and down the little staircase.

But have you ever thought of going for a "spiritual"? What's our "height"? Do we walk tall? Are we proud and upright Jews, or are we apologetically stooped and bent over by the burden of an inferiority complex?

What about our "weight"? Are we on a well-balanced diet of Torah, the sustenance of our souls, or do we suffer from spiritual malnutrition?

And how is our heart doing? A Jewish heart doesn't only pump blood; it pumps warmth and love. A healthy Jewish heart is the emotional centre of the

person. It emotes and feels the pain of another. And healthy hearts are inspired by events that point unmistakably to the hand of G-d in the world. If we aren't feeling what we should be, then we might be suffering from blocked arteries.

When the doctor took my blood pressure, I

immediately made the obvious connection – *tefillin*. I remembered the story of the simple farmer who went for his first medical checkup. When the doctor checked his blood pressure, he asked what that was all about. The doctor explained patiently that he was checking the heart rate. "But why are you holding my arm if you want to see how my heart is?" "When I check your hand," replied the physician, "I know how your heart is." The hand that gives charity, for example, indicates that it's connected to a healthy Jewish heart.

Then came the stress test, up the stairs and down the stairs, up again and down again, and again and again. How do we handle the ups and downs of life? Are we smug and arrogant when we're up, and dejected and depressed when we're down? How do we deal with stress? Do we trust in G-d that everything has a purpose, and a positive one at that? Or do we become angry and bitter at life's often unkind twists of fate?

Finally, there was the treadmill. I really dislike treadmills. After two minutes, I told the nurse I'd had enough. "The doctor said you must do four minutes," she informed me sternly. "Four minutes?" I cried. "This feels like four hours!"

Life can be a tedious treadmill. We find ourselves running and running and getting nowhere fast. A gruelling

## Torah Thought

**Rabbi Yossy Goldman**  
 Life Rabbi Emeritus  
 Sydenham Shul



rat race, where even if you win, you're still a rat. All of it leaves us wondering what it's all about and why we are working so hard with no meaningful, consequential reward.

So, this year, in addition to going for a physical, why not go for a spiritual? Find a *kohen*, a Jewish spiritual teacher, healer, or rabbi, who can search your soul for its healthy characteristics as well as your necessary growth points, and prescribe a spiritual fitness programme tailored for you and your *neshamah* (soul). May we all be healthy, physically and spiritually.

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Gqeberha	17:34	18:25
Plettenberg Bay	17:43	18:34
East London	17:26	18:17
Jerusalem*	18:29	19:48
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 Yom Hazikaron on Monday night is a poignant reminder of the sacrifices made by soldiers for Israel's independence. As it gives way to Yom Ha'atzmaut on Tuesday night, the transition powerfully reflects the deep connection between honouring the fallen and celebrating freedom.

# Signatories named and threatened after UCT list leaked

TALI FEINBERG

South African opera doyenne Aviva Pelham was called an “ugly Jewess” and a “wh\*re” in the comments section of a post shared on the Gift of the Givers (GOTG) Facebook page, after she was singled out as one of 300 alumni and stakeholders who signed a recent letter to the University of Cape Town (UCT), expressing concerns about its awarding of an honorary doctorate to GOTG founder, Dr Imtiaz Sooliman.

This letter, with a list of its signatories and other private correspondence, was leaked to the press and others at the end of March. It was quickly used to abuse, harass, and dox people on the list.

One signatory, who like most spoke anonymously for security reasons, says her correspondence with UCT was leaked, including her email address. She says the list was “shared to intimidate. It’s become a witch hunt.”

Signatories and observers told the SA Jewish Report that the hate expressed towards signatories, including in major media outlets, demonstrates how local extremists persecute anyone who doesn’t agree with them. Some signatories expressed concern that Sooliman is becoming “untouchable”, saying this should concern all South Africans.

A spokesperson from UCT Renewal, the organisation that submitted the letter to the university, says “the crux of our letter was to understand whether UCT considered Sooliman’s intolerant statements when they decided to honour him.

“Either UCT considered these, and honoured him anyway, or UCT didn’t, and therefore didn’t have all relevant factors in front of them when making the decision. This speaks volumes as to where UCT is as an institution. It’s why stakeholders are questioning how the decision was made.”

The Cape South African Jewish Board of Deputies (Cape SAJBD) says it’s “deeply concerned” that the names of the signatories were “publicly disclosed without their consent, in what is already a highly polarised environment”.

Cape SAJBD executive director Daniel Bloch says that “targeting individuals, including disseminating personal information, with the intent to expose them to harm, is unlawful”.

The Cape SAJBD is particularly concerned that signatories are being subjected to harassment and discrimination. “We have already seen commentary directed at specific individuals that is deeply hateful and overtly antisemitic, undermining their dignity and safety. This is unacceptable and must be

treated with the utmost seriousness,” says Bloch.

When signing the letter, signatories indicated the capacity in which they added their name. While only a handful did so as “Jewish” or “Zionist”, the majority did not, yet they were all painted with the same brush by those who targeted them.

“While Gaza burns, these Zionist South Africans target a man who feeds the hungry,” wrote local journalist Herman Lategan on social media, publishing the leaked list of signatories and correspondence, including email addresses.

In response to Lategan, one anonymous user on X told South Africans to boycott two local Jewish mental health professionals because they signed the letter.

One of those mental health professionals says, “I feel angry and sad that while exercising my constitutional right to protest peacefully, a total stranger attacked me in my professional capacity. This is hate speech.”

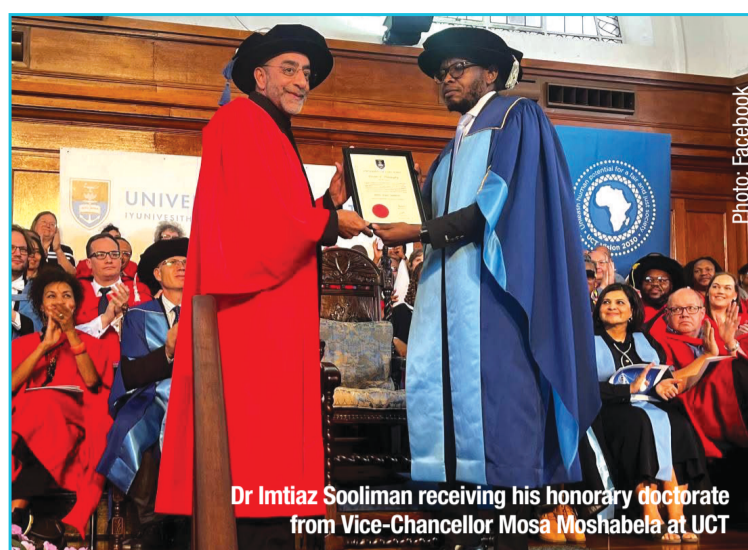
Another healthcare professional, who is not Jewish, says several acquaintances condemned her for signing the letter. “This is fascism. I was exercising my democratic right, expressing my increasing discomfort with Sooliman’s statements,” she says.

“In today’s South Africa, you are shut down and smeared if you don’t conform,” she says. “The lengths people will go to to suppress truth is staggering. It’s also concerning that we’re seeing debate shut down at UCT.”

UCT Renewal is a civic initiative comprising members of the UCT community and broader stakeholders committed to strengthening institutional governance, academic freedom, and inclusive dialogue at UCT. In a statement issued after the leak, the organisation said that no signatory consented to the public release of their name, or to UCT providing emailed correspondence to the media. It did not publish the open letter publicly so that it could “protect the personal information of the signatories”.

Despite this precaution, News24 published a version of the letter, including the names of approximately 300 signatories, appended to personal email correspondence from UCT academics to the vice-chancellor (VC). This has since been published online by other parties.

The decision not to publish the names was “grounded in lived experience”, according to UCT Renewal. “Individuals who express dissenting views [on Sooliman and the Middle East] have, in documented instances,



Dr Imtiaz Sooliman receiving his honorary doctorate from Vice-Chancellor Mosa Moshabela at UCT

Photo: Facebook

been subjected to harassment and boycotts.”

It’s against this background that “UCT, as the only recipient of the letter, compromised the signatories by leaking their names”, according to the group’s statement. “There’s a reasonably foreseeable risk of harassment of these signatories”, including academic staff and students.

This is because it is “the stated *modus operandi* of movements in support of Palestine to specifically target any person that they perceive to be aligned to Zionism or Israel”, continued the statement.

UCT Renewal is coordinating access to legal assistance for any signatory experiencing harassment. Affected individuals are encouraged to use this support. UCT Renewal reaffirmed its commitment to open dialogue, but said this is compromised when “individuals are potentially exposed to harm for expressing lawful and reasoned views. UCT bears a responsibility to ensure that confidential communications are protected, members of its community are safe from intimidation, and institutional processes do not expose individuals to foreseeable harm”.

Yet, an avalanche of hatred was directed at Pelham and others on the GOTG Facebook

page. Users described signatories as “infiltrators”, “part of the Epstein ruling class pedo [paedophile] supporters”, and “ZioNazis”. One user said, “Never trust Jews, they are demons. They were influencing leaders long before Hitler started gassing these terrorists... read the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.”

The signatory whose correspondence with UCT was leaked

said, “We see people being singled out, for example with [playwright] Mike van Graan’s open letter to Pelham, where he vilifies her, says despicable things about Israel, and implies that she supports ‘genocide’ because she signed a letter of concern about Sooliman. She’s done amazing things for South Africa, she’s the daughter of a Holocaust survivor, and a grandmother. Other people have been vilified and attacked. Who knows where this will lead?”

The signatory is horrified that UCT has “allowed the leaking of personal information of its staff, who haven’t even been contacted by the VC to apologise or say he’s dealing with the leak”.

Another signatory says the leak is “a dangerous attempt to silence dissent. It undercuts future initiatives of UCT Renewal, because participants will fear their names will be leaked.”

The media “has missed the point. This isn’t about disagreeing with Sooliman’s degree, it’s about UCT leaking names of alumni, staff, students, and parents. If a corporation did that, there would be legal repercussions,” he says.

UCT spokesperson Elijah Moholola says UCT “notes with concern claims that a letter

from a group of alumni has been leaked to external parties. The university is currently looking into the matter and is therefore unable to comment further at this stage.”

News24 editor Adriaan Basson told the SA Jewish Report that it “published the communique because of the great public interest in the matter”. He emphasises that “no email addresses were published” by News24. “They were specifically blocked out by us. The petition/letters were circulated widely over Google Docs. It would have been naive to think the documents would not go public.”

Asked about the subsequent harassment of signatories, Basson had no comment.

There are people who have stood up to the hate. Deon Irish, an advocate at the Cape Bar, wrote on Facebook that he was “horrified” by the “unspeakable vitriol” hurled at Pelham, describing it as a “thuggish free-for-all”.

UCT Renewal called on UCT leadership to conduct an urgent independent investigation into the leak. “We demand accountability from UCT, and insist for anyone found guilty of leaking the emails to be formally disciplined.”

The Cape SAJBD also called on UCT to “urgently initiate a full, independent, and transparent investigation, and to hold responsible parties accountable in accordance with institutional policies and the law”.

The organisation further urges media and commentators to “act responsibly by avoiding the unnecessary amplification of individuals’ names in ways that may place them at risk, and to respect the distinction between robust debate and the enabling of harassment”.

The Cape SAJBD is providing support to affected individuals. “We are collating evidence and will consider all available avenues, including legal remedies, against those who engage in unlawful conduct,” says Bloch.

## EFF leader apologises for antisemitic comments

>> Continued from page 1 with a full apology in the form of a public statement, which was posted on this social media platform and provided to us in writing directly,” said Kahn.

In addition to publishing this apology, Twala agreed to attend the Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centre on a guided visit within 90 days of the settlement. “The SAJBD is committed to finding ways to educate and sensitise wherever possible. Outcomes are far more sustainable in changing attitudes,” said Kahn.

Alana Pugh-Jones Baranov, president of the SAJBD KwaZulu-Natal Council, said, “History shows us that words matter and that hateful and discriminatory language

and rhetoric, if left unchecked, can soon turn into violent action. That is why the KwaZulu-Natal Jewish community is so heartened to learn of the full apology by the EFF leader in our province, Mongezi Twala, for his inflammatory and dangerous public comments in 2024.

“Our political leaders have an even greater responsibility to model the values of equality, dignity and freedom for all as enshrined in our country’s Constitution and cannot be above the law. We wish to thank the Equality Court and the SAJBD national office for their work on this case, and hope that Twala’s upcoming visit to the Durban Holocaust & Genocide Centre will be a positive learning experience about the dangers of where hate speech and prejudice can lead.”

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## Life under fire for South African *olim* in northern Israel

CLAUDIA GROSS

The call between *oleh* Kenny Struwig and the SA Jewish Report begins like any other interview. A greeting, a check on the sound, a polite apology. Then, in the background, a low boom rolls across the line. It won't be the last.

For South African *olim* like Struwig living in northern Israel, war is not an abstract headline. It's the sound that interrupts a sentence, the room you move to without thinking, and the silence that follows an explosion.

Struwig lives on Kfar Giladi, a kibbutz a few kilometres from Kiryat Shmona, one of the most heavily targeted areas in the north. "It's pretty much all day, every day," he says. "Rockets going over, aircraft infiltrations with drones."

His children, aged 13 and 16, no longer attend regular school. "They're doing a lot of Zoom training," he says. "They're pretty much in the house most of the day." When the siren sounds, there is no debate. "You just go into one of the safe rooms and wait," he says.

"Two minutes, maybe 10 minutes. Then you go back to what you were doing."

That routine, repeated dozens of times, has reshaped daily life. What once felt urgent now feels ordinary. "It's become very normalised," Struwig says. "You just carry on as if nothing is wrong." That normalisation becomes clear during the interview. A siren sounds in the distance. He pauses, listens, then continues speaking. Moments later, another noise cuts through.

"That's a rocket going over now," he says. There is a brief silence. Then a distant boom. "You'll hear the explosion," he adds. The conversation continues.

Struwig explains how the threat isn't only from incoming rockets, but also from outgoing fire. Tanks and artillery stationed nearby fire into southern Lebanon throughout the day and night. "The whole house shakes," he says. "Windows have already been broken."

Sleep is fragmented. Silence is temporary. The body keeps score. "My ears are sore all the time," he says. Despite this, he still goes to work at an essential factory about 30 minutes away. The roads are quieter than usual. "I choose to go in sometimes," he says. "But it's unsafe."

The danger isn't theoretical. Rockets aren't always intercepted. "One fell about 100 metres from me," he says, recalling the time he was driving when a siren went off, he had to quickly pull over, and the nearest place was a cemetery, where he hid until it was safe to leave.

He speaks about shrapnel scattered across the kibbutz after interceptions. "We go around and pick it up," he says. Nearby towns have been hit. A young woman from his kibbutz was killed when a rocket struck near her. Another man died in a separate incident. "Everyone knew them," Struwig says.

Loss sits close, even when unseen. "You don't believe it could actually happen," he says. The emotional impact is harder to measure. "There's a lot of hidden trauma," he says. "People are more impatient. More argumentative."

Family life is affected in quiet ways. "I'm more overprotective," he says, describing differences between himself and his Israeli-born wife. Their daughter, now in the army, returns home on weekends when she can. She is training as a helicopter technician and her routine involves long, uncertain journeys across a country at war.

Yet, despite everything, Struwig doesn't speak

about leaving. His reasons are layered. His children have grown up in Israel. Their lives are rooted there. He also speaks about what he has seen the country do for its citizens. "They relocated tens of thousands of people from the north," he says.

As the interview continues, more sirens sound in surrounding areas. The rhythm of attack and interception continues in the background. "This is what you're hearing all the time now," he says.

Further north, Moran Kurland Vasebali describes a different but connected reality. She lives on Kibbutz



Moran Kurland Vasebali with her children

Manara, on the border with Lebanon, where she was raised by her South African-born parents. "I grew up with rockets over my head," she says. "But it's never been as tough as it is now, especially as a mom."

She has two young children. Michael is nearly three, Tamara just over a year old. Her family's life has been repeatedly disrupted. After the war in Gaza began, they were evacuated for more than a year. "That's something that's never happened here," she says.

When they returned, much of the kibbutz was destroyed. "Seventy-five percent of the buildings were hit," she says. Public spaces were damaged. Infrastructure was gone. Many residents didn't return. "Only 60% came back," she says.

Her own extended family was deeply affected. The homes of her sister, parents, and brother were all hit. Despite this, she chose to return. "Something told me in my heart this is my home," she says.

That choice requires constant adjustment. Her husband is part of the kibbutz first response team. She often manages alone with the children. They have created emergency plans for different scenarios. "If something happens, I know exactly what to do with the kids," she says.

These plans include coded messages, prepared bags, and decisions about when to hide or flee. At the same time, daily life continues in unexpected ways. She describes sitting with her son and watching an interception in the sky. He thought it was a star. When she explained it was a rocket, he became curious. "He asks me to show him rockets," she says.

Childhood adapts to its environment. There are moments of loss that are harder to explain. When her mother's home was destroyed, there was little left to recover. "Everything was burnt," she says. Her young son has never seen the house where she grew up.

Still, she speaks about community with warmth.



Kenny Struwig and his sons in the bomb shelter outside their house

"It's like a big family," she says of the kibbutz. Support has come from outside as well, particularly from South African Jewish organisations. She describes this connection as a second family.

There is also frustration. She expresses disappointment with the government's response and the slow pace of rebuilding. But her outlook remains forward-facing. She speaks about peace, about raising her children where she was raised, and about not letting fear dictate life.

"It's a choice," she says. "The choice is not to let fear take over our decisions."

Back on the call with Struwig, the sounds of war continue. More distant booms. More pauses. "This was actually quiet," he says. For those living it, this is what quiet now sounds like.

# Chipkin drives legal overhaul to end political jobs for pals

CLAUDIA GROSS

South Africa has quietly passed one of the most far-reaching reforms of its democratic era, shifting power away from politicians and into the hands of administrators in a move that could reshape how the government functions for decades.

Johannesburg political analyst Ivor Chipkin is one of the key figures behind advancing the reform that President Cyril Ramaphosa signed into law on 26 March and which was gazetted on 1 April.

It is called the Public Service Amendment Act and removes key powers from ministers and other members of the political executive, limiting their control over appointments in government departments. For many analysts, it represents a decisive break from a system that enabled political interference, patronage, and, ultimately, state capture.

Chipkin worked closely with government on this reform, guiding it through the legislative process. He engaged members of Parliament, trade unions, civil society, and other stakeholders to explain the Act's purpose and gain support for it.

Chipkin told the *SA Jewish Report* that "Essentially what the Act does is remove powers from the political executive with regard to core administrative issues. It takes away the authority of ministers over recruitment and operational decisions inside departments."

That change, he said, marks "a major retreat of politicians from interference in the day-to-day life of government departments".

The legislation was passed by Parliament and approved by the National Council of Provinces in November 2025, completing a process that gained momentum after the emergence of coalition politics following the 2024 elections.

Despite its scope, the Act has attracted limited public attention. Chipkin attributes this to a broader lack of interest in how government administration works. "The mechanics of how government functions are often seen as tedious," he said. "As a result, they don't receive the attention they deserve."

Yet the implications are significant. By separating political authority from administrative control, the law aims to professionalise the public service and restore the constitutional principle that officials should serve the state, not a political party.

The reform comes in the wake of widespread findings that state capture was enabled by a politicised public service. Yoliswa Makhasi, a research fellow at

the New South Institute, said the system had been "weakened, politicised, and stripped of professional integrity".

"Appointments were politicised, prioritising loyalty over competence," she said. "The constitutional separation between politics and administration was blurred due to political overreach." She said the amended Act signalled "a commitment to a shift from a politicised administration to a professional, merit-based, accountable public service".

At its core, the legislation attempts to address a structural problem that has shaped South Africa's governance since 1994: the close link between political power and access to state resources.

In academic work co-authored by Chipkin, the political system is described as one in which access to the state has been mediated through the ruling party, which effectively acted as a gatekeeper to jobs, contracts, and influence.

Chipkin argues that by limiting political control over appointments, the Act will "restrict quite dramatically one of the major avenues to state capture".

"It's going to change the way in which people rise to positions of power and how they hold onto that power," he said.

The political dynamics behind the passage of the Act are also revealing. The African National Congress (ANC) supported the Bill throughout its journey in Parliament and provincial legislatures. The Democratic Alliance backed it nationally, although its Western Cape leadership opposed it, citing concerns about losing control over provincial administration.

Chipkin said this tension reflects a broader dilemma that political parties face. "There is a temptation, especially for parties coming into power, to want control over the administration so they can implement their programmes," he said. "But that is precisely the



Ivor Chipkin

logic that led to the politicisation of the public service in the first place."

He added that the ANC's support for the Bill may have been influenced by the realities of coalition politics. "I think they recognise that their time as a dominant party is ending," he said. "This law, in the short term, protects their people from being replaced by new political actors."

The process was not without resistance. Chipkin said opposition came from unexpected quarters, including from within government itself, where there were attempts to halt or delay the legislation. He and his colleagues spent months gaining the support of lawmakers, civil society, and trade unions.

One key breakthrough was securing the backing of trade union federation Cosatu, which represents many public servants. "We did a lot of work explaining that the Bill addresses structural issues that make life difficult for public servants," he said.

Outside government, responses to the Act have been cautiously optimistic. Terence Corrigan of the Institute of Race Relations said the law creates "the possibility of shifting the public service towards one operating according to a professional internal culture that values merit and ethical conduct".

However, he warned that change is not guaranteed. "After 30 years of deliberate politicisation, it's an open question whether the change in the law will impact behaviour," he said. "Unless there is a willingness to

implement the letter and spirit of the law, it may not have much impact."

Ray Hartley, a political analyst and former editor of the *Sunday Times*, described the Act as "a long overdue change aimed at preventing political appointments to roles that require technical and administrative skills". He said it should "strengthen the public service and guard against state capture and the deployment of incompetent cadres".

But he also highlighted risks. "There is the danger that politicians will still influence appointments indirectly," he said. "There is also the danger that new ministers will inherit administrators who were politically appointed and be unable to remove them."

For Makhasi, the success of the reform depends on implementation. "It is crucial that regulations are issued and that the reforms are prioritised across the state," she said. "If implementation is delayed, departments will continue with old practices, and the public may conclude that nothing has changed."

The broader question is whether the Act can restore public trust in government. Trust in state institutions is fragile after years of corruption scandals and governance failures. Analysts say that rebuilding confidence will require not only legal reform, but visible improvements in performance.

Corrigan said trust would depend on outcomes. "Confidence is earned through performance," he said.

Chipkin agrees, but believes the legislation creates the conditions for change. By insulating the public service from political pressure, he argues, the law could enable a more stable and capable administration, better able to deliver services and resist corruption. "This is about changing the system itself," he said. "It's about creating a public service that works according to professional principles, not political loyalty."

For now, the legislation marks a turning point. Whether it delivers on its promise will depend on what happens next in government departments across the country.

## Extremist, antisemitic content unchecked on Instagram

GRACE GILSON – JTA

White supremacist networks, terror group supporters, and Nazi merchandise vendors have gone largely unchecked on Instagram amid weakened content moderation by its parent company Meta, according to a new analysis by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

Instagram failed to remove 93% of hateful and extremist content reported by the ADL's researchers, a figure the watchdog said demonstrated a "systemic failure" to protect users, according to the report published on Wednesday.

The report comes more than a year after Meta Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg announced the company would do away with its fact-check programme and stop using automation to detect and remove hate speech.

"Instagram is developing into a hub for hate and antisemitism, and our research demonstrates this clearly," Jonathan Greenblatt, the chief executive and national director of the ADL, said in a statement. "Meta's moderation rollback has created a permissive environment where extremists thrive, bad actors turn Instagram's own features into amplification tools for hate, and, as a result, vulnerable communities suffer."

While Elon Musk's decision to permit formerly banned extremist account-holders to return to X has made his platform the most prominent avatar of social media's abandonment of moderation, Meta has undergone a similar shift more recently.

Meta still doesn't allow "organisations or individuals that proclaim a violent mission or are engaged in violence to have a presence on our platforms", according to the company's community standards, which also

say it removes "dehumanising speech" and "harmful stereotypes". But it has also scaled back its capacity to enforce the rules.

The changes, which Zuckerberg billed as a "trade-off" between catching hateful content and reducing the number of "innocent people's posts and accounts that we accidentally take down", drew criticism from Jewish groups, including the World Jewish Congress and CyberWell.

Of the 253 posts that the ADL's Center on Extremism reported earlier this year, Instagram removed only 11 accounts and eight posts, according to the new report, titled "How Meta's Content Moderation Changes Risk Turning Instagram into a Hub for Hate". In 20 cases, the watchdog said that Instagram said it lacked the bandwidth to review the reports.

The report also found a number of accounts that were linked or indirectly linked to terrorist groups, including at least 23 that spread Islamic State and Al-Qaeda propaganda, as well as 33 accounts with direct or indirect connections to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

While Meta has maintained a ban on official accounts run by Nick Fuentes, the avowed white supremacist and antisemite at the centre of a growing divide in the Republican party, the ADL study found that his content is shared on the platform by 105 Instagram accounts affiliated with Fuentes' Groyper movement, which combined had more than 1.4 million followers as of January 2026.

Oren Segal, the senior vice president for counter-extremism and intelligence for the ADL, said the "decision to gut content moderation puts Instagram at risk of being a megaphone for the world's most dangerous antisemites and extremists".



Adv. Dainius Ambrazaitis  
IN IURE Law Firm, Lithuania

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# South African Jewish Report

## Holocaust's historical importance

In a discussion about the education department's plans to condense the hours school children spend learning about the Holocaust in history classes, I was told by a smart 20-year-old that it was necessary.

His reasoning was clear; why should all South Africans be learning about something so European? We aren't living in Europe, we are Africans, and our curriculum should focus on this continent, he said. He believed that while it was necessary for us Jews to learn about it, the Holocaust wasn't that relevant to South Africa and Africa.

We should rather be focusing on the Tutsi genocide by Hutus in Rwanda, and, obviously, what happened during apartheid here. He went on to say there are many important historic episodes from all over this continent that are generally ignored, and they would help us understand Africa and its peoples.

I understand the concept of Africanising the curriculum. Perhaps we do learn too much Shakespeare, and learning about the French Revolution in such depth may not be as relevant to us here on the southern tip of Africa.

However, the Holocaust happened in our very recent history. Yes, it happened to us, as Jews, and so is particularly significant for us. But it is vital for all the world to learn about it.

The Holocaust was a deliberate, systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million human beings who happened to be Jewish by the Nazi regime and its allies. It was an evolving process that took place throughout Europe between 1933 and 1945. What happened to Jews then was a genocide, and the origin of this hateful word that is now bandied around by our enemies. It was based simply on the hatred of Jews.

And this hatred had a slow but insidious growth. It didn't start out violently. It started out with the constant and intensifying dehumanising of Jewish people. It started with the slow exclusion of Jews and then boycotting of Jewish businesses and public humiliation. It started with targeting and harassing Jewish individuals. We were seen as being "other". We were to blame for everything bad in the world. We were seen as inferior, vermin even.

This was not some historic European event, it was the worst atrocity in human history in terms of scale, intent, and method. So, we all need to learn just how bad humanity can get, and the only way to learn what not to do is to know what has been done in our history.

Generally, people learn from the things they did wrong, not what they did right. We say we learn from our mistakes, only the Holocaust was no mistake. It was a deliberate, strategic extermination of six million of our people. The idea was to rid the world of Jews. And, more than 80 years later, following a slow and steady growth, there are still fewer Jews in the world than there were before the Holocaust.

The Nazis were not fighting an armed enemy. They were annihilating unarmed civilians, including men, women, and children, just because they were born Jewish or had one Jewish grandparent.

Today, it is even more important for people to learn about this as we witness a massive rise in antisemitism. I didn't believe that in my lifetime we would be experiencing what we are in the world today. I assumed the world had learnt from the Holocaust what antisemitism can do and why it is unconscionable. However, antisemitic incidents have surged globally since 7 October in 2023. And last year, in 2025, there was the highest antisemitic fatality rate in more than 30 years.

The worst attacks happened in Sydney; Washington DC and Boulder, Colorado in the United States; and Manchester in England. The last time we had such deadly attacks was in 1994 with the bombing of the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, which killed 85 people.

Now, in the week of Yom HaShoah, when we hear the horrific testimonies of our remaining Holocaust survivors, we must really consider what we – as a world of nations – must do to stop antisemitism in its tracks before it gets worse.

Consider what led up to the Holocaust. Boycotting of Jewish-owned businesses. We are seeing this right here in South Africa. Philip Krawitz and Cape Union Mart are just the tip of the iceberg and the most prominent case. Many of our haters would love to see all Jewish businesses closed. Stand up for being Jewish too often and see what happens ...

Jewish people should never have to hide their Jewishness, but I know of parents who stop their daughters and sons from wearing their *Magen Davids* on university campus or when they go out. They are afraid they will be harassed for simply being Jews. Only, today they are likely to be called "Zio-Nazis", which is simply a cover for antisemitism.

In the story about the people who stood up to the University of Cape Town (UCT) about conferring an honorary doctorate on Gift of the Givers' Dr Imtiaz Sooliman, they are being harassed for standing up for Jews. They questioned UCT for recognising a man who has been outrageously antisemitic. For that, they are being lambasted. Can people not see how dangerous this is?

Calling a veteran opera singer, Aviva Pelham, who is not a political being, an "ugly Jewess" and "a whore"? That is horrific, but too many people in our midst think nothing of this.

I am horrified by the antisemitism I see on social media. It seems to get worse every day.

As to whether this will be impacted by how many hours school children study the Holocaust, I don't know. But I do believe every single person in the world needs to learn about what happened when human beings lost their sense of humanity, and how easily this can happen.

As we commemorate Yom HaShoah this week, we need to be clear. We said "Never again" after the Holocaust, but then 1 200 people in Israel were brutally murdered and thousands more injured on 7 October. Israel is fighting for its survival, as are we. We must ensure we do not let antisemitism continue unabated. We have to stand up for who we are.

**Shabbat shalom!**

**Peta Krost**  
Editor



## Time to pack your bags, Roelf

OPINION

HOWARD SACKSTEIN



A few weeks ago, during welcome cocktails for the new United States Ambassador, Brent Bozell III at the American Consulate in Johannesburg, I bumped into former Minister of Constitutional Affairs and chief negotiator for the former National Party (NP), Roelf Meyer. There was no indication at the time that President Cyril Ramaphosa would soon tap Meyer, a trusted confidant, as South Africa's new ambassador to the United States.

The former ambassador to Washington, Ebrahim Rasool, was declared *persona non grata* and expelled by the Trump administration in March 2025 after calling the American president a "supremacist". A month later, Brigadier General Richard Maponyane, the South African military attaché in Washington, was given the boot, followed by Thandile Sunduza, South Africa's Consul-General in Los Angeles, whose accreditation was revoked by the US State Department. By mid-2025, South Africa had no senior diplomats left in the United States.

Knowing that a hostile White House would be reluctant to accede to the appointment of a politically aligned ambassador through an "agrément", Ramaphosa believed he could circumvent the process by appointing a special envoy, which would not require US approval. But the American government refused to grant the presidential appointee, MTN Chairperson Mcebisi Jonas, a visa.

with a long-standing and trusted relationship with Ramaphosa.

At a dinner in Sandton, Meyer once told me how, as a youngster, he had seen his parents reading a newspaper report about David Pratt's failed attempt to assassinate architect of apartheid and then Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd. Meyer had announced to his family that he intended to become prime minister of South Africa one day. With a glint in his eye, he leaned forward and said, "Let's face it, if South Africa hadn't changed, I would have been."

The remark was only partly in jest. Meyer was a rising star in the NP, considered a "verligte Nat", part of the party's more enlightened, reformist wing. In 1986, the lawyer from Humansdorp and Ficksburg was appointed Deputy Minister of Law and Order by Prime Minister PW Botha, before his successor, FW de Klerk, elevated him to the position of Minister of Defence. Meyer struggled to win the support of the *verkrampste* (hardline conservative) generals, and, in May 1992, De Klerk appointed him Minister of Constitutional Affairs, placing him centre stage in negotiations with Nelson Mandela to end apartheid and shape a democratic constitution.

Meyer and Ramaphosa developed a close relationship, often meeting at businessman Sidney Frankel's trout farm for fly-fishing and negotiations.

Meyer once recounted

how, on one occasion, he, an inexperienced fisherman, pierced his hand with a fishing hook. Ramaphosa took a pair of pliers, handed him a glass of whisky, and removed it himself. Legend has it Ramaphosa turned to Meyer and said that he



Howard Sackstein, Michael Judin, and Roelf Meyer at the US Consulate in Johannesburg recently

Ramaphosa arrived for what was widely seen as a humiliating meeting with President Donald Trump at the White House, with no senior diplomats in place and a counterpart angered by South Africa's posture on its white minority and a foreign policy increasingly seen as sympathetic to Iran, driven by its proxies within the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (Dirco).

Relations between the two countries deteriorated rapidly. The United States refused to participate in the G20 Summit in Johannesburg and effectively sidelined South Africa from the 2026 G20 Summit in Miami, Florida.

The arrival of Bozell in South Africa has also been fraught with difficulties. The new ambassador publicly criticised the South African judiciary for failing to classify the chant "Kill the Boer, kill the farmer" as hate speech, prompting a Dirco démarche, or reprimand, of Bozell. African National Congress (ANC) Secretary-General Fikile Mbalula added fuel to the fire by claiming "Bozell arrived drunk and was demarched". At times, the relationship between the two countries has resembled little more than children quarrelling in a schoolyard.

Finding a replacement for Rasool was no easy task. Ramaphosa needed someone comfortable with and capable of defending the ANC's positions on Iran, Russia, Israel, farm murders, Black Economic Empowerment, Afrikaner refugees, and land expropriation, while still being acceptable to Washington, and without the baggage of having publicly criticised Trump in the past.

Prior to this week's appointment of Meyer, several names were floated for the Washington post, including former NP leader Marthinus van Schalkwyk; Justice Deputy Minister and South African Communist Party member Andries Nel; Gerhard Koornhof, son of the late NP Minister Piet Koornhof; and Ayanda Dlodlo, the former Minister of State Security who was sidelined after the 2021 KwaZulu-Natal riots and later exiled to the World Bank.

Meyer, now 78, represents a safe pair of hands, intelligent, measured, and politically seasoned,

had always wanted to hurt the Nats, but perhaps not quite that much. Moments like that cemented the relationship between the two men. Meyer became one of the very few people Ramaphosa truly trusted.

Throughout the Codesa (Convention for a Democratic South Africa) negotiations that horse-traded South Africa's transition to democracy, Ramaphosa and Meyer maintained a crucial back channel to keep the momentum of talks alive. Meyer later described the process as "one of the most successful examples of political negotiation in the world since World War II".

After retiring from politics, Meyer advised on peace processes in places like Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka, Burundi, Kosovo, South Sudan, and Zimbabwe. He and Ramaphosa travelled to Belfast in 1996 to assist in the Irish peace negotiations, sharing lessons from South Africa's transition with Northern Irish leaders.

I once asked Meyer about the prospects for peace between Israelis and Palestinians. He told me peace would be possible only if both sides believed their lives would improve, not deteriorate, after a settlement. At that time, he felt the level of animosity and distrust between the two sides made that belief impossible. People make concessions for the better future of their children, never to place them at risk.

Having helped architect a new future for South Africa, Meyer now takes on the task of rebuilding its fractured relationship with the United States. There may be no one in South African better positioned to take on that arduous challenge.

• Howard Sackstein is chairperson of the SA Jewish Report, but writes in his personal capacity. He has a Bachelor of Arts in Law and International Relations and a Master's in political advocacy and international conflict resolution. He was executive director of the Independent Electoral Commission. Catch him regularly doing political analysis on PowerFM.



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# Dutch couple risked all by saving Jewish children

LEE TANKLE

“Despite my great-grandfather being in hiding, both he and my great-grandmother showed incredible resilience and bravery to get through such a difficult time,” Benayahu Wesseloo told a packed audience at the Yom HaShoah ceremony at King David High School on 14 April.

He was speaking about the consequences of the courageous actions of his great-grandparents, Barend and Lipjke Wesseloo, who saved nine Jewish children in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands during the Holocaust.

“They survived through fear, hunger, and loneliness, and had nobody to trust until they were reunited,” he said. “This piece of history is proof that we all, as individuals and the collective, can change history for the good, and we can make a difference.”

Wesseloo, who has converted to Judaism and is part of the Pretoria Jewish community,

spoke at the first combined Johannesburg and Pretoria Yom HaShoah commemoration. Joining communities, said Gary Nowosenetz, chairperson of the Pretoria Council of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), “is a statement that we’re not separate communities, merely sharing a faith, but one family”.

“The Nazis sought to isolate us, to weaken us, to pick us off one by one. They failed. Those who hate us today ... hope that we will ... retreat into our own corners, into our ghettos, that our bond ... that too, will fail,” he said.

“Family is precisely what is destroyed, name by name, household by household, generation by generation. To remember is to deny that destruction’s final victory,” said Danny Mofsowitz, chairperson of the Gauteng Council of the SAJBD.

Those at the ceremony also heard survivor Wanda Albinska’s story, in particular how her mother, Dr Halina Rotstein, sacrificed herself to save others in the Warsaw Ghetto.

Wesseloo told how both his great-grandparents had difficult childhoods, but despite the hardships they endured, they risked their lives to help those in need.

Once the war was imminent, the pair saw that Jewish people in the Netherlands were the target of the Nazis. They knew this because they recognised the surnames of the people who were taken away or murdered.

“My great-grandmother, being a mother herself, couldn’t stand by and do nothing,” said Wesseloo. “So they decided to join the resistance, opening their home, and ultimately helping nine Jewish children. It wasn’t easy. They received extra food stamps for being part of the resistance, helping sustain the household, but often it wasn’t enough.”

“Some children would stay a few weeks, others a few days, and they sheltered mostly the young. They told the resistance they would have children only of the same age as their



Photos: Neil McCartney

Holocaust survivor Reverend Joseph Matzner

own kids, to avoid being questioned as much as possible. Because they knew if they were caught, they would be executed,” he said.

The first child they saved was the daughter of a rabbi, who was directed to them by the resistance. When this rabbi showed up at their door, all he could muster was “Please save this child”, and then he died.

“She stayed only a few days as the resistance designated the house as one of the first safe stops on the journey to

a safer place,” he said. “As time went by, the family had a sense of thirst, disruption, and fear of detection. So, my great-grandmother instructed the resistance to send at least one child to live with them permanently.”

They were then sent a child with a forged birth certificate, with the name Rob. They instructed the children to refer to him only as a brother. He became the “twin” of one of the children.

Shortly after this, Wesseloo’s great-grandmother gave birth to his grandfather. Being born during the war presented many challenges, including malnutrition, and the baby nearly died.

To save him, his great-grandmother was sent to a nearby town to improve her diet. She and her sister encountered problems with a German patrol along the way and, fearing for their lives, went into hiding overnight, planning to return home to their children the next day. That night, their town and their house were bombed by the Germans, but upon their return home they found the home standing.

“A miracle had happened. A bomb was on their porch and it hadn’t detonated,” said Wesseloo. “Inside, they found all the children, including Rob, as a protective shield over my infant grandfather. Had the bomb exploded, the family could have been killed, five children and Rob, the Jewish child.”

All the time his great-grandmother was looking after the children, his great-grandfather was in hiding. After the Germans had defeated the Dutch in 1940, he went into hiding to avoid being sent to work in German factories like many other Dutch men. For many years of the war, he stayed underground, on farms, in his own attic, and under the stairs. The

children knew they had to hide any evidence of his positions, and they successfully evaded the frequent German inspections.

“Some were not so lucky. My mother’s grandfather, unfortunately, was caught and shot by the Germans after being forced to dig his own grave,” said Wesseloo.

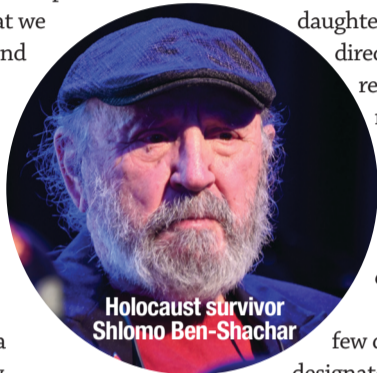
Ten years after the war ended, in 1955, the family relocated to South Africa, where they built a life for themselves and their families. “They both helped establish a carpentry business and had more children, survived cancer, and lived

vibrant lives, despite the effects of the war. On 8 April 1996, they received the award of *Chasidei Umot HaOlam*, or Righteous Among the Nations, from Yad Vashem, for saving Jewish lives in the war,” he said.

The couple lived into their 80s and 90s, saw the birth of 36 grandchildren and 57 great-grandchildren, and Barend lived to see them all.



Holocaust survivor Lyonell Fliss



Holocaust survivor Shlomo Ben-Shachar

## The narrow window of escape

CLAUDIA GROSS

Karen Tolman’s mother and grandmother were on the very last ship of Holocaust-surviving Jews allowed into South Africa in 1938. They were onboard the *Duilio*, which docked in Cape Town. After that, the doors to Jews closed, she told the Yom HaShoah commemoration at the Pinelands Cemetery on 14 April.

The theme of this year’s Cape commemoration was “Seeking Refuge”, and it marked the 90th anniversary of German Jewish refugees arriving in South Africa.

Tolman, a second-generation survivor, spoke of her mother, Inge, who was born in Berlin in 1932. Within a year, the Nazis came to power. “Jews were no longer wanted in Germany,” she said. Her grandfather left for Cape Town in 1937. Her mother and grandmother followed.

She spoke of how her mother survived, but the trauma remained. “Survival is not the same as healing,” Tolman said. Her mother never spoke about her early childhood. The impact surfaced decades later. Watching the film adaptation of Marcus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* at a cinema

triggered a severe reaction in her mother, who was affected and deeply upset by images of Nazi brutality on screen. Yet her story also carried hope. “Refuge isn’t just a place, it’s a choice made,” she said.

Daniel Gruzd, the head student at Herzlia High School, reflected on the idea of a closing window. In the 1930s,

a narrow window allowed some Jews to escape. “This was a window of time, narrow, urgent, and closing fast,” he said. He warned of another window now closing. The window of living

memory. “We are the last generation that will have the chance to sit across from a survivor,” he said.

At the same time, denial and misinformation are spreading online. “We are the first generation for whom antisemitism arrives not in pamphlets but in notifications,” he said. His message was clear. “The window of memory is in our hands now, and we don’t get to look away.”

Survivor Miriam Herzfeld, who was born in Germany in 1923, described her early life before the Nazis’ rise to power. In a recorded testimony, she spoke about the gradual tightening of restrictions. “Nobody wanted refugees. You couldn’t go to any other country,” she said. Her family eventually reached South Africa. “We were very happy to get away from Germany,” she said.

Her account reflected a broader reality. In the 1930s, Jewish families across Europe faced impossible decisions. They had to choose whether to leave everything behind or risk staying. Many who tried to flee found borders closed.

Simone Sulcas, chairperson of the Cape South African Jewish Board of Deputies, which organised the commemoration, described how persecution began with words and laws. “The victims did not die because of what they had done, but because of who they were,” she said.

The theme of refuge, Sulcas said, pointed to a time before the camps. Families sat around kitchen tables asking questions no family should ever



Lina Kantor kindling lights at the ceremony, assisted by her son, Gary Kantor

Photos: Yolande Kreitzer Keys

have to ask. “Do we leave? Where can we go? Can we bear to leave our parents behind?”

Some reached Cape Town. In 1936, the SS Stuttgart arrived carrying Jewish refugees. They had already lost their livelihoods and security. They arrived with a simple hope. “Will you let us be human again?”

Not all were accepted. Immigration restrictions soon tightened. For many, the window closed. Those who remained in Europe faced deportation and murder.

Sulcas’s address drew a distinction between two groups of survivors.

Some survived because they left early. Others survived ghettos and camps. “Together, their stories form a single torn yet unbroken thread of Jewish life,” she said.

Cape Town became part of that thread. There, refugees rebuilt their lives. They brought culture, scholarship, and a deep commitment to justice. Their descendants are part of the community today.



Daniel Gruzd



Simone Sulcas, Ryan Bloch, and Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein

# Fighting for the voiceless in SA's human-trafficking underworld

CLAUDIA GROSS

Human trafficking isn't confined to distant borders or shadowy international networks. It's happening in South African cities, harbours, and in communities where most people would least expect it. Children are disappearing and women are being exploited, yet the issue remains largely invisible.

For Madeleine Hicklin, a Jewish Democratic Alliance Member of the Gauteng Legislature, this invisibility is part of the problem. "Nobody talks about anything to do with sex trafficking as we know it," she says. "Kids disappear out of South Africa quicker than you can blink."

For Hicklin, fighting trafficking has become a personal mission. She got involved because a close friend, police officer Delene Grobler-Koonin, worked on cases involving child exploitation and trafficking.

But Grobler-Koonin was killed in the line of duty in 2020 while working on an operation with the Hawks elite investigating unit.

Hicklin describes her as "the sister I never had" and has tried to ensure her friend's commitment in this battle was not in vain. In her honour, Hicklin is holding a fundraising morning in Johannesburg to raise awareness about human trafficking, at which a friend of Grobler-Koonin will speak. Heila Niemand, Gauteng Commander of the SA Police Service's Family Violence, Child Protection and Sexual Offences Unit, will share her knowledge at the EmpowerHER Brunch on 25 April.

"I want members of society to be more aware of the dangers of human trafficking and child sex exploitation and so this is part of my effort to continue Dalene's legacy," Hicklin told the *SA Jewish Report*.

She says that recent figures point to a complex and evolving crisis. In 2023/24, authorities identified 234 trafficking victims, most of them women and children. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) report rising cases, with one hotline recording a 30% increase in 2024. The majority of victims are trafficked into the commercial sex trade, while others are forced into labour.

Trafficking hotspots include major urban centres such as Cape Town, Johannesburg, and Durban, while provinces like Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, and the Eastern Cape remain high-risk areas for children.

But statistics only scratch the surface.

Hicklin describes visiting small harbours in the Western Cape, including Hout Bay and Saldanha Bay, where she encountered a reality she says few South

Africans are aware of. "We were actually threatened to get out of the area," she recalls. "There were little boats in the harbour. On those little boats are children that are used in the sex trafficking industry."

According to her, these children are kept in unimaginable conditions. "There's six inches of air between the water in the boat and them getting out of the boat," she says.

"They are kept there to be trafficked."

Despite the severity of the problem, funding and coordination to address it remain major obstacles.

Government support for anti-trafficking efforts is limited and difficult to track, as it is absorbed into broader budgets within the Department of Social Development and policing structures. Hicklin says this lack of transparency has real consequences.

"There is no direct money allocation to assist NGOs and non-profit organisations working in the human-trafficking space," she says.

"Without government funding, without provincial funding, they are literally unable to keep their doors open."

Many organisations rely heavily on private donors to survive. As economic pressures increase, this funding pool becomes more strained, placing further pressure on stretched services.

At the same time, Hicklin argues, the crime isn't being treated with sufficient urgency. "Gender-based violence is a buzzword that trips off people's tongue," she says. "We've had thousands of commitments, and they do nothing."

She points to the gap between policy and implementation as one of the most significant challenges. "It's easier to pay lip service than to do something," she says. "There is no will to address social ills."

This gap is particularly evident in the treatment of survivors. NGOs have increasingly adopted trauma-informed, survivor-centred approaches, focusing on long-term rehabilitation and reintegration. However, Hicklin believes these models aren't adequately understood or supported by government structures. "I don't even think they are listened to," she says.

One organisation working to fill this gap is Brave to Love, a South African NGO that supports survivors of sex trafficking. Its programmes include outreach to women in prostitution, coordinated rescue efforts with law enforcement, and long-term residential care that provides counselling, education, and job training.

"They are making restoring dignity and human

rights the core values of their efforts," Hicklin says, "and those are my core values."

Her fundraiser is to raise money for Brave to Love.

Hicklin personally contributed money to get the initiative off the ground. "I want to raise as much money as I humanly possibly can," she says.

She says that her motivation is rooted in both the loss of her friend and her Jewish identity. She speaks of *tikkun olam*, the Jewish principle of repairing the world, as a guiding force in her work. "I am a woman working towards the repair of our imperfect world through compassion, care, and a drive to make life better for the voiceless," she says.

Beyond funding and awareness, Hicklin emphasises the need for better data and coordination. Currently, there is no centralised system tracking trafficking survivors or services, making it difficult to fully understand the scale of the crisis.

She also highlights the global dimension of trafficking, noting that victims are not only exploited locally but also trafficked across borders, into Africa and Europe.

At the same time, the nature of trafficking is evolving, with increasing links to online exploitation and organised criminal networks. This makes prevention and enforcement more complex, requiring new strategies and greater collaboration between government, law enforcement, and civil society.

Despite the challenges, Hicklin remains cautiously hopeful. "South Africans are resilient people," she says. "And as Jews, we are a really resilient people."

She believes that community involvement will be critical in addressing the crisis, particularly through initiatives that raise awareness and strengthen support for organisations working in the field.

In a country facing many competing crises, human trafficking remains one of the least visible yet most urgent. Addressing it will require not only policy and funding, but also a willingness to confront uncomfortable realities and act on them.



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## Letters

### SOOLIMAN DOCTORATE ARTICLE WAS BRAVE

I was shocked and outraged to note that the University of Cape Town (UCT) saw fit to honour Dr Imtiaz Sooliman, founder of the Gift of the Givers, as reported in "UCT to honour Sooliman, who describes himself as '5 000% antisemitic'" on 27 March. It awarded him an honorary doctorate of philosophy for the humanitarian work he and his organisation have done and continue to do communally.

There can be no doubt that this work is extraordinary and deserves applause and recognition. However, it is overshadowed by Sooliman's support of antisemitic and anti-Jewish rhetoric, which cannot be supported on any level.

I acknowledge the Jewish academics at UCT who raised their voices opposing this move. Unfortunately, they were in the minority, and the award was bestowed on Dr Sooliman, amid much vocal support and acclaim.

I submit that it is appropriate to recognise the brave way the *SA Jewish Report* exposed this travesty and brought it into the public domain. As Jews unashamed of our heritage and beliefs, we have an obligation to raise our voices loudly against each rising step of antisemitism and intolerance, to fight its menacing flames, which unfortunately since the 7 October tragedy have increased ferociously in practically every country to levels never seen before in our lifetime.

– Leslie Kobrin, Victory Park, Johannesburg

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# First responders rush towards disaster instead of shelter

LEE TANKLE

Rather than running away from disaster and devastation, first responders across Israel run towards the danger, wanting to help in any way they can. And when the war with Iran began on 28 February, they were ready to risk their lives to save others.

"I had a bag packed with essentials for an extended shift and possible sleepovers. So within 10 minutes, I was on my way to the Magen David Adom [MDA] Blood Services Center in Ramla," South African *oleh* Laurence Seeff said. He has been working with Israel's national emergency medical, disaster, ambulance, and blood bank service for nearly 10 years.

He knew as soon as the warning siren sounded at 09:00 that Saturday morning that he would be mobilised. "I immediately left with my team to head a blood drive in a predetermined safe area in Modi'in," he said. "During missile attacks, we took cover on the highway and between buildings in residential areas. We spent nine hours taking blood to meet emergency blood stock quotas."

As soon as the declaration of a special state of emergency on the home front was made on that



Saturday, MDA raised its readiness to peak levels. Approximately 2 000 MDA ambulances and mobile intensive care units (MICUs), 800 emergency motorcycles, and 700 rapid response vehicles were fully manned. All 38 000 of the organisation's volunteers and employees were prepared to provide a swift and efficient medical response to any need.

Terry Goodman, a South African-born paramedic who has been working with MDA since 2001, is also no stranger to war conditions and going into danger zones. She said her first shift after the Iran war began was extremely stressful as everyone was running

into bomb shelters, whereas she and her colleagues had to leave them to go treat patients.

During Operation Lion's Roar, MDA teams treated 2 503 casualties – including 594 from rocket fire – among them 23 fatalities, 23 in serious condition, 38 in moderate condition, 510 in mild condition, and 586 suffering from anxiety. More than 1 300 people were injured en route to protected areas, including three fatalities, six in serious condition, 12 in moderate condition, and 1 302 in mild

condition.

Seeff explained that what goes through his mind when approaching a site struck by an Iranian missile isn't very different from "normal" callouts. "Every first response call is different, usually with sketchy details, meaning that I don't know what to expect on scene. The main difference is mentally recapping safety protocols regarding potential explosive materials, electricity and gas hazards, and emergency vehicle traffic considerations," he said. "Missile attacks add extra concerns of imminent danger, to me personally and to my teams."

Being extremely busy doesn't leave much time for processing, he said. "But sleep is more scarce, loud noises seem louder, and checking the well-being of family and friends in strike areas is an additional overhead during strikes".

"There are no difficult emotions for me yet because we are still in it and haven't truly comprehended it all," said Goodman.

Her biggest challenge during the war was transporting an intubated patient needing urgent brain surgery from a hospital in the centre of the country to one on the northern border, an hour-and-a-half drive, all while rockets were still coming in.



"We have to keep driving and hope for the best. We wait two minutes after the sirens go off, hear the explosions, and then leave the shelters to [attend to] patients, when the rest of the country waits at least 10 minutes for the orders of the army command centre to send release messages," she said.

"When arriving on strike locations, we first assess how badly the buildings are damaged and then try to get everyone who can walk out of the building. After that, we go in pairs from top floor to bottom looking for the injured and trapped."

Seeff said that, in his role at the MDA blood bank as a driver, instructor, and blood drive supervisor, he also serves as a first responder, carrying emergency equipment in his car and ambulance. Most of his calls have been routine, as his area in central Israel has remained largely missile-free. "There's an increase in trauma cases caused by the rush to reach bomb shelters and safe spaces, especially among the elderly."

But he will never forget this year's Pesach seder night when he was on a voluntary ambulance shift. He was dispatched to attend to a week-old unresponsive baby, and sirens and missile interceptions overhead made driving extremely dangerous.

"Arriving back at the ambulance station, being able to tell my colleagues that the baby survived, and describing the parents' relief is the moment that I realised how I had made a difference," he said.

The hardest part of the job for him emotionally

is attending to the elderly and those injured while rushing to a safe area. "Experiencing their panic and helplessness hits home really hard for me. I'm there to assist medically only and then leave knowing that I hardly relieved their perpetual fear and panic," he said.

The biggest logistical challenge for responders is getting to the scenes of a disaster, or transporting patients, as other drivers panic and drive dangerously fast during alerts and sirens. They may stop, slam on the brakes, decide their chosen location isn't suitable, and then pull out into fast-moving traffic. Being caught out in the field during sirens and trying to find a protected area can be nerve-racking.

"If we're transporting a patient and sirens go off, a patient who cannot walk stays in the ambulance with a paramedic, and the rest of the team leaves and are on the floor outside for two minutes, and then we continue. So we try to get to the closest hospital as fast as possible in between sirens," said Goodman.

"Of course I worry about my safety; the shrapnel could fall on my team or me. That's the biggest concern. When patients are in their most vulnerable situations and see us, they feel relief that we are with them. Most of our work is psychologically helping the patient with what they're going through. That is what I love about my job."

## Award-winning chef's passion for food began on the *chaggim*

CLAUDIA GROSS

When his name was called at the Eat Out Woolworths Restaurant Awards, Aren Pollack didn't move. He stayed seated, unsure if he had heard correctly, until those around him urged him to go to the stage.

In that instant, a long-held dream became real. Pollack, 25, head chef at Embarc Restaurant in Parkhurst, Johannesburg, was named the Eat Out Rising Star.

"I wasn't actually sure that I got called," he said of the award ceremony at Cape Town's Baxter Theatre on 23 March. "Everyone told me to 'Get up. Get on stage.'"

This award recognises emerging talent in South Africa's restaurant industry and these awards are considered the 'Oscars' of the South African culinary scene, serving as the premier benchmark for excellence in the local hospitality industry.

For Pollack, it marked both a personal milestone and a collective achievement. "It's an individual win, but it's actually a whole team," he says. "It's not just one person in the kitchen every day."

Pollack's start in cooking wasn't conventional. As a child, he struggled to fit into the traditional school system. His parents recognised this early and moved him to a smaller, more creative environment. "It really nurtured kids' individual talents," he says. "I was allowed the space to find out what I really love. And that is cooking."

Food had always been central in his life. Growing up in a traditional Jewish home, meals and celebrations were closely linked. Family gatherings, especially around *chaggim*, centred on shared dishes and time together. "All Jewish holidays are centred around food," he says. "It's always been a safe space and something that brings people together."

He recalls the anticipation before these occasions as clearly as the meals themselves. "It was always: what are we making? Food was always the first thought," he says. This early connection shaped not only his career choice, but his understanding of food as something with meaning beyond the plate.

After deciding to pursue cooking professionally, Pollack enrolled at the Prue Leith Culinary Institute in Centurion. The three-year course included two six-month internships, both of which exposed him to demanding kitchen environments.

His first placement was at Salsify at the Roundhouse in Cape Town, under chef Ryan Cole. Pollack names Cole as his inspiration and the chef he looks up to most. Although the restaurant environment was intense, it appealed to Pollack "It's a little scary, and you have lots of anxiety, but it really grows you a lot," he says. "I was drawn to the craziness of it."

He later worked at The Test Kitchen Carbon in Johannesburg, before securing an additional internship in France at chef Jan Hendrik van der Westhuizen's Restaurant Jan. On a visit to his brother in Amsterdam, a meal at a restaurant led to an unexpected opportunity. "I loved it so much that I asked for a job," Pollack says.

He went on to work there for two years, gaining more international

experience, before returning to South Africa. Pollack joined Embarc in April last year, stepping into his first leadership role as head chef. The transition brought new challenges. "I've learned a lot about the kitchen and a lot about myself," he says.

At Embarc, he has the freedom to experiment and shape the menu. "I've had a canvas to be as creative as I like," he says. "It's been a great experience." The sense of constant growth remains central to his approach. "It's just a constant evolution," he says. "Never stop pushing."

Winning the Rising Star award has reinforced that direction. Although he insists awards are not his primary motivation, he appreciates the recognition. The work can feel relentless, and sometimes unrewarding. "So it's nice to feel like you've achieved something."

Pollack says the award has energised him, rather than adding pressure. "It's been nice to know that we're going in the right direction," he says. "And that we can keep going on this path and keep getting better."

He points out, though, that he's experienced the broader challenges within the South African restaurant industry, particularly for young chefs. When he returned from the Netherlands, he encountered a different environment. "I had just been in Europe, where it's like the epicentre of food," he says. "Coming here, it was hard."

At one stage, he worked with a team that had no formal training. "Nobody went to culinary school. It was people from fairly underprivileged positions." This meant he had to train staff, share knowledge, and build skills. "It wasn't just about pushing the food that I wanted," he says. "It was about pushing the team with me."

He believes this kind of development is essential, especially in areas where experienced chefs are scarce. "There aren't many great cooks and chefs," he says.

The demands of kitchen work also require a strong internal drive. "There are a lot of days you really don't feel like doing it," he says. "It can feel like a drag sometimes."

For Pollack, passion is what sustains the commitment. "You really have to want to do it," he says.

Looking ahead, his goals are both practical and ambitious. At Embarc, the focus remains on growth and refinement. "It's learning more, experimenting more, teaching more," he says.

On a personal level, he has a clear vision. "The goal has always been to have a restaurant of my own one day," he says.

But for now, he is focused on building experience, both in the kitchen and in managing a business. "This has been a great opportunity to learn about teaching and people management," he says.

Despite his rising profile, Pollack's approach to food remains grounded in simple pleasures. Asked whom he would most like to cook for, his answer is immediate. "It would definitely be Anthony Bourdain," he says.

The meal would be neither elaborate nor formal. Instead, it would reflect his appreciation for honest, flavour-driven food. "I'd love to just cook a great bowl of spicy Thai noodles," he says. "And sit on a little plastic chair on a street corner and enjoy that with him."

It's an image that captures his philosophy. Food is about connection, experience, and shared moments. From family tables during *chaggim*, to professional kitchens, that idea has remained constant. Now, with national recognition behind him, Pollack continues to build on that foundation, one service at a time.



Aren Pollack at work



Laurence Seeff

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

## Standing up to hate speech



This is a week of profound communal significance. On Tuesday evening, we gathered to mark Yom HaShoah and, in doing so, made history. For the first time, the Pretoria and Johannesburg communities came together as one in a unified act of remembrance. It was, in every sense, a deeply poignant occasion.

That this year's international Yom HaShoah theme was "The Family in the Holocaust" made the coming together of our two communities all the more resonant. There could be no more fitting expression of that theme than two previously separate communal events choosing to become one. In his closing remarks, Pretoria South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) chairperson Gary Nowosenetz gave voice to precisely this: that community, at its core, is family.

Next week, we will continue these commemorations with Yom Hazikaron on Tuesday and Yom Ha'atzmaut on Wednesday, a full week that speaks to our community's strength, vibrancy, and enduring commitment to its ideals.

The Holocaust didn't begin in the gas chambers. It began with politicians who divided populations into "us" and "them". It began with intolerance and hate speech going unchallenged. It began when ordinary people grew desensitised, looked away, and allowed the unthinkable to become thinkable. This isn't merely a historical observation. It's a warning that carries urgent and concrete meaning right now.

Two recent incidents have made this painfully clear. The first is, in important ways, a story of accountability. The South African Jewish community received an unreserved apology from Economic Freedom Fighters KwaZulu-Natal Chairperson Mongezi Tswala, following his 2024 threat outside a Durban court to "cut the ugly throats of the Jews". The road to that apology was neither short nor simple. But an unreserved apology, particularly from a senior politician in an otherwise hostile party, is a meaningful and significant outcome. We acknowledge

### ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner



it as such.

The second incident is of an altogether different and deeply disturbing character. The Embassy of Iran in South Africa published a cartoon depicting a Jewish person as a rat, complete with *kippah* and *payot*, riding an eagle, captioned "who holds the reins". This isn't ambiguous. This isn't a matter of interpretation. The depiction of Jewish people as rats is among the most virulent antisemitic imagery in existence, historically and inextricably associated with Nazi propaganda. Holocaust scholars identify this as the "dehumanisation phase", the systematic process by which mass violence is made psychologically possible. The Nazi deployment of this imagery wasn't merely offensive; it was genocidal in its intent and consequence.

That this identical imagery has now been reproduced by the Iranian Embassy isn't coincidental. Iran's regime has a documented and bloody record of targeting Jewish communities globally. The 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, which killed 85 people and injured more than 300, stands as testament to where this language of dehumanisation leads. The visual rhetoric of this cartoon doesn't exist in a vacuum. It exists on a continuum with that violence.

We reject this imagery without equivocation. The SAJBD has lodged a formal complaint with the South African Human Rights Commission and has written directly to President Cyril Ramaphosa, calling for concrete action to be taken against the embassy.

We will not be silenced. We will not accept hate speech directed at our community. We will continue to assert and defend our rights as equal and free citizens of this country, a country we love, and whose founding constitutional values we hold dear. We will never forget. And we will work, without ceasing, to ensure that "Never again" isn't merely a phrase, but a promise.

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

## Babka beats ideology

We stood just off to the side of the post-Shabbat crowd, engaged in polite conversation. It was just after Passover.

Kiddush had returned, along with the quiet excitement of a long-awaited babka reunion. People lingered a little longer than usual, making up for lost time, conversations stretching, plates refilling, children circling with predatory precision.

He was visiting South Africa for the first time. Smart, curious, observant. The kind of person who tries to map what he sees.

He was also, it should be noted, dressed exactly as one might expect: full black Chassidic garb. White shirt. Jacket. The works.

I, on the other hand, was not. Blue shirt. No jacket. And trousers that were ... suspiciously close to chino. My late mother would not have approved.

"How do you identify?" he asked. He clearly wasn't asking for my pronouns.

Tempted as I was to answer, "Charedi trapped in a modern Orthodox body", which sometimes feels accurate, I paused for effect and said instead, "Jewish."

He nodded, unfazed, and moved on. He asked about the community, about other communities, about whether there was a pattern, a symmetry, between levels of observance and political views. In other words: are the more religious more right-wing? The less religious more liberal?

It was a familiar framework. Imported. Neat. Convenient. And completely inadequate.

I tried to explain that if he attempted to understand South African Jewry through an American lens, he might miss the point entirely. Here, things are ... less aligned. Less predictable. Occasionally less polished. But also, I would argue, more real.

We don't fit neatly into categories. The same person who will argue passionately for Israel's right to defend itself might also be deeply uncomfortable with aspects of its politics. Someone not fully observant might run a seder with military precision, while someone more observant

### INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



is quietly checking the rugby score under the table – not really true but sounded good at time of writing. A secular Jew might send their child to a religious school. A religious Jew might hold views that don't fit any party line.

And yes, there are even vegans who walk among us. We've never really had the luxury of ideological purity. Living in South Africa, with all its complexity, contradiction, and occasional dysfunction, has forced a kind of pragmatism on us. We engage not because we agree on everything, but because we understand that community comes first. And we do this, if we're honest, with a touch of naivety.

When it comes to Israel, this plays out in a particularly interesting way. Our support is strong, often instinctive. But it isn't always filtered through the ideological battles that dominate elsewhere. We're less interested in where Israel sits politically, and more interested in whether it stands at all.

It's a simpler approach. Simple. But not simplistic. Because in that simplicity lies something quite rare: the ability to hold complexity without needing to resolve it immediately. To live with contradiction. To accept that Jewish identity doesn't have to be squeezed into a single lane. At some point, as the conversation continued, I became aware of the contrast between us again. And it struck me that perhaps that was the point.

We aren't always neat. Or consistent. We don't always present well, sartorially or otherwise. But we tend to show up. We show up to shul, even if it's in a blue shirt. We show up for each other, even when we disagree. We show up for Israel, even when we're not entirely sure how to explain it.

And in a world increasingly obsessed with labels, definitions, and certainty, there's something powerful about a community that's willing to acknowledge that we may not have it all figured out, but we're here. And we're staying for the babka.



Adv. Ernestas Šapalas  
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# Flying solo at 14

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Most Grade 8 boys spend their weekends gaming or watching sport. Fourteen-year-old King David scholar Jesse Abro, however, spends his in the skies above Johannesburg.

Three weeks ago, Abro made his first solo flight, in a two-seater Scheibe SF-25 Motorfalke, a small aircraft that is part plane and part glider. That experience gave him a sense of "insane freedom".

"I've always been interested in flying," says Abro. "Since I was a little child, I've always loved going on commercial planes. I remember always wanting to fly on Mango Airlines when I was younger."

His interest turned into a passion when his grandfather Ronald Woolf booked an introductory flight for him at a flight school as a Barmitzvah present.

"I got the feel of flight training and what it was like to actually fly a plane," Abro says. "That was all the encouragement I needed."

But getting from there to the point of being able to fly solo needed far more than passion.

"I had to read up a lot," he says. "There are about seven subjects to master and seven different books to learn to do the exam for your licence. It's difficult, but at some point, it all seemed to click into place for me." In addition to written exams, he completed a medical assessment and trained under experienced instructors before being

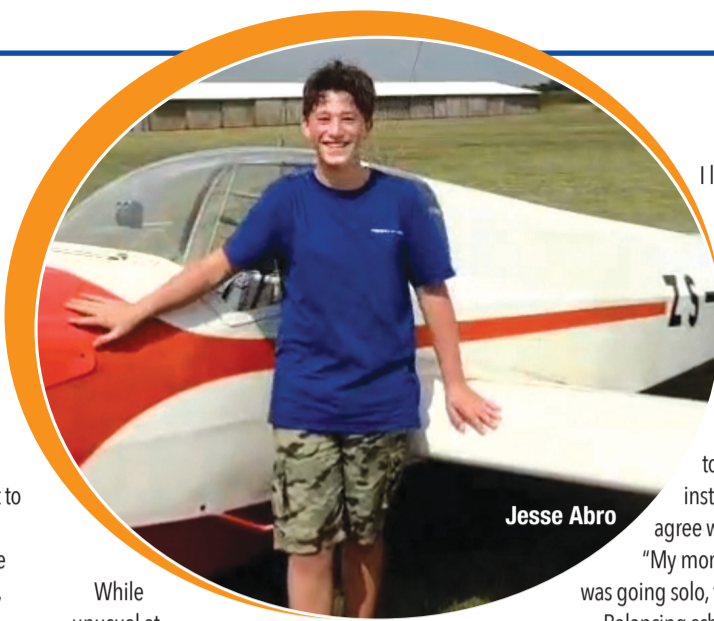
cleared to fly alone.

He trained through the Magalies Gliding Club, becoming one of its youngest members. His progress was steady. "We could only go once a week, sometimes once every two weeks because of the weather," he says. "So I'd been flying for six months by the time I went solo, but I had already done about 17 or 18 hours flying."

Within that structure, Abro chose a more challenging path. "I fly a taildragger, which is a more sophisticated aircraft," he says. "They're more difficult to fly."

The aircraft Abro pilots has an engine, so it can take off on its own like a normal plane, but once in the air, the engine can be switched off so it can glide quietly using air currents. What makes the Motorfalke more challenging is that it is also a taildragger, meaning it has a small wheel at the back instead of the front. This makes it harder to control on the ground, especially during take-off and landing, and requires more precision from the pilot.

"It's a lot harder to manoeuvre," he says, explaining that even small mistakes can throw the plane off balance, making control more demanding than in a standard training aircraft. Most training planes have three wheels arranged like a tricycle, with one wheel at the front and two at the back. This makes them more stable and easier to control, especially on the ground.



Jesse Abro

While unusual at his age, Abro's solo flight was possible because a glider pilot's licence allows students to fly solo from the age of 14, provided they meet strict training, testing, and safety requirements under instructor supervision.

Outside of the formal training, Abro found additional ways to improve. "I bought a flying simulator," he says. "That was really the biggest help, other than flight training itself."

Even before that, his interest in flying was clear. "On my Xbox, I played *Flight Simulator*. It kept me on par with flying in real life."

By the time he was ready to fly solo, fear was no longer a factor. "I was nervous initially," Abro admits. "But when

I lined up for my first solo, I wasn't nervous at all." Instead, the moment was defined by something else entirely. "Freedom and a lot of excitement. And a big sense of reward."

That confidence, he says, is built over time. "You build it in the cockpit," he says. "Everyone realises at a point that you have to take it upon yourself to work towards this dream. And if your instructor agrees you can do it, and you agree with yourself, then you must do it."

"My mom says she loves it," he says, "but when I was going solo, they were very nervous."

Balancing school and aviation remains an important part of the journey. Abro trains primarily over weekends, working his flying schedule around school commitments.

He is also aware of how unusual his achievement is. "I'm very young," he says. "There's maybe a 20% chance there's someone else my age who has gone solo."

His ambitions, however, stretch far beyond this milestone. "I want to continue gliding – you're flying with no engine, you're with the birds, it's insane freedom," he says. "But I also want to progress to other aircraft, learn how to fly everything."

"I'll never stop," he says. "Until I become the best. No matter what."

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