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# South African Jewish Report

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## Ambassador says SA must do U-turn on Iran, Israel

NICOLA MILTZ

US Ambassador to South Africa L Brent Bozell III has warned that the government's stance on Israel and Iran, and its broader foreign policy alignment has created an "impasse" with Washington.

This, he insists, could carry "grave" economic and diplomatic consequences unless the African National Congress-led Government of National Unity fundamentally "rethinks itself".

In an in-depth interview with the *SA Jewish Report*, Bozell made it clear that the US is "dead serious" about its concerns and hopes to see concrete changes from the South African government.

"The government knows we have to have some kind of a restart on this issue before we can say things are back on the right track," Bozell said. "And until these things are resolved to the satisfaction of the president of the United States, we are at an impasse."

However, despite this sentiment, the Minister of International Affairs and Cooperation, Ronald Lamola, last week held a meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in New Delhi. His department reported the discussions focused on strengthening diplomatic relations between the two countries.

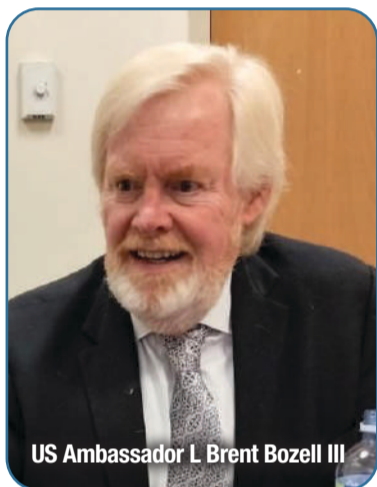
The ambassador expressed deep alarm over South Africa's growing engagement with Tehran, describing Iran as "the pariah of the world".

"At the end of the day, the South African government has to ask itself the degree to which it wants to be in solidarity with a government that eagerly slaughters tens of thousands of its own people in its own streets for having the temerity to oppose the policies," he says.

"Iran is destabilising the world economy

because it wants a nuclear bomb to threaten the world with."

Bozell references South Africa's military cooperation exercises with Iran, China, and Russia as further evidence of Pretoria drifting into hostile geopolitical territory.



US Ambassador L Brent Bozell III

"Your defence minister going to Tehran last summer, Iranians sending battleships to South Africa to participate in military exercises with the Chinese – all these things come in a big bucket," he says.

"South Africa tends to get on the wrong horses."

Bozell, who had a rocky diplomatic debut earlier this year that saw him formally demarched by the South African government over controversial remarks, speaks of his relationship with the government now as "good".

He goes on to say, "I hate the word 'strained' because everybody uses it, but there are challenges. We've had some challenges and we've made clear what our disagreements are. We're talking through them. We're having good discussions."

Washington has previously identified five major concerns it wants South Africa to

address before relations can really improve: the Expropriation Act; broad-based black economic empowerment policies; the "Kill the Boer" chant; rural violence and farm murders; and its foreign policy alignment.

For now, Bozell says, Washington is primarily focused on three issues: rural violence, economic barriers to American investment, and what he repeatedly refers to as South Africa's troubling abandonment of genuine non-alignment.

"The rural violence and attacks on the white minority Afrikaner farmers is of grave concern," Bozell says. "The economic issues, the roadblocks that are stifling investment – [Donald Trump] is a president that cares very much about trade and there are some dramatic trade barriers that have to be addressed. We are having those conversations now and I'm feeling optimistic about this."

Then comes the other issue at the heart of the diplomatic rupture.

"The non-alignment issue," Bozell says, "is one of the top concerns that we have. We have seen South Africa moving in a direction that we find uncomfortable, disconcerting, and unacceptable. We need South Africa to return to a non-aligned status."

At the centre of Washington's frustrations lies Pretoria's hard-line position against Israel and its deepening relationship with Iran, a stance that anti-Israel activists and sections of the ANC alliance applaud, but which Bozell makes clear Washington views as profoundly concerning.

"The South African government knows what our position is vis-à-vis Israel," he says. "Israel is America's staunchest ally and we are going to defend and protect Israel in return."

"There is a terrible streak of antisemitism that to me is scary as

Continued on page 3>>



## Eurovision star's SA debut

See story on page 3

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# Eurovision star serenades SA couple under chuppah

LEE TANKLE

As King David Linksfield alumnus Geena Cohen and Nathanael Stanislas stood under the chuppah in Stellenbosch 18 months ago, Noam Bettan – the Israeli Eurovision 2026 superstar – surprised guests with a moving rendition of *Im Eshkachech Yerushalayim* (*If I forget you Jerusalem*).

but he wanted to make Geena and me happy and he offered to sing the song.”

Geena, who had known Bettan for more than five years at that point, knew he was talented. But when he started singing under the chuppah, she was surprised and overwhelmed as Nathanael had forgotten to tell her it would happen.

“Standing under the chuppah

has the most breathtaking, soulful voice. However, I never actually thought it would be a reality,” she said. “When his name was called, and he started to sing, I was completely shocked in the best way imaginable. The emotion he brought to the ceremony was just pure magic; it genuinely could not have been more perfect.”

Since then, Bettan’s star power has soared. He already had a growing fan base thanks to several successful singles and appearances on Israeli music and talent shows. Songs like *Buba* and tracks from his debut album had received radio play, and he was known among younger Israeli pop audiences.

However, when he won *HaKokhav HaBa* (*Rising Star*), Israel’s Eurovision selection show, in January this year, he reached national fame.

This was no surprise to those around Bettan as they had always believed he would become a star.

“But the road to success is not easy, and Noam is a pure example of perseverance and hard work. He never gave up, even if some periods were harder than others,” said Nathanael, “I saw

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him working really hard trying to do what he loves, even if he had to be a waiter and try to tell the customers in his restaurant to listen to his songs and tell them that one day they would hear about him. He worked on himself for years and always

very first performance when he released his first album right at the start of his career, so watching him completely command that massive stage in Europe, in front of millions of people, was beyond inspiring.”

“Eurovision was made for him,” said Nathanael. “Noam speaks and sings fluently in English, French, and Hebrew. He loves music; he loves the love that music gives to people. We are Zionists and so to see him able to do what he loves and represent Israel in the best way he can, spreading love around him and light, is astonishing. I couldn’t be prouder as a friend and also as a Jew.

“But mainly I was so happy that now not only I, our friends, and Israel, but the world was able to see how talented and how much light Noam has to give to the world. He deserves it. For me, he won it a thousand times. And the funniest thing is that a big part of me knows that it’s only the beginning for him.”

“

**THE EMOTION HE BROUGHT TO THE CEREMONY WAS JUST PURE MAGIC; IT GENUINELY COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE PERFECT.**

knew that his time would come ... he worked extremely hard for it and never stopped believing in it.”

For Geena and Nathanael, seeing Bettan compete in Eurovision and do so well “was surreal”.

“It is honestly incredible to see how far he has come,” said Geena. “I actually went to his



Noam Bettan singing to the bride and groom

Bettan, a friend of the couple who met in Israel, was a guest at the November 2024 wedding.

He and Nathanael have been best friends for 18 years, since they were 10 years old in Ra’anana and Nathanael had made aliya from France. So, when he was getting married, it was obvious Bettan would be there. However, it wasn’t a given that he would sing.

“Noam and my friends decided to come to this wedding in South Africa when it was a complicated period for all of us Israelis to come, with the situation between our two countries since 7 October,” said Nathanael. “There was a lot of uncertainty, but it didn’t stop him and my friends taking the risk and coming to celebrate with us. I think it shows how incredible they are to put light first where there’s darkness and uncertainty.

“We’re best friends, but I’m also not the kind of person to ask things like these,” said Nathanael. “So maybe 72 hours before the wedding, we were speaking about G-d, prayers, and the wedding, and I don’t remember exactly how,

is already such an overwhelming and emotional experience, but hearing his voice just elevated everything,” she said. “I had always said that if anyone were to sing at my wedding, I would want it to be Noam because he

## Ambassador says SA must do U-turn on Iran, Israel

>>Continued from page 1

hell,” he says. “In a world that has been fuelled by hatred towards Israel, only bad things can come of it.

“October 7 was that sort of bad thing that happens and Israel was well within her right to defend herself and continues to be well within her right to defend herself. The United States stands with Israel on this unequivocally.”

He stresses the closeness of Washington and Jerusalem under the current US administration.

“The president of the United States, the secretary of state, our secretary of war – everyone who is a leader in this sphere is being unequivocal,” he says. “There is no air between the US and Israel. No air escapes between the two countries.”

Bozell takes direct aim at slogans heard at anti-Israel demonstrations across the world, including in South Africa. “From the river to the sea” – not a lot of people are paying attention to that. That’s not a slogan. They’re deadly serious.”

Referring to Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, he says, “They make it a point to affirm this desire to wipe out the State of Israel.

“Does the South African government want to be aligned with that kind of thinking?” he asks. “It’s got to rethink itself.”

“When our allies are treated unfairly and Israel is being treated unfairly, it’s troubling.”

Bozell warns that a fallout from the challenging relationship with the US could have “dire economic consequences”.

“There’s an executive order that prevents any investment from the US in South Africa,” he says.

“This isn’t extortion at all. It’s simply saying that if you want things like trade barriers dropped, investment at a time when South Africa desperately needs jobs – we have US companies that desperately want to do business and we have billions that are just sitting there.”

“There are some great deals that can be made with South Africa. We all want it to happen. But these things have to be resolved.”

Bozell says South Africa stands at a defining crossroads.

“It knows fundamentally that changes have to be made. It knows this,” he says. “Look at all the problems that it doesn’t need to have. People who want to invest in the country are just seeing a whole host of problems, and one of them is getting in bed with bad players.

“South Africa should rethink this if it wants to have good relations. Maybe it doesn’t want to have good relations, in which case it won’t listen. But I urge them to listen to the better angels.”

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# Kinocide – when families become targets



ROZANNE SACK

OPINION

**K**oleinu SA acknowledges the release of the Civil Commission's report, *Silenced No More*, in which Hamas's brutality on 7 October has been recognised as a previously downplayed form of torture, namely kinocide.

Kinocide refers to the deliberate weaponisation and destruction of families, particularly in the context of crimes against humanity. It is akin to genocide but focuses specifically on familial bonds, highlighting the targeting of family units as a distinct international crime. The term recognises that violence of this nature is not confined to the suffering of individuals alone. Rather, it seeks to shatter the emotional, relational, and generational bonds that sustain communal life. Kinocide is often used strategically to instil fear, fracture communities, assert domination, erase safety, and inflict profound psychological devastation that extends far beyond the immediate victims. Because this crime targets the family as a foundational social unit, its impact



Photo: Ilan Ossendryver

safety, and belonging, formed part of the broader destruction of the family unit itself.

Elkayam-Levy writes that such targeted attacks against families are not unique to 7 October, but emerge in numerous past and present global conflicts, including Rwanda and present-day Ukraine. Yet despite their prevalence and devastating impact, these acts have often remained unnamed and insufficiently recognised. Identifying and naming kinocide is therefore essential. Naming creates recognition. Recognition creates accountability. And accountability creates the possibility of justice.

It also gives survivors language for harms that are often too overwhelming to articulate, offering validation, dignity, and a path towards healing.

The development of the term kinocide is important not only for legal accountability, but for civil society as a whole. Naming the deliberate targeting of families helps society better understand the true nature and long-term impact of modern atrocities. By giving language to this form of violence, civil society is better equipped to document harm, support survivors, challenge denial and minimisation, and advocate for stronger protections for families in

reverberates across generations and entire communities.

Dr Cochav Elkayam-Levy, founder and chair of the Civil Commission on October 7th Crimes by Hamas against Women and Children, identifies several recurring forms or patterns of kinocide, including violence committed in the presence of family members, in which perpetrators intentionally kill, torture, sexually violate, or severely injure individuals while their relatives are forced to witness the abuse. In doing so, love and attachment themselves are weaponised, turning family bonds into instruments of psychological torture.

The report further documents the annihilation of entire family units, where multiple generations are deliberately erased within a single act of violence; the abduction and hostage-taking of families, including children, creating prolonged terror, uncertainty, and emotional devastation; and the intentional separation of parents and children, siblings, spouses, and elderly relatives in order to destabilise emotional security, caregiving structures, identity, and resilience within both families and communities.

Another dimension identified is the use of digital and social media to amplify familial trauma. Perpetrators allegedly used victims' phones and social media accounts to livestream or distribute atrocities directly to relatives and the wider public. The report describes this as a modern dimension of kinocide, designed to magnify humiliation, helplessness, terror, and psychological injury.

Lastly, the destruction and desecration of family homes, symbolic centres of intimacy,

conflict settings.

Recognising kinocide also reinforces a broader moral principle: that the family unit, as a source of human dignity, safety, identity, love, and resilience, must never become a deliberate target of violence and terror.

Elkayam-Levy and colleagues are now working toward having kinocide recognised formally within international legal frameworks, allowing these acts to be prosecuted more explicitly under international criminal law.

The report's title, *Silenced No More*, carries profound significance. Silence protects perpetrators. Silence isolates survivors. Silence allows denial to flourish while trauma continues to echo through families and generations. Breaking that silence responsibly, compassionately, and courageously is one of the most important steps any society can take towards truth, accountability, and healing.

Because beyond the statistics, the politics, and the headlines are shattered dining room tables, empty bedrooms, parents searching for children, children waiting for parents who will never return, and families forever altered by terror. To recognise kinocide is to recognise that the destruction of a family is not collateral damage. It is the destruction of a world.

• Rozanne Sack is a co-founder of Koleinu SA, a helpline and advocacy organisation for victims of gender-based violence and child abuse in the Jewish and wider community.

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## A blessing that grows with the child

**P**arashat Naso contains one of the most beautiful sections in the Torah, Birkat Kohanim, the priestly blessing. We know its words from shul, from *yomtov*, and perhaps most tenderly from Friday night, when parents place their hands on their children and bless them – certainly one of the most treasured moments of my week. "May Hashem bless you and protect you."

I remember with fondness and admiration when an acquaintance of mine, a Christian Zionist, contacted me. His son was turning 18 and at this milestone he dearly wished for a rabbinic blessing. Could he bring him to shul for a blessing? That's exactly what we did, and both the father and I said the words of the Birkat Kohanim for this young man as his father wept tears of gratitude for that moment.

Of all the commentaries and explanations that have been written about these beautiful words, what resonated most deeply with me was a teaching of Rabbi David Fohrman, who shows how these three lines of blessing, only 15 words in all, illustrate three distinct stages in our own parenting and blessing of our children.

The first line is "May Hashem bless you and protect you". That is the first task of a parent, and of every educator entrusted with children: to nurture and to protect. A child begins life utterly dependent. They need food, safety, clothing, warmth, routine, and boundaries. Before all the great ideals of education, before inspiration, identity, or vision, there is the simple sacred work of care.

Children cannot flourish if they aren't cared for at the level of the most basic needs on Maslow's hierarchy.

The second line is "May Hashem shine His face toward you and be gracious to you". This is a different kind of parenting. It's not only what we give our children, but how we look at them. A child is spiritually nourished by the light in a parent's face, by knowing that they bring us joy, that we notice them, that we delight in who they are becoming.

This is also where education becomes deeply formative. American talk show host and writer Dennis Prager has often pointed out that what parents communicate as their highest value shapes what children learn to value. What we choose to compliment them on matters. If the shine in our eyes appears only when our children win, achieve, perform, or impress, then they learn that these are the things that make them precious.

But if they see our pride when they show kindness, honesty, resilience, and responsibility, then our praise becomes moral education.

The third line is "May Hashem lift His face toward you and give you peace". Rabbi Fohrman reads this as the stage in which we aren't looking down towards the child, whether in caring or in pride, but meet them eye to eye.

This may be the hardest

### Torah Thought

**Rabbi Sam Thurgood**  
 United Herzlia Schools



stage of all. We spend years teaching children how to stand, and then struggle when they begin to stand apart from us. But the goal of Jewish education isn't dependence, but holy independence: children who can carry Torah, make choices, ask real questions, and build their own relationship with Hashem.

May we, and our children, be blessed in all of these ways.  
 Shabbat Shalom.

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# King David calls on former pupils to speak about sexual abuse

NICOLA MILTZ

**A** former King David High School Linksfield hostel boarder – who claims two male teachers sexually abused him when he was just 14 years old – returned to South Africa more than four decades later to lay criminal charges against them.

The case, which became public this week in a statement by the South African Board of Jewish Education (SABJE), has prompted other former pupils to quietly come forward.

“What struck me most through our engagement with him was the lifelong pain and trauma he has carried,” Rabbi Ricky Seeff, general director of the SABJE, told the *SA Jewish Report*.

“This is not something that can ever be minimised. We have a duty of care to our students, and if these alleged perpetrators are guilty, they must be prosecuted. Abuse in any shape or form cannot and will not be tolerated.”

The release of the SABJE statement on 18 May acknowledging allegations of historical sexual abuse appears to have resonated with many and has ignited difficult conversations about that era.

At the centre of the case is a man in his late 50s who says that, as a vulnerable 14- and 15-year-old staying at now-closed Sachs House Hostel in 1982 and

1983, he was sexually abused by two male teachers.

One was connected to the hostel, while the other may not have been involved with hostel life, said Seeff. It is believed the two men acted independently and may not have been aware of each other’s conduct at the time.

“After allegedly enduring decades of pain, shame, and emotional trauma, the former pupil eventually found the courage to come forward,” said Seeff.



The Studios on the site where the hostel used to be

Several months ago, the former pupil contacted the school via email from overseas, detailing the allegations. What followed was a lengthy and emotional engagement between Seeff and this man. During months of discussions, he was encouraged to document his allegations formally and compile a detailed affidavit for police.

The man has also been in contact with other former pupils from that time

and believes there may be additional survivors of abuse by the accused teachers. He hopes that the school’s public disclosure and the opening of the criminal case will encourage them to come forward.

After the affidavit was completed, Seeff approached police for guidance, but was informed that the complainant himself would need to return to South Africa to open the criminal case in person.

The SABJE helped bring the man back to South Africa to do so and he is in contact with the investigators.

The former pupil said he has confronted both alleged perpetrators during his personal healing journey – one some time ago, and the other more recently. Both men, possibly in their 70s, are aware of the allegations against them and may know that criminal charges have now been laid.

Whether they are still involved in education is not known, nor has it been disclosed at which other schools they may have taught over the years. However, the SABJE said it had reported the matter to the South African Council for Educators to ensure that “until the process has run its course, the alleged perpetrators are not teaching or part of the education sector in any way”.

In the SABJE statement, it said it was “deeply saddened and shocked” by the

allegations.

“Irrespective of the passage of 40 years, the SABJE takes allegations of this nature extremely seriously,” it read.

Seeff said the school had a responsibility not only to support the former pupil, but also to send an unequivocal message that abuse would never be tolerated.

“We have learnt so much through our engagements with him,” said Seeff. “We have a responsibility to ensure this doesn’t happen and that all students are supported and cared for.”

The SABJE had engaged lawyers and the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa to ensure the accusations are properly investigated and handled appropriately.

“We recognise the distress that abuse causes and the constant source of pain that victims live with, often for the rest of their lives,” said Seeff.

“It also takes tremendous courage for victims to come forward and share their experiences.”

The organisation extended “a sincere apology to any former Davidians who may have experienced abuse in our schools in the past”.

Seeff said the former pupil had been plagued by emotional suffering well into adulthood before he had finally sought closure and justice.

The SABJE asked that former pupils who may have experienced or witnessed abusive conduct during the period under investigation, or at any other time, to come forward confidentially.

It said it now had extensive

safeguarding measures in place across King David schools, including police clearance checks and sexual offender vetting. It also has compulsory annual safeguarding training, abuse-prevention education programmes beginning in Grade R, and formal reporting escalation protocols involving teachers, social workers, and senior management.

The SABJE has partnered with safeguarding specialists The Guardian to review and strengthen abuse prevention and reporting structures.

Koleinu SA, which runs a sexual abuse prevention programme at King David schools, welcomed the SABJE’s public response.

“As providers of the Schoolsafe Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse programme, we salute King David for the transparency and accountability reflected in its response to the allegation of historical sexual abuse at the school,” Wendy Hendler and Rozanne Sack of Koleinu SA told the *SA Jewish Report*.

The organisation praised the school’s safeguarding commitments and highlighted the immense courage it takes for survivors to speak publicly about abuse, particularly decades later.

“Belief and support of survivors, public acknowledgement, and a commitment to investigation are critical steps in creating safer communities,” they said.

In a direct message to the complainant and any possible additional survivors, Sack and Hendler said, “You are not alone, you deserve to be heard, and your experiences matter.”

Police investigations are continuing.



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# South African Jewish Report

## In honour of Steven

It was a real coup for us to get an interview with the new United States Ambassador to South Africa, L Brent Bozell III. The ambassador has hardly done interviews since he got to South Africa, and we had literally been asking for a one-on-one since weeks before he arrived on our shores.

When I say “we” I am actually referring to my wonderful late colleague Steven Gruzd, who right up until the day he was abducted and killed on Friday 27 March was emailing and calling the US embassy, requesting this interview, once and sometimes twice a week.

During the dreadful time we were all reeling from the shock of what had happened to Steve, there was an outpouring of love and respect for him and all that he had achieved in his life. One of the many messages was a personal letter from the US ambassador saying he was “deeply saddened to learn of the tragic passing” of Steve. “On behalf of the United States government, I extend our deepest sympathies.”

He went on to say, “We had the privilege of engaging with Steven in his capacity as a journalist, where we benefited from his thoughtful analysis and his commitment to rigorous, informed public discourse. His work always reflected a deep understanding of South Africa’s place in the world and contributed meaningfully to important global conversations on international affairs.”

I was moved by what a mensch Bozell was to send this to us, whether it was prompted by colleagues or not. He didn’t have to do that.

At the time, I made it clear to the embassy and our team that when we finally interviewed the ambassador, we would do it in Steve’s honour. Well, we got our chance, and our undoubtedly controversial front-page lead is in Steven Gruzd’s honour today. I have no doubt he is proud of the job that his colleague and friend Nicola Miltz did in tribute to him.

The ambassador pulled no punches and stuck to his guns in insisting that the South African government reconsiders its friends who are detrimental to its other relations – not least the one with the US. His commitment to Israel and the Jewish world was equally admirable, but is certainly unlikely to impress our haters. But then I am sure he knows this.

I have to say that it gives me such a feeling of warmth to know we have friends like this in high places.

In the same week, I initially had a sinking feeling when I read Klaas Mokgomole, who was once a member of BDS and is now a staunch friend of the community and Israel, complaining about his talk at St Mary’s School being canned because of “security threats”. I feared another ugly Roedeian saga.

I worried that antisemitism was spreading through private schools, and that St Mary’s had had two anti-Israel speakers and Mokgomole was unable to give an alternative perspective. I do get that St Mary’s got scared by threats from anti-Israel haters. Who wouldn’t be? But it was disappointing that it didn’t still go ahead with offering a different perspective, as one expects from a school of this calibre.

Having said that, I am so relieved that this week St Mary’s committed to holding the Mokgomole talk after exams. I understand that it must put the security of pupils first, but it cannot kowtow to threats. And activists have no right to stop schools from hearing all sides of the Middle East situation. If they are so convinced that they are right, what are they scared of? Makes you think!

Well done to St Mary’s for not allowing threats and fearmongering tactics to stop you doing what is right – even if it is a little later than it was meant to be.

I have to say the South African Board of Jewish Education also stepped up to the plate this week in letting the King David community, past and present, know about the sexual abuse that took place during 1982 and 1983 at King David Linksfield. What was impressive was the willingness to be transparent and share the information in the interests of finding others who may have suffered under two predators. Also, it showed parents and pupils that abuse was not and will never be acceptable at King David.

This is modelling transparency and integrity, and I have to say *kol hakavod* to Rabbi Ricky Seeff and the Board of Jewish Education.

And while I’m in the spirit of honouring, it was a joy to watch the Eurovision final on Saturday night and to see the incredible support for Israel’s super-talented Noam Bettan as he sang Michelle. I have no doubt Israel was very happy with second place, especially because coming first would have meant being host country next year. Both winning and hosting would have come with all sorts of political fallout, which I don’t believe would be worth it.

So, taking second place in this competition is winning for Israel. And for us at the *SA Jewish Report*, finding out that Bettan had performed at a wedding in South Africa not that long ago was also a coup.

As this is our Shavuot edition, with Shavuot from Thursday to Saturday evening, we have some wise food for thought in terms of spiritual nutrition. One of the esteemed rabbis writing for us is none other than Rabbi Dr Meesh Hammer-Kossoy, who in 2015 became Israel’s first female Orthodox rabbi. She will be joining us for Limmud later this year so you can get to hear more from her then.

Finally, I want to welcome Yoel Levy to our shores. I am one of the thousands who follow @thejewishfitnesscoach as he runs marathons in cities around the world, making people aware of and jogging people’s memories about 7 October and what’s happened since then.

He runs in a Batman outfit in memory of Ariel and Kfir Bibas, the ginger-haired little boy and baby Hamas terrorists kidnapped with their mother and killed in captivity in Gaza.

Astonishingly, he was en route to South Africa at the beginning of the week when his plane had to turn back and was then cancelled. Fortunately, he persevered and will be on the road in Cape Town on Sunday. Good luck, Yoel! We’re rooting for you!

**Chag Shavuot sameach and Shabbat Shalom!**

**Peta Krost**  
Editor



## The New York Times damage is done

OPINION

SIMON PLOSKER



The recent controversy surrounding *The New York Times* column alleging widespread sexual abuse of Palestinian prisoners by Israelis should alarm anyone who still believes journalism has a duty to separate evidence from propaganda.

The issue is not whether allegations against Israel should be investigated. Of course they should. Democracies are obligated to examine accusations of wrongdoing seriously and transparently.

The issue is how one of the world’s most influential newspapers came to publish allegations so grotesque, so inflammatory, and so thinly substantiated that under any normal journalistic standard they should have triggered immediate editorial scepticism.

Most shocking among them were claims that Israelis had trained dogs to rape Palestinian detainees.

Pause for a moment and consider the enormity of that accusation.

This was not a claim about excessive force, mistreatment, or even isolated abuse. It was an allegation bordering on medieval fantasy, portraying Israelis not merely as soldiers or jailers but as uniquely depraved monsters engaged in systematic sexual sadism.

And yet these claims were elevated into mainstream international discourse through the pages of *The New York Times*.

The extraordinary nature of these accusations should have demanded overwhelming corroboration before publication. Instead, basic questions regarding sourcing, evidence, and credibility appear to have been subordinated to a narrative that parts of the media are increasingly eager to embrace: Israel as uniquely evil.

That matters because accusations of this kind do not exist in a vacuum.

Historically, blood libels against Jews relied on portraying them as grotesquely inhuman, capable of crimes so monstrous that ordinary moral standards no longer applied. Medieval Europe accused Jews of ritual murder. Modern discourse replaces those accusations with claims of genocidal cruelty, deliberate child murder, or sadistic sexual depravity.

The language changes. The mechanism remains disturbingly familiar.

What made *The New York Times* episode particularly revealing was how little scepticism these claims initially encountered in many media and activist circles. Had similarly sensational accusations been levelled against almost any other democratic country, editors would probably have demanded forensic evidence, multiple layers of independent verification, and extraordinary caution before publication.

But when Israel is involved, the evidentiary threshold too often appears dramatically lower.

Claims of Israelis training dogs to rape prisoners should have immediately raised glaring credibility concerns. Instead, they were treated as serious and publishable assertions.

Beyond that, the sourcing behind the article included heavy reliance on activist organisations and partisan accounts lacking meaningful independent corroboration. Additional revelations only deepened doubts over the credibility of the allegations and the editorial process that allowed them to be amplified globally.

*The New York Times* should retract the piece altogether.

Whether or not that happens, the broader damage is already done.

Once allegations of this nature enter international discourse, they spread instantly across social media, campuses, political movements, and activist networks. Corrections rarely travel as far as the original accusation. Nuance disappears. What remains is the image: Israelis as monsters.

And this is precisely why Hamas and its allies invest so heavily in information warfare.

They understand that emotionally shocking accusations can shape global opinion more effectively than military victories. They understand that parts of the international media are often predisposed to believe the worst about Israel. Most importantly, they understand that once such narratives take hold, many journalists become reluctant to revisit them, even when serious doubts emerge.

This creates a dangerous asymmetry in coverage.

Israeli statements are routinely treated with intense suspicion, while allegations emerging from deeply partisan or hostile sources

are frequently granted immediate legitimacy if they reinforce prevailing ideological assumptions. Verification becomes secondary to narrative.

That is not journalism. It is advocacy masquerading as reporting.

And the consequences extend far beyond Israel itself.

Such coverage fuels antisemitism worldwide by reviving and legitimising

ancient portrayals of Jews as uniquely malevolent. It poisons public discourse and erodes trust in journalism itself. Every time a major media institution appears willing to relax its standards when covering Israel, it reinforces the growing belief that political agendas increasingly drive editorial decisions.

No democracy should be exempt from scrutiny. But neither should any democracy be subjected to standards abandoned nowhere else.

Responsible journalism requires scepticism about all sides, particularly when dealing with allegations designed to provoke maximum emotional outrage. It requires editors willing to ask whether a claim is merely shocking or actually credible. Most importantly, it requires the discipline to resist amplifying narratives before the facts are firmly established.

*The New York Times* controversy matters because it exposed how quickly those principles can collapse when Israel is the accused party.

And until major media institutions rediscover the difference between rigorous reporting and narrative amplification, they will continue to damage not only Israel’s reputation, but their own credibility as well.

• *Simon Plosker is the Editorial Director of HonestReporting, an Israeli media advocacy group.*

**Blood libels against Jews relied on portraying them as grotesquely inhuman, capable of crimes so monstrous that ordinary moral standards no longer applied.**

## Connect with those still at the table

OPINION

RABBI ARI KIEVMAN



Over years working with seniors in our community, it has become increasingly clear that our elders are among our greatest treasures and yet often among the most overlooked.

There are Holocaust survivors who still hum lullabies their mothers sang to them so many decades ago. When I walk into our communities’ retirement facilities and sing Yiddish melodies something remarkable happens. Faces that seemed distant moments before suddenly light up, and voices quietly begin to join in. There are seniors who cannot remember what they had for breakfast yet can recite childhood prayers without missing a word. And there are moments when everything changes simply because someone pauses, sits down, and listens long enough for their world to open again.

As Shavuot and Yizkor approach, these moments feel even more significant.

Shavuot is not only the anniversary of receiving the Torah at Sinai. It is *zman matan Torateinu*, the festival of transmission, how Torah moves from one generation to the next. While children are the guarantors for the Torah, it is parents and grandparents who ensure its perpetuity through decades of lived example.

As children, these were routines. Only later do they reveal themselves as eternity in motion.

On the second day of Shavuot, Yizkor is recited for those no longer with us. The day we received Torah is also the day we

remember those who brought Torah into our homes.

Jewish law teaches that when a festival arrives, even a mourner sitting shiva must pause their grief for the *yomtov* celebration. At first glance this is difficult to understand. How can grief simply be interrupted?

Perhaps the answer is that a Jew is never only an individual life, but part of an unbroken chain. A life may end, but the story it helped build continues.

This reality is one that I witness daily in my work with the elderly. Families try, even if imperfectly but sincerely, to repay a lifetime of care with presence and patience.

Yet, many seniors are physically cared for but emotionally unseen. What is often needed most is not another service, but dignity, attention, and presence.

Because one day, the voice we were too busy to answer will be the voice we would give anything to hear again.

Yizkor is not only about memory, it is about responsibility.

This Shavuot, as you again hear Ten Commandments, including “Honour your father and mother”, perhaps the greatest tribute we can offer to those who have passed is how we treat the grandparents and seniors still sitting at our table.

Because what they built in love does not end. It continues in us.

• *Rabbi Ari Kievman is the rabbi at Chabad Sandton Central.*

# St Mary's School commits to hosting pro-Israel speaker

LEE TANKLE

An attempt by anti-Israel activists to silence dialogue about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was thwarted last week by the commitment of St Mary's School, Waverley to have this conversation securely.

The Johannesburg school invited Coordinator of Africans For Peace Klaas Mokgomole – a former Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions activist – to give a talk about Israel on 14 May. This was to have followed a previous pro-Palestinian activist's talk. The school's Diversity and Inclusivity Committee believed pupils should be allowed to hear both sides of the story.

Danny Mofsowitz, chairperson of the Gauteng Council of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), says the SAJBD was approached by individuals at the school about two speakers who had used narratives that portrayed a one-sided understanding of the conflict. The SAJBD approached the school, requesting that another perspective be provided to give a more balanced and informed understanding.

"St Mary's immediately agreed to the request in line with its commitment to diversity and inclusivity. Our office introduced them to Klaas, and they arranged for him to share his perspectives," said Mofsowitz.

Mokgomole was told, however, that his talk was

"cancelled" because of security concerns. He was upset by this, believing the school had acceded to anti-Israel threats. The school, however, said that external organisations' threat to disrupt the event and protest on school grounds constituted what it believed were valid security concerns. This, the school now says, led to it postponing Mokgomole's talk until it could find a way to hold it securely.

"The events surrounding this matter have raised serious concerns about the growing culture of intimidation around conversations involving Israel in South Africa," said Mokgomole. "It is deeply troubling that organised activist pressure appears capable of influencing whether pupils are allowed to hear perspectives that differ from a particular ideological position.

"What seems to unsettle some activists is that a black South African voice with genuine regional insight may

not fit neatly into the narrative they seek to monopolise. Instead of debate, there are attempts to delegitimise, pressure, and exclude," he said.

On Monday, 18 May, Mofsowitz and Wendy Kahn, the SAJBD National Director, met with St Mary's Head of School Deanne King and Senior School headmistress Seipati Shiakallis to address the issue of shutting down alternate narratives. The Board said it was pleased to hear that the school intended to reschedule the talk for after exams. It said it needed to find a way to host Mokgomole securely.

"In our engagement with the head of school and headmistress, they categorically stated that this is a postponement. They affirmed the principles of intellectual rigour for which St Mary's is renowned, and confirmed that they will explore how best to provide an alternative voice to balance the anti-Israel speakers who have previously addressed the school," said Mofsowitz.

St Mary's has a proud history of encouraging open discussion and diverse perspectives, and had readily agreed earlier this year to host a speaker offering a

different perspective on the Middle East, according to Mofsowitz.

"It is a really sad day when the anti-Israel bullies threaten schoolchildren to force their views. It is appalling that St Mary's has to deal with this intimidation and harassment," said Mofsowitz.

Mokgomole himself was scheduled to meet with St Mary's on 20 May to discuss moving forward.

"Schools and universities should be places where difficult issues are explored openly and critically, not spaces where outside lobbying campaigns determine which viewpoints may be heard," he said. "I remain hopeful that St Mary's will continue to uphold the values of intellectual openness and balanced engagement for which it is widely respected."

Mofsowitz explained that the intimidation at the hands of the anti-Israel lobby groups is an affront to democratic freedoms, "whether in the workplace, our shops, our universities, sporting events, or our schools. Pupils have a right to be exposed to different narratives. St Mary's understands this and is committed to creating opportunities to accomplish it.

"The anti-Israel lobby groups that threatened the school should be exposed for the bullies that they are, as well as their attempts to intimidate and stifle academic freedom. Censorship has no place in a constitutional democracy, especially in terms of the messages that it gives pupils in a school environment. We should be encouraging our young people to learn, not attempting to shut this down. The desperation by these activists to silence other speakers speaks volumes about their tactics, as well as their fear of other voices," she said.

## Cape hate fest calls for 'death to Zionists'

TALI FEINBERG

Antizionist hate was on full display at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town on Saturday, 16 May, at a Nakba Day festival.

At what was billed as a family outing, attendees proudly held posters saying "Death to Israel, death to Zionists", including bloodied handprints, "Glory to the martyrs, long live the resistance", "Globalise the intifada", "F\*\*k Israel", and "Cape Town is not Tel Aviv", with an image of South Africans persecuting an Israeli soldier. Other posters depicted the Hamas symbol of the inverted red triangle.

Executive Director of the Cape South African Jewish Board of Deputies (Cape SAJBD) Daniel Bloch says his organisation is deeply troubled by the rhetoric, symbolism, and messaging at the gathering. While attendance at such events appears increasingly confined to a narrow echo chamber, "the seriousness of the language and imagery on display should not be underestimated".

It is "consistent with what has become commonplace at these rallies: disinformation, incendiary rhetoric and offensive language, including terms such as 'ZioNazis', alongside coded messaging that deepens division," says Bloch.

Equally troubling is the "normalisation of hostility in an environment where children are present".

Although attendance at the event – hosted by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and affiliated groups to commemorate the displacement of Palestinians in 1948 – was low, the levels of incitement were sky high.

Participants held "Wanted" posters targeting South African Jews, and posters defaming retailer Cape Union Mart and its executive chairperson, Philip Krawitz. This is while a case responding to this defamation is before the Western Cape High Court.

Other posters bore images praising leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. One sign openly celebrated the 7 October massacre, while another poster depicted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin

Netanyahu holding a knife over an unconscious child.

In January, the PSC and its supporters protested outside an event at the Castle because the organiser was born in Israel. At the time, they said the Castle was a "sacred" historic site that should not host celebratory events. However, the Nakba Day event featured signs on the Castle walls, a band, a drumming workshop, kite flying, and a parade of motorbikes.

Addressing attendees, the PSC's Martin Jansen referred to South Africans who have made aliyah and served in the Israeli army as "young ZioNazis", comparing them to the Thulsi twins, who were convicted of terrorism in South Africa.

He said, "We have a real problem in this country, with the Zionists, US imperialism, and the Government of National Unity that is serving their interests."



The Cape Union Mart case is "bankrupting the PSC," said Jansen. He asked people to "mobilise and have a mass presence at that court, and to put pressure on the judges".

Bloch says the Cape SAJBD is also concerned by the repeated slogan "Sea Point is not Tel Aviv", now expanded to "Cape Town is not Tel Aviv", displayed prominently at the Nakba Day event. Such messaging carries "insinuations of illegitimate influence and collective suspicion, echoing long-standing antisemitic tropes relating to Jewish power, manipulation, and divided loyalties," he says.

The Cape SAJBD regards with seriousness the defamation of members of the Jewish community. "We will continue to monitor developments closely," says Bloch. "When rhetoric or conduct crosses the threshold of South African law – including hate speech, unlawful incitement, intimidation, or defamation – we will not hesitate to pursue legal remedies."

The Executive Director of the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) Cape Council, Joshua Schewitz, says that for a movement that so frequently accuses Israel and its supporters of oppression, extremism, and violence, "what was visible throughout this event was a striking inversion: eliminationist language, hostility, glorification of terrorism, and imagery that reflects the very impulses they so often project onto others".

Perhaps "most disturbing" was the involvement of children in an environment in which "hostility and militancy were normalised."

As at previous antizionist events in Cape Town, children were dressed up and held imitation guns. They were encouraged to hold hateful posters and take part in activities. A teenager held a poster with an inverted red triangle and the words "You can't hide, we are coming for you". A child painted an image of a terrorist in a keffiyeh. A third child wrote a letter to a Palestinian child saying, "The idiots of Israel will be taken down."

Schewitz says posters praising Hezbollah and the Houthis – groups that keep Lebanon and Yemen trapped in instability – sat alongside images celebrating figures of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "a regime notorious for brutal repression and the violent suppression of women and protesters, and which is, quite literally, executing people right now".

That such figures are elevated at a South African gathering "should trouble anyone committed to this country's democratic values" he says.

The SAZF firmly believes that the rhetoric on display "does not reflect the views of most South Africans or its

constitutional values", which are rooted in "dignity, coexistence, and democratic engagement, not the celebration of armed movements and authoritarian regimes".

Against the backdrop of the release of the report by the Civil Commission on October 7th Crimes by Hamas against Women and Children, and in a country where gender-based violence is an epidemic, the glorification of Hamas is morally indefensible says Schewitz.

The American founder of the Movement Against Antizionism, Adam Louis-Klein, told the *SA Jewish Report* that the goal of these events is "not to support Palestinians, but to propagate antizionist hate and libels. Accusations of 'apartheid' and 'genocide' are used as forms of projection to mark Israel for annihilation." He emphasises that "antizionism is a hate movement", which subjects both Palestinians and Israelis to "endless wars, organised around the destruction of Israel and the genocide of Israelis, a protected national group".

Professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of Florida, Norman JW Goda, has written extensively about why Israel's war in Gaza is not a genocide. Now, he says that "the glorification of terror leaders, all of whom spent their lifetimes obsessed with the destruction of the Jews, makes this event explicitly antisemitic".

Pre-eminent Holocaust scholar Dr Michael Berenbaum says it "should be clear why 'Death to Israel' is rightfully regarded as antisemitic." This is because a plurality of Jews have decided to build their future in Israel. "Opposition to Israel is opposition to the choice Jews have made regarding their personal and Jewish future."

Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Cape Town and antisemitism expert Milton Shain says "it has become increasingly evident that antizionism is a 'hygienic' form of Jew-hatred. Legitimate protest for Palestinian statehood often crosses the line into blatant antisemitism."

This Nakba event "certainly raises questions", he says. "Terror appears to have been celebrated, while calls for the elimination of Israel – a legitimate member of the family of nations – were loud and clear. In crude and ahistorical caricatures of Zionism, the door to hate,



Klaas Mokgomole

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# The power of the moon

GILANA LAB

“Sometimes, when things are chaotic here on earth, you have to turn to heaven. In heaven, there is clarity, there is vision, there is perspective.”

That was the advice from Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak “YY” Jacobson – a prominent global Jewish scholar, author, and lecturer on Torah and Jewish mysticism – during a webinar centred on the role of the moon in Jewish thought.

Jacobson used moon-related symbolism to deliver a powerful pre-Shavuot message about resilience, vulnerability, and renewal, during the Chabad webinar, which was dedicated to the memory of former Miracle Drive President Meyer Kahn.

Introduced by broadcaster Howard Feldman in partnership with ChaiFM and Miracle Drive, Jacobson opened by acknowledging that speaking about the moon during a time of war, fear, and uncertainty might seem unexpected.

But, he said, “The moon teaches us the power of rebirth, of recreating yourself. Sometimes it’s invisible, but that doesn’t mean it’s gone.”

Jacobson repeatedly returned to the lunar cycle as a metaphor for both Jewish history and personal struggle. “Don’t let the moon deceive you,” he said. “You may not see it, but it comes back.”

He said that while the sun generates its own light, the

moon reflects light from another source, making it a symbol of humility and spiritual openness. “The moon doesn’t own the light. The moon knows it’s the sun’s light. All it can do is reflect the light.”

Jacobson spoke candidly about his own life and the temptation of ego that comes with public recognition. “When people would compliment me about a lecture, I wanted to hijack the compliment,” he admitted. “Later in life, I realised that I’m stealing from G-d. When we think we own the light, we lose the plot.”

**The moon teaches us the power of rebirth, of recreating yourself. Sometimes it’s invisible, but that doesn’t mean it’s gone.**

Jacobson recounted the story of when Holocaust survivor Edith Eger, author of *The Choice*, arrived at Auschwitz as a teenager. Just before her mother was taken to the gas chambers, she told Eger, “They can take away everything you have. The only thing they cannot take away are the thoughts that you put into your mind.” Jacobson described how Eger survived by

retreating into her inner world, imagining herself dancing in the Budapest Opera House, even while imprisoned in Auschwitz.

“What she taught,” he said, “was literally the embodiment of the moon – the ability never, ever to despair.”

The audience discussion turned to the aftermath of 7 October and the ongoing trauma experienced by Israelis and Jews around the world. Feldman said, “October the 7th was very much a diminishing of light. We have tunnels where there’s no sun. There’s no moon.

There has to be a message in this period of darkness that we have lived through.”

In response, Jacobson shared the story of a hostage survivor who described how her understanding of faith changed during captivity in Gaza.

At first, she found comfort in “a crack in the wall” that allowed a sliver of daylight into the room where

she was held. Later, when she was moved underground, she focused on “a little glimmer of light” from an LED bulb. “But then,” Jacobson said, “she was taken into complete darkness. No crack in the wall. No LED light. Nothing.” According to Jacobson, the woman later reflected, “That’s when I found G-d.” For him, the story captured the essence of the moon’s message.



“Sometimes our most powerful moments, the moments of deepest growth, transformation and rebirth, are the moments when we can’t see light,” he said. “It’s not because there is no light. It’s because that’s the moment when we’re actually absorbing the light from above.”

Feldman said that he had heard similar sentiments repeatedly while interviewing survivors of the Nova festival massacre. “Every single answer involves G-d, or knowing there’s a different purpose,” Feldman said. “In that darkness and in that moment where there was no control, something changed.”

Jacobson suggested that suffering often strips people of the illusion that they are fully in control. “The moments of deepest pain and surrender,” he said, “can also become moments of rebirth.”

The lecture closed with one of Jacobson’s characteristic

stories from the folklore town of Chelm. Asked whether the sun or moon was more important, the townspeople concluded that the moon mattered more because “the sun shines when you don’t need it. The moon shines when you need it.”

Jacobson said the joke reflected a deeper spiritual truth. “We take the sun for granted because it’s daytime,” he said. “But our calendars are established by the moon because of the power of receptivity, the power of humility.”

He ended by describing Kiddush Levana, the blessing of the moon, as more than a ritual. “It’s a celebration of human vulnerability,” he said. “A celebration of intimacy with our source. The celebration of knowing that I don’t have to control everything, and I can just be a channel for infinite light.”

## Eurovision talent and enjoyment win the popular vote

OPINION

CHARISSE ZEIFERT



I came to learn about the Eurovision Song Contest only as a student living in Amsterdam in the mid-1990s. Initially, it seemed rather “naïf” that Europe took a singing competition so seriously. Yet soon, my Japanese friend Hiromi and I became obsessed. As outsiders, we were possibly more excited than our continental mates.

I was particularly interested, then, to hear

from Hiromi that later this year Bangkok will host the first Asian Eurovision contest. That feels significant. Eurovision was conceived in 1956 as a project to bring Europeans together through music, a cultural antidote to division. Seventy years on, despite political tensions and repeated boycott threats, the format is not shrinking but spreading.

So, it was unsurprising that the first person to WhatsApp me early on Sunday morning, as the results of the 2026 competition were announced, was Hiromi.

“Bulgaria came first. Israel, second. Did you watch?”

I did. The last few minutes were enthralling. I was captivated by the scoreboard. While Bulgaria maintained its lead from the jury vote, I watched Israel move steadily up and down the rankings. It settled in eighth spot. However, after the public vote, where Israel received a whopping 220 points, it moved into first place. In the final moments, the contest had come down to Noam Bettan from Israel and Dara from Bulgaria, a split screen showing the two contestants.

For Israelis, this must have been a moment of déjà vu. Last year, Israel also reached the final two due to the public vote: JJ from Austria and Yuval Raphael from Israel.

In a conversation I had on ChaiFM with Israeli Eurovision enthusiast Ron Gilran just prior to the event, he speculated that it was this moment, the split-screen picture of JJ and Yuval, that resulted in five countries boycotting

allowed to perform. The public rewarded her with a staggering 323 points. Similarly, Yuval Raphael was reviled and ostracised during the competition last year, but the public vote surged her to the top of the list. Was Israel’s success itself behind the boycott calls? A desire to silence Israeli contestants precisely because they had become so popular?

One can only imagine the collective frustration of the boycotters and protesters. While demonstrators gathered outside the Wiener Stadthalle in an attempt to silence Noam, the opposite unfolded inside. Far from being silenced, Noam’s talent was on full display. Performing *Michelle* in Hebrew, French, and English, he captivated audiences with his distinctive style, rich vocal texture, impressive range, and emotional delivery, earning widespread praise and recognition. Indeed, the only formal reference made to the boycott during the show was by Victoria Swarovski, the master of ceremonies, during her closing remarks, “Hopefully the countries we’ve missed this year will be back in the Eurovision family.” It was a gentle nod to their absence, an invitation for them to return, but, to me, also a way of saying, “The show goes on, with or without you.”

The more significant point, however, is that most countries did stay. They competed, voted – including for Israel – performed, and allowed the evening to remain what Eurovision

has always claimed to be: a gathering around music, spectacle, and national flair, even when politics presses heavily against the stage. That matters. Boycotts often rely on the assumption that absence will become the story. The absence was noticed, but it did not become the event. Eurovision, even without five of its staunch participants, still provided spectacle, sparkle, and entertainment.

What also matters is that the dissonance between state actors and ordinary citizens remains as clear as it was two years ago and last year, when the public showed their support for the Israeli singers. Israel is investing in talent rather than vote-rigging. And this talent is appreciated by European audiences.

Predictably, there is already talk of countries boycotting Eurovision next year. In our conversation on ChaiFM, Gilran already pointed out that Belgium, with its two official broadcasters, one of which is more anti-Israel, might join the boycott when Bulgaria hosts next year. Gilran also subsequently noted that while Bulgaria, a first-time winner, is uncertain as to how it will go about hosting the event, it will not be unduly hostile to Israel. The countries have a good relationship. While there are still a lot of uncertainties for the coming contest, and we will have to wait and see how the politics unfolds, at least we still have the first Eurovision Song Contest Asia 2026 to look forward to in November.

Hiromi and I will be in touch.

• Charisse Zeifert is the Deputy Director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies.



Israel's President Isaac Herzog meets to congratulate Noam Bettan

Israel’s participation in the competition this year. Gilran spoke of the cognitive dissonance between what governments’ lines were and what ordinary citizens felt. He believes it was after that moment that accusations of Israeli vote-rigging began to emerge.

He pointed out that, during the height of the war between Israel and Gaza in 2024, Eden Golan participated. She was bullied, booed, vilified, and maligned, but nonetheless

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# Why we celebrate the day before we received the Torah



RABBI DAVID STAV

One of the more familiar questions surrounding the holiday of Shavuot focuses on why we seem to celebrate the holiday on the “wrong day”. According to the tradition of Chazal, we left Egypt on a Thursday and received the Torah on Shabbat, 51 days later. Yet we celebrate Shavuot on the 50th day.

Over the course of generations, many have asked this question and offered explanations. But I would like to focus on one particular approach that carries powerful ramifications for how we approach our very identity and peoplehood as Jews.

The answer lies in the premise that the question itself is wrong. We aren’t, in fact, celebrating the actual giving of the Torah on Shavuot. We’re celebrating the process that led up to it and events that came before, the moments where we were preparing to receive the Torah.

We celebrate understanding what the Torah actually means for us in building our nation. Without that understanding, one might assume that Torah is a scholarly or academic text or book of rules that needs to be understood and learned. What makes the Torah so special isn’t simply the knowledge it contains, but the values, responsibilities, and sense of purpose that accompanies it.

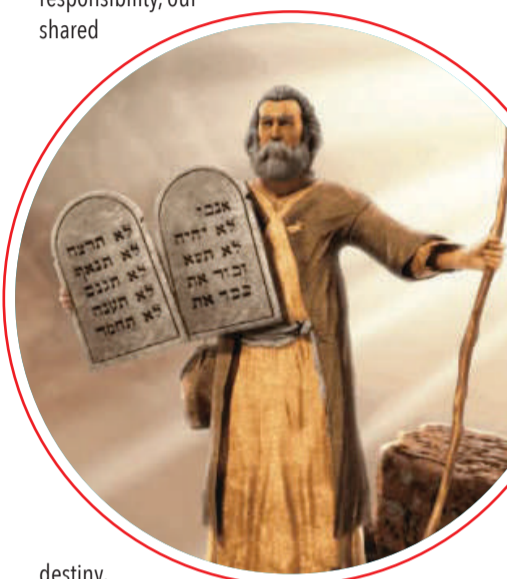
The lesson we learn is that the preparation to receive the Torah is just as important as the Torah itself. Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook emphasised the teaching of Chazal that the Jewish people were punished because they didn’t properly recite the blessing over the Torah before studying it. He explained that the issue wasn’t merely the absence of a blessing, but rather the absence of the proper attitude towards Torah itself. Torah cannot be approached as simply an academic discipline or intellectual pursuit. If it is studied only on a surface level, detached from meaning, spirituality, and moral responsibility, then something essential is lost.

Indeed, if we approach halacha and Torah study without inherently linking it to the morals, ethics, and spirituality that make it so central to the Jewish people, and if Torah is embraced without the critical concept of *derech erez kadma laTorah*, “dignity and proper behaviour precede the Torah”, then the Torah would lack all of the influence and sanctity that makes it what it is.

Only when we view the Torah as a guide for how we live and how we live among others can we begin

to understand how our connection to its teachings have made us who we are. Torah must be predicated on values of humanism, unity, and solidarity well before it becomes a text of laws and topics for academic or scholarly analysis.

In preparation for receiving the Torah, the Jewish nation was described as *k’ish echad b’lev echad*, “as one person with one heart”. Before we could receive the Torah, we first needed to understand that our peoplehood isn’t only about personal observance or individual scholarship. It’s about our collective responsibility, our shared



destiny, and our mutual care for one another. Our unity was what allowed us to be worthy of receiving the Torah and become the nation of Israel.

This is what’s being celebrated on Shavuot – on the day before we actually received the Torah. In this regard it’s worth noting that the very name of the holiday, Shavuot, meaning “weeks”, is a reference not to the day itself but to the seven weeks of spiritual preparation to receive the Torah.

The holiday reminds us that being worthy of the Torah matters just as much as receiving it.

Shavuot provides us the chance to remember that our very identity as Jews isn’t solely about the study of Torah itself, but the kind of people we become because of it.

• Rabbi David Stav is the chairperson of the Tzohar rabbinical organisation and the chief rabbi of the city of Shoham.

# From lamb to leader in three stages



RABBI DOVID HAZDAN

OPINION

It is a trio of months and themes that link liberation to revelation, binding Pesach to Shavuot in one continuous movement of the soul. The journey isn’t merely historical. It’s the blueprint for how a person moves from dependency to maturity, from slave to prince, and from being saved to becoming a partner with G-d.

The verse in Shir HaShirim captures it perfectly: “Draw me to You; after You shall we run; the King led me into his inner chambers.”

Three clauses, three stages, three months.

In Nissan, G-d drew us to Him. He initiated, He intervened, He shattered the natural order with the 10 plagues and the splitting of the sea. We were followers and passive recipients of miracles that enveloped us.

Nissan is Aries the ram. The lamb is the symbol of Pesach, the offering that marked Jewish homes and spared us during the final plague. The lamb is passive, docile, dependent. That was the Jewish people at the exodus.

We stood at the 49th level of impurity, almost beyond redemption. We didn’t earn our freedom through strategy or strength. We were swept out on the wings of divine mercy.

This stage is real and necessary. Before we can run, we must be pulled from the mire. Before we can choose G-d, we must experience that He chose us first. Nissan teaches humility: salvation begins not with what we do, but with what G-d does for us.

It is infancy – being carried, fed, and protected without having earned it.

But the gentleness of the lamb that follows its leader cannot, on its own, secure the mission of freedom. If we remain lambs forever, we will never build a nation.

We enter Iyar, the stage of “after You shall we run”. The miracles of Nissan become the foundation for the work that now begins.

Throughout Iyar we count Sefirat HaOmer, the 49-day ascent from Pesach to Shavuot. Each day is a step of refinement, a deliberate act of self-development. The passivity of Nissan gives way to action. Now it is our turn to respond to the hand of G-d that reached down in Egypt.

Iyar corresponds to Taurus the bull: brute force, passion, and drive. This is adolescence. Our independence awakens, and we discover strength, will, and desire. The danger is that this energy remains raw and self-centred. We can start running, but we will run in circles, or in the wrong direction, if we don’t know where we are meant to go.

Iyar is about inner work. The Kabbalists map these 49 days to the refinement of the seven emotional traits, each interacting with the others. Anger checked by kindness.

Kindness tempered by discipline. It is challenging, uncomfortable, and absolutely necessary. We cannot receive

Torah if we remain slaves to our ego.

Iyar asks: Now that we are free, what will we do with that freedom? Will we use it to serve, or will we use it to serve ourselves?

We enter into Sivan, the month of receiving the Torah. “The King has led me into his inner chamber.”

Sivan is synthesis, harmony, unity. The timidity of the sheep and the brute energy of the bull are blended in Hashem’s embrace. At Sinai we stood as both followers and leaders, humble foot soldiers and empowered leaders with a mission. We were passive enough to listen and active enough to declare “*Naaseh v’Nishma*”, “We will do and we will understand”.

Sivan corresponds to Gemini the twins. There are two distinct entities that carry the same essence. On the surface these forces seem contradictory – humility and assertiveness, surrender and leadership. But in the inner chamber of the King, opposites pull together. The lamb’s trust and the bull’s strength become one force directed towards purpose.

This is adulthood. Maturity comes when we can draw on both the innocence of the child and the self-assertiveness of the teenager without being trapped in either. We are no longer merely reacting. We are choosing. We have integrated the gifts of both stages and can now draw on their combined strength.

By Shavuot, our national liberation had matured into a readiness to commit to values, purpose, and the mission of shaping the world with the word of G-d and the teachings of the Torah. We did not merely leave the geography of Egypt. We became a people with something to say to the world.

These stages are evident in every life. We begin as infants, dependent and unable to fend for ourselves. That is Nissan. We are loved before we have done anything to deserve it.

Then come the transformative teenage years. We discover inner powers, challenge authority, feel energy surging within. That is Iyar. We learn our boundaries and test what we are made of.

Maturity arrives when we can hold the trust of the child and the drive of the teenager. That is Sivan. We are no longer defined by passivity or rebellion. We are defined by purpose.

May we all be blessed to receive the Torah with great joy and inner sincerity, not as a burden imposed from outside, but as a calling and privilege that answers something deep within us.

May we use the auspicious moments of Shavuot to hasten the final redemption with the coming of Moshiach, our righteous redeemer. May he bring security and peace to Am Yisrael and to the world.

• Rabbi Dovid Hazdan is the dean of Torah Academy and rabbi of Great Park Synagogue.

# The Book of Ruth: A book of grafters and shafters



RABBI WARREN SHER

OPINION

When I was in Grade 11, I was privileged to be selected for A-guard at Bnei Akiva Machaneh with 160 of my friends. I saw it as my mission to help set up the camp site and ensure it was ready for when all the *channichim* would arrive a week later. Many of the others had no such intentions.

One of the *madrichim* who was in charge of A-guard that year taught me and a few of my dedicated friends a life lesson. “In life, there are grafters and shafters. If you’re going to be remembered, you need to be a grafter.”

The meaning was plain for all of us to see. Had all 160 of us decided to work, we could have pitched the camp site in a day. But, it took the 60 dedicated grafters three or four days to complete the work, while the rest chilled, sunbathed, and engaged in water fights.

When I reflect on the Book of Ruth and its characters, we see the same split. The grafters look for opportunities to serve and are rewarded with their names being remembered for posterity. The shafters are vanquished to the footnotes of Jewish history, some not even earning the right to have their names mentioned at all.

The book is set in the days of the judges. Like the Book of Judges, our

rabbis teach us that the Book of Ruth was authored by the prophet Shmuel, whose motivation for writing both books was to teach what sort of leadership the Jewish people need and what sort of leadership doesn’t work.

Each character in the book fits into one of the two categories.

## The shafters

Elimelech was a leader in Judah. Rashi describes him as a very wealthy man. At the time of famine, when the community most needed him and his resources, he decided to take his family and leave the land. This left his community to fend for themselves. Why did he leave? He was distressed by all the destitute people knocking on his door (Rashi, Shoftim 1:1). By chapter 1 verse 3, this deserter has died, leaving his wife and children in a foreign land to fend for themselves.

Machlon and Kilyon are Elimelech’s sons, whose names literally mean disease and destruction. It is highly unlikely those

are the names their mother and father gave them. They seem to be pseudonyms. The two followed their father out of the land and, even after his death, never

whose name is not important. This is still true in modern-day Hebrew.

Orpah was the widowed wife of one of Na’omi’s sons. She was good to her mother-in-law but when pressed by Na’omi, chose to go her own way to try and rebuild her life.

Calling her a shafter might be a bit harsh. She maybe fits into a more neutral category of someone who is a good person but doesn’t go out of their way for others. I suppose this can be debated.

## The grafters

Rut was a Moabite princess who, once widowed, was completely dedicated to her mother-in-law, Na’omi. She followed her back to the land of Israel, subjected herself to abject poverty – which I’m sure was not on her *shidduch* resumé – and was even prepared to glean the dropped ears of wheat in the field like the peasants of Judah. She was rewarded to be the grandmother of David, the founder of the royal family.

returned to assume their responsibilities. They too perish within two verses.

Ploni Almoni was a pseudonym for Elimelech’s closest relative. He was a man prepared to take the land of his brother, nephew, or cousin but not responsibility for the two widows or to maintain Elimelech’s family name. This pseudonym has been adopted for posterity to denote anyone who doesn’t have a name or



Na’omi, the wife of Elimelech, embraced her daughters-in-law and always looked out for them, even at great cost to herself. She remained committed to Rut and coached her to build a relationship with Boaz and ensure her survival.

Boaz, a distant relative of Elimelech, felt responsible to help the two widows in the family. He instructed those working in his field to purposefully drop extra wheat for Rut to collect and eventually took responsibility to redeem the field and marry Rut. He, too, was rewarded with being the great-grandfather of David.

The message of the Megillah is clear. If you want to make an impact and be remembered, you need to put up your hand, take responsibility, and make things happen.

• Warren Sher is an Orthodox rabbi and engineer. He’s the current Johannesburg Chair of Limmud and will be presenting “Freeing the Widow of Lieutenant Billy Gesundheit” this year. Lieutenant Gesundheit was a Capetonian whose plane was shot down off the coast of Italy in July 1944.

# Shavuot calls on us to resist polarisation



RABBI DR MEESH HAMMER-KOSSOY

OPINION

Our diversity is our great strength. Rather than pull to extremes, the Jewish people must amplify their centripetal force.

For many years, I have spent Friday mornings reading through a stack of newspapers reflecting a wide spectrum of editorial positions in Israel. It used to be amusing to count the differences in news coverage between them, as if each newspaper came from a slightly alternate reality. Recently, however, these differences have grown into chasms of ill will, cynicism, and dehumanisation of "the other", making it difficult to understand how all streams of Israeli society might continue living together. This problem is not unique to Israel – more than ever, polarisation plagues societies throughout the world – yet in Israel, it seems that this development threatens our very existence.

Even in the shadow of war, polarisation remains one of the greatest problems facing Israeli society today. Despite our multi-party tradition, in recent years Israeli political society has succumbed increasingly to the demonisation of the other. The current governmental embrace of extreme parties, opinions, and policies that until now have been taboo in Israel has provoked horror and

alienation, as well as suspicion of anything that reflects the Jewish character of the state on the left.

Fortunately, our Jewish tradition provides us with an approach to resist and overcome the grave dangers of polarisation, one that is particularly resonant as we approach the holiday of Shavuot. The key, I believe, is to replace binary identities with multiple identities and to recognise that all of these identities, while they may compete, ultimately serve a singular purpose.

The balance between singularity and plurality can be traced to Sinai. The Midrash relates that at the moment of revelation: "When the Blessed Holy One was revealed on Mount Sinai, twenty-two myriads of angels descended with G-d... Once Israel saw them composed of flags and flags, they themselves started desiring flags. They declared, 'My G-d, we want to have flags like them.'" – Bamidbar Rabbah 2:3

Like a small child at the Grand Canyon enthralled by a bug or a small rock, when G-d appeared to the Israelites at Sinai in that moment of direct revelation, and they heard G-d's voice "face to face in the mountain out of the midst of the fire" (Deuteronomy 5:5), their attention was actually drawn to the colourful flags that angels were

waving.

According to the Midrash, rather than becoming frustrated by our lack of attention, the Blessed Holy One grants our request: "The Blessed Holy One said, 'Just as you have desired to make flags, on your life, I will fulfil your request', as it says, 'G-d will fulfil all of your requests.' (Psalm 20:6)"

Flags have played a central role in our internal conflicts, maybe more than our international ones, sometimes in a weaponised form. Flags are a stand-in for identity. Angels descend to accomplish a single mission (Genesis Rabbah 50:2 and Rashi Genesis 18:2). To wave a flag is to know precisely whose team we are on and what our mission is in the world.

Each of the tens of thousands of angels was waving their own flag, and yet what characterised us at Sinai was unity and singularity, we were like a single individual with a single heart (Rashi).

This apparent tension between plurality and singularity is resolved in the opening of the book of Numbers in which the Israelite encampment is described, "each individual on his flag according to their family" (Numbers 2:2). Each tribe, like any modern army, has its own flag, fight song, and skill set. There may be rivalry and competition between the units, but never polarisation. All of the flags are carefully arranged around our shared core mission – the tabernacle holding the holy ark, which emblemises the recreation of Sinai and the continued Divine presence among the Israelites.

As we begin to read the book of Numbers and immediately afterwards celebrate the revelation at Sinai, we would do well to remember that just as each flag in the desert represented a distinct and critical aspect of the overall mission in the journey of the Israelites

to the Promised Land, so, too, do each of our "tribal" voices play an essential role in sustaining Israel and protecting the singular mission that resides at its core. Our multiple identities compete with but must also complement one another in order to help us resist polarisation and work together, each of us with a unique and necessary mission.

Our current world has succumbed to centrifugal force. The magnets are pulling us to the extremes, causing us to experience our identities as binary rather than complex, as "us versus them", as threatening rather than mutually enriching. We feel it in our world, we feel it in our country, and I feel it in my work at Pardes, an institute that brings Jews together from across the religious spectrum to learn from the Torah and one another. Resisting that pull is incredibly challenging on a national and a personal level. However, our diversity is our great strength. Rather than pull to the extremes, we must amplify the centripetal force, centre ourselves symbolically around the ark, and see our critical identities as contributing to the whole, united around a central mission. This is precisely the holy work that the festival of learning, Limmud, does, bringing together Jews from across South African Jewish life. I am honoured and excited to learn with and from you this coming August at Limmud South Africa. In the meantime, may we use this season as an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to that task.

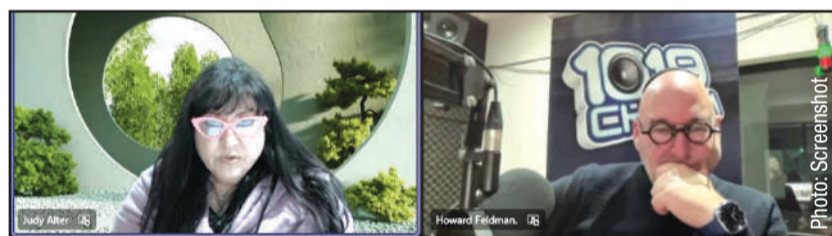
• Rabbi Dr Meesh Hammer-Kossoy is Rosh Beit Midrash at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. She will be presenting at Limmud South Africa in August 2026. An earlier version of this article was published by JNS.

## How to break the doomscrolling spiral

LEE TANKLE

What begins as simple scrolling through social media easily spirals into hours upon hours of consuming distressing headlines, arguments, and negativity, otherwise known as doomscrolling.

Talk show host and columnist Howard Feldman and psychologist Judy Alter, in a webinar hosted by the Chevrah Kadisha on 13 May, discussed how easily we've gotten sucked into doomscrolling, especially over the past two and a half years, but there are ways to combat this horrible habit.



"If you're looking for some kind of reassurance or certainty, it's highly likely your phone is not going to give that to you," said Alter. "We have to be much more creative in terms of reading a book, going for a walk, meeting a friend, having a play date, calling somebody, doing the things that give us the real space of growth and connection."

Alter said that doomscrolling provides a kind of chewing gum for the brain, which means that while it is interesting, it's not useful, and can even be harmful to mental health.

Although it may seem that we are getting more and more connected to the world around us by scrolling, it is more often making us feel less and less in control.

"So the purpose of constantly checking is to make us feel better. And the result of the check is that we feel worse. And then when we feel worse, we need to check again to feel better. And so it becomes this endless vicious cycle of getting momentary satisfaction. And then going back to that place where we have to compulsively check, hear about it, speak to people about it, watch the news on a loop," she said.

"We actually think that the dopamine that we get isn't from the scrolling itself; it's actually from the anticipation of finding something.

"It's coming from the knowledge that you're going to be able to scroll. It's coming from the search. It's coming from curiosity. Once we get that dopamine, we think that it will set us, but actually, it dysregulates us. And so once we dysregulate, we need more dopamine," she said.

Alter likens doomscrolling to an addiction "because it activates certain chemicals in the brain that compel us, almost in an obsessive way, to do more and more of it. So it's really about having a very hard think, taking a look at ourselves, and deciding what we're going to read, what we're going to allow, and what we're going to start to turn away," she said.

This is often difficult to do because that process has started to impact us and increase our level of anxiety.

"The problem with doomscrolling is that the more we

scroll, the more we believe that scrolling is the solution to the anxiety we feel when we don't scroll. And the difficult thing is that with any mild addiction, we get relief. We feel relief in the first few seconds. And then, of course, we read the news. It's bad news, it's personal, it's a lie. And we begin to feel bad again. And so we set up the cycle again to look for other pieces of information that don't corroborate that, which will help us to get relief," she said.

"In the doomscrolling and in terms of our dopamine and our cortisol, we actually set up a cycle where it becomes compulsively repetitive. And that in itself will create more and more ill health."

If you doomscroll long enough, you're going to get all kinds of untrue things spouted at you, and the difficult part is that it's interspersed with bits of true information. "And

what that does to the brain is that it makes us believe everything. Because that's the best lie, isn't it? The best lie is when you intersperse it with the truth," Alter said. "The brain isn't very good at distinguishing between reading about danger and feeling as if we really are in a dangerous situation. So when we read about danger, the brain automatically puts us into a state of stress."

Alter emphasised, though, that there is a difference between excessive scrolling and doomscrolling. The main difference is in how we feel after we get the information.

"If you can read the news and you don't have to, then reread the news and you feel informed, and you hear what's going on, and you move away and go and do another activity, you're probably just checking out what's going on in your world," she said.

"If you're doomscrolling and you feel worse afterwards, and feel like you need to find more information and feel more down, more distressed, if you're feeling like you have to phone somebody or ask somebody, or you're going to check again in a little while, then that's doomscrolling, and that's not healthy for you."

Alter set up a few rules to keep us from doomscrolling. The first is to stop scrolling in bed. "Because you go in to check one thing, and then three hours later, you know the particular hardships of 15 different countries that are at war, what they're saying, and the time has flown by. And that's going to the blue light and the actual information, and that process stops sleep. And we're pretty aware, for the most part, of how we're affected if our sleep gets impacted upon," she said.

Another rule is to set up a designated time for scrolling, so the constant checking is replaced with scheduled checking.

"The minute you start the algorithm of doomscrolling, you're going to be pounded with that algorithm. So if you counterbalance your diet of bad-news scrolling with how to knit a jersey, how to cook a great lasagne, and whatever else may or may not interest you, it resets your algorithm."



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Riaan Bellingan is a valued member of the South Africa Israel Chamber of Commerce (SAICC), a long-standing organisation dedicated to strengthening trade, fostering innovation, and building strategic partnerships between South Africa and Israel.

Daniel Yakobi serves as Executive Director of the Chamber. For membership enquiries, please contact: Lauri Kruger | info@saicc.co.za

# Jewish pride in a Batman suit and running shoes

GILANA LAB

What was meant to be a straightforward journey to Cape Town for this weekend's marathon turned into a test of resilience for fitness coach and endurance athlete Yoel Levy.

Levy, who is known to more than 265 000 Instagram followers as @thejewishfitnesscoach, was en route to South Africa when his travel plans went awry. His flight at the beginning of the week was forced to turn back mid-air and was subsequently cancelled, leaving his arrival uncertain just days before the scheduled race on Sunday, 24 May.

"Bit of a crazy travel update," he posted. "After flying for around 90 minutes, our flight had to turn back and was unfortunately cancelled. Safety always comes first, and I'm very grateful for that."

Levy immediately shifted into logistics mode, determined not to miss the race or the community commitments surrounding it. He called for help and advice from his followers in South Africa. He told the *SA Jewish Report*, "Right now, we're working as hard as possible

to sort new flights and make sure I can still get to Cape Town in time for the marathon and the events we had planned throughout the week."

On the night of Tuesday 19 May, after 60 hours of travel, three days without sleep, and a number of cancelled flights, Levy finally touched down in South Africa.

Since 7 October, Levy has been running marathons around the world specifically to remind people of the massacre and subsequent targeting of Israel and the rest of the Jewish world. He has run in Jerusalem, London, Sydney, Toronto, New York, Panama, Costa Rica, Mexico, Miami, Tel Aviv, Paris, and Boston. The run in Cape Town will be no different.

Levy says the overwhelming feeling is excitement rather than nerves. "I've heard South Africa has one of the most passionate and proud Jewish communities in the world. Especially when it comes to community spirit and supporting one another. So many people have already messaged me saying they'll be coming to support during the race," he says. "That genuinely means a lot."

Levy is also eager to experience Cape Town for the first time. "I've heard Cape

Town is one of the most beautiful marathon routes anywhere in the world," he says. "I'm really looking forward to experiencing that atmosphere and hopefully meeting as many people as possible while I'm there."

He generally runs marathons dressed as Batman, not to stand out for the sake of attention, but as a poignant reminder.

"After 7 October, like many Jewish people around the world, I was struggling with what I could actually do to help," Levy says. "I'm not a politician. I'm not a journalist. I'm a fitness coach and content creator."

Running, however, gave him something powerful: visibility. "The marathons gave me a way to create conversations," he says. "People everywhere stop and ask the same question, 'Why is Batman running?' And that question opens the door to a story that should never be forgotten."

Batman was the favourite superhero of four-year-old Ariel Bibas, who along with his baby brother and mother were kidnapped on 7 October and later killed in Gaza. The redheads became emblematic of the hostages held in Gaza for more than a year.

Levy wanted to honour the family in a way that would resonate with people across

cultures and backgrounds.

"It started because Batman was one of the Bibas boys' favourite superheroes," he says. "But very quickly, I realised it became something much bigger. It became a way to use something positive through fitness and movement to help keep their memory alive."

Running a full marathon in a Batman suit is physically demanding, hot, and exhausting, but Levy says the discomfort serves as a reminder of why he's doing it.

"Growing up, Batman was just a superhero, like for so many kids around the world," he says. "Now the character means something completely different to me. Wearing the suit for 42km is not easy at all. But in many ways, that discomfort reminds me this run has a bigger purpose than me."

Fitness has played a major role in Levy's life journey. Long before he built a social media following as "The Jewish Fitness Coach", training was a source of confidence and stability during difficult years growing up. "Fitness honestly changed my life," he says. "I struggled a lot with confidence growing up, and I was also dyslexic at school,



which made things difficult at times."

Even speaking on camera once felt intimidating. "Creating content didn't come naturally to me at all," he says. "For years, I posted three to five times a day, slowly improving my confidence, my speech, and my ability to communicate."

Levy says he didn't deliberately set out to become an influencer. "I genuinely just loved helping people and sharing my journey," he says. "Over time people connected with it."

His message, he says, has always been rooted in helping people become healthier without toxic pressure or unrealistic expectations. But over the years, the message evolved into something larger than fitness alone.

Now, his marathon runs are moments of connection with people all over the world. "The biggest surprise has honestly been how universal human connection really is," Levy says. "You don't need to speak the same language to connect through emotion, sport, or kindness."

While travelling through Central America, he admits, he initially worried people wouldn't understand the message because of the language barrier. "I was nervous because I don't speak Spanish. I worried people wouldn't connect with what I was doing. But the support was incredible. People wanted to learn. They asked questions. They wanted to understand."

Some of the reactions during races have stayed with him long after crossing the finish line. "I've had non-Jewish people travel hours just to support during races. I've had strangers cheering, crying, and hugging me afterwards, sometimes without even knowing the full story at first."

For Levy, those moments have reinforced how important visible Jewish pride can be.

"So many people quietly come up to me and say, 'Thank you for representing us,'" he says. "I never take that lightly." More than anything, he hopes people see his runs as a positive example. "I hope people see someone using fitness and positivity to unite people instead of divide them," he says. "Even if someone never learns the full story of the Bibas family, maybe they still walk away wanting to ask questions, learn something new, support others, or simply become a little more compassionate."

He is especially conscious of the message younger Jewish people may take from his visibility online and at races around the world. "I hope younger Jewish people see that they don't need to hide who they are," Levy says. "You can be proud and strong all at once."

## No more milking it

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

When eating cheesecake shifts from guilty pleasure to religious custom, many grab a free pass to indulge. Yet for some, being lactose intolerant means that whether it's Shavuot, a special occasion, or an ordinary day, consuming dairy is never a simple prospect.

"On Shavuot, I always worry, 'Am I going to be able to eat things?'" says Natalia Levin. Now 23, Levin was diagnosed with lactose intolerance when she was 16, and later also with an intolerance to gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley, rye, and their derivatives. "I try prepare before I go out by taking my own food as I don't expect people to cater according to me."

For Levin, ensuring there's appropriate food available, whether she's going to a restaurant, friends, or family, has almost become second nature. That's not to say that this doesn't still come with a degree of anxiety.

"It's around whether I'm going to be the one left out at a meal or that I won't be able to eat, which is awkward," she explains. Her anxiety also manifests in other ways, for example when ordering coffee and asking for alternative milk. "I always ask about 500 times if the person serving me is sure it's correct as I've had an experience where I got sick because I was served dairy. So, it's led to almost not trusting people and having to constantly triple check."

Levin is not alone in the challenges she faces. It has long been acknowledged that Ashkenazi Jews have a higher chance of being lactose intolerant.

"Lactose intolerance affects around 25% of people in Europe, but rises to 50%-80% among Ashkenazi Jews, people of Hispanic origin, South Indians, and black populations," says registered dietitian Leigh-Ann Silber. This risk approaches 100% in Asian and American Indian populations, she says. "The reason comes down to evolution and understanding genetic adaptation. Lactase persistence, the ability to digest lactose comfortably into adulthood, developed in populations that depended heavily on dairy farming, particularly Northern Europeans."

Lactose intolerance is rooted in what is essentially a digestive mismatch, Silber explains. "Lactose is the natural sugar found in milk and most dairy products, and to absorb it properly, your small intestine needs to produce an enzyme called lactase. When lactase production is insufficient, lactose passes undigested into the large intestine, where gut bacteria ferment it – and that's where the trouble starts."

"The resulting gas and short-chain fatty acids cause the classic cluster of symptoms: abdominal cramps, bloating, diarrhoea, nausea, and flatulence." These symptoms usually occur between 30 minutes and two hours after eating dairy, she says. "The severity depends on how much lactase someone produces, how much dairy they've consumed, and what else they ate at the same time. It's a spectrum, not a switch."

Silber says lactose intolerance is different from a dairy allergy, which is an immune response and an entirely different condition. "Lactose intolerance is a digestive enzyme issue, uncomfortable, but not dangerous in the way an allergy can be."

With lactose intolerance, cutting out all dairy is rarely necessary. "The goal is finding your personal threshold, the point at which your digestive system

starts complaining. The key is portion size and context. Dividing daily intake into smaller portions and taking dairy with other foods helps significantly. Gradually increasing milk intake over time also can encourage intestinal adaptation, allowing higher amounts to be tolerated in the long run." Lactose-free dairy products, which are readily available at many retailers, are also worth investigating, Silber says. They're nutritionally identical to regular

dairy but pre-treated with lactase.

Those with the condition can also take lactase enzyme supplements before a meal, which compensate for what the gut isn't producing adequately.

Levin says she's sometimes annoyed by fellow sufferers who advocate eating dairy anyway because of the "Yolo ('You only live once') philosophy. "I can't, because I know I'll be in pain and that could be in a day lost in the bathroom," she says.

Indeed, not modifying diet can reduce quality of life for those with lactose intolerance, Silber says.

"Continuing to consume dairy well beyond your threshold keeps the gut in a state of ongoing fermentation-driven inflammation. Over time, this disrupts the microbiome, keeps the gut inflamed, and can compound other digestive vulnerabilities." Yet, she cautions those who need to reduce dairy significantly to intentionally replace calcium with foods including sesame seeds, almonds, and fortified plant milks and supplements.

For those facing challenges beyond lactose, full dairy avoidance can be necessary. At 11 months old, Talya Brodtkin was diagnosed with dairy intolerance. "My body couldn't properly break down both the sugar element (lactose) and the protein element (casein) found in milk," she says. "I still have this condition today, but I control the symptoms by cutting out dairy."

Brodtkin also suffers from celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder in which eating gluten triggers an immune response that damages the small intestine. "Today the only treatment is a lifelong, 100% gluten-free diet," she explains.

"There are certainly emotional aspects of being forced to give up gluten and dairy products," Brodtkin says. "One feels overwhelmed at first but it gets easier when you get the hang of the diet. It's a steep learning curve as to what you can or cannot eat."

She says she's grateful that these days there are so many wonderful dairy- and gluten-free products available that it's easy to find substitutes or alternatives for foods. "But, at night I do dream of Shavuot cheesecake, Purim hamantaschen, and Chanukah doughnuts," she admits.

Brodtkin's challenges have, however, been instrumental in shaping her professional journey. "I studied to become a nutritionist, and I specialise in the gluten-free diet." She runs celiac and gluten-free support groups on Facebook and WhatsApp and consults with those newly diagnosed with celiac disease. "Fellow sufferers have lived it and can offer invaluable tips and emotional support," Brodtkin says. "They understand these conditions in a way textbooks often cannot. There's comfort in that."



# Same as it ever was

Someone who confused me with my late father had added me to a "40 years since school" WhatsApp group. "Shame," was my first reaction. I should probably reply that he won't be attending unless they plan to host it at Westpark Cemetery.

It was only when a few familiar names started surfacing that the horrifying realisation hit me. It's been 40 years since my matric. And my former classmates are now old.

I, however, have been fortunate enough to spend most of my life at 41 years old. While others have endured the long, exhausting process of ageing, I skipped most of that entirely. I was pretty much 41 for decades.

Growing up as a 41-year-old wasn't always easy.

While other children rebelled, I worried about traffic. I was the kid mentally calculating departure times for family functions. I rolled my eyes at my parents not because I was immature, but because frankly they had absolutely no sense of urgency.

At university, while everyone else experimented with identity and alcohol, I was already standing at the braai discussing geopolitics, and wondering whether one should perhaps leave 10 minutes earlier to avoid congestion on Corlett Drive.

I was never really young.

And then, at 41, something extraordinary happened. My physical age finally aligned with my internal age. For one brief, shining moment, the software matched the hardware. Emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically, I had arrived home. Forty-one was my peak, in terms of my operating system. Finally I was old enough to know things. Young enough to still recover from things. It was the sweet spot between optimism and Nexium.

School reunions are strange because they're supposed to remind us of who we were. But mostly they remind us who we always were. The

## INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



loud ones are still loud. The insecure ones still overcompensate. And the people who used to swear that they hadn't studied for exams, now run entire compliance departments. Packages might have changed. But personality has not. Beneath all of it, everyone is instantly recognisable. No matter what age they peaked at.

What reunions really expose is that adulthood is mostly costume design. We spend decades acquiring job titles, watches, medical aid plans, and opinions about air fryers, only to discover that underneath it all, the class clown is still performing, the anxious kid is still seeking reassurance, and the prefect is still policing tone in the WhatsApp group. Time ages the face remarkably well. It does almost nothing to the operating system.

The reunion itself will no doubt be filled with nostalgia. Stories beginning with "Do you remember when..." But what interests me more is the unspoken realisation that hovers beneath all the small talk.

That inside every balding head, every reading glass case, and every discussion about Discovery rates, is the same person who once walked through those school gates believing life hadn't started yet.

And perhaps that's why reunions unsettle us. Not because they measure how much time has passed, but because they measure how little has actually changed. We're simply balder, and slightly more upholstered versions of the people we always were. Forty years on, I am still the boy mentally calculating the drive home. And that, I suspect, is the closest thing to longevity any of us is going to achieve.

# BDS bullying and interfaith solidarity

Last week brought concerning news from a place where young minds are meant to be nurtured and challenged. St Mary's School in Johannesburg postponed an address by Klaas Mokgomole, an expert on Israel-Palestine relations, after organisers were advised that the event would attract protesters and thereby pose a security risk to pupils. It is a troubling development that, regrettably, follows a pattern we have come to know all too well.

The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and its allied organisations have made a practice of threatening, harassing, and intimidating speakers, institutions, and individuals until silence becomes the easier option. They have now turned this instrument on a school, its leadership, and its children. This isn't activism, it's intimidation. And it must be condemned without qualification by everyone who takes the values of an open society seriously. A place of learning that cannot host a diversity of voices without fearing for its pupils' safety is a place whose freedom has been quietly corroded.

We must state that while we are disappointed that St Mary's acquiesced to the pressure and postponed the talk, it acted in what it believed to be the best interests of its pupils' security. Our real anger and frustration must be targeted at those who sink so low as to intimidate a school into abiding by their narrow world view.

South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) Gauteng Chairperson Danny Mofsowitz and National Director Wendy Kahn met with St Mary's leadership, and were heartened by their assurances that the session wasn't cancelled but rather postponed until the school can find a way to host the speaker securely. They affirmed the principles of intellectual rigour for which St Mary's is renowned.

Context matters here. This invitation didn't arise in a

vacuum. The SAJBD requested that Mokgomole be invited to speak after we received complaints from within the school community that two deeply anti-Israel speakers had addressed pupils. We weren't seeking a platform for propaganda. We were asking for something far simpler and far more foundational: intellectual balance. It is so unfortunate that the concept of such a diversity of views is so threatening to BDS and its allies that they would threaten to intimidate teenage pupils. It tells us everything we need to know about the nature of this campaign.

Last weekend, the Holy Trinity Church in Braamfontein was vandalised. We, as Jews, know all too well that a house of worship is a sacred space, and any attack on it isn't merely an attack on a building, but on the dignity of the people who gather there and on the values of a free and compassionate society. The SAJBD condemns this vandalism and expresses our heartfelt solidarity and support with the congregation and leadership. Sacred spaces must be kept safe, not only for the congregants but for society as a whole.

This act of desecration occurred in the very same week that the parish's own Father Russell Pollitt joined us at the Sandton Shul, together with a remarkable group of seminarians from the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, led by Bishop Graham Rose. SAJBD board member Rabbi David Shaw hosted the engagement, in which the seminarians, who are in their eighth year of study, are spending a semester focusing on inter-religious dialogue. The gathering was a testament to the immense value of interfaith engagement in our country and the important role it plays in fostering understanding, mutual respect, and unity.

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

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# Immortalising the Jews of Krakenowa

GILANA LAB

While there are no Jews living in Krekenava, Lithuania today, it was a thriving Jewish community before the Holocaust. South African businessman Bernard Seeff, whose family originates from what was then called Krakenowa, left an indelible memorial to this once cultural and religious Jewish hub last week.

Seeff, who lives in Johannesburg, created and unveiled a memorial plaque on the building that was once the synagogue.

For Seeff, this visit to Krekenava was also a tribute to his father's dream of returning to his birthplace. His father, Morris, and uncle Sydney grew up there. Although the family came to South Africa in 1929, memories of the town and the winding Nevėžis River stayed with them throughout their lives.

At the plaque ceremony, Seeff shared his father's stories of his childhood and swimming in the river. His family belonged to the Krakenowa Sick Benefit Society, so Seeff felt a duty to return and honour the community that once flourished there.

Seeff's mother, Dora, who is now 103

years old and lives in Johannesburg, is the oldest surviving Litvak in South Africa. She was from a nearby town. In its heyday, half of Krakenowa was Jewish. Just before the Holocaust, there were about 500 to 700 Jews in the town, but most of them were killed in mass executions in August 1941 by Nazi supporters and local collaborators.

For Seeff, unveiling the plaque on Tuesday 12 May marked the fulfilment of an idea that had been years in the germinating. "I visited Krekenava in 2009," he told the SA Jewish Report. "Many other shtetls had plaques and I always wanted to do the same for Krekenava. Logistics were impossible by remote so as soon as I had a chance to do it myself, I did."

The ceremony was attended by the Mayor of the Panevėžys District Municipality, Antanas Pocius, and the local priest. "I was greeted by the mayor of the Panevėžys region. Also, Gediminas Jankunas who is the priest of a beautiful basilica that was recently renovated," Seeff said.

The plaque, he said, was to commemorate both the Jewish community of then Krakenowa and their many descendants who later settled in countries including

South Africa. Before World War II, Lithuania was home to one of the most vibrant Jewish populations in Eastern Europe, with small shtetls such as Krakenowa forming the heart of Jewish religious and cultural life.

Like all Lithuanian shtetls, it was devastated during the Holocaust. Yet memories of the town survived through the families who left before the war, many of whom built lives in South Africa.

Seeff said it was important to remember not only the Jewish community that once lived there, but the descendants who carried its legacy abroad. "Like many other shtetls, Krakenowa had a vibrant *landsmanshaft*, the sick benefit society, and it was fitting to memorialise them with a plaque on the shul," he said.

*Landsmanshaften*, organisations formed by immigrants from the same town or region, became an important part of South African Jewish communal life during the early 20th century. These societies offered



The mayor of the Panevėžys District Municipality, Antanas Pocius, and Bernard Seeff at the unveiling of the plaque

the community's families are widespread. "I don't know numbers, but there were a lot of Jews from Krekenava and they now have numerous descendants."

The plaque installation formed part of a wider trip through Lithuania with his wife, Isarae. "We were attending a conference in Lithuania starting on Thursday, so Isarae and I began our trip early to visit our roots," he said. "That afternoon we visited the Šeduva shtetl museum and then went on to Keidan, where my wife's grandfather came from."

Visits such as these have become increasingly common among descendants of Lithuanian Jews seeking to reconnect with family history and preserve the stories of communities that were mostly

wiped out during the Holocaust. For Seeff, the plaque now serves as both a memorial to the once thriving Jewish community of Krekenava and as a bridge between past and present for the South African families who emerged from it.

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