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■ Volume 30 – Number 40 ■ 12 November 2026 ■ 2 Kislev 5787

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Queen Rania's Gaza speech divides youth summit

NICOLA MILTZ

Queen Rania of Jordan used a high-profile global youth summit in Cape Town to deliver a fiercely one-sided condemnation of Israel, drawing cheers from sections of the audience, but leaving Jewish delegates and others deeply uncomfortable. Influential South African business people involved questioned her judgement.

During the opening ceremony of the One Young World Summit on 3 November, the queen invoked South Africa's apartheid struggle, condemned Israel's conduct in Gaza, and applauded Pretoria's "genocide" case against Israel at the International Court of Justice.

"When South Africa formally accused Israel of violating the Genocide Convention, it did so boldly, plainly, and unapologetically. Thank you, South Africa. If only every nation had your moral clarity."

One young Jewish entrepreneur attending the summit was so distressed that she got up and left, witnessing others doing the same.

"She hijacked this auspicious event with hateful rhetoric. I have never felt so uncomfortable or unsettled. Hearing people applaud made me feel sick," she told the *SA Jewish Report*, requesting anonymity.

"Here was a room filled with extraordinary, impressionable young minds from across the globe, gathered to inspire and change. Instead, they were subjected to a divisive political message that had no place on a platform intended to unite and inspire."

Another attendee said she felt "let down and disappointed".

"There should have been other speakers to provide balance, context, and nuance."

Prominent businessman and philanthropist Ivor Ichikowitz, who was seated on stage when Queen Rania spoke, said she had "misjudged" the occasion.

"I was uncomfortable, but I think she miscalculated this thing terribly. Her speech went down like a lead balloon," he told the *SA Jewish Report*.

Geoff Rothschild, Johannesburg Stock Exchange chairperson and Africa adviser to One Young World since 2013, said, "It was not in keeping with the ideals of One Young World. If there is to be harmony in the world, hate has no place."

One Young World brings together emerging leaders from around the world to tackle pressing global challenges. The Cape Town summit featured approximately 300 speakers, including Nobel laureates, former heads of state, business leaders, and renowned humanitarian Graça Machel.

During her address, Queen Rania accused the international community of failing to uphold international law in Gaza and described Palestinian life in the West Bank as "a living hell".

She accused governments that failed to act against Israel of making a deliberate choice, describing their position as "a cop-out dressed up as neutrality".

Her speech made no reference to Hamas's 7 October attacks or the Israeli hostages taken into Gaza, omissions that drew criticism from Jewish organisations.

Ichikowitz, whose family foundation partnered with One Young World through the National Programme for Job Generating Entrepreneurs initiative, said Queen Rania's address stood in stark contrast to the overwhelmingly positive messages delivered by other speakers.

"She should have been there in celebration of youth, like everybody else was. Instead, she was there to make a political speech," he said. Her speech was "so against the theme of the event and was just so out of place".

Ichikowitz stressed that his objection was not to differing political opinions but to the appropriateness of the occasion. "It was an inappropriate forum for that message."

Although Queen Rania received applause, Ichikowitz said it was noticeably less enthusiastic than that for other speakers.

"Graça Machel got up and made a speech and got a standing ovation. Queen Rania did not."

"I was sitting on the stage, so I was watching. I've spoken to numerous people who were in the crowd, and other speeches got a much more rousing reception than what she received.

"She is an icon and got the polite reception that somebody of that nature would receive, but her speech didn't get the reaction that she probably expected," he said, suggesting that the queen may have anticipated a more sympathetic audience in Cape Town.

He was particularly encouraged by the summit's flag ceremony, which included both Israeli and Palestinian flags.

"Yes, there was an Israeli flag in the mix, and the Israeli flag got exactly the same applause."

The South African Zionist Federation condemned the queen's speech.

"Queen Rania of Jordan wrapped herself in Soweto, Sharpeville, and Robben Island, and borrowed the moral authority of South Africa's liberation struggle for a speech devoted to condemning Israel," said national spokesperson Rolene Marks.

"In an address about Gaza, she found no room for Hamas, for 7 October, or for the hostages. That silence tells you what kind of speech it was."

Marks accused the queen of overlooking

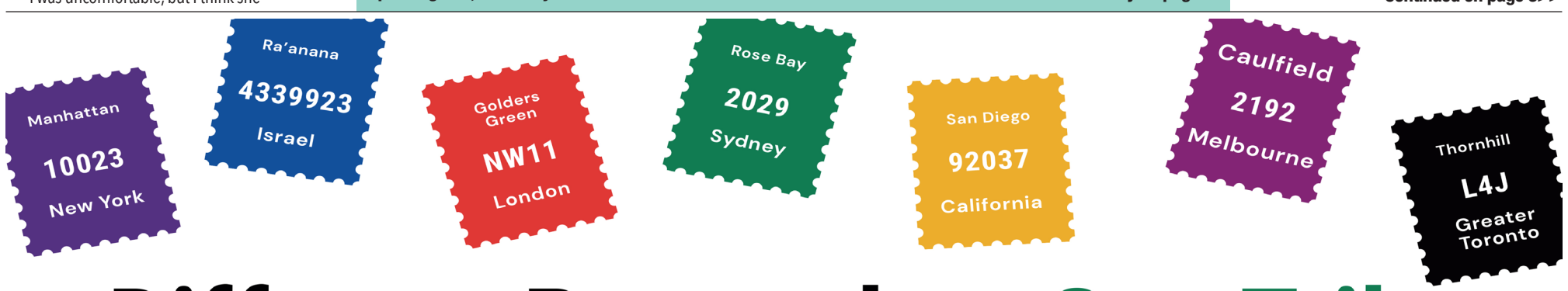
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Courage when it counted



Avi Ben Zikri and Yaniv Hayun at the Cape of Good Hope during Hayun's South African speaking tour, hosted by The Base and JNF South Africa

See story on page 3



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Inspired by Rebbe's growing army of rabbis



RABBI YOSSY GOLDMAN

I have been attending the annual Kinus Hashluchim, the International Conference of Chabad Rabbis, for many years. Yet somehow, it continues to reinvent itself. This year, several new features took the programme to another level.

Speeches were no longer limited to someone standing at a podium and talking. Many were enhanced with multimedia presentations, making them far more engaging.

Of course, some classic fixtures need neither innovation nor modernisation. Thousands of rabbis travelling together to the Ohel, the Rebbe's resting place in Queens, New York City is a sacred experience that needs no update or modification. It is spiritual, prayerful, and quite unique. There, the Shluchim prayed for themselves and their families, for their communities, and for the countless individuals in need of special blessings.

The group photograph grows larger every year as more young rabbis join the Rebbe's army. That is remarkable in itself. Each year, hundreds of young couples – men and women who never saw the Rebbe in person – commit their lives to his mission. They move to the four corners of the world, reaching out, and striving to touch every Jew with Torah, tolerance, love, and acceptance.

For me, the iconic photograph, always taken outside 770 Eastern Parkway, the Rebbe's shul and Chabad headquarters, is both empowering and humbling. I felt part of something much bigger than myself. At the same time, seeing some 6 000 defenders of the faith reminded me that I am but one small cog in a wheel far greater than any individual.

On Thursday, Friday, and Sunday, programmes, seminars, and workshops addressed the full range of issues confronting communal workers: leadership, creative Torah teaching, fundraising, succession planning, counselling skills, the effective use of artificial intelligence, contemporary halachic questions, and much more.

Shabbos was devoted to inspiration, reconnecting with old friends and making new ones. Personally, I did not take off my *tallis* all day. It was winter in New York, so Shabbos began on Friday at 16:28 and ended some 25 hours later. The morning davening was followed by a *brocha* and a large luncheon. From there, I went on to two other homes, where South Africans were celebrating and enjoying a *farbrengen* together. At one of them, we were joined by a group of Australians. Remarkably, we all got along just fine.

Thursday night's plenary session featured an array of true miracle stories from Israel: children surviving life-threatening illnesses, and women struggling with infertility who were blessed to bring children into the world despite medical prognoses declaring it impossible. It was deeply inspirational.

Saturday night focused on true stories of Shluchim helping fellow Shluchim. Rabbis facing fundraising challenges of their own reached out to assist colleagues, even sharing "their" donors with others. Their generosity was impressive, to say the least. I found it tremendously inspiring.

Of course, the closing banquet is always the biggest and best event on the agenda. In addition to the Shluchim, hundreds of friends and supporters attended, making it one of the biggest sit-down dinners in the world. The food was delicious – and arrived hot. Unbelievable!

This year's banquet programme was exceptional. It was wonderful to see Rabbi Avi Shlomo of Cape Town honoured with leading one of the Psalms at the beginning of the evening.

One of the main highlights was an eloquent address by 14-year-old Nosson Schlanger from Sydney, Australia. His father, Rabbi Eli Schlanger, was murdered by terrorists at the Bondi Beach Chanukah menorah lighting almost a year ago. Nosson movingly described how his father had taught him Jewish values and instilled in him Chabad's emphasis on outreach. When his grandfather Rabbi Yehoram Ullman, of the Sydney Beth Din, joined him on stage and embraced him, I don't think there was a dry eye in the vast hall.


Photo: Yisroel Teitelbaum; Chabad.org
Nosson Schlanger, son of the rabbi murdered in the Bondi Beach massacre

Rabbi Alex Kaller is now a highly successful Shliach in Miami, Florida, serving the large Russian-speaking community there. A video traced his journey from Moscow, where he grew up without a Jewish education or connection to Yiddishkeit. When the Soviet Union began to open up, he joined a Chabad school and was chosen to light the menorah at an international Chanukah event watched by the Rebbe in New York.

Rabbi Kaller said that although he never saw the Rebbe, he was forever touched by the knowledge that the Rebbe had seen him light the menorah in Moscow in 1990. Today, he presides over a thriving centre in Sunny Isles Beach, Florida, comprising a shul, a school, and a large community centre.

Rabbi Aharon Canarutto, a Shliach in Rome, told the incredible story of inviting an elderly Jew, Gabriel Sonnino, to light the public menorah on Chanukah last year. Gabriel recounted how, in 1943, a non-Jewish milkman had saved his life and that of his sister. When a Nazi soldier was taking them away to certain death, the milkman intervened and claimed that they were his children. Incredibly, his shop was on the very site where the Chabad House stands today in the Roman Ghetto.

The keynote address was delivered by Israel's Ambassador to the United States, Yechiel Leiter. His eldest son, Moshe, lost his life in Gaza, while another son, Neria, was seriously wounded in a car-ramming attack in September. Ambassador Leiter spoke about his meeting with the editorial board of *The New York Times*, where he accused the newspaper of perpetrating a blood libel against Israel through selective and deceptive reporting.


Rabbi Yossy Goldman and his sons at Kinus

As always, the banquet concluded with the International Roll Call, representing more than 100 countries in which Shluchim serve. For the first time, it included the newly appointed Shluchim to Slovenia and Albania.

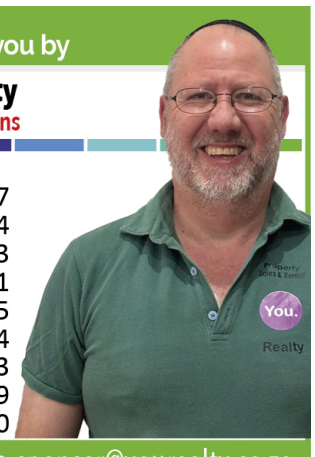
After the Roll Call, spirited singing and dancing erupted in a powerful expression of international Jewish unity, with rabbis and laymen dancing together in joy and ecstasy.

Throughout the weekend, I heard many languages spoken, including English, Hebrew, French, Spanish, and Russian. It was clear for all to see and hear that the Rebbe's army is truly international and inspirational, educating and uplifting the Jewish world as never before.

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

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Durban	18:10	19:03
Bloemfontein	18:15	19:21
Gqeberha	18:15	19:35
Plettenberg Bay	18:15	19:44
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The plumber who became a hero of Flight 1073

CLAUDIA GROSS

When an emergency unfolded aboard a flydubai aircraft, Yaniv Hayun faced a choice familiar to most people in a crisis: remain where he was or step forward and try to help. He chose to act, becoming one of the heroes who helped 174 people make it out alive.

The Israeli shared his experience in Cape Town on Sunday 8 November and in Johannesburg on Monday 9 November at events presented by The Base and the Jewish National Fund South Africa (JNF SA) in association with the Israel Centre, South African Zionist Federation (SAZF), and the Wilfred and Fay Back Charitable Trust.



The Cape Town event was described as a global first as it was the first time Hayun shared his story before a live audience. He spoke in conversation with David Cohen, chairperson of the SAZF Cape Council, who provided a simultaneous translation from the Hebrew.

JNF SA chairperson Michael Kransdorff introduced them, describing Hayun as someone who had the courage to believe he could make a difference when others needed help.

Hayun was returning from Vietnam with his wife and three daughters on the flydubai aircraft. The emergency therefore didn't involve only strangers; his own family was directly affected.

The Omani pilot of the flight to Israel, who later turned out to be a terrorist, greeted everyone as they boarded, including many families. "I don't know how this monster could greet children boarding the plane when he knew what he was planning to do," Hayun said.

Two-thirds of the way into the flight, Hayun heard a noise from the front of the plane. A female passenger was shouting that someone had been stabbed. Hayun later learned that this passenger had accompanied her young daughter to the toilet, just outside the cockpit. While there, they heard a commotion in the cockpit.

A pilot who wasn't flying the plane at the time but rather seated in the front of the aircraft tried to open the door to the cockpit with both hands and all of his body weight and strength. He was briefly successful before the Omani pilot shut the door and held it closed from inside the cockpit.

In the moment the door was briefly open, the female passenger was able to see that the cockpit was covered in blood, and the Indian pilot, Smit Machchhar, had been stabbed. Upon hearing her cries, Hayun immediately felt compelled to help. "It's strange to think that in a sense I became involved because a little girl and her mother went to the toilet on a flight," he said.

The plane rapidly dropped thousands of metres, tilted and dived, before eventually evening out enough for Hayun to get up and run to the cockpit. He managed to get inside and put the Omani pilot in a chokehold, forcing him out of the cockpit.

Hayun isn't a pilot or an aviation professional. He owns a waste management company and previously served as a soldier and worked as a cook. Yet, when the situation aboard the aircraft demanded action, he responded.

An unexpected source of preparation was a television programme about air crash investigations. Hayun told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after the incident that watching the programme had helped him understand what to do when the emergency unfolded.

He returned to the cockpit and pulled back the yoke, or control column, in an attempt to stabilise the plane. Two off-duty pilots, one of whom is South African, were able to take over and safely execute an emergency landing in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia.

"Everyone clapped and cheered when we landed," Hayun recalled. An ambulance was on the tarmac to take Machchhar to hospital.

Hayun wanted to ensure that authorities were aware of the Omani pilot's actions.

He was connected via a fellow passenger's cellphone to Israeli authorities who said that nobody from the flight should board a replacement flydubai flight, which airline staff were encouraging them to do, but should rather wait for an Israeli plane that they were trying to organise, despite bureaucratic challenges.

"The next thing I know I get a call from the prime minister," Hayun told the audience. Netanyahu assured him that an Israeli plane was coming to get them. The plane eventually came, and upon landing at Ben Gurion Airport, the passengers clapped, cheered, and sang *simcha* songs such as *David Melech Yisrael*.

Following the ordeal, Hayun was invited to meet Netanyahu, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, and US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee respectively. After their meeting, Netanyahu personally left a five-star Google rating for Hayun's sewage pumping business. Herzog honoured Hayun with the Presidential Award for Civilian Heroism, Israel's highest award possible for civilian bravery.

The evening in Cape Town highlighted Hayun's reluctance to take sole credit for what had happened. His actions formed part of a collective response by people who recognised the seriousness of the situation and chose to intervene.

But Hayun also received the Hineni Award from the Friends of Zion Museum, recognising his willingness to take responsibility when others needed help. *Hineni* (Here I am) is a Hebrew expression associated with the biblical figures Abraham and Moses. Both used it when responding to G-d's call, despite not necessarily knowing what would be required of them.

Hayun's experience also raised questions about individual heroism and collective responsibility. The people who helped alongside him were also acknowledged. The Indian pilot and the other individuals involved demonstrated how a person's willingness to act can encourage others to do the same.

An ordinary passenger, travelling with his family, found himself in circumstances that required him to act. His willingness to do so became part of a collective effort that helped save lives.

Queen Rania's Gaza speech divides youth summit

>>Continued from page 1

Jordan's own treatment of Palestinians, citing the 1970 Black September conflict, the stripping of Jordanian nationality from West Bank Palestinians, and the withdrawal of citizenship affecting Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

"South Africans need no lessons from a royal court on the meaning of apartheid. We lived it. Queen Rania is entitled to her politics. She is not entitled to conscript Soweto into a campaign that erases Hamas from the story, prejudges a court, and exempts her own kingdom from scrutiny."

This was not the first time the queen used the summit platform to condemn Israel. In 2025 in Munich, she drew parallels between Nazi dehumanisation of Jews and Israeli rhetoric about Palestinians.

One Young World defended its decision to give her a platform, while acknowledging the discomfort expressed by some participants.

Managing director Ella Robertson McKay said the organisation existed to facilitate open discussion, including on contentious political issues.

"One Young World is a platform for the free and frank exchange of views. That includes perspectives on deeply contested issues, which participants must be free to question and disagree with."

She said Queen Rania was one of 300 speakers and had addressed three previous summits. Her longstanding work in children's rights, education, and refugee advocacy made her a relevant contributor, Robertson McKay said.

"Providing a platform for political views does not imply endorsement by One Young World or by anyone else attending the summit."

She pointed out that the programme had also addressed conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as well as gender-based violence and security.

The organisation had previously hosted Holocaust survivor Eva Clarke, and Israeli and Palestinian peacebuilders Maoz Inon and Aziz Abu-Sarah.

Robertson McKay stressed that the organisation took participants' concerns seriously.

"We want young people of every nationality, faith, and background to feel welcome, respected, and heard at One Young World."

She said organisers were willing to meet participants who felt their perspectives had not been represented and consider ways to make future summits more inclusive.

Ichikowitz was emphatic that the controversy should not overshadow the summit's success.

"I've very seldom attended a massive summit of this nature that was quite as well delivered as this. It was a real celebration of the power and the resilience of global youth. I think we can celebrate the fact that Cape Town stood to its principles. It didn't allow itself to get used and abused."

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Abel carries SA roots into Georgia State Senate

CLAUDIA GROSS

South African expat Kevin Abel, 61, was elected to the Georgia State Senate in the United States on 3 November and is preparing to enter office and help shape the future of the state he now calls home.

Cape Town-born Abel grew up in Camps Bay and left South Africa at 14. Yet the experiences of his childhood continue to shape his views on race, civil rights, and immigration.

More than four decades later, Abel won the election after a closely contested Democratic primary runoff. "I won the primary runoff back in June, and that was really the race. It was incredibly competitive and I won by just a small fraction," he said.

The general election was less uncertain because his district strongly favours Democratic candidates. On election night more than 100 friends and supporters gathered to celebrate at a local bar, where they watched results emerge from across the country.

Abel attributed the wider Democratic gains to dissatisfaction with President Donald Trump's administration, concerns about corruption and affordability, and the war with Iran. He criticised Republican lawmakers for failing to challenge the president.

"It was far less about 'we love Democrats' and far more about 'we can't go on with this kind of sycophantic Republican Congress'," he told the *SA Jewish Report*.

For Abel, the election marks a new chapter after 35 years of civic involvement in Atlanta and Georgia. But his political outlook has roots in the country in which he spent his early childhood.

Abel, who moved to the US in 1979, described his family as liberal by South African standards.

"While we took full advantage of the apartheid system in terms of maids and gardeners, there was chatter in my house that suggested that this was all wrong," he said in an earlier interview with the *SA Jewish Report*.

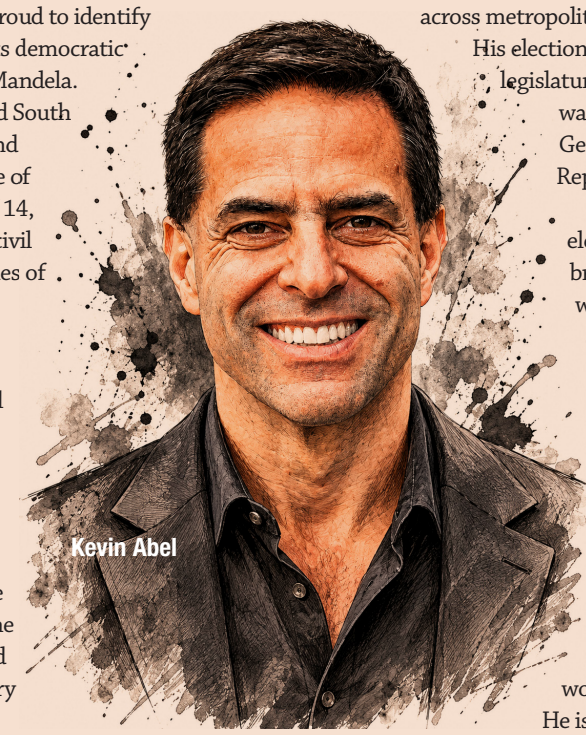
His parents were divorced, but with five sons of military age between them, the prospect of conscription contributed to the family's desire to leave. The US represented freedom and opportunity to the young Abel, who remembers being excited about the move.

He has since returned to Cape Town many times to visit his father, who remained in South Africa until his death in 2021. His stepmother still lives in the city, giving him a continuing family connection to the country.

Although his wider family gradually emigrated and his connection to South Africa diminished, he has continued to appreciate Cape Town's natural beauty. He described being repeatedly struck by the city's landscape when he returned.

Abel said he had never felt attached to apartheid South Africa itself. However, he'd felt proud to identify with the country during its democratic transition under Nelson Mandela.

"The racism of apartheid South Africa that I grew up in, and became peripherally aware of as I approached the age of 14, also informs my sense of civil rights and liberty and issues of race," he said.


Kevin Abel

His experience as an immigrant also remains central to his politics. Abel often begins campaign speeches by identifying himself as an immigrant, reflecting on the opportunities he believes the US gave him. At 61, he said, he was grateful for the life he'd built there and did not want to see the country undermine its promise.

He is concerned about the Trump administration's treatment of immigrants, particularly those who do not have the advantages he had when he arrived with a green card. He has worked closely with refugee communities for many years. He described the closure of the American refugee resettlement programme, with an exception for white South Africans, as a significant concern.

Abel's new role will allow him to pursue these concerns through state legislation. His top priority is expanding Medicaid, the American public health insurance programme for people with limited incomes and resources. He believes expansion would allow more Georgians to obtain health coverage.

He would also like Georgia's abortion ban overturned, although he acknowledged that this would require support from some Republican lawmakers. Other priorities include public transport, school funding, and housing.

Abel previously served on the board of the Georgia Department of Transportation. He hopes to draw on that experience to encourage greater investment in public transport across metropolitan Atlanta.

His election increases Jewish representation in Georgia's legislature. Before the election, Esther Panitch was the only Jewish member of the Georgia General Assembly, serving in the state House of Representatives.

Abel will join her in the Senate, while newly elected representative Adam Cleveland will bring the number of Jewish legislators to three when they take office in January. "Among the Jewish community, the line was 'Esther needs company'," he said.

He also intends to push for greater funding to protect Jewish institutions. Some security funding increased in the previous year, and he hopes to secure further support.

Abel acknowledged that antisemitism remains a concern in Georgia, although he believes the state has experienced fewer incidents than some other parts of the United States. "Antisemitism has reared its head worldwide, and Georgia is no exception."

He is involved with the American Jewish Committee and has chaired its antisemitism task force. He believes education is central to challenging prejudice, including helping people understand how antizionism can become antisemitism.

For Abel, entering the Senate is an opportunity to contribute more directly to the community in which he's spent most of his adult life. He plans to retire from his existing career and move into public service, a role he expects to offer fulfilment rather than financial reward.

He is also looking forward to learning the legislative process, meeting new people, and taking on a new challenge. "I'm most excited, at the age of 61, to be entering a new career and learning and growing," he said.

SA achieves nothing by having no diplomats in Israel



OPINION **PAULA SLIER**


President Cyril Ramaphosa accepting credentials of the former Israeli ambassador to SA, Eli Belotsercovsky, in 2022

Three years have passed since South Africa withdrew its remaining diplomats from Israel. But the deterioration in relations began much earlier. In May 2018, Pretoria recalled Ambassador Sisa Ngombane following the deaths of dozens of Palestinians during mass demonstrations and violent confrontations with Israeli forces along the Gaza border. He was never replaced.

South Africa has now gone eight and a half years without an ambassador in Israel. What, exactly, has this achieved?

The 2018 recall followed a December 2017 decision by the ANC to downgrade South Africa's embassy in Israel to a liaison office, in support of the Palestinian cause. The ANC wanted the downgrade implemented immediately. Yet in March 2019, President Cyril Ramaphosa told Parliament that the government was still working out how to do it. He cited concerns about Palestinian self-determination while acknowledging South Africa's responsibility to engage with all parties.

The following month, then International Relations and Cooperation Minister Lindiwe Sisulu announced that the liaison office would have no political, trade, or development cooperation mandate. But in January 2022, under her successor, Dr Naledi Pandor, the department defended maintaining formal diplomatic ties with Israel, arguing that a presence there enabled South Africa to work with international partners on the Palestinian question.

To me, this suggests a government more certain about the message it wanted to send than how the decision would work in practice. Pretoria wanted to put pressure on Jerusalem, but also recognised the value of keeping diplomatic channels open.

By November 2023, Pretoria had gone further. A month after Hamas's 7 October attack and amid Israel's subsequent military offensive in Gaza, South Africa recalled its remaining diplomats for consultations, citing the civilian death toll and humanitarian crisis in Gaza. The Department of International Relations and Cooperation still lists its embassy in Israel as closed, with both the ambassadorial and chargé d'affaires posts vacant.

That decision made South Africa's position clear, but it also reduced opportunities for Pretoria to raise concerns directly with Israeli officials. Condemning a country's actions and maintaining diplomatic relations with it are not mutually exclusive. I have spent much of my career speaking to people whose actions I strongly opposed. Engaging with them has never meant agreeing with them.

After Palestinian Hamas operative Ahlam al-Tamimi was released from an Israeli prison in the 2011 Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange, I travelled to Jordan to interview her. She had driven the suicide bomber to the site of the 2001 Sbarro pizzeria bombing in Jerusalem, which killed 15 people, including seven children. I also approached Frimet Roth, whose 15-year-old daughter, Malka, was murdered in the bombing. She refused to participate in my report featuring Tamimi, telling me there could be no "moral equivalence" between her daughter and the woman involved in the bombing. I understood her objection, but interviewing Tamimi didn't mean excusing her actions, nor did I intend to suggest that the perpetrator and victim were morally equal.

That experience nevertheless reinforced something I strongly believe: speaking to someone isn't the same as endorsing them. Governments, like journalists, sometimes have to deal with people whose actions they disagree with, condemn, or even abhor.

Keeping an ambassador in Israel wouldn't have meant South Africa approved of Israeli government policies. Nor would it have prevented Pretoria from condemning those policies or taking legal action.

In December 2023, South Africa brought a case against Israel before the International Court of Justice (ICJ), alleging violations of the Genocide Convention in Gaza. Israel denies the allegations. The court hasn't ruled on whether genocide occurred, and proceedings continue. The case is significant, but South Africa didn't need to withdraw its diplomats to bring it.

If the withdrawal was intended to put pressure on Israel, how effective has that pressure been?

Israel has maintained relationships elsewhere on the continent, including Kenya, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Ghana. So, the recall didn't isolate Israel from other African governments, and there is no clear evidence that it changed Israeli policy.

Commercial relations have also continued. Figures reported by Israel to UN Comtrade, the United Nations database of international trade statistics, show that Israeli exports to South Africa fell from approximately $287 million in 2017 to $158 million in 2025. That's a decline of about 45% in US dollar terms. But exports had fluctuated before the ambassador's recall, and rose again in 2021 and 2022 despite his absence. South Africa continues to import Israeli machinery, chemicals, medical equipment, and pharmaceuticals, while exporting goods to Israel. The figures cannot establish how much of that decline, if any, was caused by the ambassador's absence.

The diplomatic consequences have been more direct. In January 2026, South Africa expelled Israel's chargé d'affaires, Ariel Seidman. Israel retaliated by declaring South Africa's representative to the Palestinian Authority, Shaun Byneveldt, persona non grata and ordering him to leave. He was based in Ramallah. The episode showed how a dispute with Israel could complicate Pretoria's own efforts to represent Palestinian interests. Keeping an ambassador would have preserved a channel for raising concerns and dealing directly with Israeli officials.

Consider South Africa's relationship with Russia. Following the escalation of the Russia–Ukraine war in February 2022, Pretoria maintained diplomatic relations with Moscow, arguing that engagement could contribute to resolving the conflict. In February 2026, that engagement produced a practical result. Ramaphosa raised the plight of 17 South African men, recruited to fight alongside Russian forces, directly with President Vladimir Putin. The governments cooperated to secure their release from military contracts. By 26 February, 15 had returned home, with arrangements continuing for the remaining two. South Africa's embassy in Moscow remained involved in assisting those still there.

Russia and Israel are very different relationships for South Africa, but the Russia example shows why keeping diplomatic channels open can matter.

South Africa's opposition to Israeli policies is clear. Its ICJ case has given that opposition a legal dimension. But the benefits of withdrawing its ambassador remain much harder to establish. South Africa has spent eight and a half years demonstrating its willingness to distance itself from Israel. The unanswered question is whether that distance has given it greater influence, or simply left it with fewer ways to exercise the influence it had.

- *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.*

SA influencers visiting Israel bombarded with hate online

TALI FEINBERG

When young, gay South African TikTok influencer Andile Ngidi was invited on a sponsored trip to Israel, it was a dream come true. "As a queer young man from a disadvantaged background, opportunities like this don't come often," he wrote, adding that it was also extremely meaningful for him as a Christian.

"Lord, thank you for this life," he wrote on Facebook on 1 November, sharing photos from his first few days in Israel.

But he was soon hounded with hateful messages for choosing to visit the Holy Land. The intimidation and harassment became so extreme that he booked the next flight back to South Africa, cutting his dream holiday short. "I am threatened now and I don't feel comfortable going outside," he wrote.

He felt that he needed to apologise. "I take full responsibility for my actions, and I will definitely do better in the future. Once again, I ask for forgiveness," he captioned a letter that he posted on his social media pages.

In the letter, he wrote, "I have seen and noted all the concerns, critiques, and disappointment surrounding my trip to Israel. I have come to understand the hurt and disappointment my presence here during this painful time has caused many of you. I am truly sorry."

Ngidi, who is known as Space Andza, said he had not done "thorough research" before taking the trip.

In a Facebook post, he expressed concern for other South African content creators on the trip who stayed in Israel, knowing they too were being harassed with hate.

Ngidi was in Israel with several other South African Christian TikTok influencers, all of whom have thousands of followers on social media. But not all of them responded in the same way to the intimidation directed at them. Roseanne Pillay, known as @miss_independent79, made several videos slamming the hatred directed at her.

"Let's get something straight. South Africa has real issues that deserve your energy – water shortages, unemployment, loadshedding, the rape of women and children, kidnappings, human trafficking, serial killers, and a government that continues to fail its people. But suddenly, my trip to Israel is your biggest concern?" she wrote on social media.

"Stop pushing your political views onto my trip," she added. "I earned my opportunity. You are entitled to your opinions, but you are not entitled to dictate my journey. Let me live my life. My trip. My opportunity. My experience. Your opinions are not my responsibility."

She excitedly shared her experience, which included visiting the Kotel, Masada, and the Bahá'í Gardens. Like Ngidi, she said that this holiday – her first international trip – was especially meaningful to her as a Christian from a disadvantaged background.

"I grew up with very little and have had few chances to travel. For those of us in the group who come from similar backgrounds, an invitation like this was rare," she wrote on Facebook. "South Africans travel to Israel for different reasons, including research and faith. I chose to accept the invitation, and our faith was why we went. As a Christian, visiting Jerusalem was an experience I never imagined I'd have."

Content creator Agnes Mabuda, or @vhayellow, who goes by the display name "Eggy yellow OOTD", was also in the tour group. A Venda woman who presents her videos in her native language, Tshivenda, she shared clips of herself visiting the Nova festival memorial, attending a Boy George concert, dancing in a shuk, and visiting Christian sites. She ignored the hate and



Photo: Facebook

Andile Ngidi in Israel

intimidation directed at her.

The backlash extended to people who didn't condemn the influencers. Social media personality Goboane Setsile, known as "Smokey Mirror", congratulated Ngidi on the trip and said he has always wanted to visit Israel. He was then hounded by antizionists to the point that he, too, felt forced to issue an apology.

But content creator Chad Nathan, known as a @gingerwithagopro, advises young influencers to take up every opportunity to travel, and not to let a minority of hateful voices affect them.

"Go with an open mind and an open heart. See Israel with your own eyes, meet the people, and form your own opinions," says Nathan.

He warns that influencers should expect a backlash. "You might lose followers, you might lose brand deals, but you cannot live your life trying to please everyone on the internet. You'll drive yourself absolutely mad."

Rather, "stay true to yourself, share your experiences, and never let the hate stop you telling your story".

The Embassy of Israel in South Africa told the *SA Jewish Report* in a statement that Israel welcomes delegations from around the world "to experience a side of the country that traditional and social media often fail to portray on a daily basis".

These delegations come from across the globe, including from Africa and, specifically, South Africa.

"We warmly welcome South Africans to visit Israel, see the country with their own eyes, and discover for themselves what Israel is truly about, and the positive contributions it has to offer."

South African Friends of Israel spokesperson Bafana Modise says the influencers come from a range of ethnicities, and some are from the LGBTQ+ community, "yet they didn't experience apartheid or discrimination in Israel. They were happy, they were joyful, and South Africans could see with their own eyes what Israel is, through the videos they shared."

He says those who are bullying the influencers are trying to protect their own warped narrative.

"These are content creators, not politicians," says Modise. "The imposition of political narratives on young people should be guarded against."

He says South Africans have "every right" to go to any country "to see the truth for ourselves.

"And if Israel really is 'evil' then why won't they allow people to go and see it for themselves?"

The attacks on the content creators "are an attempt to silence and censor them", says Modise. But libels "were refuted" by the influencers freely visiting Israel and sharing what they saw.

National director of the South African Jewish Board of Deputies Wendy Kahn says that this is just one more attempt by antizionists "to threaten and intimidate South Africans".

However, "bullying people because of their views and travel destinations is the antithesis of who we are as South Africans", says Kahn. "Cancel culture is inconsistent with our constitutional values."

Babka and the world's biggest marathon



PERSONAL STORY DAN STILLERMAN

I flew to New York to run the biggest marathon in history with no cause, no personal-best target, and nobody to run it with.

As far as I knew, I was the only Jewish South African runner travelling to the race, and I wished I belonged to something.

Then, on the Friday before the race, I went to a "Shakeout run" in Central Park.

My friend Daniel Singer had told me about this Nice Jewish Runners (NJR) run. "You must go," he said.

Seven thirty in the morning, Central Park on the Upper East Side, at the Fred Lebow statue. About 200 people arrived, many in branded NJR kit. I had never heard of Fred Lebow, by the way.



Dan and Kayli Stillerman at the finish line, singing *Hatikva* with close to 1 000 Jewish runners and supporters

Beatie Deutsch, the "Marathon Mother" and Israeli national marathon champion, was there. We laughed about the June 2025 morning she had joined us in Glenhazel for our pre-Comrades run, on the coldest day of the year, when my fingers were so icy I spilt my cappuccino on my race shoes.

We ran through Central Park, and at Columbus Circle hundreds of Israelis met us, singing, dancing, and waving Israeli flags. They were running for Team Shalva, the Israel Association for the Care and Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities. Together we ran the last 800m to the official marathon finish line and sang *Hatikva* with close to 1 000 Jewish runners and supporters. I will never forget it.

At the finish line on that Friday morning, I met Valerie Hartman and Matthew Schmidlin, who were running for Achilles International, a non-profit that helps blind and disabled athletes run the marathon. Valerie explained why the Fred Lebow statue stood by the finish line pavilion. They move it there from the Upper East Side for race week.

So who was Fred Lebow? Born Fischel Lebowitz in Arad, Romania, in 1932, he fled the Nazis as a teenager and reached America in 1951. In 1970, he helped organise the first New York City Marathon: four laps of Central Park, 55 finishers. Six years later, he took the race through all five boroughs for the first time. He was race director for 24 years. In 1990 he was diagnosed with brain cancer. Two years later, aged 60, he ran the marathon again alongside champion Grete Waitz. He died in 1994. Every runner on that start line in 2026 followed a route he helped create.

We then walked to Bread, a bakery on the Upper West Side, for babka and coffee. There I met Fred's niece Estee Stimler. I also met Marty Granoff, aged 90, the oldest runner in this year's field. Marty had not run a marathon in 43 years. He decided to train again and run it with his son and grandson. He finished the marathon in eight hours and 26 minutes, alongside his son Michael and grandson Avi. The back of his t-shirt read "If you can read this, you're losing to a 90-year old man!"

On race day on Sunday morning, I put on *tallis* and *tefillin* in the International Minyan tent at the start village on Staten Island. I finished the race in 3:38, in a record field of 61 146 finishers, on the 50th anniversary of the five-borough course. My wife Kayli cheered me on, among two million crazy fans along the route.

I arrived in New York wishing I belonged to something. I found it on a Friday morning, over babka.

I have brought the inspiration home. Forty people came to the inaugural Friday-morning Babka Run at Run Glenhazel, our new social running group for the community. Babka Run is now a weekly tradition. Come join us at the next one. Bring your takkies and your appetite.

- *Dan Stillerman is a visionary entrepreneur, productivity coach, and founder of Excel Academy, who also champions causes in Jewish communal leadership.*



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south african Jewish Report

Machaneh – making lifetime memories



Many of my most beautiful childhood memories are from being at Jewish youth movement camps, *machanot*. At this time of year, when it's a short countdown to *machaneh* and trommels are being secured and clothes bought, I still miss those days.

The bizarre thing is it was more than a few years ago; it was decades. However, camp will always be part of my December holiday memories. Simple: I gained, learned, grew, empowered myself, and became a leader at camp. It is just a reality for me.

I totally get that *machaneh* is not for every child. And there are those who went and hated it. But the overriding experience that most young people have of *machaneh* – be it Bnei Akiva, Habonim, Netzer, in the old days Betar, or Camp Kesher – is memorable.

I am biased. I went to many *machanot*, both Bnei Akiva and Habonim, from an early age. And I loved my experiences. I learned what it was truly like to be a Jewish kid among other Jewish kids. I know I went to King David School, but that was school and I was there not necessarily to have fun with others; it was to get an education.

At camp, I learned to love singing *Birchat Hamazon* (grace after meals). I have long since stopped needing to read it because when you sing it often enough with as much gusto as you do at camp, it sticks in your head. I learned leadership and how to stand up in front of people and talk confidently. I learned how to work in a group and brainstorm ideas. I learned to share with people I hardly knew and get to know them, even if they were painfully shy. I learned to formulate and share my opinions, even if they weren't popular. I also learned to take responsibility for ensuring I had clean clothes, which meant doing my own washing. Sharing a tent, I had to keep my stuff neat so that I didn't bother others.

I could probably go on for days about the unique experiences I had on *machanot*, but I won't because I simply want to say our community offers *machanot* to our children and it is the best gift we can give them.

Having said that, it isn't the parents and oldies like me who offer the camps. It is young adults themselves who do everything. They have just gone through the ranks of the movement themselves. This model has been working successfully for many decades.

Our contribution as adults is simply to make it happen for them.

Now, I appreciate that as parents, we want our children to share our family holidays. Their childhoods speed past and we don't want to lose a year. I get that, but holidays are long and there is always time after camp to spend with your kids.

Holidays are awesome and they are what make family memories. However, the gift of *machaneh* is something no other community has.

I look at my children, nieces, and nephews and I see their growth from *machaneh* to *machaneh*.

It is not about which youth movement. I repeat: it doesn't matter whether your children find their home at Bnei Akiva, Habonim, Netzer, or another youth movement. Whichever one suits them is the right one. And if, at first, the youth movement isn't a fit, they can change.

The saddest thing for me is that children may not get this experience, and that youth movements that have so much to offer our children close. When I was growing up, Betar was huge. I always said the hottest guys went to Betar. And I still have friends from that youth movement. But Betar is no longer around in South Africa. That makes me sad.

And this year, there will be no Netzer *machaneh* unfortunately. I have friends who started their lives and closest friendships at Netzer. Their experiences weren't that different from mine, only they found themselves in a different youth movement for whatever reason.

We should never take *machaneh* for granted. When COVID-19 forced Habonim to cancel its camp in 2020, it was a first. As the *SA Jewish Report* reported at the time, Habonim leaders described the impact as "devastating". Yet the appetite is clearly still there. Bnei Akiva is expecting more than 1 000 *chanichim* (campers) and *madrichim* (leaders) at its *machaneh* this December and Habonim is not too far behind.

Going to Cape Town, Plett, Umhlanga, or Ballito with the family or friends will no doubt be fun. But it is a different experience to *machaneh* and you can't get that experience anywhere else.

I have spoken to parents in the last few years who worry about their children being away from them for so long – three weeks. How will they cope? Will they make friends? Will it be too intense? What if they get homesick? Will there be too much learning when they are on holiday? How safe will they be?

They will be in probably the safest places in South Africa as the security could not be better there. It has to be, our *kinderlach* are there. They will cope. In fact, they are more likely to want to go back and keep going back. They may get homesick, but they will get over it fast.

They will be surrounded by children their own age, wanting to have fun just like them. It is a great leveller and even the shyest kid makes friends. That's *machaneh*!

It is likely to be one of the best experience of their lives and something they will always harp on about, like yours sincerely.

I know I sound like I am on a sales mission, but I have no reason to be. I am not selling anything, nor am I getting anything out of this. I just know that being able to go to *machanot* when I was a kid was a gift from my parents and the community. I also know how much my own children and family have benefitted from *machaneh*.

If it turns out not to be your child's thing, I am sure they will have a magnificent time wherever you plan to go. But if it is, you will have given them something they will carry for life.

Shabbat shalom!
Peta Krost
Editor

Joburg may be broken, but its people and spirit are not



OPINION

DANIEL SCHAY

At 07:00 on Monday 2 November, Johannesburg was doing what Johannesburg does best these days. Not working.

Rubbish hadn't been collected in the city for three or four weeks. I was chasing an electricity outage in Linksfield, while residents elsewhere complained about water pressure.

Technically, I was unemployed. My five-year term on the city council had ended, and I hadn't yet been elected for another one. It turns out that being unemployed as a ward councillor involves much the same workload, just with less job security.

And in an hour, we were supposed to start getting people out to cast their special votes.

A fitting start to election week.

This was the final stretch of a campaign that had begun in September 2025. More than 300 coffees with residents, four or five community meetings a week, registration drives that exceeded their targets, and countless hours behind the scenes.

There's a perception that a councillor's job on election day is to wear a party shirt, stand behind a table. and smile at people.

I wish.

Election day is an exercise in logistics and troubleshooting. Checking stations, monitoring queues, getting voters to the polls, coordinating volunteers, and anticipating the next thing that will go wrong. And because Johannesburg doesn't suspend its collapse for an election, you're still dealing with the normal service delivery problems.

Special voting began with Orange Grove opening 20 minutes late because the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) area manager was running behind.

But Tuesday afternoon showed me another side of the IEC.

At 17:30, I was following one of our presiding officers around the neighbourhood. We still had a few special votes outstanding, and this incredibly dedicated woman was determined that those residents wouldn't lose their opportunity to vote.



Making their mark on election day

Meanwhile, her boss, the area manager who seemed perpetually late when it mattered, arrived at the voting station and was furious to discover it hadn't been packed up. Our presiding officer stood her ground. Those residents had a right to vote, and she was determined to get to their homes.

This is the calibre of people at our voting stations in Ward 72. Real public servants who understand that their responsibility isn't simply to follow a timetable, but to serve our democracy.

Unfortunately, not everyone at the IEC demonstrated the same commitment.

Then came Wednesday. The uncollected bins were still visible around our voting stations, and I was still fighting Monday's electricity outage.

By 10:00, we had another problem. The previous evening, I'd asked the IEC area manager whether she had a plan to ensure all ballot papers would be delivered before voting stations opened. No response.

On election morning, both I and the IEC's own presiding officers warned that stations had received insufficient ballot papers. As stocks ran down, we raised the alarm again. Eventually, the area manager stopped answering calls, including those from her own presiding officers.

The necessary supplies weren't arriving, and one by one, all four voting stations in Ward 72 ran out of ballot papers.

Consider the absurdity. We'd spent more than a year registering voters, encouraging participation, and getting people to voting stations. And when they arrived, the organisation responsible for the election didn't have enough ballot papers.

We begged residents to remain in the queues. Some had been waiting for hours. A few left in frustration, but almost all returned. People had every reason to be angry. Yet they weren't prepared to surrender their vote.

And that brings me to something about election day that I struggle to explain.

For five years, I've interacted with the people of Ward 72 as residents. For the past year, I've also interacted with them as voters. But on election day, something changes.

There's excitement in the air. People are warmer, conversations are richer, and there's a sense of shared purpose you don't quite experience on an ordinary Wednesday. People who would normally stop you to complain about a pothole are suddenly excited to tell you they've voted.

And there's something slightly strange about me on election days.

Queues make me happy.

On an ordinary day, a queue usually means something isn't working. At a voting station, provided it's moving, it's one of the most beautiful things you can see. Morning queues are expected. Afternoon queues are special.

At around 15:00, I was standing outside Summerwood Primary School. The queue was consistently 40 or 50 people deep, but moving. People were going in, people were coming out, and more residents kept arriving.

I stood there watching, feeling an enormous sense of *nachas*. That wonderful feeling of pride and joy you get from seeing people you care about doing something special.

And quite unexpectedly, I found myself tearing up a little.

After five years of working with this community, through endless outages, water cuts, and municipal battles, there they were. Still showing up. Still participating. Still believing their voices mattered.

It was one of my favourite moments of the campaign.

By 20:57, our gazebos were packed away, counting teams briefed, and I was sitting on a bollard outside Glenhazel Primary School. Three minutes remained before voting closed, and I wasn't going anywhere in case another voter arrived.

My smartwatch chose that moment to suggest I relax, because apparently I was showing signs of stress. Very helpful. Thank you.

In 2021, we finished counting at around 02:15.

This time, at about 03:00, a counter told me they were finished and just needed to complete the audit. Excellent, I thought.

Then we waited.

And waited.

At around 04:30, the results finally came through.

Of Ward 72's 13 538 registered voters, 64.3% had turned out.

The DA won all four voting districts, receiving 89% of the ward vote. Glenhazel and Summerwood both exceeded 91%.

I was obviously delighted. But elections aren't won by candidates standing under gazebos. They're won by volunteers who give up their time, teams who knock on doors, and residents who turn up to vote.

And despite everything that went wrong, our residents turned up.

At 04:35, I sent a video thanking them and sharing the results.

By 05:00, I was in bed.

More than a year of campaigning. Hundreds of coffees. Thousands of conversations. Registration drives, special votes, power outages, and an IEC that somehow managed to run out of ballot papers.

All culminating in a 04:35-in-the-morning video and a pillow.

Apparently, I'd been rehired.

- *Daniel Schay is a member of the City Council of Johannesburg, serving as the Democratic Alliance Shadow MMC of Development Planning and Ward Councillor for Ward 72.*

Both Zionism and equality need to be defended

OPINION

CHARLES CHEMEL



ROB KATZ



South African Jewry is a predominantly Zionist community, proud of its Jewish identity, its place in South African society, and its enduring connection to Israel. For many of us, Zionism is an integral part of our Jewish identity and our understanding of Jewish history.

Our concern, expressed in this opinion, is not simply with the direction of Israeli politics, but particularly with how we, as South African Jews, respond when political leaders in Israel adopt positions that conflict with the democratic principles we profess to uphold.

Being steadfast in our commitment to Zionism should never mean being uncritical of what is done in its name. There is a fundamental difference between supporting Israel and accepting political exclusion based on race or ethnicity as a means of addressing its problems. We should be willing to examine that difference openly, even when doing so creates disagreement within our community.

This matters particularly in South Africa. Our history has taught us the consequences of political exclusion based on identity, and the importance of building a society in which people with profoundly different histories and aspirations can participate as equals.

It also matters for the place of Jews within the wider South African society. We rightly seek understanding and respect for our Jewish identity and our connection to Israel. But our credibility in defending those commitments depends, in part, on demonstrating that our opposition to racism and discrimination is principled and consistent.



AI-generated image

The question we want to raise is therefore not whether we should support Israel, but what that support should mean when fundamental democratic values are at stake.

Zionism need not negate the rights of Arabs living in Israel. Theodor Herzl's vision, particularly as expressed in his novel *Altneuland*, envisaged a Jewish society in which Arabs and Jews could live together and enjoy equal rights. While this was an idealised vision rather than a complete constitutional programme, it demonstrates that Jewish national aspirations and the rights of others need not be mutually exclusive.

Israel's Declaration of Independence, proclaimed by David Ben-Gurion in 1948, explicitly promised equal social and political rights to all citizens, irrespective of religion, race, or sex, and invited Arab inhabitants to participate fully in the state and its institutions.

Yet the October 2026 Israeli election exposed a troubling contradiction. We vigorously reject the characterisation of Zionism as inherently racist and challenge accusations that Israel is an apartheid state. But how do we reconcile that position with election campaigning that presented increased Arab voter turnout as a warning to Jewish voters, or with opposition leaders who ruled out cooperation with Arab parties, citing ideological differences?

The distinction is fundamental. There are legitimate reasons to refuse political cooperation with particular individuals or parties. Support for Hamas, endorsement of violence against the state, or rejection of peaceful democratic processes can provide principled grounds for exclusion from a governing coalition. These standards must apply equally to Jewish and Arab parties.

No political party has an automatic right to participate in government. Coalition partners must be able to agree on fundamental principles and governing objectives. But every citizen has an equal right to political representation, and no party should be disqualified from consideration solely because of the ethnic identity of those it represents.

Nor should a party's refusal to identify as Zionist automatically disqualify it. When high Arab voter turnout is portrayed as a danger in itself, an entire population risks being treated with suspicion simply for exercising its democratic rights. In our view, treating Arab identity or democratic participation itself as a political threat is racism, not legitimate political disagreement.

The Democrats leader Yair Golan has articulated a different approach, arguing that Arab parties should not be excluded from coalition negotiations simply because they represent Arab voters. He has supported cooperation with Mansour Abbas and the Ra'am party on the basis of an agreed political programme. His position demonstrates that Zionism and Arab political partnership need not be incompatible.

Nor is this commitment to equality foreign to religious or nationalist Zionism. Rabbi Yehuda Amital regarded the equality promised in Israel's Declaration of Independence as a binding obligation under Jewish law. Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, confronting a ruling by Israeli rabbis that sought to prohibit selling or renting homes to non-Jews, challenged both their interpretation of Jewish law and their judgement. His intervention demonstrated that even deeply held commitments to the Jewish people and the land of Israel must not prevent us from questioning measures that discriminate against others. Even former prime minister Menachem Begin, whose nationalist Zionist credentials were beyond question, opposed the military government imposed upon Israel's Arab citizens and argued in the Knesset in 1962 for equal rights irrespective of religion, nationality, or origin.

These were voices from within Zionism who insisted that Jewish national self-determination carries moral responsibilities towards others.

As South African Jews, we should understand this better than most. Our history has taught us that democracy means more than the right to vote. It requires the legitimacy of every citizen's participation in political life, including the possibility of sharing political power. We know the consequences of exclusion based on identity and the importance of leadership that brings divided communities together rather than exploits their fears.

Many South African Jews are deeply troubled by our government's one-sided approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, its failure to distinguish adequately between the Palestinian cause and Hamas, and its failure to draw upon South Africa's experience of negotiation and accommodation to promote peace.

But criticism of our government cannot excuse silence about racism and political exclusion in Israel.

We were horrified by attempts at the Durban conferences to equate Zionism with racism. Yet when we fail to challenge exclusionary politics in Israel, we lend credibility to those who seek to delegitimise Zionism itself. **Continued on page 10>>**



SA Jews add their unique take to Our Jewish Story

LEE TANKLE

Stephen Smith's goal is to tell 30 000 stories about 30 000 lives that show what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century.

Smith – former executive director of the USC Shoah Foundation, established by filmmaker Steven Spielberg to preserve Holocaust survivor testimonies – was in South Africa this week to interview people for this ambitious project.

The Our Jewish Story project, in partnership with the National Library of Israel, aims to document the lives of 10 000 Jews in Israel and 20 000 across the diaspora, preserving their voices for generations to come.

Expected to take about five years to complete, the project will see Smith, a renowned Holocaust educator and oral historian, and his team travel to Jewish communities across the world, working with local organisations to record stories that reflect the diversity of Jewish life.

Smith has spent the past 30 years interviewing Holocaust survivors, trying to understand and counter antisemitism during the darkest point of Jewish history. But throughout that time, he has always been struck by the resilience of the Jewish community in the face of extreme hostility.

Now he's turned his attention to documenting contemporary Jewish experiences. From family histories and religious traditions to questions of identity, belonging, and antisemitism, the interviews aim to capture what it means to be Jewish today.

"Today, as antisemitism rises, everyone is rushing to put out fires, strengthen security, and fight the hateful narratives spreading online. But I've come to realise that the Jewish community can be a source of strength to itself. When we appreciate and share our own stories, we create something powerful that goes beyond what anyone else says about us.

"Telling your story is, in itself, a Jewish act. It's an act of resistance, although I wouldn't describe this as a resistance archive. When you stand up and say, 'This is who I am', and make yourself vulnerable enough to share that publicly, it's a statement of strength. You're not fighting an antisemite or responding to someone else's narrative. You're simply saying, 'This is who I am, this is what matters to me, and this is why.'

"That's what motivates me about this project. It's about allowing individuals and communities to tell their own stories and, in doing so, creating a tapestry of Jewish life. When you stand back and look at it, you see the extraordinary colour, diversity, and beauty of who we are. I think we owe it to ourselves to preserve that."

South Africa is among the first countries in which the project has begun. The accounts will form part of a permanent archive at the National Library of Israel and be accessible to the public through the Our Jewish Story app, allowing future generations to hear directly from those who lived these experiences.


Stephen Smith interviewing David Akinin

"Over the past two weeks, we've been in Cape Town and Johannesburg, meeting with community leaders to explain the project and conducting around a dozen interviews. We're interviewing key figures not simply because they're leaders, but because we want them to understand the value of sharing their own stories and how the process of documenting their community's experiences works," Smith said.

He explained that South African Jews were among the first interviewed not just because it's an English-speaking community, and he has an established relationship with the Cape Town Holocaust & Genocide Centre and SA Jewish Museum, but because he wants to examine a community very different to those in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

"Very often when one thinks of diaspora, because the US has such a large proportion of diaspora, it tends to get first dibs on what it means to be Jewish in diaspora. And I wanted to be really clear that actually some of the smaller communities, like the entire South African community, which is the size of a Philadelphia community, for example, has so much culture, cultural diversity, history, and also a different political, cultural, and historical context in which Jews live," he explained.

The minimum number of interviews in each country will be based on the size of its Jewish population, while ensuring representation across different backgrounds, denominations, ages, and genders. Working with local organisations, the team hopes to capture voices beyond established communal structures, including unaffiliated Jews, to create an inclusive picture of Jewish life that reflects the unique makeup of each community.

The interviews are tailored to both the country and the individual, exploring issues specific to South African Jewish life, the legacy of apartheid, antisemitism, and Jewish identity. Questions are then adapted to each person's background, career, and communal involvement, allowing conversations to develop naturally and uncover more personal experiences.

Smith explained that an interview with virologist Professor Barry Schoub, for example, began with questions about balancing his religious observance with his scientific career, but evolved into a deeper discussion about faith, science, and identity. Through this approach, the project aims to capture the complexities of what it means to be Jewish in South Africa today.

One of Smith's biggest discoveries from 15 interviews has been that South African Jews experience life very differently to what he'd expected. Given the South African government's accusations of "genocide" by Israel, and its case at the International Court of Justice, Smith had assumed that Jews might find living here oppressive.

"However, I've been completely surprised by what I've heard. Of course, people still need to be cautious, but the picture emerging is very different from places like Australia, where I've heard that many Jews who felt safe two years ago are now deeply fearful," he said. "By and large, the South African Jews I've spoken to say they don't experience antisemitism in their daily lives, don't fear for their safety beyond taking general precautions, and feel that South Africa remains a welcoming place where Jews can thrive. That has genuinely surprised me."

Sticker mania takes hold of moms and *bobbas*

LEE TANKLE

Your *bobba* may have gone to Checkers for milk and come out with three shopping bags, six Stickables, and a list of exactly which ones the grandchildren still need.

The Checkers collectables have sparked a craze that seems to know no age limit, with children and adults trading doubles, hunting down missing characters, and recruiting friends and family into the mission to complete their sets.

For some, it's a bit of harmless fun; for others, completing the collection has become a family operation. WhatsApp groups have turned into trading floors, spare Stickables are carefully catalogued, and no friend, relative, or unsuspecting Checkers shopper is safe from being asked, "Which ones did you get?"

In Facebook groups, moms and grandmothers search high and low not just for the stickers but the books to put them in.

It is a genius marketing strategy for the supermarket chain, getting people to spend their hard-earned rands in R200 increments for small stickers.

Steven Sidley, visiting professor at the Centre for Postgraduate Studies at Rhodes University, explained that in researching his newly released book, *Checkmate: How Shoprite Checkers Rewrote the Rules and Won*, he got a chance to look under the hood of its often innovative approach to marketing.

"The Minis were one of their first forays into a sort of viral 'cultural moment' market in which kids are recruited into marketing ambassadorships for the company. Obviously, this was subsequently extended to the mini Sixty60 motorcycle scooters and other child-oriented mini campaigns. They are extremely good at these – no one else gets close. It is a different sort of marketing than the traditional world of '10c per bag of apples'. Create demand by having kids pester their parents. Pester power," he said.

An anonymous Joburg Jewish mother explained that since the promotion started, she has spent an ungodly amount so she could meet the threshold to get a few stickers every time she's gone shopping. She would even make special trips every day and spend at least R400 so she would get two stickers.

"I can't even tell you how much I have spent at Checkers. I want to complete the collection; it's not even for the kids at this point. It's bringing back the days of collecting stickers in my sticker book when I was younger."

The most frustrating thing about the whole phenomenon for her is that she's spent all this money and has so many duplicates. "I need just two more, and it's like I am haunted by these duplicates and my financial irresponsibility," she said.



Sandton mom Staci Lyons explained that she and her seven-year-old were sad that Checkers decided to do stickers this year instead of the miniatures. But she has used collecting the stickers to teach her only child to share.

"Sharing isn't always the easiest for her because she's seven. So, what we did was help her complete her collection first, and now we're focusing on helping her friends complete theirs. I write to the class groups asking who needs what, and every day she takes Stickables to school to give to other children. We don't swap them or ask for anything in return; we just give them. It's been really good for her to learn how to share and help others," she said.

She explained that though she hasn't gone out of her way to shop at Checkers during the promotion, all of her clients know that she and her daughter love collecting things and so will bring their stickers to her.

"Just in the last week, I opened about 85 Stickables, and I haven't even shopped at Checkers. It all comes from people who know I'm collecting – clients who don't have young kids, sales reps, everyone. It's so nice that people know and think of me. Altogether, I've probably opened about 400 or 500 packets."

Another anonymous Johannesburg mom explained that she, too, was shopping at Checkers more to get stickers for her children.

"It definitely has influenced me, as I made sure I did all my shopping at Checkers only. I'd also buy stuff I didn't really need to get to the R200, R400, or R600 mark if I was close to getting that extra sticker. I've spent a fortune just to get the stickers, as I had to make sure each time I got her the most I could, so I would buy extra to get that sticker," she said.

The anonymous mother explained that she gets more excited than her children when they get a new sticker to add to the collection. "It's almost like I throw a party for a new sticker, but when I am spending so much money on these things, I want to make it worth it."

Lyons agreed, saying that she and her husband got into collecting stickers and Minis as well.

"I was actually a bit disappointed when I saw they were Stickables rather than Minis because I loved the Minis. My husband and I used to sit and feel the packets, try to guess what was inside, and then open them for the surprise. This year, we didn't love the Stickables quite as much, but my daughter absolutely loved them. She was also really lucky and managed to get about six or seven gold ones."

Machaneh wins hands down

A holiday with the folks or machaneh? For many, this is a no-brainer.

A holiday is an escape, *Machaneh* is about connection



AARON KAHANOVITZ

Almost 15 years ago, I stepped onto my first Bnei Akiva *Machaneh* as a wide-eyed eight-year-old. Nearly every year since then I've found myself going back. I didn't know it then, but those dusty grounds, occasional cold showers, and tents would end up shaping the trajectory of my life. Fast forward through a decade and a half of summers and, while my role at camp has changed over time, my reason for stepping onto those grounds every single December remains exactly the same.



In a world driven by holidays in luxury hotels in buzzy cities, people often ask why more than 1 000 of us trade modern comforts for the raw, messy reality of camp. The answer is simple: you may go to Cape Town or Plett to escape, but you go to *Machaneh* to connect.

We live in an age of digital overload and constant screen time. Camp offers a rare and powerful alternative. When you step onto the campsite, you leave behind parental safety nets, school or university pressure, and the noise of the outside world. You aren't sitting in a hotel room or scrolling through social media. You are fully present. Living shoulder to shoulder in tents strips away pretence and reveals what really matters.

At *Machaneh* there is genuinely something for everyone. Days are packed with swimming in the sea and pool, high-energy activities, time to relax, and very competitive volleyball and soccer. We have unbelievable *ruach* (spirit) sessions filled with singing and dancing, alongside *minyanim* and Jewish learning tailored for everyone from complete beginners to advanced students.

A huge part of the magic comes from our incredible *madrichim* (counsellors). Having people who care and connect with you on your level means everything. They don't just supervise. They are mentors and role models that one can always turn to.

I've lived through countless unforgettable times on camp, but two stand out. First, the 2019 camp concert with Jeryko in the amphitheatre. Ask anyone who was there, the vibe and energy were palpable. There were hundreds of us singing together. Second are the soccer and volleyball finals that go through the entire last Saturday night of camp. Everyone is around. People are singing, dancing, and watching the game intensely. It often ends after sunrise and with an early Shacharit davening like no other.

At its core, camp exists purely for the *chanichim*, from the youngest kids on their very first camp to the teenagers finding their voice. We come back every year simply because we want every young Jewish person to experience that absolute joy and the building of a deep, lasting love for each other, for Judaism, and for Israel.

Cape Town and Plett will always be there, but the experiences on *Machaneh*, the lifelong friendships, the Torah, and the warmth of the Bnei Akiva family, can only be found at camp. Every year I leave the campsite feeling more inspired, more connected, and more ready for the year ahead.

• *Aaron Kahanovitz is the national chairperson of Bnei Akiva South Africa.*

Habos are friends for life



BEN KANN

If you don't know where to spend some of your December holiday, Habonim is where it's at! Now, if you were to go Plett, it would be a good time. But why would you want to have a good time rather than a great time? The difference between a random holiday and Habonim is how you have your fun: on Habonim, fun is all about togetherness. During *peulot* (activities), we grow together; at Mifkad Eish, we cry together; after singing the Havdalah *brachot*, we all run towards the centre of the *kikar* (the main field) and dance together. Sharing in these moments bonds us and creates friendships that last a lifetime.

Joining Habonim from an early age provides an advantage in life, not only because of the ideas and skills you learn, but because of the friends you make. The reason I go back to camp every year is mainly because of the lifelong friends I've made. Often, it's the only place I get to see them since they either live in Joburg or attend different schools to me. At camp I love staying up late with my friends, talking and playing games, often with the sound of someone playing guitar in the background.



Every year, we dive into new challenges and experiences based on the *shichvah* (age group) we're in. Each *shichvah* comes with unique milestones and themes, containing deep lore and traditions.

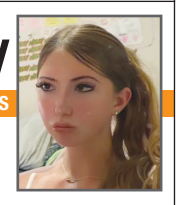
Another highlight of Habo is getting to meet new *madrichim* (counsellors). Some come from countries such as the UK, Canada, the US, Australia, and Israel. It is an incredible experience meeting young Jews from around the world, and showing them South African culture, as well as for them to show us games or traditions from their own movements. There are Habonim movements around the world so, in addition to the friends you make at Habo, you join a community and culture that you take with you even after you graduate.

All of this takes place in Onrus, in the Western Cape, where the campsite is Habonim's most underrated feature. It is huge, with so much to explore. After three years as a *channie* (camper), there are places I have yet to discover.

So in the end, there are way more reasons to go to Habonim this December rather than waste it somewhere else.

• *Ben Kann is deputy head student in Grade 11 at Herzlia.*

Camp Kesher is my second family



KAYLA EVANS

There are many places in the world that bring happiness, but for me, Camp Kesher is one of the most special places of all. Camp Kesher is a summer camp that takes place in Cape Town, where people come together to make memories, meet new friends, and experience things they will never forget. It is so much more than just a camp. It is a place where I feel happy, free, and surrounded by people who make every moment worthwhile.



One of the biggest reasons I love Camp Kesher is the opportunity to meet new people. Every year, I get to meet people from different places, with different personalities and stories. It's amazing how strangers can become such important people in your life in such a short amount of time. Some of the friendships you make at camp last long after the summer is over.

Another reason Camp Kesher is so special to me is getting to spend quality time with my friends. Being at camp gives us the chance to forget about everyday responsibilities and simply enjoy ourselves. Whether we are laughing until our stomachs hurt, staying up talking, participating in activities, or just enjoying each other's company, every moment becomes a memory. It's not always about doing something exciting; sometimes the simplest moments turn into the best ones.

Of course, one of the most exciting parts of Camp Kesher is the amazing adventures. From exploring Cape Town to taking part in activities and trying new things, there's never a dull moment. Every day brings something different, and there is always something to look forward to. These adventures allow us to step outside our comfort zones, challenge ourselves, and experience things we might never get the chance to do anywhere else.

However, I think the biggest reason I love Camp Kesher is the feeling of having a family away from home. There is something so special about being surrounded by people who understand you, support you, and make you feel like you belong. Even though camp lasts for a limited time, the connections you build make it feel like a second home. The people, the laughter, and the memories create a bond that's difficult to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it.

In conclusion, Camp Kesher is much more than just a summer camp in Cape Town. It is a place filled with friendship, adventure, happiness, and unforgettable memories. It has taught me the importance of meeting new people, appreciating the friends I have, and making the most of every opportunity. Most importantly, it has given me a family away from home. No matter how many years pass, the memories and friendships I make at Camp Kesher will always have a special place in my heart.

• *Kayla Evans is 18 and lives in Johannesburg. She attended Camp Kesher for seven years.*

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REVENGE OF THE CREATIVES
Ann Nurock: AI v humans at the Cannes Lions Awards



Dr Platzhund to lead the veterinary pack

LEE TANKLE

No two days are ever the same for Dr Melvyn Greenberg, otherwise known as Dr Platzhund from Radio 702. Even after 52 years in private veterinary practice, the challenges of diagnosing and treating animals, and the relationships he builds with their owners, continue to fuel his passion for the profession.

Now, that lifelong dedication has brought him to a historic milestone: his election as president of the South African Veterinary Association (SAVA), making him the first Jewish leader in the organisation's 103-year history.

Despite his decades of experience, numerous national awards, and years of involvement on various veterinary committees, Greenberg said his election came as a surprise.

"I never thought they would consider someone like me. They've had English and predominantly Afrikaans presidents, but I never imagined they would elect a Jewish person to the position," he said.

He sees it as an opportunity to make a lasting difference, tackle the challenges facing vets, and leave a meaningful legacy. Although his tenure officially begins only in December next year, he is already fulfilling several roles as part of the preparation process.

Still, it's not his first rodeo.

"It's a prestigious position, but I've also been fortunate to receive three national awards, including honorary life membership, the Boswell Award for my 18 years as 'Dr Platzhund' on Radio 702, and an award recognising my contribution to the Johannesburg community. I was also involved in organising the largest veterinary World Congress ever held in South Africa, in 1994. These are achievements I'm incredibly proud of and grateful for," he said.

The SAVA represents vets across the country, whether they treat small animals, livestock or wildlife, or are in industry or academia. Unlike the Veterinary Council, which regulates and disciplines vets, the association advocates for their rights and interests, while also addressing challenges such as foot-and-mouth disease and the importation of veterinary products.

Greenberg was nominated by a colleague and subsequently approved by the SAVA board of directors. He hopes to bring innovation, financial stability, and greater transparency to the association, ensuring members are regularly informed about issues, the progress being made, and the value of their membership.

"I currently serve on 17 committees, and I want to ensure that we make responsible, well-considered decisions. For example, during a recent meeting about bursaries, I argued that funding should prioritise students with the greatest financial need, strong academic results, and those nearing graduation, in the hope of encouraging them to remain in South Africa.

"Ultimately, whether it's animal welfare, ethics, foot-and-mouth disease, or any other issue affecting the veterinary profession, we have a responsibility to address it. My main priority is to improve communication at every level and ensure that the association makes a meaningful difference."

Greenberg explained that while his Jewish identity may not necessarily influence how he approaches his presidency, his election holds particular significance given the antisemitism he experienced earlier in his career. For him, reaching this position is a testament to his perseverance.

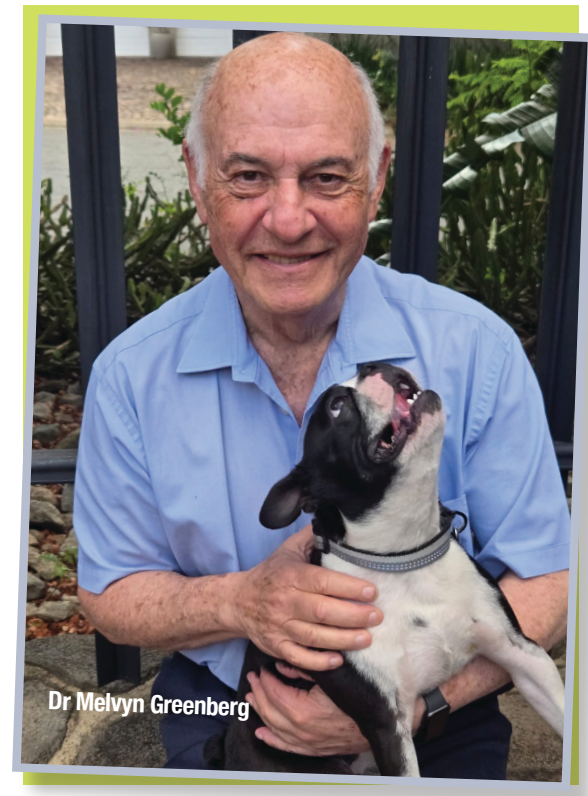
"I'm very proud of what I've achieved, particularly because I experienced a great deal of prejudice and antisemitism, both as a student and after qualifying. But I have never tolerated antisemitism, racism, or discrimination of any kind," he said. "Those who treated me that way will never forget me because I made sure to stand up for myself and teach them lessons they would remember. Interestingly, many of those same people are now friends of mine, and we have developed mutual respect."

He never would have believed when he started his career that he would be in the position he is in today.

"I've been in private practice for 52 years and previously served on 14 committees over a period of 14 years. Unfortunately, that chapter ended on an acrimonious note, as I felt the president at the time didn't fully appreciate the work we were doing on a voluntary basis.

"However, I believe there is now a completely different attitude towards colleagues within the profession. When you are given a position like this, you have to prove yourself and fulfil your responsibilities. Ultimately, when the time comes to hand over the reins, you want your successor to feel that you've done an effective and responsible job."

This is the kind of dedication to the profession that his patients and their owners can attest to.


Dr Melvyn Greenberg

"Every single day is unique. There's never a dull moment because every day brings new animals, new owners, and new challenges. Whether it's making a diagnosis or treating an animal, there's always something different, and that's what makes the profession so rewarding."

For him, it's also about building trust with clients. "I want them to know that I'll always be honest with them, that I won't take advantage of them, and that I'll do what's best for their animals. The relationship between the veterinarian, the animal, and its owner is incredibly precious, and I work hard to nurture that trust.

"I have about 800 clients who have my personal cellphone number, and I don't mind when they contact me for advice, no matter where I am. What might seem like a minor issue to me could be very important to them, and I want them to know they can always reach me," he said.

"Ultimately, I want to offer practical, affordable solutions while maintaining the highest standards of professionalism and collegiality. It's about building lasting relationships based on honesty, trust, and genuine care," he said.

Both Zionism and equality need to be defended

>>Continued from page 7

Our communal leadership has a particular responsibility to make these distinctions clear, but the responsibility does not end there. Each of us must decide whether our commitment to democratic equality is a principle we apply consistently, including when it challenges people and institutions with whom we identify.

We should be prepared to discuss these questions openly within our community and with fellow South Africans. That means defending Jewish self-determination while also being willing to challenge discrimination, listen to contrary views, and seek common ground.

The alternative is to allow our public identity to become associated with positions we may neither hold nor wish to defend. In a country with South Africa's history, that carries consequences for the credibility of our community and for the relationships we have worked to build across society.

South Africa's own transition, imperfect as it has been, offers lessons about the courage required to engage with those we do not trust, recognise competing aspirations, and begin building a shared future.

Perhaps our greatest contribution would be to work in partnership with other South Africans to demonstrate how people with deeply opposing views can engage constructively and seek common ground.

Rather than allowing the conflict over Israel and Palestine to deepen divisions within South Africa, could we not become an example of the inclusive dialogue we hope to see in Israel itself – a dialogue that moves beyond fear, hatred, and distrust towards a better future for all?

That would be a meaningful expression of what it means to stand up for our values.

• *Charles Chemel is a trustee of Koleinu SA, principal of CSC Advisory, chairperson of Lesaka Life, and former chairperson of the South African Credit and Risk Reporting Association. Rob Katz is founder of the Shoshana Foundation and is currently completing a master's in Holocaust and Genocide Studies in the US.*

Durbanites are like magnets no matter where in the world

LEE TANKLE

Bermuda may be thousands of kilometres away, but for two former Durbanites at a recent concert, "home" suddenly felt remarkably close.

A chance meeting between Warren Bank and Deena Weiss at the Bermuda Chamber Music Festival quickly turned into a game of Jewish geography as they discovered their shared roots in Durban, swapping familiar names, places, and memories from the community they'd both once called home.

For Bank, the encounter was another reminder of a phenomenon he's experienced across the world: there is something about Durbanites that draws them together, wherever they end up.

His connection with Weiss was almost immediate. Despite meeting thousands of kilometres from South Africa, the pair soon realised that their lives overlapped in unexpected ways, from the people they knew to their experiences growing up in Durban's Jewish community.

"I was late getting to the concert, so I quickly found a seat on a bench, squeezed in, and the concert went ahead. At the interval, I was talking to my friend Anne when the woman sitting in front of me turned around and asked, 'Excuse me, are you South African?' I said yes, and when I told her I was from Durban, she said, 'Gosh, I was born in Durban.' I asked where she had lived, and she said, 'In Berea.' Being from Durban, I immediately corrected her: in Durban it's 'on the Berea', not 'in Berea'," Bank said.

"She told me she had lived on Windmill Road. The only person I remembered living there was Rabbi Weiss, but at that point, I had no idea she was Jewish. She then mentioned that Seventh-day Adventist missionaries used to knock on their door," he said, "I told her that Durban's Great Synagogue was just down the road from the church, and that I happened to be Jewish and had celebrated my Barmitzvah there. She just stared at me and said, 'My father was the rabbi of that synagogue.'

"It was just the craziest coincidence. I didn't have to go to that concert, and Deena and her husband, who live in Jerusalem, didn't have to be in Bermuda. Yet somehow, we ended up sitting right next to each other."


Warren Bank and Deena Weiss

Bank, a barrister, moved from the United Kingdom (UK) to Bermuda during the COVID-19 pandemic after being offered an opportunity to pursue a different area of law. There, he became involved in strengthening the island's small Jewish community. Despite strict work-permit regulations and initial opposition to bringing a rabbi to Bermuda, the community successfully appealed the decision, and the rabbi has since helped expand Jewish life on the island through communal meals, holiday gatherings, and other programmes.

Bank had lived in South Africa until 2015, but the Weiss family had left in the 1970s.

"It's not like we told each other our entire life stories, but we caught up. I remembered that her sister, Chana, had been in my year, and Deena told me where she was now and about her family. She told me that she lives in Jerusalem and that she and her husband love to travel. We wanted to stay in touch, so I got her husband's number, and we have remained in contact ever since," said Bank.

"After I shared the story on the Facebook group Durban Calling, several of Dina's old school friends came out of the woodwork and contacted me privately, asking if I could put them back in touch with her," he said.

"Besides being a lawyer here, I feel that part of my mission in life is bringing people together. I love being able to reconnect people in this way, and I'm thrilled that, through this extraordinary bit of divine providence, I was able to do that."

This is not the first such connection he's made so far from home.

"Capetonians are friendly with each other, and in Joburg, you might be close to people who grew up in the same area as you. But Durban has this perfect Goldilocks mix. We all went to the same schools, sometimes from the age of three or six, or from high school, so we all know each other and almost see each other as family.

"That connection exists between Durbanites all over the world. Wherever I go, I seem to have friends from Durban. I was in California for the first time in May, travelling from Berkeley and San Francisco to Irvine and La Jolla, and I was surrounded by old school friends."

He said the Durban connection has remained strong across the world, with old friends meeting up in places such as Israel and the UK and forming what he described as an "enormous little family of ex-Durbanites". Even though he and his classmates matriculated about 40 years ago, they remain in regular contact and continue to be closely involved in one another's lives.

"Even though the Durban we grew up in doesn't really exist anymore – the school is no longer there, and the Jewish community has become much smaller – it was the most incredible place to grow up," Bank said.

"I think that Durban lives on in our hearts and in the relationships we've managed to maintain over decades. It takes effort to keep those connections alive, but for me it doesn't feel like an effort. I do it naturally because I love my friends so much."

No stopping young long-distance swimmer

CLAUDIA GROSS

A 15-year-old Herzlia High School long-distance swimmer has raised more than R127 000 to help other children learn to swim.

For Mia Braun, swimming has become about far more than personal achievement. She's founded an initiative called Stroke for Hope to support water safety and swimming opportunities for children. And to raise funds, she's completed increasingly demanding open-water swims, including the 7.4km Robben Island Freedom Swim, a cross-continental swim in Turkey, and 11km around Cape Point.

Her journey began in 2024 when she started playing water polo. While training to maintain her fitness, she discovered that she preferred swimming longer distances.

She considered the Robben Island swim but initially thought it was an unrealistic ambition. However, as her interest in endurance swimming grew, she became increasingly determined to attempt it.

Her first open-water swim, the 1.6km New Year's Day Mile at Clifton, was an important step towards her ultimate goal.

Another opportunity emerged when she was selected in March to the Cape Town Junior City Council. Each young councillor is expected to develop and implement a project to benefit a community. Braun decided to turn her Robben Island challenge into a fundraiser. She established Stroke for Hope and set a fundraising target of R30 000. She raised more than R127 000 in less than a month.

On 22 May, Braun completed the 7.4km Robben Island Freedom Swim in two hours and 44 minutes.

Knowing she had already exceeded her fundraising target gave the crossing additional meaning. "The biggest motivation throughout the swim was that I could save a life just by doing my swim," she wrote.

What began as a single fundraising challenge has developed into an ongoing commitment. Braun has partnered with organisations working to introduce children to swimming and other water-based activities, including Glide Along Aquatics, a swimming school and training organisation in Atlantis, and the Little Optimist, a sailing academy at the V&A Waterfront that provides therapeutic support and life skills to marginalised and health-compromised children.

"Seeing the smiles on their faces after getting in the boat and watching how they get more confident makes me remember why I did the Robben Island swim," Braun wrote.

Her own swimming achievements have continued alongside the fundraising work.

On 30 August, she took part in the annual 5km Hellespont swim from the European side of Turkey to the Asian side. Braun was the youngest international swimmer and finished 72nd among 866 female participants, completing the crossing in approximately one hour and 10 minutes.

Back in Cape Town, she found her motivation flagging without another swimming goal. Derrick Fraser, a Big Bay events organiser, suggested the Three Capes swim, an endurance crossing around the southern tip of the Cape Peninsula.



Mia Braun

It takes place infrequently because of the weather and sea conditions, but just three days after the initial discussion, conditions appeared favourable on 5 October. Braun hadn't specifically trained for the challenge and there were other obstacles, including seals, kelp beds, strong currents, and water temperatures of between 13°C and 14°C. She finished the approximately 11km in just more than four hours.

Herzlia principal Shane Brorson said Braun has been a role-model to the school's pupils, parents, and community at large. "I am extremely proud of Mia and proud to have her as a pupil of Herzlia High School."

Braun hopes to complete a double Robben Island swim and is interested in the Oceanman international open-water swimming competition. But she says, "For me, the goal is no longer just about how far I can swim, but how many lives I can help change along the way."

- *Find a fuller version of this story on* SA Jewish Report *online at sajr.co.za*

The funeral supplement



INNER VOICE
Howard Feldman

It's time to revise the infamously purple Jewish guide to death and mourning. It needs a supplement for those who understand the traditions but remain unsure what to do with an umbrella.

We could begin with getting to the cemetery. There are two types of Johannesburg Jews: Greenside people and highway people. Both are convinced the other route is ridiculous. "I always go through Greenside" carries the confidence of someone who was an early investor in Microsoft.

Then comes the call, "Can another four gentlemen come forward to act as pallbearers?" Calculations must be completed in nanoseconds. How far am I from the coffin? How many men are moving? Will there still be a free handle when I get there? Is that man approaching it or merely on his way to a grave inspection?

Nobody wants to stride forward only to discover all the handles are taken. You cannot pretend you were just passing by. Suddenly, you're back in Grade 3, being picked second-last for the soccer team. The shame is almost too much to bear. Especially when the mourners glance up and through their own pain, nod empathetically.

Secure a handle and you must walk in step with men who apparently haven't walked before. A sergeant major would despair. You don't want to be the one to trip, and so you concentrate on everyone's feet while trying to look like someone who can be trusted with this responsibility. All while hoping the phone in your top pocket doesn't choose this moment to remind you that your ringtone is *Stayin' Alive*.

At the graveside comes the familiar "Will the gentlemen…", and we take turns placing three shovelfuls of earth into the grave before returning the shovel to the ground for the next gentleman. Some men struggle with the quantity. Three modest scoops feel inadequate. They aren't bare-minimum people. They've never done half a job and aren't starting now.

Then there are those whose years of training appears to have been leading to this moment. It isn't Hyrox. Strava probably has no grave-filling category. But for a Discovery member, a point is a point.

Umbrellas require guidance. How many people must you accommodate? Once someone shelters beneath yours, may you move? And are the obligations different for rain and sun?

Sandy shoes create difficulties. You want to clean them or empty them, but hopping beside your car feels insufficiently solemn.

The anxiety doesn't fully dissipate when safely back in the car. I seriously never can decide, when driving out, when it is respectable to turn the radio back on? The parking area? The gate? Does talk radio qualify sooner than music? I work in radio and would appreciate a ruling.

But the most urgent chapter concerns the walk back from the grave.

Fall into step with a random someone and you've entered an arrangement with no termination clause. How long must you remain together? Can you accelerate? What if they accelerate too? I have escaped many an unintended post-grave liaison with the excuse that I have a grave to visit nearby, only to find myself standing at the tombstone of a stranger who died in 1982 leaving behind a loving and heartbroken family.

I couldn't leave immediately. My former walking companion might look back.

The supplement needs to cover this too. How long must you spend with a man you never knew, only to avoid another five minutes with one you actually do?

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

Pride and responsibility



ABOVE BOARD
Karen Milner

Election season is finally behind us, although those of us in Johannesburg and Tshwane will have to wait a little longer to learn who will be running our cities. We are not alone in our uncertainty. In Israel, the result appears to have brought even less clarity than ours. Whatever the coalition talks produce, it was heartening to see how well our local elections were conducted, and I am once again very proud of the election observers who played such an important part in the day.

Their role did not go unnoticed. In his address at the announcement of the results, Mosotho Moepya, chairperson of the Electoral Commission of South Africa, made a point of acknowledging them.

"We particularly acknowledge the role of election observers. For these elections, we accredited about 6 000 observers from 121 organisations. Their presence and independent scrutiny are an important part of building confidence in elections," he said.

Our observer team will spend the coming days completing its reports, and these will give us a clearer picture of how this year's polls were run. To all 116 South African Jewish Board of Deputies volunteers who gave their time, energy, and commitment to this mission, thank you. Your contribution matters. We are proud to have played our part in strengthening confidence in our democracy, and it was you who made that possible.

Over the weekend we were fortunate to be addressed by Stephen D Smith OBE, chief executive and co-founder of StoryFile, the world's first artificial intelligence conversational video platform. Mr Smith is also executive director emeritus of the USC Shoah Foundation, the archive founded by Steven Spielberg to document the Holocaust and genocide.

Mr Smith is launching a project with the National Library of Israel to record the stories of Jews across the diaspora, and South Africa will be part of it. In fact, it has already begun here, with the first interviews recorded over the past few days. The result will be a virtual, interactive archive for future generations who want to understand Jewish life and experience around the world. For that reason the collection has to be as broad as possible. It must include Jews from every walk and stage of life, and with every kind of connection to their Jewish identity, from the deeply observant to those whose Jewishness lives mostly at the Seder table. We are delighted to be partnering with Mr Smith, and I look forward to seeing our stories take their place among the 20 000 interviews that will make up the first edition.

In his address, Mr Smith described certain elements of the Jewish story that have come up again and again in the interviews collected so far. One he spoke about in particular was a deep sense that Jewish identity carries both pride and responsibility, and I have no doubt our South African stories will echo this sentiment.

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



Judaism helps Stormer navigate life and injury

LUKE ALFRED

Stormers' loose-forward Hacjivah Dayimani is a lucky man. He knows he's a lucky man because he makes two references to it in our interview, telling me that when he compares where he is to where some of his former classmates at Jeppe Boys now find themselves, he has no cause for complaint.

He attended about 10 high schools (his own count) before ending up at Jeppe High School for Boys in eastern Johannesburg. There he told a rugby master that he wanted to play on the wing because he'd seen Bryan Habana slide over the wet tryline in the 2007 World Cup and it looked cool. His master just looked at him and said, "You're far too big to be a wing, Hacjivah."

So, no Life of Bryan for him.

"Rugby has been good to me," he said. "The chances of me being where I am today are a million to one compared with some of the people I grew up with. I wouldn't be where I am today without it."

Despite having had an impressive start to the season, scoring two tries against the Sharks in the United Rugby Championship (URC) in the Stormers' 39-22 home victory, and one in the week before that against Edinburgh, this season has been somewhat darker for Dayimani. He injured his head during the Stormers' victory over the Sharks, and, having sat out for the mandatory period, looked set to return for the URC match against the Scarlets in the second half of October.

Still suffering from headaches, the 29-year-old missed the Scarlets match, no bad thing, as the Stormers scrambled to a late 52-40 win in a helter-skelter encounter that showed them far from their best. As a precaution, he also missed the following week's home game against Ulster, which is when I spoke with him at half-time. "The headaches have continued," he said. "We need to be careful."

He added that the recess for the Stormers in November – because of the international window during which time the Springboks are in Europe – came at a good time because it allowed him to rest. He hoped to be back for the return match against the Sharks in Durban in early December.

"Getting the headaches means I've got to limit screen time," he said. "I've been doing a lot of walking and cycling [at the upmarket estate in Bloubergstrand north of Cape Town] where I live. I've been concentrating on my lawn, watering it every day. My water bill has doubled, but I want it to look as slick as Twickenham."

Dayimani has also taken up golf in the last three months. He's bought himself a set of clubs and recently became a member at King David in Mowbray. He politely brushes aside a question about his handicap, but adds that there's another reason he wants a really nice green lawn in Bloubergstrand – and he tilts his head ever so slightly – "because I think it will help with my chipping".

He also spends time every day in his prayer room at home. His late father, Frank, an Igbo from Nigeria, was a practising Jew and Dayimani inherited his religion, rather than that of his isiXhosa sangoma mother, Lushabowang.

"I have a copy of the Torah in the prayer room and observe Jewish holy days and Shabbat," he said, noting that religion has provided him with a template for understanding his position in the world. "Religion has helped me navigate my life. It has given me a purpose. Being where I find myself today can't just be luck. There has to be a higher power."


Photo: Facebook

Hacjivah Dayimani

If Dayimani resumes his season against the Sharks early next month as he hopes, it will be the beginning of wall-to-wall rugby for the Stormers for the next six, the season ending only in May. The Stormers play in two parallel competitions, the Champions Cup and the URC. The Champions Cup, which used to be called the European Cup, is the more prestigious and lucrative tournament because, unlike the URC, it features French and English club teams and attracts larger broadcast revenue for the clubs as a result.

Having spoken to Stormers staff about their ambitions for the season, it's clear that they'd dearly like to make an impression on the Champions Cup, a competition no South African team has won and which therefore looms as a kind of final frontier for South African franchises.

Dayimani might not always be first-choice eighth man, that honour falling to Evan Roos when he is fit, but the season is long and tortuous. Dayimani's opportunity will present itself sooner rather than later.

First, though, the Sharks away. While the Stormers were compelling in their defeat of the Sharks in Cape Town in early October, their form in the local derbies last season was abysmal, so it's clearly a case of wait and see. Indeed, since the Sharks lost to the Stormers, their form has been excellent, and includes a tough away victory against difficult-to-beat Munster in Limerick.

Dayimani is limiting the screen time as he waits for his headaches to dissipate, but you can be sure he's been watching from afar as he counts his blessings.

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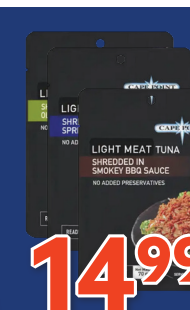
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