



Chief rabbi signs ‘Reject the Lie’ open letter

GILANA LAB

Chief Rabbi Dr Warren Goldstein has joined thousands of prominent figures from around the world in putting his name to an open letter rejecting the accusation that Israel has committed “genocide” in Gaza. Goldstein is among more than 6 000 signatories to

“Reject the Lie”, an initiative bringing together people from politics, entertainment, academia, religion, business, and public life. The letter’s message is unequivocal: “Disagree with Israel. Protest its policies. Challenge its government. But do not call it genocide.”

The letter was released by the US-based Creative Community for Peace organisation, in partnership with Israeli author Yossi Klein Halevi, Rabbis Yitz Greenberg and Micha Odenheimer, and US Professor Jonathan Karp. Those who’ve signed have done so as individuals rather than on behalf of the companies and organisations with which they are affiliated.

Goldstein appears to be the only signatory currently living in South Africa, making his inclusion particularly significant in the country that brought the “genocide” case against Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ). He isn’t, however, the only name on the list with South African roots. Johannesburg-born Hollywood executive Gary Barber, chair and chief executive of Spyglass Media Group and former chief executive of MGM, has also signed. Barber attended King David Linksfield and the University of the Witwatersrand before moving to the United States in 1982.

Goldstein and Barber are on a list of signatories that spans industries and continents. Former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson appears alongside singer Boy George, *The Big Bang Theory* actress Mayim Bialik,

actress Debra Messing, Harvard psychology professor and author Steven Pinker, and historian Sir Niall Ferguson. Behind the camera, *House* creator David Shore and Amy Sherman-Palladino, creator of *Gilmore Girls* and *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, have also put their names to the letter.

“Reject the Lie” doesn’t argue that every Israeli action during the Gaza war should be defended. “There is a vigorous debate within the Jewish community over aspects of how this war was fought, and that is a sign of moral health,” the letter says, acknowledging “our pain over every innocent life lost”. Where its signatories draw the line is the accusation of “genocide”.

At the centre of their argument is the question of intent. The 1948 Genocide Convention defines genocide as specified acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group. That intent is a necessary element of the legal definition of the crime.

“A crucial difference between war as tragedy and war as genocide is intent,” the letter says. Its authors argue that Hamas demonstrated genocidal intent through the 7 October 2023 attack and its stated aims, while rejecting the allegation that Israel’s military campaign was undertaken with the intention of destroying the Palestinian people.

The letter also argues that the events of 7 October have been downplayed

in discussions about genocide, and says that accusations against Israel began circulating even before its ground operation in Gaza. For its authors, the debate isn’t simply about the use of a legal term, but about how the war and the events that triggered it have come to be understood internationally.

Goldstein putting his name to the letter is notable against the backdrop of South Africa’s ICJ case. Instituted on 29 December 2023, it accuses Israel of violating its obligations under the Genocide Convention in relation to Palestinians in Gaza. The ICJ issued provisional measures in January 2024, followed by additional measures in March and May. These were significant and binding legal orders, but they weren’t a final finding that Israel had committed “genocide”. The court has yet to issue a final judgment on that.

The open letter argues that the “genocide” accusation has increasingly affected Jews and Israelis far from the war itself, saying it has become “a pretext for excluding, attacking, and even murdering Jews around the world”. Its authors warn that the accusation is being used not only against Israel, but to delegitimise Jewish self-determination more broadly.

For Goldstein and the thousands of others who have signed “Reject

the Lie”, rejecting the “genocide” accusation doesn’t mean ignoring Palestinian suffering or shutting down criticism of Israel. The letter explicitly leaves room for debate over Israel’s government, military decisions, civilian deaths, and the conduct of the war. But it argues that these questions are different from establishing the intent required for genocide.

Goldstein may be just one name among thousands on an international list, but his signature places South Africa’s Chief Rabbi alongside politicians, academics, entertainers, business leaders, and religious figures collectively challenging an accusation being pursued internationally by his own country.

The letter ultimately calls on both Jews and non-Jews to reject the accusation and warns against allowing it to become accepted simply through repetition. Its thousands of signatories come from markedly different backgrounds, but their closing message on this issue is brief: “We will not allow this lie to stand.”



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Forgiveness goes all ways

Torah Thought

It's that time of year again. We ask for and offer forgiveness. To those near and those far away. To each other and to G-d Almighty. Often forgiveness with those closest to us is the most difficult. We expect our close family and friends always to be there for us and never to let us down, certainly not to hurt us. So, while charity ought to begin at home, where does this leave us with forgiveness?

It is said that to forgive is Divine. Indeed, this is so. At times it can take super-human effort to overcome feelings of being deeply hurt by someone, especially someone close to us. However, being that there is a *mitzvah* in the Torah to forgive and to ask forgiveness, we certainly have the G-d-given ability to do so.

I would like to share a story that was told by Rebbetzin Rivkah, the fourth Chabad Rebbetzin.

There was a Jewish family that lived in a small village without a community. For *yomtov* they would go to the nearest town that had a shul so that they could *daven* with a *minyán*.

One erev Yom Kippur morning the father got up early to pack and get ready to head to the town.

His family, however, were taking their sweet time. “What’s the hurry,” they asked. He kept trying to get them to load the wagon and leave, but his wife and children seemed to have other priorities.

The day went on and the man grew frustrated. He told them that he was

starting to walk and they should pick him up along the way once they decided to leave.

He set out on foot and further down the road took a rest along the side of the route, relaxing under a tree. He was sure to position himself in a way that the travellers would see him as they went by. Shortly afterwards he fell into a deep sleep. Meanwhile, his family left the home and began heading towards the town. But they completely forgot about their father. Eventually he woke up, only to realise that the sun was now setting behind the hills.

What could he do now? He was stranded on the roadside with nothing. He would have to spend Yom Kippur under a tree in some deserted area. He had nothing with him and hadn’t eaten before

Rabbi Levi Silman
Rabbinical coordinator for Kosher SA



the fast. He lifted his head heavenward and said to Hashem, “Master of the Universe, my family have forgotten me, even after all that I do for them. And yet I completely forgive them because they are my family. I ask that You too completely forgive Your children, even if they have forgotten You.”

So when we come to Yom Kippur and ask Hashem for forgiveness, we do so on the understanding that we forgive each other as well.

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	Shabbat		Yom Kippur	
	Starts	Ends	Starts	Ends
Johannesburg	17:44	18:34	17:45	18:35
Cape Town	18:22	19:14	18:23	19:16
Durban	17:32	18:23	17:33	18:24
Bloemfontein	17:51	18:42	17:52	18:43
Gqeberha	17:53	18:46	17:55	18:47
Plettenberg Bay	18:02	18:54	18:03	18:56
East London	17:44	18:36	17:45	18:37
Jerusalem*	18:01	19:16	17:59	19:14
Tel Aviv*	18:21	19:18	18:18	19:15

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G-d instructs Moses to ascend Mount Nebo. “For you shall see the land opposite you, but you shall not go there, into the land which I give to the children of Israel.”

*Please note that Israel time is 1 hour ahead

Ramaphosa demands Israeli ‘accountability’

TALI FEINBERG

While Jews around the world were celebrating Rosh Hashanah last weekend, President Cyril Ramaphosa stood at the podium of a BRICS summit and said that “there must be accountability for the ongoing genocide against the Palestinians”.

Ramaphosa was delivering a speech at the 18th BRICS Leaders’ Summit in New Delhi, India on 12 September, in a session titled “Inclusive global governance and strengthening multilateralism”. He also said there must be accountability for “the crimes committed against the people of Sudan and for the illegal war against Iran”.

“We must exert pressure and expose violations whenever, and by whomever, they are committed,” said the president, who has rarely condemned Hamas violations of international law, or spoken up for Israel’s rights to safety and security. “International law cannot be applied selectively: the same principles must apply to all states and the same protections must apply to all peoples”.

It was for this reason that South Africa and other BRICS member states had turned to bodies like the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC) “to seek justice for the people of Palestine”, Ramaphosa explained.

The South African Zionist Federation national spokesperson, Rolene Marks, notes that at the same summit, Ramaphosa sat down with the president of Iran, “the regime that funds, arms, and trains the Hamas terror group that murdered 1 200 people in southern Israel on 7 October 2023 and dragged hostages into Gaza”. Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian even invited him to Tehran.

“Ramaphosa then used the same summit to declare that international law cannot be applied selectively,” she says.

He said this in a room with Russian President Vladimir Putin, “who is wanted by the ICC for deporting Ukrainian children. South Africa is a state party to the Rome Statute. Ramaphosa also sought Putin out.”

Marks says Ramaphosa used the occasion “primarily to attack Israel, repeating the charge of ‘genocide’ as though a court had established it. None has, and South Africa

knows exactly what its own application did and did not achieve.”

She points out that while Ramaphosa says international law cannot be applied selectively, South Africa has not taken Ukraine, Darfur, or Iran to the ICJ or ICC. “This is not principle but political alignment, dressed in the language of international law.”

Ramaphosa is correct that international law must be applied fairly and consistently, but “he might begin with the men whose hand he

The declaration said that “a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict depends on the fulfilment of the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people, including the rights to self-determination and return”, but also said it supports a two-state solution.

Local political analyst Daniel Silke says he doesn’t think Ramaphosa’s comments will have any impact on US-South Africa relations.

“South Africa is clearly adopting a two-tier strategy now, by maintaining its harsh criticism of Israel, but also attempting to find common ground with the US administration over trade, with the use, of course, of [ambassador] Roelf Meyer and other trade envoys,” says Silke. He says this “dual strategy” enables South Africa to continue its “vociferous rhetoric on Israel”. He thinks Ramaphosa’s extreme position on the Middle East aligns with the broader African National Congress’s (ANC) position, and with that of many BRICS members. “It’s in line with the views of probably a large majority of United Nations members, and it also maintains

the continuity of how the ANC sees its leadership position on the critique of Israel, emanating from the ICJ case.”

South Africa has “bought fully into the Palestinian view of the crisis” and “continues to avoid providing equal weight to the insecurities that Israel faces”. This is seen in Ramaphosa’s speech and the BRICS declaration, says Silke.

But much of what we’re seeing now is also about domestic politics, he says. “It’s local government election time and the ANC will be looking to find a point of differentiation between itself and perhaps the Democratic Alliance, and it cannot find that on service delivery, because the ANC’s service delivery has been so shocking.”

But the ANC can use the Middle East to try to regain support. “What it loses in terms of its domestic performance, it will attempt to make up in its foreign policy strategy, and it’s not going to let up on this issue,” says Silke.

Middle East expert Professor Glen Segell says Ramaphosa is “pandering to global opinion by justifiably stating that international law can’t be selectively applied, and calling for accountability for atrocities. He would have been applauded by America and Israel had he not chosen them selectively and incorrectly as examples of violators in Gaza



President Cyril Ramaphosa speaking at the 18th BRICS Leaders’ Summit in New Delhi

shook in Delhi”, says Marks.

In a statement called the BRICS New Delhi Declaration, released at the summit, the bloc of countries expressed concern “regarding arrangements that may prejudice the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people and legitimise or prolong occupation”.

The declaration condemned violations of international law, including “the use of starvation as a method of warfare, attacks targeting civilians and civilian objects – including healthcare facilities and other civilian infrastructure – as well as the unlawful obstruction of humanitarian access”.

BRICS reasserted its “steadfast” support for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, better known as UNRWA.

The declaration rejected “any unilateral measures that seek to alter the legal and historical status of occupied Jerusalem” and welcomed the ceasefire in Lebanon. But it called on Israel to respect the terms agreed with the Lebanese government and to withdraw its “occupying forces” from all Lebanese territories in which it remains.

It expressed “serious concern over deliberate attacks on civilian infrastructure and peaceful nuclear facilities” and on the “continued violence in Gaza despite the ceasefire agreement of October 2025”.

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and Iran.”

Segell says that at face value, Ramaphosa’s foreign policy gamble has failed.

“Foreign policy should serve the country, not overshadow the urgent challenges that define everyday life for its population. The prestige and symbolic influence generated by his foreign policy has not translated domestically into jobs, wage increases, or reduced poverty – or even resolved terrorist attacks by Hamas, attained Palestinian statehood, or stopped Iranian attacks on Gulf states.”

The director of the Middle East Africa Research Institute, Benji Shulman, says, “This is a useful distraction for Ramaphosa – he is talking at BRICS about international affairs while the ANC can’t even register election candidates back home.”

BRICS is also a place where South Africa “can legitimately interact with Iran without incurring too much wrath from the Americans or anybody else, so it gives them a free hand to network and to drive their policy agendas, which are anti-Israel measures and an anti-Western agenda under the guise of economic diplomacy”, says Shulman.

Journalist William Saunderson-Meyer, who has criticised South Africa’s stance on the Middle East and its alignment with anti-Western countries, says that the 11 BRICS member countries account for 49.5% of the world population, 40% of gross domestic product, and 26% of global trade, “to which one might add, and [they account for] only 1% of the world’s common sense”.

Statements like Ramaphosa’s speech and the BRICS declaration, “which are so obviously one-sided, are political theatre with no real immediate consequence, except for one thing”, says Saunderson-Meyer. “They help to raise the background level of anti-Israel hysteria at a critical time.”

Post-7 October, “Israel is facing an onslaught that has very successfully been internationalised”, he says. “One day sanity will return, but the challenge for Israel and those who care about her fate, will be to ride out the interregnum.”

Mozambique kidnapping shows ISIS gaining ground

>>Continued from page 1

Els says that ISM goes to camps and villages in the area, “and they gather the people, they preach, and they try to sway them to their ideology”. He says the group is becoming stronger because of the Mozambican government’s lack of strategy to counter it.

Solomon says he isn’t sure if South Africa would negotiate for the release of the hostage, but his instinct says it probably would.

He warns that “with each passing day, the ISM insurgency is gaining ground. What this shows is there’s an intensification of this insurgency.”

In 2022, South Africa sent troops and armoured vehicles to Cabo Delgado as part of the Southern African Development Community’s (SADC) military intervention to quell the insurgency. Rwanda sent troops separately. It is understood that Rwanda is being backed by the French government, as French energy company TotalEnergies has a huge gas concession in Cabo Delgado.

However, Solomon says SADC’s intervention has “failed spectacularly” and, in addition, “the Mozambican armed forces are not up to speed” in quelling terrorism activity.

Sanders says the community doesn’t need to be more concerned than usual, because the northern part of Mozambique is known for terrorist activity, so this is not an escalation. Even though the attack happened in a neighbouring country, Sanders says it is not cause for alarm. As for travelling to Mozambique, Sanders says, “Travelling internationally anywhere can pose risks, so you need to be well informed and understand the environment to which you’re travelling.

“In Mozambique there are good areas and bad areas, just like in South Africa, so knowing where you’re going, and where you shouldn’t go, is imperative. If anyone needs advice, they’re welcome to reach out to us, as we have relationships with the Jewish community there, who can give advice and support.”

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SA Jews wary but staying in UK, despite antisemitism

CLAUDIA GROSS

South African Jews living in the United Kingdom (UK) say they remain largely safe despite a sustained surge in antisemitic incidents since 7 October 2023, including two terrorist attacks against Jewish communities in the past year.

The comments come as Britain records antisemitic incidents at almost double the monthly rate seen before the Hamas invasion of Israel. They also follow Foreign Secretary Ed Miliband’s speech in Parliament just before Rosh Hashanah, in which he said that holding British Jews responsible for the actions of the Israeli government was antisemitic.

Miliband’s remarks came as Britain announced new measures against trade in goods from Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

For South Africans interviewed by the *SA Jewish Report*, however, the increasingly hostile political climate has not translated into a uniform sense of personal danger.

Amy Lazarus, who has lived in Britain for three years, said, “I don’t feel threatened.” Her everyday life continues normally, although additional security around Jewish areas has made her more aware of potential threats.

Lazarus experienced antisemitism once, shortly after moving to Britain, when someone shouted antisemitic insults at her while driving past. She has not experienced anything similar recently.

She also feels comfortable with her children being visibly Jewish. Her 15-year-old son wears a *kippah* and travels into central London. Her daughter attends a religious school and dresses modestly. “I’m definitely not scared,” Lazarus said.

Her experience comes against a significant rise in antisemitism since 7 October 2023. The Community Security Trust (CST), which monitors antisemitism in Britain, recorded at least 600 incidents in the 17 days after the Hamas attack. This was a 641% increase on the same period in 2022.

The annual figures have remained high. CST recorded 4 296 antisemitic incidents in 2023, followed by 3 528 in 2024, and 3 700 in 2025. Last year’s total was the second-highest annual figure ever recorded.

In the first six months of 2026, CST recorded another 1 926 antisemitic incidents. This was 21% higher than the 1 598 recorded during the same period last year. It was also more than the total recorded for the whole of 2022.

Physical attacks have formed part of this increase. CST recorded 135 incidents involving assault during the first six months of 2026, an 82% increase compared with the same period in 2025.

On 29 April, two Jewish people were wounded in a stabbing in Golders Green, north London. Counter Terrorism Policing declared the incident a terrorist attack.

It was the second declared terrorist attack against Britain’s Jewish community in seven months. The first was at Heaton Park Synagogue in Manchester on Yom Kippur on 2 October 2025. Two people, Melvin Cravitz and Adrian Daulby, were killed and three others were seriously wounded in the car ramming and stabbing. It was the first antisemitic terrorist attack in Britain to result in deaths since CST began recording incidents in 1984.

The Golders Green attack also triggered further antisemitism. CST recorded 21 antisemitic incidents on the day of that stabbing, followed by 24 the next day, and 26 on the third day. Four involved face-to-face abuse directed at Jewish people.

Jewish children have also been targeted. On 10 September, three 14-year-old Jewish boys were allegedly assaulted and subjected

to antisemitic abuse on a bus in north London. Police are treating the incident as an antisemitic hate crime.

Lazarus said she believes British authorities are doing enough to protect Jewish communities. She pointed to increased security in Jewish areas and police statements that there is zero tolerance for antisemitism.

Another South African Londoner, Sarah*, shares that view. She said she currently feels “very safe”.

But she acknowledged that the atmosphere had changed immediately after 7 October. “Initially after October the 7th happened, there were a lot of those [pro-Palestinian] marches happening in central London and everything was just rife.”

Sarah said that she had become more wary, but her everyday life had not changed. She works in central London and has two young children. Her six-year-old attends a Jewish school. Sarah said she has never felt that her children are unsafe because they are Jewish.

She also praised the government and police response to antisemitism, pointing to the visible police presence in Jewish areas and around synagogues during Rosh Hashanah. “I didn’t feel vulnerable, or any more than I would if I was in South Africa.”

However, Tanya*, a South African-born woman living in Golders Green, described a more significant psychological impact. She said she still loved living in Britain and could continue with her normal life, “but there is definitely a heightened sense of tension and awareness since 7 October”.

Before the Hamas attack, her husband had worn his *kippah* everywhere, but she had subsequently asked him to remove it when travelling on the Tube because she was worried about his safety. He now generally avoids wearing it outside the Jewish areas of Hendon and Golders Green.

The Manchester synagogue attack was significant for her. “After the attack at Heaton Park Synagogue in Manchester last year, it was the first time I genuinely questioned whether it was still safe to raise our family here.”

Tanya has not experienced antisemitism in person. However, she received significant antisemitic abuse online after using social media to discuss 7 October.

Incidents closer to home have also affected her. She cited the Golders Green stabbing and the burning of Hatzola ambulances as examples of attacks that made her more conscious of her surroundings. “There is a feeling that even walking around our own neighbourhood isn’t quite as carefree as it once was,” she said.

Tanya is less satisfied than the others with the authorities’ response. “Unfortunately, I don’t feel they are doing enough,” she said, adding that authorities often respond by increasing security after an incident rather than addressing the rhetoric and attitudes that allow antisemitism to grow.

Her concerns come amid a broader debate about the relationship between anti-Israel activism and antisemitism.

Of the 1 926 antisemitic incidents recorded during the first half of 2026, 787 referenced or were linked to Israel, the Palestinians, Hamas, or the war in Gaza, while also containing anti-Jewish language, motivation, or targeting.

Miliband addressed this distinction directly in Parliament. “Our argument is not with the people of Israel,” he said. “Our argument is with the conduct of its government.”

The government’s new measures target goods and services connected to Israeli settlements rather than British Jews. The measures are expected to be implemented



A Community Security Trust volunteer standing guard outside a shul

through a new sanctions regime.

Lazarus described the sanctions as “unnerving”, but said similar political tensions existed elsewhere. She believes Britain remains a country where Jews can live openly. She cautioned, however, that she could not vouch for the future.

Tanya similarly has no plans to leave Britain, despite her concerns. “We love our life in the UK and have wonderful friends and family around us,” she said.

The experiences of the three South Africans reflect a Jewish community navigating a changed security environment without reaching a single conclusion about its future in Britain. There is a greater awareness of antisemitism and, in some cases, changes to everyday behaviour. Yet none of the three currently plans to leave the country.

The attacks and rising number of antisemitic incidents have made the question of Jewish safety harder to ignore. But the interviews also show that increased concern does not necessarily mean British Jews feel unable to live openly in the country.

As Tanya put it, the psychological impact remains difficult to escape. “However settled you feel, you can never completely take your safety for granted.”

*Interviewees have requested anonymity for privacy reasons.

Will Israelis in SA fly home to vote?

CLAUDIA GROSS

Israelis living in South Africa will have to spend thousands to vote in the upcoming election. They will have to fly home as there is no way to cast their ballot outside Israel, not even at the local embassy.

With the election scheduled for 27 October, Israelis are trying to decide whether one vote is worth that cost, time, and effort.

A new initiative, Fly&Vote, has registered more than 30 000 Israelis living overseas who intend to return for the election.

Among Israelis in South Africa, however, the decision is far from unanimous. Some see voting as a democratic responsibility. Others question whether people who’ve chosen to live abroad should influence decisions affecting those who remain in Israel.

Guy*, a software engineer living in Sandton, Johannesburg, will fly home specifically to vote. He moved to South Africa four years ago to expand his technology company into Africa, but still has business operations and a residence in Tel Aviv.

“People ask why I’m spending tens of thousands of rands on a flight for a single day, but democracy isn’t a convenience,” he said. “It’s a duty. If I can fly back for work meetings twice a year, I can fly back to ensure there is a functioning country to return to.”

Guy said living in Johannesburg had given him a different perspective on governance and stability. “You realise very quickly what happens when civil institutions erode,” he said.

His parents and siblings remain in Haifa, making the election particularly personal. “Every vote cast from the diaspora is effectively a vote for the security and future of the family members we left behind.

“Israel’s voter laws force your hand,” he said. “Without absentee ballots for citizens abroad, physically standing in that line is the only leverage we have left.”

Rachel* has reached the opposite conclusion. The former Haifa resident moved to Cape Town with her husband and children six years ago and does not plan to go to Israel in October.

“When you look at the cost of flights from Cape Town right now, combined with taking time off work, you have to ask yourself if one vote in a proportional system actually alters the coalition maths,” she said. “Realistically, it doesn’t.”

She questions whether Israelis abroad should still influence policies in Israel. “If my children are growing up here, going to school in Cape Town, and not serving in the Israel Defense Forces, do I really have the right to fly in for 24 hours and dictate the security policy for people who live there full-time?”

Years of political instability have also left her feeling exhausted. “After watching coalition after coalition collapse, that urgency has turned into complete burnout,” she said.

For younger Israelis with plans to return, the calculation is different. Talia*, 22, was born in Jerusalem and moved to South Africa as a teenager. She is studying and plans to return to Israel within two years.



“This will be my first time voting in an Israeli general election since turning 18, and there was never a doubt in my mind about whether I’d be on that plane,” she said.

“Because I plan on making aliya back to Tel Aviv once I finish my degree, the outcomes of this election will directly dictate my career, housing market, and social realities in just 18 months.”

Her flight will come at the expense of a holiday. “My flight budget was meant for a summer holiday, but choosing the future of the Jewish State easily takes priority over a vacation,” she said.

Zev*, 67, is also planning to return. He owns property in both countries and spends about half the year in South Africa near his grandchildren. “I’ve voted in almost every Israeli election since 1977, and I’m not about to break that streak now just because I’m spending six months of the year in South Africa.”

He believes living abroad doesn’t sever an Israeli’s connection to their country. “My pension, my property, and my children’s heritage are tied to Israel,” he said. “Why shouldn’t my voice count?”

Netser, an electrical engineer who has lived outside Israel for three years, is also going home to vote. He works remotely as a freelancer and continues to work for an Israeli employer. His family visits Israel regularly.

He told the *SA Jewish Report* that he plans to arrive the day before the election and vote the following morning. He described voting as the most significant action he can take while living abroad. “I care about what’s happening in Israel and I care for Israelis. I care about it as the home that I would like to go back to one day.”

For Netser, the decision to leave Israel was closely connected to one issue he believes voters should address: education.

“The gap in quality between Israel’s education system and the education options in Cape Town, specifically Herzlia, but also other private schools, is what made us decide to move in the first place,” he said. “That was the number one reason to leave Israel.”

Netser believes education should receive greater attention during the election, alongside the cost of living, equality, judicial reform, and a Constitution. He said the war had highlighted inequalities between different sectors of Israeli society.

Security concerns could overshadow issues affecting Israelis’ everyday lives, according to Netser. “When people go to vote, unfortunately, they tend to go to what politicians are putting the focus on, their fears. Then they forget about what actually matters to their own everyday lives, which is what they pay for and what their children are learning at school.”

The election has Israelis in South Africa weighing more than the price of a plane ticket. Their decisions reflect different views of responsibility, belonging, and their continuing relationship with Israel. Those making the journey see their physical presence at the ballot box as a way of remaining part of Israel’s future, despite living thousands of kilometres away.

*Interviewees have requested anonymity for privacy reasons.

SA man brought music to Yom Kippur soldiers' ears

LEE TANKLE

When the Yom Kippur War broke out in October 1973, South African musician Dennis Feldman was on the Greek island of Crete. After reading about the unfolding war in an English newspaper, he made a decision that would take him from the tranquility of the Mediterranean to Israeli hospital wards and the Sinai Desert.

Armed with his guitar, Feldman flew to Israel to entertain the troops, sharing the journey with another musician travelling with the same purpose, Leonard Cohen. Over the weeks that followed, Feldman performed for wounded soldiers, sang to troops stationed near the Sinai Peninsula, and even provided the music at a wedding held in the desert in the midst of war.

More than five decades later, Feldman remembers the experience not through the war's politics, but through the people he met and the role music played during an extraordinary period in Israel's history.

When Feldman had learned about the situation in Israel, he'd wanted to help in any

way he could, so he phoned the Israeli embassy to see if volunteers were needed. At that time, they explained that they didn't need any, but this didn't stop Feldman from flying back to Israel from Athens anyway.

American singer Leonard Cohen, then 39 and living on the Greek island of Hydra, had also travelled to Israel, eventually joining Israeli musicians performing impromptu concerts for troops in the Sinai.



Leonard Cohen singing to Israeli soldiers during the Yom Kippur War

When Feldman arrived back in Israel, the mother of a volunteer suggested that he go sing to soldiers. So he went to the Israel Defense Forces Headquarters in Tel Aviv and auditioned. "For the first week, I was part of a small group that included a young man and woman who sang as a duo, a magician, and me. I sang and played guitar, and we spent that week performing for wounded soldiers in hospital," he said.

He recalled an unusual incident while performing in the hospital. The magician travelling with his group agreed to hypnotise a wounded officer and the man unexpectedly began speaking German and describing a neighbourhood in Germany. When he awoke, the officer reportedly said he couldn't speak German, leaving Feldman astonished by what he'd witnessed.

After a week working in the hospital, he

decided that he wanted to do more, so he asked to be sent either to Gaza or the Sinai Peninsula.

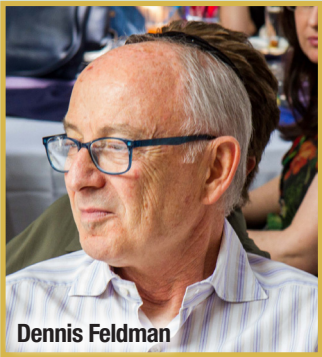
"On the Sunday evening, the duo, the magician, and I boarded a military transport plane. It wasn't a passenger plane; it was more like a cargo plane, with seats running along the sides. The following morning we were taken by truck to the Sinai Peninsula. From there, some of us were allowed to cross the canal while others weren't. The duo and I went across, and that was where we did our first performance," he said.

It wasn't long before he was confronted with the realities of war.

"I was in the middle of a song when a missile came overhead. I didn't know what to do, so I just kept playing. When I finished, I asked if I should continue, and they all said, 'Obviously, you must continue.'"

Feldman recalled performing at the wedding of two Israeli soldiers in the Sinai during a stalemate in the fighting. Friends and family travelled by bus from Tel Aviv, Haifa, and elsewhere to attend, while the chuppah was held up using submachine guns.

He was also taken with the singing duo to an air-raid shelter in no man's land, where they performed as bombing continued throughout the afternoon. He said they were close enough to the Egyptian forces that, using a soldier's binoculars, he could see one of their machine gun positions. He also remembered watching Israeli soldiers volunteer to travel through the area on a tractor to search for mines.



Dennis Feldman

Though Feldman volunteered for only about three months, it left a massive impact on him, and brought him closer to the Israeli people.

"I had been in Israel for a couple of months before the Yom Kippur War and found it difficult to relate to Israelis. I found them very arrogant and abrasive. I remember speaking to a professor at a university and telling him, 'I don't like the Israeli people.' He said to me, 'You have to understand where we're coming from. We're fighting wars all the time, so we're always on alert.'"

"When I returned to Israel after the war broke out and volunteered to sing for the soldiers, I saw a completely different side of Israelis. They couldn't do enough for me. They were phenomenal, and that's when I began to understand what they were really about," he said.

On his return to South Africa from Israel, Feldman became one of the pioneers of its professional sound industry, providing sound for stadiums, theatres, opera houses, and musicians until 2011.

In 2018, he began distributing Israeli health products produced by bees fed different blends of herbs.

Waverley Shul and Chabad of Savoy team up

LEE TANKLE

Waverley Shul and Chabad of Savoy have taken the first step towards a potential merger, signing a Memorandum of Understanding that could see the two Johannesburg Jewish communities join forces.

Though the details are still being worked out, the proposed merger could lead to the creation of a community campus bringing together prayer, learning, social activities, and other communal initiatives.



Waverley Shul

Rabbi Gabi Bookatz, the rabbi of Waverley Shul, explained that this began as an idea many years ago, but, given the changes in the Johannesburg Jewish community, this was the time for the two shuls to join forces.

"We've seen the changing dynamics of Johannesburg Jewry, and South African Jewry as a whole. We've seen many people making aliya and the challenges facing our community. We feel that if we bring our resources together, we can achieve far more together than we could separately.

"I said to Rabbi [Eitan] Ash the other day that it reminded me of the verse in Kohelet, Ecclesiastes, which says, 'Two are better than one.' Two groups working together can achieve more than they could apart. It means shared resources, shared manpower, shared vision, and shared responsibility.

"Rabbi Ash and I have also been good personal

friends for many years, long before any of this came about, and our children have been friends. So, we're excited about the possibility of working together."

Rabbi Bookatz explained that Chabad of Savoy has a large youth population and is outgrowing its current campus. The parents of the younger Chabad of Savoy members attend Waverley Shul. So, it seemed like a no-brainer that they join forces to build a possible community campus.

"We proposed it a few years ago as something that could potentially happen in the future. Chabad of Savoy is bursting at the seams. They're doing very well; they have a strong youth presence, but they're limited in terms of infrastructure and resources because of their location.

"We have the resources and facilities, so there's an opportunity for us to work together for the benefit of the wider community. There's also a lot of crossover between the two communities – parents may come to us while their children go there, or vice versa – so it's in everybody's interests," he said.

Rabbi Bookatz explained that he and Rabbi Ash would like this to become a flagship model of how different, diverse communities can work together for the benefit of Johannesburg Jewry.

"The vision is to create a community campus, not just a shul. We want it to be somewhere people can pray and socialise, where students can learn in a safe environment, and where communal meetings and other activities can take place. There are quite a few ideas about what this wider community centre could become, but at this stage, those details are still up in the air," he said.

The next steps will involve working through the legal, registration, and administrative requirements, followed by meetings between the leadership of both communities. Various options will then be presented to members for their input, with an emphasis on ensuring that the community helps shape and ultimately takes ownership of the merger.



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Jewish Report

Urgent need for new leaders

This past weekend was Rosh Hashanah, but in my area the new year began under the shadow of failing services: no electricity at the start of the weekend and no water by Sunday night. It wasn’t loadshedding, nor was it scheduled water or power outages. It was simply more failures, and more problems to manage. We are so used to losing one essential service or the other that we no longer have the energy for outrage. We just deal with it because this is Johannesburg and, unfortunately, this is what we’ve come to expect.

After Rosh Hashanah ended on Sunday evening, I went to a garage shop to buy a couple of five-litre bottles of water to sustain us until we could make another plan. I chatted to a Sowetan woman who works at the shop and told her about our situation. She said she understood because, living in Soweto, she still has loadshedding. In fact, she said, loadshedding has never stopped for her.

I was astonished as I didn’t know this. She said that most days she doesn’t have power either between 05:00 and 09:00 or 17:00 to 22:00, or both. I asked what her councillor was doing about it, knowing full well that my ward councillor may stand on his head or threaten lives, but he has little or no impact on outages. It doesn’t help that he is a Democratic Alliance councillor.

She said she knew her councillor and he was fighting, but nothing made any difference.

I said hopefully this would change after the elections. She laughed at me, saying she doesn’t believe in politics or politicians. They are all the same.

I asked if she planned to vote. She said she thought she might but didn’t think it would help much. I suggested that voting was the only real chance of changing the situation, but she wasn’t hopeful. She ultimately told me she would vote and made it clear it would not be for the African National Congress (ANC). I didn’t know whether she truly meant it, or whether she was simply telling me what she thought I wanted to hear. After all, customer service experts tell us the customer is always right.

That brief conversation stayed with me because it said so much about where we are as a city and as a country. It wasn’t only about water, electricity, or one woman’s daily experience of loadshedding. It was about the exhaustion that sets in when people stop believing that any leader, party, or councillor can make their lives better.

I left the shop feeling unsettled, and worried. We are now in our Jewish new year and we have one and a half months until local elections. The ANC leading our government has failed us so dismally and I cannot imagine that anyone doesn’t see this. I cannot believe every South African doesn’t feel the same dismay I do. It isn’t a race, religion, or gender issue, it is a South African problem. Johannesburg – or Gauteng, and I cannot speak specifically about any other province – is in a shocking state. Our infrastructure is failing badly. Our roads are in a horrible condition and there are burst water pipes all over the city. Half our street lights don’t work and neither do many of our traffic lights. We have such serious unemployment and beggars on every corner who are clearly desperate.

To so many of us, it’s obvious we have to change our government. We have to ensure that whoever comes into power in Johannesburg and Gauteng is hardworking and determined to fix this place. That’s the only way we are ever going to sort out our problems.

We need a leader who is determined to do what needs to be done to fix infrastructure and put into place whatever is needed to build this city and province to their true potential.

We don’t need someone who’s going to focus on racial issues or with their heads stuck in the Middle East. We need someone who’s focused on our city, province, and country. They cannot be worried about any peripheral issues or international problems, they need to be *hardegat* and focused on what needs to be done.

I have to say that every part of our infrastructure seems to be crumbling at the moment. I am shocked that it has taken the murder of seven or eight women for police to start considering that there is a serial killer on the loose in the Kempton Park area.

Having once upon a time been a crime reporter, I know how many serial killers we’ve had in this country and we aren’t, or certainly weren’t, short of expertise in finding such criminals. My first question to the police would be: were DNA and forensic profiles compared across the cases? Were missing person reports crosschecked against the unidentified bodies? Were comparisons of the different crime scenes done? Was the investigative psychology unit brought in and when? If not, why not?

We’ve had around 12 convicted serial killers in the past 20 years. In fact, the police have identified 170 murder series since the 1990s, according to research by Gerard Nicholas Labuschagne, a Doctor of Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand. This is why South Africa has real expertise in this area and has been able to solve a lot of these crimes.

We still aren’t sure it is a serial killer this time, and yet the number of dead half-naked women being found keeps climbing.

I would like to believe that within the next few days we will have some answers about these murders. I would like to believe that the experts in the South African Police Service are still at the top of their game. I want to believe this, but time will tell.

As we head towards Yom Kippur at sunset on Sunday, a time of reckoning for all of us, I would like to believe that it augurs well for the future of Jozi, Gauteng, and the whole country. I pray that the year will begin with good news and that it escalates through the year.

Next Thursday is Heritage Day, a day on which we specifically celebrate our different cultural backgrounds, as well as our shared heritage. We do it with pride as South African Jews who love our country and our home, and who celebrate this amazing country of ours. South Africa has endless potential and all it will take is the right leadership to guide us into the future.

Here’s to new, capable, focused leaders and to developing our city into a place we can once again be proud of and that will attract many investors.

I wish you all Gmar Chatimah Tova, Shabbat shalom, and Happy Heritage Day!
Peta Krost
Editor

PS: We won’t be publishing a newspaper next week because of the chaggim and the public holiday. We will be back on 1 October. We will continue to send online-only newsletters.



AI working behind the scenes to influence your vote

OPINION

PAULA SLIER

In June, an election video appeared online showing Gadi Eisenkot, the former Israel Defense Forces chief of staff and now one of Benjamin Netanyahu’s main political rivals, shaking hands with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas. Mansour Abbas, leader of the Arab Islamist Ra’am party, was shown joining them.

Except the meeting never happened.

The video was created using artificial intelligence (AI) and posted by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich’s Religious Zionism party. A month later, Israel’s Central Elections Committee ordered that it be removed, ruling it depicted an event that had never taken place but looked realistic enough to mislead voters. Smotrich and his party were ordered to pay NIS 10 000 (R53 427) in legal costs. While they had posted a disclosure saying parts of the video were created using AI, the committee found it wasn’t enough as it appeared only in the text accompanying the Facebook post and could therefore be hidden from view.

But this fake video may actually be the easiest part of Israel’s first AI election to understand.

then test the questions again. None of this is necessarily sinister.

But the same basic idea can be used very differently. Researchers are now studying malicious GEO, where online material is deliberately rewritten or designed to manipulate what generative search engines retrieve and use.

A study published this month tested seven such attacks across five AI models. Before the researchers applied their defence, the attacks succeeded on average just more than half the time. This isn’t to say that putting a lie on a website will automatically make ChatGPT repeat it. The research was conducted under experimental conditions and AI chatbots have safeguards and use different sources. But they aren’t foolproof and for an election, the implications are concerning. If political actors can increase the chances that particular material is picked up by AI, the information environment the chatbot searches becomes something worth trying to influence.

A deepfake uses AI to try to influence the voter. A more sophisticated information operation could try to influence the AI that the

voter consults. The voter may never see the original website, post, or piece of propaganda but they could encounter its framing later inside an apparently ordinary answer from an AI chatbot they themselves asked for information.

There is no evidence that Israeli political parties

are currently doing this, and I don’t want to suggest there is. But as voters increasingly ask AI what politicians believe or which candidate they should support, the incentive to care about what chatbots find and say is obvious.

Israel is already showing why this gets complicated. The ISOC-IL published a simulation in which 26 fictional voter profiles questioned ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, Perplexity, and Grok about the elections. What it found was that answers could vary according to the persona, language, and chatbot being used. A fictional Haredi woman asking ChatGPT about the cost of living was shown a political landscape dominated by United Torah Judaism and Shas. When the same type of voter asked Perplexity, the Democrats and Yashar came first and the Haredi parties disappeared from view. While this was a simulation and didn’t prove political bias, it did show that there wasn’t one simple AI version of an election.

We’ve become accustomed to worrying about politicians using AI to influence us. What is harder to see is an attempt to influence the information an AI chatbot uses when it answers us. This leaves a lot for voters to think about. If you ask an AI chatbot about an election, don’t assume its first answer is right. Ask what sources it is using and what it may have left out. Change the question. And perhaps most importantly, ask another chatbot the same thing.

Most us will not be voting in Israel come October, but we have South African local elections a month later. It’s worth remembering it’s not only about AI affecting elections, we also need to ask who, or what, has influenced the machine we’re asking for advice.

• *Paula Slier is an international journalist, war correspondent, and speaker who has reported from conflict zones across the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. Her work focuses on geopolitics, modern conflict, information warfare, and the battle for truth.*



An Open University of Israel project, monitoring politicians and political parties, reported last month that AI had been used to create or edit roughly one in eight posts it had tracked since late July. And it wasn’t only politicians using AI. A survey conducted in May for the Israel Internet Association (ISOC-IL) found that one in four Israelis was considering using AI or another online tool to help inform their voting decision.

This changes the game for campaign managers. For years, they worried about search engine optimisation, or SEO. If someone searched for their candidate on Google, the goal was to get their website, policies, and favourable information as high as possible in the results. Now there’s another acronym entering the vocabulary, GEO, or generative engine optimisation. It sounds like SEO for the AI age, but there’s an important difference. With Google, the aim is largely to get information in front of voters and persuade them to click on it. With GEO, the voter may never see the original material at all. Here, the goal is to increase the chances that an AI chatbot finds and uses a candidate’s information when constructing its answer to a voter’s question.

This is already changing what some campaign managers do. In the United States, Run for Something, which supports progressive candidates for state and local office, has developed CampSight to monitor what AI chatbots say about candidates and which sources they use. The organisation says it has seen AI descriptions of candidates change within days of campaigns updating their digital presence.

Imagine a candidate has made housing central to their campaign, but the policy barely appears when voters ask ChatGPT. The campaign can test likely questions, see which sources the chatbot is drawing from, publish clearer and more detailed policy material, put transcripts online rather than leaving information buried in video, and



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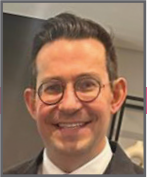
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The aroma of Yom Kippur

OPINION

RABBI AHARON ZULBERG



Yom Kippur is the day we stand together. Not only as individuals auditing our own ledgers, but as one body, Klal Yisrael, appearing before Hashem as a single congregation. That is the aroma of the day. Not the *ketoret* (incense) itself, which we no longer have, but the unity it was always meant to represent.

The *Midrash*

Tanchuma

(commentary on the Torah) tells us that the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) was fully assembled, the Altar, the Table, the Menorah, everything in its place, and the Shechinah did not descend until the *ketoret*

was brought. Why the *ketoret*? Because it contained every spice, including *chelbenah*, the one with the foul smell. The Torah itself includes that spice among the ingredients, teaching that no one is left outside the circle.

The *Kohen Gadol* entered the Holy of Holies as the representative of the entire nation, not only those with a beautiful fragrance, but also those who are distant. There is no King without a people, and the rendezvous in the *Kodesh Kodashim* was a rendezvous of the King with His people, all his people.

That is the aroma I recently smelled in Johannesburg. It wasn't really planned, at least not in the way it turned out. A friend of mine had just met the Rosh Yeshiva of the



Rav Yitzchok Ezrachi addresses The Base community

Mir, Rav Yitzchok Ezrachi, and I suggested we ask him to come to South Africa. I thought it would be a tremendous merit for us all to host a very special man, a great sage of Israel. And more than that, I have been feeling of late that there is so much noise in the world around us that if we could just get back to basic core values, it would also be a really good thing.

The trip itself was at short notice. We confirmed his coming only on the Thursday night before the planned arrival on Sunday. A few calls were made, a few messages sent out, and we were astounded by the sheer volume of people who arrived at the airport, from many different communities, with their leadership present, the whole reception done in a very formal fashion.

The excitement, the respect, and the awe were palpable. Singing and dancing began. When everyone was standing and dancing around him, the Rav refused to remain seated in his wheelchair. He wanted to stand after a long flight; he wanted to stand and dance with the people who were standing and dancing for him.

In the car, he kept repeating how he had dreamed about what Johannesburg could be like, and then to see what it actually is, and this was only the beginning. "What a community. What a community!" That was his refrain. The love of Torah. The honour for Torah. The

excitement about Torah and *mitzvot*. He was amazed by the connection and commitment he saw, not in one shul or one school, but across the board. He also spoke of still more potential, and of how important it is to be grateful for what we already have. If we nurture it, he said, there will be tremendous further growth.

Beyond the talks themselves, which were focused on strengthening our Torah focus and values, what keeps coming back to me is the way the Rosh Yeshiva loves the Jewish people, each and every Jew, regardless of affiliation. With unimaginable patience he sat with whoever came before him, whether they were going through a difficult time or asking about someone else. And quite literally hundreds of people came to him individually.

From the early hours of the morning until the early hours of the next morning he went from school to school, shul to shul, with all the difficulty of getting in and out of the car and into each venue. That was the level of his energy, and of his desire to reach as many people as possible. Add up the participants and you are into the thousands. The reception from the community was phenomenal.

Standing at his grandfather's grave in Brixton Cemetery was profoundly emotional. His grandfather Rav Boruch Shlom, of blessed memory, originally of Kelm in Lithuania, became rabbi of a remarkable community in Oudtshoorn, a small town whose influence reached far beyond its borders. His Lithuanian roots are our roots too. A century later, one of the greatest sages of Israel stood at Shlom's grave. It was an intensely special privilege to be there now with him, to watch the Rosh Yeshiva *daven* there, the way he said *tehillim*, the way he cared for each person he prayed for. He told us it was a very special place to *daven*, and that anyone who did so would have their *tefillot* heard.

On a personal note, the time I spent with him brought me so much *chizuk* (spiritual strengthening), it was mind-blowing. It was a great merit for me, for my family, and for our community, The Base, to facilitate this trip, together with partners Ari Slasky and Rabbi Raff. *Baruch Hashem*, many others came forward as well.

From the moment he arrived, we realised the power of the visit. Rav Ezrachi brought so many different people together without ever making a speech about unity. Whoever interacted with him came away inspired, understood, supported, and more positive about the future.

And I think that is the point. First, we realise, as individuals, how much is contained within us. Then we experience that together, and the "we" becomes something filled with possibility, how much we do have, and how much we can have, when we double down on what is truly important.

This may be why we recite Shehechyanu out loud immediately after *Kol Nidrei*. The Tur writes that we recite it in shul because we do not recite Kiddush at our tables on Yom Kippur. Perhaps there is another reason. After the community has stood together and invoked the eternal covenant, it is as if we are born anew. What more appropriate time to say a blessing "that He gave us life, sustained us, and brought us to this time"?

As we approach Yom Kippur, that is what we need to carry with us: the potential contained within us, and the core values that are critical. When we work together and care for one another in that context, the return on the investment is unimaginable. May the aroma of this Yom Kippur rise before Hashem, and may the outcome be a *Gemar Chasimah Tovah* for all of us.

• Rabbi Aharon Zulberg is the rabbi of The Base in Johannesburg.

Why cheating on your wife is a topic on Yom Kippur

OPINION

RABBI YOSSY GOLDMAN



There was a fellow who was so proud of himself. He claimed that he had conquered all his vices, except one.

Which one? Temptation!

Now, every single year, at least one congregant challenges me about the Torah reading for Yom Kippur at Mincha. It's the Bible's Immorality Act, all the forbidden relationships.

"Rabbi, was there no better chapter in the whole Torah to read on the holiest day of the year?"

In the morning we read of the pristine purity of the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest of Israel, as he performs the sacred services in the Holy Temple on this Day of Atonement. And then in the afternoon, we shift to the most immoral and impure subject matter, including incest and even bestiality.

Is there really nothing else in the whole Torah that is more appropriate for this holy day?

And every year I give the same answer. The reason given by the sages themselves. That, ultimately, the acid test of our virtue and commitment to G-d, faith, and Torah is this very subject. Keeping our heads and remaining faithful to our spouses, and faithful to the Torah's moral code in this specific area of sexual relationships, is the single most difficult area of morality and this is therefore the ultimate test of our righteousness and commitment to our faith and our heritage.

Rightly do we pray every morning, "Do not bring us into the grip of error, sin, temptation, or shame."

There is the shocking Talmudic story of Rav Amram the Pious, a wise and respected sage. A group of Jewish women had been kidnapped and then freed from captivity. To keep them safe, they were taken to the attic of Rav Amram, and the heavy ladder was taken away so that no men could climb



AI-generated image

up to bother them. One of the women was exceptionally beautiful. When Rav Amram noticed her, he took the ladder, which was so heavy that ordinarily it would take 10 men to move it, and picked it up all by himself so that he could climb it. Only when he was halfway up the ladder, did he come to his senses, still the burning urge within him, and go back down.

If these giants of the spirit were vulnerable and susceptible to sin, who are we to expect ourselves to be morally invincible?

That's why we have the laws of *yichud*, a set of regulations designed as precautionary measures to prevent us from getting into any morally compromised positions in the first place. Basically, a man and woman who are not married to each other are forbidden to be alone, in any private, secluded setting. Either there must be other people around, or it should be in a public space where nothing untoward is likely to occur.

How well I remember the exact words of a

fellow in our community who, unfortunately, got involved with a married woman. His apologetic justification was that he hadn't planned the affair, but they had both been working late at the office after everyone had gone home, and it had "just happened".

We are all susceptible, we are all prone to our hormones getting the better of us, and our hearts conquering our brains. Rationally, we know it isn't right, but emotionally we throw caution to the wind, and sadly, lives are often ruined in the process.

But the Torah doesn't give up on us. The Torah believes in us. If it is in the Torah that we must desist from these behaviours, then that is the greatest proof that we are capable of doing so. That we have the ability to remain strong in the face of temptation.

That is the strength of the human being. This is the power of men and women created in the image of G-d, that we have freedom of choice, and we can exercise control over our passions, no matter how strong that passion may be. Sometimes it is more

difficult than others. But we firmly believe that we can overcome the challenge, regardless.

But not everyone accepts this thinking. There are those who argue against the very principle of free choice, and they even present their arguments scientifically.

I remember some years ago; there was a huge article splashed across *Time* magazine. The title? "Infidelity: It may be in our genes." It described at length the findings of a group of "evolutionary psychologists", who based their research on evolution, on the behaviour patterns

of apes, ancient man, survival of the fittest, etcetera. Over eight pages it suggested that "infidelity is completely natural".

The very clear implication was that human beings weren't necessarily meant to be faithful to one spouse for life. If "infidelity is natural" then it follows quite logically that "monogamy is a mistake".

I can just see your typical macho male who hasn't been as faithful to his marriage vows as he should have been, now proclaiming with great justification, "Aha! I knew it! What did I tell you? I can't help myself. I'm a compulsive lover. It's in my genes. Monogamy isn't for me. It's unnatural. I'm not a sinner. I'm just a normal human being!"

So let me share a little bit of Jewish philosophy. Do you think the Torah believes that we are angels? Do you think Judaism considers mortal men and women beyond temptation?

Of course not! The Torah teaches us right from wrong, and how to live our lives

precisely because it acknowledges our human frailty. Judaism acknowledges our moral challenges. And it addresses them head on.

The Torah teaches us that G-d gave us temptation, but he also gave us a conscience. Or, as the rabbis long ago described it, a *yetzer hara* and a *yetzer tov*. We believe that G-d deliberately created men and women with an inner conflict between good and evil, right and wrong, moral and immoral. But the dice aren't loaded against us. Because, although we are subject to temptation, we also have the power to overcome it – every single time we face it.

And that is the meaning of freedom of choice. Is it easy? No. But in every one of life's challenges, we can dig deeply into our psyche, and our spiritual, moral resources to do the right thing. Do we really want to enjoy a 10-minute fling and throw away our family life? Is it worth it?

Not even the most intelligent chimpanzee can make that calculation. But we can. And we must.

So despite the evolutionary psychologists, we remain committed to monogamy and marital fidelity. We remain committed to a Torah value system that teaches us the correct moral code to follow in all our intimate relationships.

So when we read about immorality on Yom Kippur, we can tap into our inner strengths and achieve nothing less than immortality!

Please G-d, may we all come to appreciate our own strengths and abilities, so that we can each reach our personal potential to be men and women of conscience, and a proud and holy people.

• Rabbi Yossy Goldman is life rabbi emeritus of Sydenham Shul in Johannesburg and president of the South African Rabbinical Association.

Rosh Hashanah brings new life to East London shul

CLAUDIA GROSS

The dwindling Jewish community in East London (KuGompo City) once again filled its shul for Rosh Hashanah services, with a full *minyan*

throughout the festival despite torrential rain.

The East London Hebrew Congregation held evening and morning services, with Rav Ilan Herrmann travelling from Johannesburg to lead them.

For a congregation of about 26, most of them elderly, the weekend represented an important return to communal Jewish life after years in which full high holy day services weren't possible. "We amazingly had *minyanim* for the services," congregation secretary Ellen Ettinger told the *SA Jewish Report*.

The achievement came after a particularly difficult period for the community. Its last full Rosh Hashanah services were in 2019, before a prolonged dispute with its then rabbi and the disruption caused by COVID-19 stopped regular services.

The situation had a significant effect on the congregation's ability to function. Previous reporting by the *SA Jewish Report* described a community struggling to maintain regular religious life.

"Over the years, we've never ever had a full Rosh Hashanah," Ettinger said. "We either had perhaps in the morning and not Yom Kippur, or we had Yom Kippur and nothing over Rosh Hashanah."

The congregation recently renovated and re-equipped the former rabbi's house to make it habitable again before Rosh Hashanah.

"We spent thousands of rands and many hours going shopping to equip it properly," Ettinger said. "We had to bring everything up, crockery, cutlery, everything from the shul."

The house can now accommodate five people across three bedrooms, with additional space available if required. The aim is to make the property available to Jewish visitors who want a kosher holiday in East London, while also encouraging religious visitors to provide services during their stays in return for accommodation.

Ettinger said a family from Johannesburg, including a rabbi, his wife, and their two children, is expected to visit towards the end of the year, and has indicated that it would like to conduct some services while there.

"If anybody wants to come down and do a Friday night service or Saturday morning service in return for having their house along that basis, we'd love to have people," she said.

Herrmann became involved after seeing an advertisement for the Rosh Hashanah services. He contacted the congregation and travelled to East London with Errol Hurwitz, to help make a *minyan*.

Louis Robinson, president of the congregation, said the presence of the two visitors allowed the community to hold services on both mornings, something it had been unable to do for many years.

"We had a *minyan* both days and nights. And we just scraped it," the rabbi said. He estimates that the Jewish community in the city now numbers only a few dozen people.

The weekend also included communal lunches at the rabbinical house. For Ettinger, the social aspect was as important as the services themselves. "The community really came alive," she said.

The difficult weather made the achievement more striking. Heavy rain flooded drains around the shul, making access difficult. Ettinger described the conditions as so severe that members "practically had to swim" their way into the shul. Despite the weather, community members who were able to attend came together for the services and meals.

The congregation's small size remains its biggest challenge. Ettinger said many of the people who

previously had the knowledge to lead services had died, while most of those left are elderly. She does not expect East London to return to the type of Jewish community it once was, with services every Friday night and Saturday morning.

Instead, the congregation is looking at a model based on occasional services, communal meals, and visiting rabbis. "The way we see it is to bring somebody down occasionally and get the community together, maybe to have a dinner together and have a service," she said.

The community had previously considered selling its shul and creating a smaller prayer space in part of the rabbinical house.

For now, the Rosh Hashanah weekend provided evidence that the congregation can still gather when the necessary support is available. "We are going to try and do this more often for the community," Robinson said.

Herrmann said the experience showed that there was still a Jewish presence in East London that could be supported through visiting families, rabbis, and other members of the wider community.

After years in which its future appeared uncertain, the East London Hebrew Congregation has had an opportunity to gather again. For a community that has struggled to reach a *minyan*, having enough people for every Rosh Hashanah service was significant in itself. The challenge now is turning that weekend into an ongoing connection between East London and Jews elsewhere in South Africa.



Rav Ilan Herrmann, Louis Robinson, and Errol Hurwitz on the beach in East London

Fauda makes 7 October personal

REVIEW

PETA KROST



Season 5 of *Fauda* is shocking because of how realistically it evokes 7 October. For those of us who weren't directly affected by that horrific day in Israel, the new season brings the terror, grief, and helplessness close enough to feel personal. I want to say it should be essential viewing for adults outside Israel, while recognising that some viewers may not be able to stomach the violence or the realism that *Fauda* provides.

What makes this season so unsettling is not simply that it depicts violence, but that it turns national trauma into something intimate: the viewer is asked to sit with fear, shock, impotence, and grief through characters they already know.

Full declaration: I have been a fan of *Fauda* since the first episode. I think the script, storyline, and acting are superb, and it has always shown empathy for both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. *Fauda* has shown Israelis with warts and all. It doesn't claim they are angels or superhuman, it tells it like it is. Israelis are shown as human, with faults, special gifts, community, and honour, and who sometimes make bad errors too. The army is made up of real people, many of whom are heroes and yet there are some who at times seem heartless. Again, Israel is shown as a country of passionate, tough, gentle but sometimes ruthless people who love their country and recognise it is the only one they have.

I know that the scriptwriters, Avi Issacharoff and Lior Raz, who plays Doron, had to rewrite the script for season 5 after 7 October 2023. What is extraordinary is that an earlier version of their storyline reportedly included a terrorist border raid, which they removed because it seemed too unbelievable in Israel. Then 7 October happened, and they, along with the whole of Israel and the Jewish world, had to reconfigure what they believed was possible.

When they went back to the drawing board, they were no longer imagining horror from a distance. They were writing through their own grief and distress, drawing from a reality that was far too close to home.

Raz served in a specialist undercover counter-terrorism and intelligence unit in the army, as well as spending 20 years as a reservist, while Issacharoff was a journalist specialising in Palestinian affairs. Much of *Fauda*, until this season, was therefore rooted in realities they knew closely.

On 7 October, Raz apparently woke up to a panic call from his sister who was trapped in a bomb shelter on a border kibbutz. She made it out safely. Two days later, Raz and Issacharoff joined the volunteer group Brothers in Arms and drove down to the heavily bombarded town Sderot on the border of Gaza and were involved in the rescue of two Israeli families trapped in their homes. Turns out one of the women Raz rescued recognised him



French actress Mélanie Laurent and Lior Raz in a scene from *Fauda*, season 5

as Doron from *Fauda*.

This goes to the heart of the realism of the series, which steers clear of gratuitous violence. I need to mention that you see plenty of exploding cars and people being shot, but the camera always cuts away before moments of extreme bodily harm. While there is the devastating impact of terrorism and military raids on civilians, there is restrained focus on the emotional trauma and psychological toll rather than on graphic torture.

While the season is effectively about post-7 October and

seeking out those who perpetrated the atrocities in Israel, there are two episodes that take us back to 7 October itself. There is a very clear alert to viewers that if they have experienced recent trauma or are too sensitive to it, they may want to skip the two episodes. They are assured that they miss nothing in the storyline.

However, as much as I was dreading those two episodes, they were massively impactful. As a South African Jew, I didn't personally know anyone in the south of Israel who was harmed or lost someone

on 7 October. So, while I remain horrified and shocked at what happened to my people, and in that way, it was personal, it was not directly personal.

However, I was invested in the characters of *Fauda* and seeing the terror experienced by family members and the cold hatred in the eyes of the Hamas terrorists, it felt personal and so real. As we count down to the third anniversary of 7 October, it was all brought back to me. What was so painfully clearly portrayed was the sheer panic of the day. People shocked to see that terrorists were

in their country, and en masse. The total impotence of the characters and their families in the face of Hamas on that day.

All of the core characters are shown to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and the aftermath of 7 October hangs heavy on the portrayal of Israelis in *Fauda*. There is no whitewashing of this or their pain. The *Fauda* team lost a core member of its production crew, who was killed in a booby-trapped tunnel blast in Gaza. Idan Amedi, who played Sagi in previous seasons, was critically injured in Gaza.

Until this season, the script specifically portrayed Israelis and Palestinians as complicated human beings, showing their love, humour, and motivations for violence. However, Raz and Issacharoff were open about the fact that they couldn't empathise with Hamas after 7 October.

Fauda, season 5, will stay with me. I am grateful for it because I needed this reminder now: not only of what happened on 7 October, but of how fear, grief, and resilience continue to shape Israeli life. If you have the stomach to watch it, I believe it is vital viewing.

• Peta Krost is the editor of the SA Jewish Report.



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A voluntary crisis

OPINION

RABBI GABI BOOKATZ



There's a specific type of tragedy that I've witnessed a couple of times and maybe you have too. It's the tragedy of watching others, especially those we love, not heeding the warnings of friends and family about the dangers of their destructive lifestyles. Whether it's a friend or a family member who may be addicted to gambling, or abusing alcohol or marijuana, you try to help, have honest discussions, but they just deny any problem. Somehow, they are unable to hear the alarm bells or make the necessary changes to avoid a crisis. It's like watching a person run towards the edge of a cliff.

It's frustrating, painful, and often tragic. But we need to remember that people are ultimately responsible for themselves and that we cannot change them, or decide for them, regardless of how much we love them.

It seems as if only through suffering do we make the necessary changes in our lives. Most people make fundamental shifts in their character only when they face a crisis. The very word "crisis" originates from the Latin version of the Greek *krisis*, meaning a turning point or a decisive moment. For most people, tragically, only when they face such a turning point do they dig deep and make fundamental shifts in their values and character; moments such as facing the end of a relationship, losing a job, experiencing failing health, or even facing death.

Is this reality of life a tragedy or is it the way it's meant to be?

Friedrich Nietzsche, the great German philosopher, argued that suffering is not to be avoided or even pitied; it is the source of all human creativity and strength. He compellingly argued that we must accept and even embrace suffering because it is the only source of spiritual accomplishments and human greatness.

But as profound and true as Nietzsche's point may be, it is not the Jewish view. Hashem's view of the human being, as is apparent throughout the writings of the prophets, is a much more hopeful one. The Torah is entirely founded on the belief that a person can and must grow spiritually and morally by the power of education, self-reflection, and observing the *mitzvot*. We need not suffer the tragedies of life to grow spiritually and become wiser and more refined. We cannot avoid the hardships of life, but we don't need to suffer its torments to grow as human beings.

When King David heard the rebuke of the prophet Nathan for the sin with Batsheva, he prayed to Hashem to create for him a renewed spirit and a pure heart (Psalm 51; 12). King David understood that Hashem could and would perform the miracle of a renewed heart if he prayed with genuine humility and was prepared to make the necessary changes that repentance demands; he need not suffer misfortune and pain.

Similarly, the prophet Hosea rebukes the kingdoms of Israel and Judah for their moral corruption and wilful blindness to their spiritual failures. He warns them of the impending disaster coming from Assyria, and that Hashem will abandon them if they don't repent. But at the end of chapter five the prophet ends on a hopeful note. He says that the purpose of their suffering is not destruction but *teshuvah* (return). When the nation recognises its wrongdoing and sincerely returns to G-d, the calamity can be averted, and the relationship can be restored (Malbim on Hosea 5; 15).

The anguish and shame of owning up to the truth of one's choices, accepting whatever the terrible consequences, and making the necessary changes are the real suffering that make all the difference.

In Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov faces his tormented conscience for the murder he committed. On the edge of confessing to Sonia, he asks what he's supposed to do, she tells him, in effect, "Accept the suffering and achieve atonement through it." Sonia instructs Raskolnikov to go to the crossroads, kiss the earth he's "defiled", and confess aloud to the world. Suffering isn't incidental to his redemption in her view – it's the mechanism of it. That idea threads through the rest of the novel too: he only really begins to change once he's serving his sentence in Siberia and lets himself feel, rather than intellectually justify, what he's done.

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the opportunity that Hashem has blessed us with to make the fundamental shifts in our character that mitigate and even avert the agony of terrible consequences. As we say in the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *Machzor*, "Repentance, prayer, and charity avert the evil of the decree".

The magic of Rosh Hashanah is that it is an invitation to enter a voluntary crisis. We choose to look in the "Book of Memories". With great trepidation we acknowledge, "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many will pass away and how many will be healed. Who will live and who will die; who in his due time and who before; who by water and who by fire; who by sword and who by beast; who of hunger and who of thirst; who by earthquake and who by plague; who by strangling and who by stoning; who will find rest and who will wander; who will be calm and who will be harassed; who will be at ease and who will suffer; who will become poor and who will become rich; who will be cast down and who will be raised". (From the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer)

The people we watch run towards the cliff never choose the moment of the fall. It chooses them, and by then there's nothing left to decide. Rosh Hashanah asks something almost opposite of us: to walk to that same edge on our own terms, while we can still see clearly, and look down before the ground gives way. This is why the *Machzor* doesn't flinch from the terror of *Unetaneh Tokef*. It forces us to imagine every kind of ending, not to frighten us into paralysis, but to strip away the illusion that we have unlimited time. It's the same disaster we watch others walk into, except now we are the ones

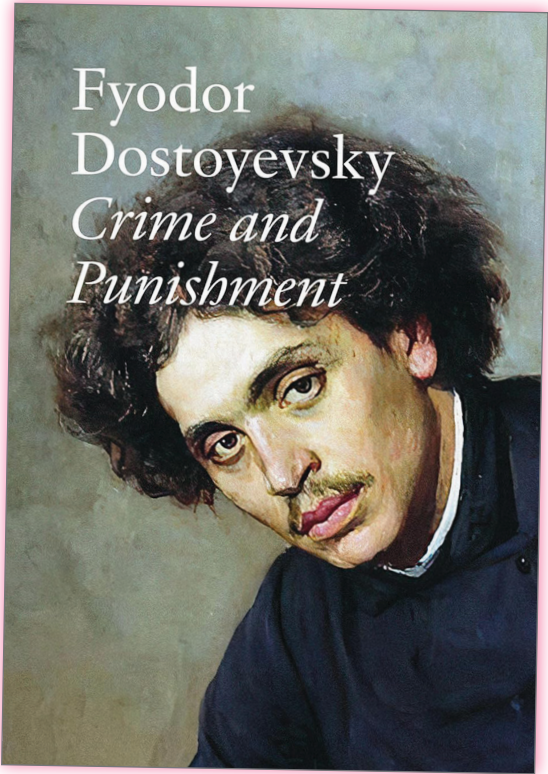
standing at the edge voluntarily, with the chance to step back before we're pushed.

Raskolnikov could only confess once he stopped arguing with his own conscience and let himself actually feel what he'd done. Hashem asks far less of us than a prison sentence. He asks only that we do, in the quiet space of these 10 days, what tragedy eventually forces on everyone else: to feel the truth of who we've become, to name it without flinching, and to change.

That is the entire wager of the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe) – not that we can escape judgement, but that we can face it voluntarily, and let it reshape us the way suffering reshapes a person, minus the wreckage.

So this year, before life stages the crisis for you, choose it yourself. Stand at the edge deliberately. Read the book of your memories honestly. And climb down from that cliff still standing, having done through repentance, prayer, and charity what otherwise only ruin can accomplish.

• Rabbi Gabi Bookatz is rabbi of Waverley Shul and a teacher at King David High School.



Time to step up as who we truly are

OPINION

REBBETZIN ESTEE STERN



We know how to find almost anyone these days. We can track a package across the world, find a restaurant in seconds, locate a lost phone, and instantly know what our friends are doing on the other side of the globe. We are remarkably good at finding things.

And yet, one of the hardest things to find is ourselves.

Who am I beneath everything I do? What is really going on inside me? What have I become so used to that I no longer question it? These aren't necessarily comfortable questions, but they may be some of the most important we can ask ourselves during the high holy day season.

In fact, this very question was asked thousands of years ago, in the very first story of humanity, on the very first Rosh Hashanah.

Ayeka? Where are you? Adam and Eve had eaten from the Tree of Knowledge. They heard G-d approaching and they hid. G-d called out to Adam, "*Ayeka?* Where are you?"

But surely G-d knew where Adam was. He wasn't asking for his location. He was asking something much deeper. Where are you in your life? Where are you inside yourself? Where is the person you were created to be?

I find that question particularly powerful at this time of year because we spend so much of our lives moving. We are busy, responsible, and productive. We have things to accomplish, people who need us, messages to answer, and problems to solve. We move from one thing to the next, often without stopping long enough to ask ourselves how we are actually doing, or whether we are truly living as the person we want to be.

Adam's response to G-d is to hide. Why? Because he suddenly becomes painfully self-conscious. He sees himself as naked, exposed, and inadequate. Something has changed in the way he sees himself. Instead of seeing himself as the magnificent creation G-d made, he sees himself through the lens of shame.

And isn't that something we all know? We make a mistake and instead of thinking, "I made a mistake", we begin to think, "I'm a failure". Something difficult happens to us and slowly it becomes part of the way we define ourselves. Someone criticises us and their opinion becomes our inner voice. We compare ourselves with someone else and decide that we are somehow less.

Over time, we can create an entire story about who we are and then live inside that story. We tell ourselves that this is simply who we are, that we could never change, that it is too late, or that we are just not that kind of person. Eventually, we stop questioning those statements.

But what if the story isn't completely true? The Torah tells us that every human being was created in the image of G-d. Before we are anything else – before our achievements, failures, roles, personalities, successes, or struggles – there is a Divine soul within us.

That doesn't mean we don't have flaws. We do. It doesn't mean we don't have work to do. We certainly do. But it does mean that our flaws aren't our essence. Our mistakes aren't our identity, and our past doesn't define us.

There is something deeper. This is why the high holy days can be such a powerful time. They are not simply about looking at everything we did wrong. They are also about returning. *Teshuvah* means return. On one level, it is a return to the person we really are, beneath the noise, the expectations, the fear, and the stories we have accumulated along the way.

This is where the shofar comes in. Its shape itself seems to capture something about this journey. It begins narrow and opens wider and wider. How often do we live from the narrow end? We tell ourselves, "This is just who I am", "I could never do that", "It's too late for me", or "This is how things have always been". We can become so accustomed to our limitations that we mistake them for our identity.

And then the shofar blows. It calls us to open, to breathe, and to expand our sense of what is possible. It isn't asking us to become

someone else. It is asking us to become more fully ourselves – more courageous, more joyful, more connected, and more alive.

That is where the question of *Ayeka* becomes practical.

Over these days, perhaps we can simply pay attention to ourselves a little more. We can notice where we are, what we have been carrying, where we are living from fear rather than possibility, and where we have become smaller than we need to be.



Then we can ask ourselves a simple question: What is one small step I can take in the other direction?

It doesn't have to be dramatic. Perhaps it's one conversation we've been avoiding, one *mitzvah* we want to strengthen, one relationship we want to invest in, one habit we know isn't serving us, one place where we need to forgive, or one dream we've stopped allowing ourselves to think about.

Teshuvah doesn't mean becoming a different person overnight. Sometimes it means taking one step back towards the person we know we can be.

Adam hears G-d ask, "*Ayeka?* Where are you?" And he hides.

Later in the Torah, G-d calls to Avraham, the first Jew, "Avraham!"

And Avraham answers, "*Hineni.*" Here I am.

This is the journey of these days. We move from *Ayeka* to *Hineni*. G-d asks, "Where are you?" and we answer, "Here I am."

Not because we have everything figured out and not because we are perfect. We answer because we are willing to show up, to look honestly at ourselves, to grow, and to change. We are willing to stop hiding from the parts of ourselves that need attention while remembering that those parts aren't all of who we are.

The high holy days are a beautiful opportunity to become more present in our own lives, to stop living on autopilot, and to stop defining ourselves by the narrow story we have told ourselves.

We are being reminded that there is a Divine soul inside us with far more possibility than we sometimes allow ourselves to imagine.

So this year, when we hear the shofar, let's hear it as a personal call.

Ayeka? Where are you?

Where have you been hiding? Where have you made yourself smaller? Where have you forgotten who you are?

And then, instead of hiding, let's step forward and answer with Avraham's words.

Hineni. Here I am.

I may not have all the answers, but I am here. I am listening. I am willing to begin.

Because the goal is to uncover more of the person G-d created us to be, to live a little wider, a little deeper, and a little more honestly, and to bring the unique light that only we can bring into the world.

The first human being hears *Ayeka* and hides. The first Jew hears his name and answers *Hineni*.

That is our choice too.

As we move through these high holy days, may we have the courage to stop, to look inward, and to hear the question being asked of each of us: *Ayeka?* Where are you?

And may we each find the courage to answer: *Hineni.* Here I am.

• Estee Stern is the rebbetzin of Sydenham Shul and a life coach.

Competitive fasting

Every year, immediately after Yom Kippur, somebody asks me how my fast was. It's a surprisingly complicated question. Do they want a spiritual answer? A medical report? Or should I provide a chronological account of when I first developed a headache and began hallucinating about steaming oats and cinnamon?

This year, I am approaching the fast with pharmaceutical technology on my side. My brother brought me some very fancy slow-release caffeine capsules from Israel. Apparently, you take one before the fast and, at precisely the time you would normally wake up and reach for coffee, the caffeine is released into your system. I don't fully understand how it knows what time I wake up, but it came from Israel, so I assume that both G-d and military technology are involved.

The capsule promises to change my life. It certainly beats the caffeine suppositories I used to take. Those were just weird, particularly when you bumped into other guys heading towards the bathroom for what was, technically, a quick coffee break.

It says something about us that even on the holiest and most spiritually demanding day of the Jewish year, we are looking for hacks.

We want to fast, but without the headache. We want to repent, but preferably without being too uncomfortable. We want the full Yom Kippur experience, provided there is pharmaceutical assistance, a synagogue that is climate controlled, and a rabbi that says exactly what we want to hear.

And then, once the fast is over, the comparisons begin. "My fast was so easy." "I wasn't hungry at all." "I could have gone another three hours." There is always one person who says that. Nobody likes them. Nobody has ever liked them.

The rest of us are pale, dehydrated, and emotionally attached to a slice of honey cake, while they announce that they feel "surprisingly energised". They are the same people who finish a marathon and say, "I could easily have done another 10km." Perhaps they could have. The important thing is that nobody asked them to.

Then comes the competitive suffering. "My head started pounding during Mussaf." "You were lucky. I stopped producing saliva before *Kol Nidrei*." "By Mincha, I could hear colours."

Soon, people are exchanging fasting symptoms with the intensity of war veterans comparing injuries. Every headache is documented. Every wave of nausea is given its own chapter. One person claims to have briefly left their body somewhere around *Unetaneh Tokef* but returned because they remembered there was cheesecake at home.

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



Within minutes, the conversation has divided into two camps: those who believe an easy fast is evidence of spiritual superiority, and those who regard extreme physical collapse as proof that they did Yom Kippur properly.

Neither group asks the more relevant question. Not "How was your fast?" But "How was your Yom Kippur?"

The problem is that the first question is easy to answer. The second might take the rest of the year.

I know when I became thirsty. I know when the headache started. I know exactly which point in the service caused me to wonder whether toothpaste might technically qualify as a beverage. What I don't always know is whether the day changed anything.

Perhaps that is because we like achievements we can measure. We completed the fast. We made it to shul. We stood when we were meant to stand, sat when we were allowed to sit, and avoided checking how many pages remained more often than was strictly necessary.

By nightfall, Yom Kippur was "done". But Yom Kippur may not be something we "do". And maybe the best answer to "How was your fast?" is, "Ask my family in a week", and, "Ask me in a year."

Maybe then we will know whether it worked. And if it didn't, I will at least be alert enough to hear their feedback. Assuming the capsule knows when to wake me up.

The Yom Kippur scar

OPINION

RABBI ARI KIEVMAN



As Yom Kippur approaches, I find myself thinking about my beloved Bubby, Sara Kievman, of blessed memory, and a story she once told me. It's a story from a very different time and place, but somehow, every year, it feels more relevant.

Bubby grew up in Soviet Russia during the early years of the Communist regime, when keeping Yiddishkeit was anything but easy. Religious practice was forbidden, Jewish education was suppressed, and those who openly observed Judaism could put themselves and their families in danger. As a teenager, Bubby was required to work in a glass factory. Attendance was strictly monitored, and missing work without a convincing excuse could have serious consequences. Then Yom Kippur was approaching. For Bubby, there was simply no question that she would fast and observe the holiest day of the year. The problem was finding a way to avoid going to work.

With time running out, Bubby knew she had to do something. She picked up a piece of glass and deliberately cut her arm. Blood began running down her arm and soaking her sleeve. Within moments, what had been an ordinary day at the factory had turned into an emergency. She was rushed to the infirmary, where a Russian doctor stitched up the wound.

The doctor offered the young girl a glass of hot milk to help her recover. Bubby refused. The doctor tried again, encouraging her to drink it for the sake of her health, but she wouldn't give in. Eventually, the doctor quietly took her into another room. There, with a candle flickering in the darkness, she revealed that she too was Jewish. The two of them spent Yom Kippur together in

secret, praying and sharing stories, two Jewish women finding one another in a country where Jewish life had been driven underground.

The doctor arranged for Bubby to be given two weeks to recuperate at home. When she told her parents what had happened, their sadness turned to great joy. They had been devastated, believing that their daughter had been forced to work on Yom Kippur. Now they learned that she had not only avoided work, but would be able to remain at home and spend Sukkos with her family.

Many decades later, when Bubby told me this story, tears rolled down her cheeks. Then she lifted her sleeve and showed me the scar on her arm. That scar remained for the rest of her life, a permanent reminder of the Yom Kippur she had refused to surrender. In many ways, it was the longest Yom Kippur of her life.

I think about that scar when Yom Kippur comes around. For us, Yom Kippur means walking into shul, fasting, and praying openly. We don't have to hide. We don't have to pretend. We don't have to risk our safety simply because we want to be Jewish. We have inherited a freedom that people like my Bubby could only dream about.

Bubby was prepared to bleed rather than give up one Yom Kippur. We have the freedom to observe every Yom Kippur we choose. My Bubby's scar reminds me that we are not only the beneficiaries of those who came before us. We are the next link in the chain. This Yom Kippur, when we stand in shul and hear prayers that Jews have recited for generations, perhaps we should ask ourselves, if my Bubby was willing to bleed to keep one Yom Kippur, what am I willing to do to make sure the next generation will still have one to keep?

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



A young Ari Kievman and his Bubby in the early 1980s

----- A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies -----

A time to be counted



ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner

As *shana tova* once again to our community. As we stand in the early days of 5787, it is worth pausing to consider what the year ahead is likely to ask of us. It looks set to be a significant one politically, with important elections in Israel, South Africa, and the United States in the coming months. Each of these has the potential to affect our community in ways large and small, and each is of real interest to us. In two of them, though, we are spectators. In the third, the one right here in South Africa, we are participants, and it would be a waste of a considerable opportunity not to have our say.

As has become our custom ahead of an election, the SA Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD) will host debates in Johannesburg and Cape Town, where we will hear directly from mayoral candidates and other political leaders. Additionally, the Board leads an intercommunal election observer mission. This is how we, as a community, take part in the process rather than simply watching it unfold, and how we ensure that elections are free, fair, and open to all. Local government carries responsibility for water, electricity, roads, safety, and a great many of the other services that shape daily life. For that reason alone, our community has a direct stake in the outcome of these upcoming municipal elections.

We are also entering exam season, with our university students and matric pupils preparing for the end of their academic year. It is a period that carries both hope and anxiety in equal measure, and I wish every pupil and student well as they sit their papers.

This weekend brings the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur. I am always

struck, at this time of year, by how far our own liturgy has travelled beyond our congregations and how the spirit and ethos of the day has entered mainstream culture. Among the prayers we will read that day is the *Unetaneh Tokef*, which asks who shall live and who shall die in the year ahead, and by what manner: by fire, by water, by sword. It is a prayer many congregants would recognise even without knowing its name, because Leonard Cohen built one of his best-known songs, *Who by Fire*, directly on its words. He never hid the source. A prayer written for the Day of Atonement shaped a song heard on the radio, in places that had never heard of *Unetaneh Tokef*.

It is a day of unusual stillness, carried by tradition and customs that stretch back deep in history, and that bind our community to our fellow Jews across the globe. I wish everyone a meaningful fast and a *Gmar Hatima Tova*.

As I have documented in this column, the SAJBD was extremely busy throughout last year and our work will not slow as we move into 5787. Our efforts to combat antisemitism, to represent Jewish interests to government and other authorities, and to protect Jewish rights and our way of life in this country, are made possible by the United Communal Fund (UCF). Without that support, we could not continue to act in the courts or take the steps our communal interests require. You can support our work in protecting and enabling Jewish life in South Africa by making a donation to the UCF.

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EREV ROSH HASHANAH	Friday, 11 September 2026	4PM
ROSH HASHANAH	Saturday, 12 September 2026	CLOSED
ROSH HASHANAH	Sunday, 13 September 2026	OPEN MOTSE CHAG
FAST OF GEDALIAH	Monday, 14 September 2026	OPEN
EREV YOM KIPPUR	Sunday, 20 September 2026	3PM
YOM KIPPUR	Monday, 21 September 2026	CLOSED
EREV SUKKOTH	Friday, 25 September 2026	4PM
SUKKOTH	Saturday, 26 September 2026	CLOSED
SUKKOTH	Sunday, 27 September 2026	OPEN MOTSE CHAG
EREV SHMINI ATZERET	Friday, 2 October 2026	4PM
SHMINI ATZERET/ EREV SIMCHAT TORAH	Saturday, 3 October 2026	CLOSED
SIMCHAT TORAH	Sunday, 4 October 2026	OPEN MOTSE CHAG

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34⁹⁹
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18⁹⁹
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