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Kanye West 'not under Jewish control anymore'

Shortly after he aired a Super Bowl commercial for a website selling a swastika T-shirt, and two days after posting an antisemitic rant on X, the rapper Ye announced that he was quitting the platform.

One week later he was back, and tweeting about Jews again. "I am not under Jewish control anymore," he wrote on Monday, 16 February. "In war, you take a couple loses [sic]."

He also wrote, "There's [a] lot of Jewish people I know and love and still work with."

By Tuesday morning, all the tweets had been deleted. But in the stream of all-caps posts the previous day, Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, defended selling white shirts featuring a black swastika on his website, and wrote that "a few specific Jews not the entire race for crying out loud but a few specific Jews came together and did everything they could to destroy me". He added that he was "not playing victim just refreshing everyone's memory".

He also wrote that after e-commerce company Shopify stopped working with his site to sell the swastika shirt, no-one else had agreed to sell it. And he defended the symbol, widely recognised in the Western world as the emblem of the Nazis, because it has historically been a feature of Indian and other Asian religions.

West said he had been thinking of selling the shirts for eight years, far predating his first stream of public antisemitic comments in late 2022.

Ye has been one of the most vocal and prominent purveyors of antisemitic invective since October 2022, and less than two weeks ago, called himself a Nazi.

At present, his online store displays a handwritten message saying that it's "coming soon", followed by a heart symbol.

Montreal shul defaced with swastika on Shabbat

A Montreal synagogue was graffitied with a swastika on Shabbat, drawing condemnation from Canadian officials as well as a defiant response from the synagogue's rabbi.

A congregant at Temple Emanu-El-Beth Sholom, a Reform congregation in the city, noticed the 3-foot-wide (91cm) symbol on the synagogue's side on Saturday afternoon, 15 February. At the time, according to the Canadian Jewish News, members had been rehearsing the synagogue's Purim spiel, a whimsical pageant performed on the holiday of Purim next month.

The swastika was removed by Corey Fleischer, an activist whose nonprofit organisation, Erasing Hate, scrubs off hate speech graffiti. Police are investigating and have yet to identify a suspect.

The following morning, the synagogue's rabbi, Lisa Grushcow, said in a social media video that she wasn't surprised by the graffiti, citing

heightened levels of antisemitism in Canada and worldwide.

"This is a place where we try and open doors and build bridges. We love it here," she said. "Now here's the thing: with how the world is right now, it was a matter more of when, rather than if, something like this would happen."

In the video, which has been viewed tens of thousands of times since it was posted on Sunday, Grushcow goes on to suggest ways non-Jews can counter antisemitism.

"For some of us, what's just as disturbing as these acts of antisemitism is the silence of our friends," she said, adding later, "The world's a bit of a mess right now, but we can make a difference."

The graffiti is the latest antisemitic incident in Montreal over the past year-plus. In December 2024, another synagogue in the city was firebombed for the second time in just over a year. The first such attack took place in November 2023, shortly after antisemitism began to spike following Hamas's 7 October attack on Israel.



Photo: Jakub Potzycski

That same month, shots were fired at an Orthodox girls' school in Montreal. Antisemitic incidents have occurred at other Jewish institutions throughout Canada as well.

Montreal Mayor Valérie Plante condemned the incident, noting that she had recently visited the synagogue.

"Such attacks are unacceptable in our metropolis and I can assure Rabbi Lisa Grushcow that the [police department] is investigating," she wrote. "We must all unite and denounce all forms of antisemitism."

Mark Carney, a Liberal candidate running to succeed outgoing Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, said the incident was "another reminder that Jewish Canadians have been targeted by a rising wave of antisemitism, particularly since 7 October.

"It has to stop. As Canadian leaders, we need to say firmly and loudly that the Jewish community has the right to feel safe in Canada."

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Being present to presence

Have you ever found yourself preparing for something big – racing from one task to the next, your mind bouncing between thoughts, only to realise that you've lost track of what you meant to do in the first place? The closer the event gets, the more overwhelming it becomes.

In the previous parsha, Parashat Yitro, Moses is called to relay messages between G-d and the people of Israel, climbing the mountain and coming down no less than seven times. Can you imagine doing this physically? And metaphorically? Each ascent and descent, each new task pulling you further from your centre. But in this week's parsha, Parashat Mishpatim, we hear a profound call from G-d in Exodus 24:12: "And G-d said to Moses, come up to me on the mountain, and be there..."

The Kotzker Rebbe, an 18th-19th century Hasidic teacher, pointed out the apparent redundancy in G-d's call: Why say "come up" and "be there"? As the Kotzker teaches, it's possible to climb many mountains and still not be there. We can be physically present, surrounded by loved ones and blessings, and yet not truly experience the moment. In fact, we may spend so much time worrying about the next step or being pulled in multiple directions that we lose the ability to truly connect to the present moment, think clearly, and appreciate what there is.

This is where the call to "be there" resonates so powerfully. Using an element of Bibliodrama, in which we enter the characters' worlds to explore both theirs and our own, I invite you to join me in a visualisation, a journey Moses took to ascend and be there. This practice can be used whenever you feel like you've been climbing, ascending to new heights, but not fully arriving at the moment.

Take a slow, deep breath. As you inhale, feel the air filling your lungs, and as you exhale, release all tension. Sit comfortably. Feel your feet grounded, and your body supported. Relax your arms, your shoulders, your neck, and your face. Breathe in deeply, then exhale slowly, feeling the air at your nostrils – calm and steady.

You are on a journey. At the bottom of the

mountain your people, the people you have cared for deeply. You feel the warmth of their love as you ascend toward the cloud where G-d awaits.

The mountain air is fresh. You feel safe, supported. As you climb higher, you start noticing the small details around you – pebbles, flowers, butterflies, and birds – feeling gratitude for each moment, each breath.

At the summit, the world around you feels timeless. The sun and the moon continue their eternal dance, but your heart remains steady. You feel open and grounded in this moment. Ready for meeting the ultimate Presence.

Then, you hear the Voice. It calls you in, and you step into the cloud, enveloped by presence, wonder, and peace. Taking slow deep breaths, you are absorbing this sacred feeling.

Torah Thought

**Rabbi Andrea Kuti
Vice-Chair of the
South African
Association of
Progressive Rabbis**



When you're ready, gratitude filling you, you start taking your leave. You notice a smile in the corner of your mouth. As you meet others, you see softness in their eyes. When you return to your tasks, you do them with presence. Everything feels easier and better. You move your body, your fingers and toes, and take this feeling of calm with you. And you know you can always return!

May our ability to return to the Presence and the practice of being present fill our lives and those around us with peace, transformative insight, and wonderment.

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Two words in this week's parsha – *Na'aseh ve'Nishma*, "We will do and we will hear" – are among the most famous in Judaism. It is what our ancestors said when they accepted the covenant at Sinai – expressing their total faith in G-d.

South African Jewish Report

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A LETTER FROM THE SA JEWISH REPORT CHAIRPERSON

A blank front page? Here's why

This week, we've taken the unprecedented step of printing a blank front page of the newspaper.

The reason is simple, without YOU, there is no SA Jewish Report, there is no news, and our community has no voice.

Since 7 October, our community has learned an important lesson about South Africa. While we have many friends and supporters and the backing of the vast majority of ordinary South Africans, much of the media and political elite has been captured by the ideology of a morally bankrupt, jihadist death cult that would prefer us to be silenced.

They mistakenly believe that their opinions matter, but I quote Menachem Begin, "I am not a Jew with trembling knees. I am a proud Jew with 3 700 years of civilised history. Nobody came to our aid when we were dying in the gas chambers and ovens. Nobody came to our aid when we were striving to create our country. We paid for it. We fought for it. We died for it. We will stand by our principles. We will defend them. And, when necessary, we will die for them again, with or without your aid."

We will never forget the image of Cyril Ramaphosa draped in a Palestinian keffiyeh mere days after the Hamas invasion of Israel and the slaughter of 1 200 innocent people, the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust. His failure to acknowledge the South Africans murdered and taken hostage will forever be a blot

on his already tarnished presidency.

We will not forget Hamas's visit to South Africa and the African National Congress (ANC) hosting its representatives in both Parliament and the ANC offices in Johannesburg. We will not forget Naledi Pandor's phone call to Hamas or Julius Malema's threats to arm Hamas!

We have exposed the hypocrisy of the South African government, we have given a voice to the dead, and we have amplified the plight of the hostages.

We will not be silenced!

We will tell the truth, and stand up for our principles and our community amidst a sea of media lies and propaganda, but we cannot do that without you.

If having a Jewish voice is important to you, then we need you to take action NOW and donate generously to the SA Jewish Report.

If you do nothing, our voice will fade, our community will be silenced, and the only voices to be heard will be the ravings of Naledi Pandor and Julius Malema.

You hold the fate of the SA Jewish Report in your hands. Be bold, be brave, and ensure that our community does not lose its voice.

Our banking details are alongside.

Warm regards

Howard Sackstein

Chairperson: SA Jewish Report

Having a Jewish voice since 7 October takes courage.

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Ramaphosa's promises worthless as embassy still shuttered

TALI FEINBERG

Back in December 2023, in a meeting with the South African Jewish Board of Deputies (SAJBD), President Cyril Ramaphosa gave his assurance that the South African embassy in Israel would reopen once there was a Gaza war ceasefire. The ceasefire is now more than a month old, but the embassy is still firmly closed.

The SAJBD sent a letter to Ramaphosa on 4 February to remind him of his commitment. However, the presidency hasn't responded in the two weeks since, besides an email saying that the letter had been passed on to the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO), which deals with embassies and consular affairs.

"This is more evidence of how Ramaphosa makes up foreign policy as he goes along," says Ray Hartley, the author of *Ramaphosa: Path to Power*. "Statements and commitments made seldom have any bearing on reality but merely attempt to ride whichever populist tide rules on the day. It's not surprising that he has failed to honour his word on reopening the embassy. In



The South African Embassy in Israel

any event, it's very unlikely that the Iran-leaning DIRCO, which always takes the most radical view, would allow this."

Indeed, responding to questions from the SA Jewish Report, DIRCO spokesperson Chrispin

Phiri said his department was unlikely to change anything as it was concerned that "the situation in Palestine has reached a critical point".

"The threats to forcibly remove Palestinians from Gaza have created fear and uncertainty," Phiri wrote. "Additionally, the escalation of attacks in the West Bank has further exacerbated the crisis. In light of this, we are closely monitoring the ceasefire."

The issues around the embassy in Ramat Gan began back in 2017, when the African National Congress voted for its downgrade to a liaison office. The government recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv in 2018. In April 2019, then South African foreign minister, Lindiwe Sisulu, announced that the ambassador wouldn't be replaced when his term ended and the embassy would be

downgraded to a liaison office. This was reinforced by a symbolic vote in South Africa's Parliament in March 2023 in favour of the downgrade.

On 6 November 2023, South Africa recalled its diplomats in Israel as a way of censuring the Jewish state for the Gaza war, essentially closing the embassy. It has been closed ever since. In late November 2023, Israel recalled Israeli Ambassador Eli Belotsercovsky to Tel Aviv for "consultations", and he hasn't returned.

Said SAJBD National Director Wendy Kahn, "We were told both at the time of the closure, at the meeting with the president on 13 December 2023, and in subsequent meetings and communications that this was a temporary closure until such time as a ceasefire was reached. Now that this has taken place, we call on our government to reopen the mission and reinstate consular services in a country with many South African citizens."

Continued on page 5>>

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South African terrorism expert globally recognised

STEVEN GRUZD

Free State University's Professor Hussein Solomon was selected to a prestigious list of the world's top 100 terrorism experts (at number 93) by ScholarGPS, a body that ranks global academic excellence through publication, citations, and impact.

Solomon, who is professor at the university's Centre for Gender and African Studies, said his colourful family tree, including a Jewish grandfather, contributed to his approach of promoting dialogue and inter-faith tolerance rather than boycotts and hate.

"My grandfather was a Greek Jew, hence my surname Solomon," he told the *SA Jewish Report*. His pedigree contains ancestors of multiple faiths. He attended a Catholic school, St Anthony's, in Durban, and grew up in a Sufi Muslim household. Sufism is a strain of Islam that promotes spiritualism and unity. His father was under house arrest for anti-apartheid activities, and the young Solomon was touched by how people of all religions lent a helping hand to his family when they fell on hard times.

"I've always been an outsider," Solomon said. "That's good. That's where serious academic work gets done. I wasn't expecting this recognition. I do this work because I'm passionate about it, and not for awards." He said the award was testament to the fact that Africa could produce top-class scholars, even as its universities are defunded and in crisis.

Solomon was working on conflict resolution issues at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes in Durban in 1998 when two major events that year caused him to shift his focus to terrorism. The first was the simultaneous bombing of the United States (US) embassies in Nairobi in Kenya and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, killing and maiming hundreds. One of those responsible for the Tanzania bombing was found by the US Central Intelligence Agency in a safe house in Cape Town. Hussein was fascinated how this terrorist had received asylum-seeker status in South Africa.

The second was the widespread urban terror campaign of People Against Gangsterism and Drugs in Cape Town, culminating in the bombing of the Planet Hollywood restaurant at the V&A Waterfront.

"It went beyond just craving academic understanding," Solomon said. "It's because I'm a Muslim. I wanted to know how come my co-religionists would do that. And I saw the seeming inability of the South African state to stop anything." His dream is to have a centre devoted to studying terrorism in Africa, but at present he simply doesn't have the money or the resources.

Solomon moved from Durban to the University of Pretoria. "Unfortunately, there, the local Muslim community and student body had issues with me. They tried to prevent conferences and interfere with publications." He was called everything from an Islamophobe to a Mossad agent. "What was really hurtful were the personal attacks. People don't deal with the issues."

He then moved to the University of the Free State, where he has had much greater academic freedom. Solomon has invited two Israeli ambassadors to address his students, something he said would be most unlikely to happen at South Africa's other large urban universities. "Academia should provide space to articulate different positions, not what the mobs are doing out on the street," he said.

Solomon has reached out to the Jewish community, and has enjoyed attending Jewish learning festival Limmud on several occasions, mentioning its openness,

pluralistic ethos, and positive spirit.

He noted that attitudes have hardened in the Muslim and Jewish communities since 7 October 2023, "But it's important that we still have dialogue. We still have so many commonalities, including our humanity. Can't we find ways to communicate better? Maybe it's uniting against our failing local government, or getting the potholes fixed.

"If you combine religion and politics, it dirties politics,"

Can't we find ways to communicate better?

Professor Hussein Solomon



Solomon said. He cited the current right-wing Israeli government as an example.

Turning to his subject, Solomon said, "Africa is the epicentre of global terrorism, and it is imperative to understand it" – across the Sahel, in the Horn of Africa, and latterly in northern Mozambique. "South Africa has been used as a conduit for terror financing for years."

Solomon said he was extremely worried about the growing terrorism threat in South Africa, especially as the country's intelligence structures have been politicised

and are more focused on fighting factional battles than stopping terrorists. "We've seen the criminalisation of security services," he said. He has detected increasing numbers of Islamic State (IS) cells in South Africa, witnessed through more kidnappings, extortion, and funding of IS. He noted that terror financing from South Africa is well documented, exacerbated by corruption.

"And everything is up for sale – it's not national interest but personal interests that trump everything.

Like any cancer, if you leave it to fester without chemotherapy, it's going to spread," Solomon said. He noted the nexus between organised crime syndicates and terror groups.

He reflected on the reappointment of Ebrahim Rasool as South Africa's ambassador to the US, who "has said some bad things about President Donald Trump, including a Hitler reference at one stage. But things have changed since he was there during the Obama administration. South Africa has taken a different stance on the Ukraine conflict; its proximity to China; and the ICJ (International Court of Justice) 'genocide' case. We have irritated the US on a number of occasions. Biden could look past it; Trump won't let it slide." He said Rasool "may worsen things" for South Africa. The current spat over Trump's tweet about land expropriation in South Africa illustrates the strained relations between the countries.

Solomon admitted that he is troubled by regimes like Afghanistan's Taliban and how it discriminates against women in the name of Islam. "How is this justified?" he asked.

"We need to understand our common humanity," Solomon said. "I'm not saying I'm always right, but I like to have a decent engagement, no matter how tense, without name-calling. We need people committed to the project of humanity."

"Being recognised is motivation to do more and do better," he said.

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As we are all fully aware of the current situation in South Africa where we face many uncertainties not just for today but for our children's future too.

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European citizenship will be that tool we are looking for.

As we know, the majority of South African Jews are descendants of Jews whose European citizenship was illegally deprived, and therefore you are now entitled to reinstate it and obtain your EU passport.

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Countries like Poland and Lithuania did not exist as independent countries, and till 1918 these territories were only known as Lithuanian or Polish regions/countries of the Great Russia Empire who ruled all of north eastern Europe.

Until 1918 residents of these territories were of Russian citizenship – as Polish and Lithuanian citizenships did not exist. Therefore applications

for reinstatement of these citizenships can only be based on if one's ancestor was a Polish or Lithuanian citizen.

However, a descendant of an ancestor who left Europe prior to 1918 – will not be eligible.

In addition, since borders in Europe were shifted during and after WWII, one's eligibility for a Polish or Lithuanian citizenship depends on the City from which his/her ancestor lived in. Where borders shifted and cities changed nationalities Jews who left Vilnius and its region will be declined where as a similar application for reinstatement of Polish citizenship could be approved.



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SA defiance of US puts it in foreign territory

NICOLA MILTZ

With tensions between Pretoria and Washington at breaking point, a high-powered South African delegation is preparing for a crucial diplomatic mission to the United States (US), with additional stops in other key countries, in an effort to mend fraying ties and clarify South Africa's foreign and domestic policies.

The identities of the prominent envoys remained undisclosed at the time of going to print, but the urgency of their task is unmistakable. South Africa stands on the precipice of a full-blown diplomatic crisis with its largest trading partner, the US.

This diplomatic outreach underscores the precarious position South Africa finds itself in as it attempts to maintain strong ties with the US while simultaneously entrenching its position as one of Israel's most vocal adversaries on the global stage.

With renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) looming, South Africa faces the grim prospect of further economic turbulence, a self-inflicted wound from a government determined to pursue its ideological agenda at any cost, say political commentators.

Despite diplomatic efforts by President Cyril Ramaphosa's administration to try mend relations with the US, prominent African National Congress (ANC) officials continue to amplify their condemnation of Israel, reinforcing the ANC's unwavering support for the International Court of Justice (ICJ) genocide case against Israel.

Even as South Africa faces mounting pressure from the US following Trump's hardline stance on the country, senior members of the ANC remain steadfast.

In response to Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio falsely accusing South Africa of land grabs, Ramaphosa didn't retreat, saying, "We are as South Africans a resilient

people, and we will not be bullied. And we will speak with one voice in defence of our national interests, our sovereignty, and our constitutional democracy."

Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Ronald Lamola told the *Financial Times* that Pretoria had no intention of backing down from the ICJ case against Israel, and vowed that South Africa would pursue the case despite



South African ambassador to the United States, Ebrahim Rasool (right) in an interview with Mehdi Hasan

US pressure, signalling defiance in the face of geopolitical scrutiny.

The South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) condemned the government's "reckless vow" by Lamola.

SAZF spokesperson Rolene Marks said, "The ANC government has abandoned any pretence of neutrality and has instead placed South Africa on a path of antagonism and hostility against the democratic West, siding with regimes like Iran while falsely accusing Israel – the region's only democracy – of genocide."

South African ambassador to the US, Ebrahim Rasool, appears to have upped the rhetoric by telling British-American broadcaster Mehdi Hasan, that Gaza is "apartheid on steroids". His comments stand in stark contrast to his own previous statements. Just two months ago, Rasool told *Daily Maverick* it was time to "put down the megaphone" on Gaza. His shift in tone suggests an effort to push anti-Israel narratives in American media despite South Africa's diplomatic efforts to smooth tensions with Washington.

Rasool told Hasan, "The growing consensus in South Africa is that whatever we've experienced in South Africa is on steroids in Palestine. The template of apartheid has been completely magnified. That is the kind of DNA that we recognised as South Africans."

Rasool criticised Trump and Elon Musk for meddling in other countries' politics, telling Hasan, "South Africa will not be falling into the temptation that President Trump and Mr Musk have fallen into themselves, and that is to interfere in the internal politics of other countries, as was done with Britain and Germany and others."

Adding to the rhetoric, Reverend Frank Chikane, a veteran ANC figure and influential voice in the party, compared South African Zionists to apartheid-era supporters, claiming they were the same people who upheld white minority rule. "The people who support Israel's

genocide in Gaza are the same people who supported the apartheid system here," he told Newsroom Africa. "Zionism is straightforward racism."

Meanwhile in a significant escalation of diplomatic tension, four US congressmen have called on Trump to revoke South Africa's access to the US market under AGOA and to consider severing diplomatic ties over the country's "vendetta" against Israel and its alignment with hostile regimes.

In a letter dated 11 February 2025, Republican congressmen Andrew Ogles, Tom Tiffany, Joe Wilson, and Don Bacon accused South Africa of undermining American interests, committing human rights violations, and fostering ties with China's Communist Party.

"We urge you to revoke South Africa's preference benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act," the letter states. "We would also suggest that you consider suspending diplomatic ties unless that government is prepared to engage constructively with our own."

Trump's executive order halted all US aid to South

Africa, citing not only the ICJ case, but the controversial land expropriation law, and alleged co-operation with Iran on military and nuclear matters. Rubio has also announced that he will boycott the upcoming G20 summit in South Africa, further straining relations. Additionally, Trump has signalled willingness to offer asylum to white South African farmers, further exacerbating tensions between the two countries. All of which has sent Pretoria into damage-control mode, scrambling to stave off deeper fallout.

While the ANC dismissed land-grab claims by Elon Musk and Trump as "misinformation", its pro-business coalition partner, the Democratic Alliance, has warned that severing ties with the US could cripple the country's economy.

South Africa's continuously aggressive stance against Israel may come at a high cost. The mixed messaging, on one hand seeking to repair relations with the US while on the other escalating anti-Israel rhetoric, risks further diplomatic fallout.

The ANC's decision to maintain its antagonistic position against Israel despite the diplomatic and economic risks appears to be driven more by ideological commitment and political posturing than by strategic pragmatism, say political commentators.

Marks said the consequences of this "reckless" foreign policy were already evident.

"South Africa is at serious risk of losing crucial tariff-free access to US markets. This would have a devastating impact on South Africa's struggling economy, costing thousands of jobs and further exacerbating poverty and unemployment."

Should AGOA be revoked, she said, the blame will rest squarely on the ANC government and its "self-destructive foreign policy".

"The South African government no longer speaks for all its citizens on foreign policy. We urge other parties in the government of national unity to exert their influence and reverse this trajectory of diplomatic and economic self-sabotage."

Ramaphosa's promises worthless as embassy still shuttered

>>>Continued from page 3

Kahn said the SAJBD wrote directly to the president "as the matter had been discussed with him at our 13 December 2023 meeting, where we expressed the difficulties experienced by South Africans in Israel in the absence of a South African embassy", such as applying for passports, death certificates, and birth certificates.

"DIRCO has made arrangements in most circumstances, but it has been a challenge," said Kahn. "Another difficulty has been applications for work and other visas. DIRCO arranged for other embassies to assist, but it involved travelling to other countries to make applications."

The letter asks Ramaphosa for feedback on his intentions to reopen the embassy, but Democratic Alliance Member of Parliament Michael Bagraim doubts the president will live up to his commitment.

"The reality is that much of what the president says is for effect only and certainly not to be implemented," Bagraim said. "I believe that he's probably even forgotten about what he had to say, and in any event, he cannot do something without turning to his various handlers and controllers. I don't believe the ceasefire promise was worth the paper it was written on."

South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) spokesperson Rolene Marks said the SAZF urged the immediate reopening of the embassy in line with the government's commitment made upon the establishment of a ceasefire. "This prolonged closure and dereliction of duty has left thousands of South African citizens effectively abandoned, struggling to access essential consular services including critical emergency support, compromising their welfare and security. This affects real people with real needs, from students and businesspeople to tourists and dual citizens who depend on their government's support.

"South Africa's diplomatic relationship with Israel carries clear legal obligations to maintain functional embassy services for its citizens," said Marks. "Reopening the embassy represents a practical step toward fulfilling both legal obligations and diplomatic responsibilities. It would demonstrate South Africa's commitment to protecting its citizens' interests while maintaining its position as a

credible participant in international affairs. Diplomatic withdrawal serves neither our national interests nor our citizens' needs."

Bafana Modise, the head of media at the South African Friends of Israel (SAFI), agrees that the embassy closure affects many South Africans, including Christians. "Not having consular support isn't easy when you are in a foreign land. However, we have also witnessed an increase in tourism from South Africa to Israel," he said. "This shows that regardless of the government's position, the people of this country are indifferent to hatred, and most travel to Israel annually.

"SAFI's position is that the embassy must be opened in Israel," he said. "South Africans refuse to be labelled as enemies of Israel. That is evidenced by continued travel to the Holy Land, and continued business relations. We call upon government to choose people rather than partisan policies which aren't in the interest of the majority."

Kim Kur, who works to help South Africans navigate travel challenges, notes that the embassy had already been downgraded to a liaison office before the war and therefore was unlikely to be restored to a fully functioning embassy.

To South Africans in Israel, she advises that they "make every effort to register your children as South African", so that they can fly in and out of South Africa should visas be required. She said there were many options in applying for a late registration of birth abroad, including at several branches of home affairs in South Africa or through any DIRCO mission abroad. Many Israelis choose the missions in Cyprus, Greece, or the United Kingdom.

She recommends that South Africans abroad apply for their new passports at least a year before they are due to expire. It's noteworthy that should South Africans ever require a visa to visit Israel, the current three-month requirement could grow to six months. Kur points out that while citizens of Israel can stay in South Africa for up to 90 days without a visa, this could change in light of South Africa's hostility to Israel, and vice versa.

The *SA Jewish Report* reached out to the presidency for comment but didn't receive a response by the time of going to print.

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No joy living in historic times



We're living through Jewish history. When my colleague, Tali Feinberg, messaged to say this in reference to the hostages returning, it rang true although we imagine history as something in the distant past.

This idea also fitted in with what Rabbi Leo Dee, who is visiting our community this week, told me about how we are writing the final book of the Tanach (Bible). He makes the point that some of the miracles we are witnessing go far beyond what we see in the Tanach. (See page 8.)

It is not easy to see the miracles from the pain. Dee, like many people in Israel, have suffered such immense trauma and pain but still look forward with hope and a deep sense of belief. This faith for many of us is difficult to do in light of the devastation people are experiencing. It's also hard to be hopeful for many when there is so much animosity and hatred around, even sometimes within families and former friends.

The truth about being in the midst of history in the making is that history rarely records the good times. It inevitably tells of our most harrowing times, when the darkness seems almost insurmountable. It is in historic times that the truth is often so hard to bear, it seems impossible to surpass.

I wrote this on Wednesday, 19 February, before we published and, at the time, we weren't 100% sure which bodies would be returned to Israel from Gaza on Thursday. We know they were people listed in the 33 hostages Hamas was due to release in the first phase of the ceasefire agreement. Hamas claimed the bodies of Shiri Bibas and her two sons, Kfir and Ariel, who were nine months and four years when Hamas abducted them on 7 October, would be returned then.

The horror and devastation of this is too much. What this family has been through is unconscionable! Yet our haters will tell you that this innocent family that was destroyed by Hamas is the equivalent to criminals being released from Israeli prisons. How, I don't know.

The Bibas family, with their two little boys who were the youngest hostages taken by Hamas on 7 October, has come to represent the hostage crisis. I don't believe there's a person with a heart who hasn't held out hope beyond all reasonable doubt that Shiri and her children make it home alive.

The idea that this mother and her babies aren't coming home alive can only create a deep sadness across Israel and the Jewish world. Yes, other children were brutally murdered on 7 October. Yes, children have been killed in terrorist attacks. But it feels as if we have got to know this family, especially those two beautiful ginger-haired baby boys.

Throughout the past 500 days or so, their sweet little faces have been embedded in our minds and created a sense of hope that just maybe these little ones were being cared for so that they could come home. How do you not take care of such innocent little people?

In tribute to the Bibas family, and we're aware they aren't the only people who have lost loved ones, we have an orange ribbon on our front page this week to replace the yellow one we have displayed there since 7 October 2023. Our hearts go out to the family and Israelis as they return home.

It's difficult to imagine that for just 33 hostages coming home, dead or alive, as many as 1 900 Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons are being released.

It seems absurd, but Israel has no choice. Its leadership has to ensure that it gets all the hostages home so the country can resume a semblance of normal life. That cannot happen as long as there are hostages in Gaza. In truth, the war cannot end until they are all home. This is something Israel has been saying for more than 500 days. Simple: "Give us back our people and the war will end!" Unfortunately there have been too many on the wrong side who didn't want to the war to end.

Rabbi Dee is convinced that those who perpetuated the lies about Israel and Jews over this period will see their faults and apologise. The tables will be turned on them, and the truth will out.

In the *SA Jewish Report*, we have a "broad church" of ideas, and we encourage all sorts of views, from the left and right, secular and religious, and all other interesting sources. As you can see on page 9, Samuel J. Hyde puts across a well-reasoned and fact-based argument about Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership, especially during this war. You may or may not agree with it, but it's well worth a read.

When we give people a platform for their views, it needs to be done respectfully and allow for debate. As a rule, we don't allow people to attack others within the community. How is that helpful to anyone or informative? How does that offer anything worthwhile to our readers? It doesn't.

All it does is feed our haters – whom we know love reading our publication – something I cannot see the point of doing. It's divisive, and defeats the whole purpose of a community newspaper.

Our purpose is to give you views and information that you can't get elsewhere. We aren't a forum to attack one another, especially leaders in our community who may have views you don't like.

You don't have to like them. Neither do I. But do we attack that person for those views? I think not. There's a well-worn saying that's often misquoted, but it makes the point that I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it. We strongly believe in that.

There are some who may want to use this platform to attack or silence others, but frankly, we won't allow for that kind of viciousness and underhandedness. It is beneath us.

I look forward to the positive conclusion of this era in our history, where war and hatred is behind us.

Shabbat Shalom!

Peta Krost
Editor

Five hundred days



OPINION

ROLENE MARKS

Five hundred days have passed since 7 October, and despite the passage of time, the changing of days into weeks and into months and then years, we are still stuck on that Black Saturday, the day when time stood still.

Time continues to stand still for us, at least emotionally. We cannot take that first step to healing until all of our hostages are home. The living and the dead, all of them.

Five hundred days in the hell of Gaza

The stories from the hostages who have returned home are horrific. Accounts of starvation, torture, psychological torment, and conditions too awful for words. Every second is critical for survival, and we still have hostages in those terror tunnels. We need the living to come home so that we can help them start to recover, and the dead laid to eternal rest with dignity. Over the past 500 days, there has also been tremendous activism from Israelis, who have fought every day to keep the hostages front and centre in the global conscience. Jewish communities and allies around the world have joined these efforts, fighting alongside us, making sure that their cities are covered in yellow ribbons and posters. Thank you! We know their names, we know their stories, and we will make sure that the world does as well until the last one returns home.

bereaved, donating blood, digging graves, visiting the infirm, comforting the grieving, raising money, and serving wherever needed. On 7 October, we saw the worst of humanity. The very next day, Israelis showed up for each other and we haven't stopped. We have shown the best of humanity. Our efforts may have changed iteration, but we are there, cleaning the kibbutzim, advocating for hostages, feeding our soldiers, comforting the bereaved, and getting through each day with our fierce reverence for life. Israelis have demonstrated how it is possible to navigate grief with resilience. We said we would dance again, and we intend to make good on that promise.

Five hundred days of supporting our warriors

Prior to 7 October, many wondered if Israel's young people were also part of the TikTok addicted, safe space searching generation. On 7 October, Israel's young people were weighed in the balance, and they have risen to every challenge magnificently. Without hesitating, many ran into the fire on that painful day and others didn't hesitate to get on flights from wherever they were and return to defend their country. On air, land, sea, in the tunnels, and on the airwaves they defend us magnificently but the price has been painful. More than 800 of our sons and daughters have paid the ultimate price, and thousands more have been injured, many losing

limbs. The internal scars will take much longer to heal. These lions of Zion, these modern-day Maccabees, we owe them a debt we can never repay.

Five hundred days of solidarity

You have stood with us, unwavering and resolute, proudly and loudly. There have been times when you have carried us on your shoulders. We have been watching as antisemitism spreads like wildfire around the world, and it has brought us closer. Like all families, we have our differences of opinions, but these past 500 days have taught us the meaning of *Am Yisrael Chai!* To our many allies who stand with us, we know how much this exposes you to the same hatred and intolerance, and from the bottom of our hearts, thank you!

Five hundred days of awakening

The events of 7 October didn't just waken the slumbering beast of Jew hatred that had been bubbling under the surface, but an extraordinary response from the Jews all around the world.

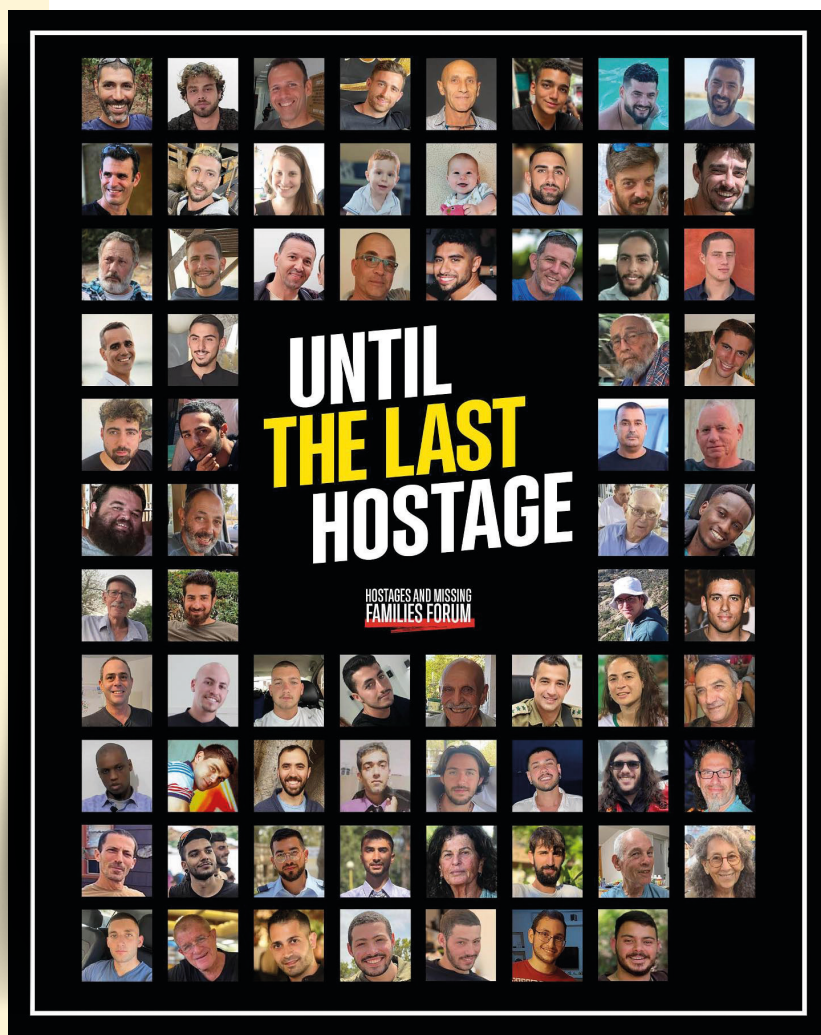
Antisemitism is at levels that we have not seen since World War II, and is rampant on campuses, on the streets of major cities, on social media, and has infiltrated institutions we once thought immune. While there is a minority of vocal anti-Zionist Jews, the vast majority around the world have responded by being more Jewish, more Zionist, and more proud of our identity. We have answered the ancient hatred with incredible Jewish pride!

Five hundred days for me

It is the privilege of my life that no matter how painful, my profession affords me the honour of bearing witness, of recording history, of telling the stories of our victims and remarkable heroes. It has also been 500 days of pain, trauma, and things I never thought I would see in my lifetime. I have seen the evidence that evil exists, and smelt the stench of death. I have cried more tears than I thought the human body could produce, and I know you have too.

This war has been the longest in Israel's modern history. Some refer to it as the second war of independence as we fight for our survival. We have passed a difficult milestone. Five hundred days.

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



Five hundred days of war

When Hamas invaded and committed the atrocities it did on 7 October, it knew it would provoke a war. In his declaration that Israel was at war, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said clearly, "We are at war, not an operation, but war." I have lived in Israel for almost 15 years and in this time, experienced numerous military operations, waves of terror, and escalations. This is very different. War is brutal. War is loss – the loss of our young warriors, our civilians, homes destroyed, non-stop barrages from multiple fronts, and a massive impact on our economy and psyche. It's huddling in our shelters as Iran rained down missiles. It's decisions made based on the proximity to shelter. War is funerals and *shivot* and honour guards. War is falling to your knees in grief as the siren cries on Yom Hazikaron. War is hundreds of thousands of internal refugees forced to flee their homes from the north and the south. War is our children using words like "hostage" or "mamad" (shelter) in their everyday lexicon. War is pain. Some have asked me if I should not be used to the rockets by now. Does one ever get used to genocidal maniacs firing on our homes with intent to kill?

Five hundred days of mobilisation and support

On 8 October, every Israeli woke up with a mission. Despite our grief, we mobilised and got to work packing boxes, picking produce, fighting in the media, helping to collect whatever was needed for displaced citizens, comforting the

Fallen soldier's gifts live on in SA baby's name

TALI FEINBERG

Half a year after Israeli soldier Staff Sergeant Nitai Metodi (23) fell in battle in Gaza, his legacy continues in South Africa, where his mother and grandparents lived before they made aliya decades ago.

In Johannesburg, Tali and Elchanan Nudelman decided to bestow their newborn son with an everlasting gift: they named him Nitai, after Nitai Metodi and two other fallen soldiers in the war. The baby was born on 23 January 2025, five months to the day since his namesake died in defence of the Jewish people.

"After the tragic events of 7 October, when we lost so many of our brothers and sisters, we wanted to honour the brave soldiers who gave their lives for our homeland and Jewish nation," said Elchanan at his son's bris on 30 January.

"Among them were three soldiers named Nitai, all of whom paid the ultimate price defending *eretz Yisrael*: Nitai Metodi; Nitai Meisels; and Nitai Amar," said Elchanan. "We dedicate this name to them and to all the brave soldiers and civilians who lost their lives."

The name Nitai roughly translated from Hebrew means "my gift", and soon after their son arrived, the Nudelmans reached out to the late Nitai Metodi's mother, Lara, in Israel, to give her the gift of learning that a new soul was carrying her son's name.

Responding to the couple, Lara wrote, "Thank you. I have broken down [in tears]. This story has touched me like no other. We chose his name from the Bible, and Nitai lived up to each and every responsibility that was bestowed on him from his name. Our light was taken, but through beautiful stories [like yours], some light has been restored. Thank you from the bottom of my heart, and may G-d and my Nitai protect you all." They also exchanged photos of their beloved sons.

Speaking to the *SA Jewish Report* from her home in Ashkelon, Lara says, "If Tali and Elchanan get even half the *nachas* from their son that my Nitai gave me, they will be the happiest parents in the world."



Baby Nitai Nudelman at his bris

Photo: Chad Gaddie

son – to walk through life with integrity, joy, and a clear sense of purpose."

Lara says that after the Nudelmans reached out to her, she called her ex-husband to tell him that a baby in Johannesburg had been named after their son, and "we just sobbed".

As she approaches six months since her son's death, she says it's still surreal that he's gone. "I think I felt that Nitai was invincible, especially because he was on the battlefield multiple times since the first days of the war," she says. On 7 October, Nitai rushed back to Israel from holiday in Australia to enlist in the reserves. Since that day, he returned to military service three times, putting his country above all else.

"He would always tell me nothing was wrong, that he was just on guard duty," Lara says. "He didn't tell me he was actually going on missions to find the hostages."

conscious effort to get through her day. Her other son is also finding it particularly hard, as "Nitai was his best friend", and her parents are heartbroken at the loss of their vibrant, adored grandson.

Sharing who Nitai was and what he stood for is now her most important mission. "That's what I promised Nitai," she says. With her strong personality and celebrity status in Israel as a previous participant on the *Big Brother* TV show, she will stop at nothing to make sure her son's light continues to shine.

She has worked with an Israeli TV station to make a documentary about Nitai that will air soon. In addition, Nitai's friends are making a movie about him, and he will be featured on a podcast. Murals of fallen soldiers and 7 October victims are being painted on bomb shelters across the country, and Lara hopes Nitai's mural will soon be on a shelter at the entrance to their hometown of Ashkelon.

Unlike some other parents of fallen soldiers, Lara says she isn't angry with the army, as her son believed in what they were fighting for. She dreams of addressing Jewish audiences around the world, sharing Nitai's story, and encouraging them to make aliya, as she feels that Israel is where all Jews ultimately belong.

"Nitai was such a mensch," says Lara. "So many people looked up to him. He was a leader, he was patient, and he talked to everyone on the same level. He had no airs and graces. He was my mentor – he was the one who taught me things, not the other way round."

To the Nudelmans, she says, "My Nitai was truly a blessing: he was generous, kind, and never had a bad word to say about anyone. He could change any situation into a positive one with his presence. May G-d protect and grant your precious son all these gifts."

Elchanan says he and Tali first came across the relatively rare name when they began learning *Pirkei Avot* together every Shabbat afternoon. It's there that Nitai of Arbel is described as an important leader. They loved the name.

Then, they saw the name in other meaningful contexts, even though it was unusual. But it was after reading about the death of Nitai Metodi in the *SA Jewish Report* that they realised the name was destined for their son. Not only did the late Nitai have South African roots, but he lived with *menschlichkeit*, leadership, warmth, and wisdom beyond his years – all qualities they hoped their son would emulate.

"In *Pirkei Avot*, Nitai of Arbel teaches the importance of distancing oneself from negative influences and serving Hashem with joy," says Elchanan. "This resonated with us, and was something we knew we wanted to instil in our



Mural of fallen soldier Nitai Metodi

Her son was killed in an explosion in Gaza City, alongside two other soldiers. Now, every day, Lara faces her own battle to go on living without him. The owner of a busy Pilates studio in Ashkelon, she has to make a

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Grief and *geulah* – Israel gives Rabbi Dee hope

PETA KROST

Rabbi Leo Dee, whose wife and two children were murdered in a terrorist attack during Pesach 2023, says he believes “antisemitism in the diaspora is G-d’s way of calling his people back home”.

Dee, who is in South Africa this week, told the *SA Jewish Report*, “Sending people down the streets, shouting, ‘Kill the Jews’ or whatever they scream is a pretty good strategy to get people to make aliya, don’t you think?”

And having lost his wife, Lucy, 48, and daughters, Maia, 20, and Rina, 15, who were shot and killed in an ambush by terrorists in the West Bank in April two years ago, Dee has suffered the harshest grief. However, his faith is stronger than ever, and the message he brings to South Africa is about the marvel that is Israel.

Dee was brought out by the South African Zionist Federation in conjunction with Chabad of Strathavon, Chabad of Savoy, and the Israel Centre, and will be speaking in Johannesburg and Cape Town to select groups and schools.

Dee, who made aliya from the United Kingdom in 2014, understands the horror of antisemitism. He tells of his cousin’s husband who was murdered by an antisemite on the way to synagogue in Cardiff, Wales, 40 years ago.

He was very clear that had the tragedy that befell his wife and daughters happened outside of Israel, he didn’t think he would have recovered because “my life would be meaningless. But living in Israel, you live in a land of hope that can carry you through almost anything”.

Part of his message in South Africa is to remain proud of being Jewish and of Israel despite the “many lies spreading around the world about Israel”.

He believes that “We are writing the final book of the Bible, and some of the miracles we are seeing go far beyond anything you have read in the Tanach.” He maintains that this is the generation of the *geulah* (redemption). “We are heading at a high speed towards the culmination of the Jewish dream we dreamt thousands of years ago,” Dee said.

As is stated in the prophecy of Isaiah, Israel will be the light unto the nations, Dee said. “We have never before been such a light as we are today.” This notion may make people uncomfortable because they assume that the light is about *chesed* and kindness, but in this case, Dee said, Israel is the only nation standing against evil.

He compares what Israel is doing to a pipe pumping good into the world, much like a tap in a bathtub that occasionally gets blockages, which in this instance is as a result of evil. “This blockage reduces the ability for good to keep flowing, and so the greatest moral action is to remove the blockage to allow good to flow again,” he said.

All the misinformation about Israel perpetuating genocide in Gaza is due to other religions needing to portray Jews as immoral so their newer religions can claim G-d’s chosenness, taking the place of Jews. “The good news is that the truth comes out in the end, and we’re coming to the point where the world will start to acknowledge that we were right,” he said.

Research has shown that antisemites make up 20% to 30% of the world, which means, Dee said, that “most people aren’t antisemitic and many are pro-Jewish, but they are just more silent than the antisemites. It’s just a process to see through the lies, which is starting to happen.”

Dee admitted to being nervous about coming to South Africa for the first time because he heard that travel in the country was dangerous. “This may be odd coming from me after what happened to my family, but if I wanted to risk my life, I’d prefer to do it in Israel,” he said.



Rabbi Leo Dee

He was scheduled to visit South Africa on 9 October 2023, just days after the Hamas massacre in Israel, a trip which was obviously cancelled.

Speaking about the deal in which Israeli hostages are being returned in exchange for many terrorists from Israeli prisons, he said, “Israel is stuck in a complete moral dilemma. We obviously want our hostages home safely and alive, but we certainly don’t want to put the rest of the country at existential risk.

“We know that exchanging 1 000 Palestinians in Israeli prisons for Gilad Shalit enabled many to return as mass murderers, including Yahya Sinwar, who effectively organised the killing of more than 2 000 people on

7 October. In a perfect world, we wouldn’t negotiate with terrorists.”

Dee has visited people who lost loved ones on and after 7 October to try and comfort them. “It’s difficult even though I have been through it myself. I had the benefit of 10 000 people comforting me.”

He said he learnt from his grief, especially the importance of the community support. “When you’re going through trauma, you can’t make decisions, and your close community needs to manage your life in the moment. You have no ability to plan ahead, and that can last for weeks or months. Saying to people, ‘Tell me when you need me, and I’ll come over’, or ‘Tell me when you’re free for Shabbos’ really doesn’t work. You need to



Rabbi Leo Dee next to a picture of his wife Lucy and daughters Maia and Rina

say, ‘I’ll be here on Monday at 14:00 every week until you tell me to stop’, or something like that.”

He said friends and strangers coming to him during shiva felt like “being embraced with a big hug from everyone”, even when people came and didn’t say a word.

He told how once he was able to, he engaged in many different projects in his wife and daughters’ memory, many of which he is still involved in.

“Being involved in meaningful activities is the greatest therapy, and something which is within your control. After a while, as the mourner, you need to take control of your life again and waiting for someone to visit, when they may not, isn’t productive. So, if you are engaged in activities and not dependent on others, it’s helpful with healing.”

He also said that to heal, one should focus on the future. “If I choose to live in the past, I’m thinking about my pain, but if I choose to live in the future, I can have hope, ambition, and motivation for a better tomorrow. So that’s my choice,” he said.

Another learning he – and the Israeli army – have gleaned was from a woman who came to his shiva and told him how she had lost her soldier fiancé in 2002 in an attack in Jenin. She said her fiancé gave her a letter a week before going into battle, and said she should read it only if he didn’t come out alive. She wasn’t happy about it, but when he didn’t come back, she sought it out and it gave her solace. Dee said that letter became “compulsory study material” for every Israeli soldier, which is why today, soldiers have to prepare a letter to their loved one before going into battle.

This same woman told him how she had prayed to Hashem, saying he owed it to her to find her a new husband and to have sons to make up for those who were killed in battle. A year later, she was married and went on to have nine children, eight of whom are boys.

“She taught me to demand miracles from Hashem. I have and many of them have been fulfilled,” he said.

In the light of all the trauma Israel has experienced in the past few years, not least of all on 7 October 2023 and during the war, he still believes Israel is the best place for Jews to live.

“In my early career as a strategy consultant and analyst, I learnt to look not at the headlines but at the facts,” he said. “The headlines tell you about terror attacks and wars, but the facts are that life expectancy in Israel is higher than 95% of the countries in the world. So, if you come to Israel, you will live longer.

“You will also live in a wonder country with every possible type of scenery. You will live with Jewish people, and your children will marry Jews. You will celebrate Shabbat and keep kosher even if you don’t intend to. You will be immersed in Jewish culture even if you are an atheist.

“This is our country. This is our home,” Dee said.

• Rabbi Dee will be speaking on Thursday, 20 February, in Johannesburg and on Thursday, 27 February, in Cape Town. To buy tickets, email admin@sazf.org (Johannesburg) or register at <https://tinyurl.com/RabbiDeeCT> (Cape Town).

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Netanyahu's pandering undermines Israel's protection

OPINION

SAMUEL J. HYDE

Former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant presented a rare glimpse into the mechanics of modern-day warfare in an interview with Dan Senor recently, showing the political paralysis that defines its most decisive moments.

Gallant recounted a missed opportunity four days after the 7 October massacre and three days after Hezbollah launched its attacks in the north, when Israel had the chance to neutralise Hezbollah as a military force in a single, co-ordinated operation.

Hezbollah's retaliation. He reiterated this concern repeatedly that day. I wasn't that pessimistic. I believed we could defeat both Hamas and Hezbollah. I had full confidence in our capabilities.

"The fighter jets were already in the air awaiting the final order," Gallant states. "When the decision came down [from Netanyahu], they were ordered to land."

What followed was inevitable. A year later, Israel was forced to fight Hezbollah without the element of surprise, without optimal conditions, and at a far

greater cost. True, the IDF still managed to dismantle Hezbollah's military power and eliminate its command, but only after enduring prolonged missile barrages on Israeli population centres and towns and more than a year of displacement from the north, leaving more than 60 000 residents homeless, more than 60% of agricultural land decimated, and a war that stretched Israel's military resources across two active fronts, with a direct impact on the IDF's capacity in Gaza.

The cost of Netanyahu's decisions isn't theoretical; it's quantifiable – lives lost; prolonged conflict; in allowing Hezbollah's strategy to fracture Israel's war effort; in the simple fact that Tel Aviv is still standing; and in economic and strategic damage that could take years to repair.

Netanyahu has spent decades curating his image as Israel's indispensable protector, the Churchill of the Jewish state. But the comparison collapses under even the mildest scrutiny. Churchill unified his country against Nazi Germany and led with decisive action. Netanyahu, by contrast, has consistently weakened Israel's security, misjudging threats, deepening internal divisions, and hesitating when it matters most.

A Churchill takes action. A Netanyahu defers, delays, and then retroactively spins his inaction as prudence. Netanyahu's genius lies not in anything he does, but in convincing his now shrinking base of followers that his rhetoric ought to be confused with reality.

The pattern is inescapable. For years, Netanyahu declared that under his leadership, Israel would never allow the Islamic Republic to acquire nuclear weapons. He built his international reputation on warning the world about Tehran's ambitions. And yet, throughout the war, the regime's nuclear programme has been closer to completion than ever before. Israeli deterrence, once formidable, was shattered on 7 October. In many ways, we have regained it, in other ways, not at all. Zealand clearly felt emboldened enough to launch direct missile attacks on Israel, something it had never dared to do in the past.

Netanyahu's 2015 speech before the US Congress warning against the Iran nuclear deal was a masterclass in political theatre. But what did it achieve? Nothing. The deal was signed. Of course, there are other reasons for this, which lie in Washington. But in the years that followed, when Israel had opportunities to take direct action against the nuclear programme, Netanyahu hesitated and did nothing. The cycle repeated until the inevitable happened.

Then there's Gaza. In 2009, while campaigning,

of Israeli policy and the events of 7 October, it's not the 2005 disengagement but the decisions made from 2013 to 2014, when Netanyahu, instead of crushing Hamas at its weakest, propped it up with Qatari cash, ensuring its survival for years to come.

Netanyahu isn't a strategist. He's a tactician, a political survivalist whose short-term calculations have for years now come at the cost of Israel's long-term interests.

In time, we will probably uncover the full extent of the policies and backroom deals Netanyahu pursued in the years leading up to 7 October. Some of it will be incompetence he will attempt to disguise as strategy. Some of it will be evidential, cynical self-preservation masquerading as pragmatism.

What's needed now is responsibility – real responsibility, not the deflections and political manoeuvring that have defined Netanyahu's political career. The only path to that is an independent state commission of inquiry into the failings of 7 October, something his government has worked tirelessly to avoid.

This isn't solely about assigning blame, it's chiefly about ensuring that the catastrophic failures of 7 October are never repeated. It's about a reckoning with failed policies and it's a necessary step toward national healing. Without it, the wounds of this disaster will fester and the lessons that must be learned will remain ignored. This is a price no Israeli, regardless of their political views or affiliations, should be willing to pay. The time has come to return to a fundamental question: what is in the best interests of Israel and by extension the Jewish people in the 21st century?

• Samuel J. Hyde is a writer and a fellow at The Jewish People Policy Institute in Jerusalem.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant

Photo: Amos Ben Gersthom

"Hezbollah started a war of attrition against Israel," Gallant recalled. "The attacks began on 8 October 2023, in the Hermon Mountain region, then escalated across the Galilee." Intelligence assessments were unequivocal: this was a calculated strategy to stretch Israeli defences thin, forcing the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to split its focus between Hamas in the south and Hezbollah in the north.

Within days, "we had three divisions in the north, with tens of thousands of soldiers, tanks, armoured vehicles, and a significant portion of the Air Force on standby. At any given time throughout this war, we needed to preserve at least two-thirds of the Air Force to be ready for Hezbollah," Gallant said.

Then, on 10 October, intelligence revealed that 14 senior leaders – 11 from Hezbollah, and three from the Islamic Republic of Iran – were scheduled to meet at a single, vulnerable location. Among them was Hassan Nasrallah himself. Under scrutiny with Israel's military command, they concluded that the opportunity was too significant to pass up.

It wasn't just an opportunity, it was the opportunity. Israel had the element of surprise. Hezbollah had already fired the first shot, providing full justification for retaliation. Global sympathy was at its peak among Israel's allies and domestically, Israel was unified. Militarily, the IDF was fully prepared, with ground forces stationed in the north and the Iron Dome at full capacity. More than that, the strike would have redefined the entire balance of power in the Middle East. By eliminating Hezbollah, the strongest link in the "Axis of Resistance", within the early days of the war, Israel could have then shifted its full weight toward dismantling Hamas, with tens of thousands of troops available to wear Gaza's jihadists down systematically. As Gallant said, "When dealing with multiple threats, you go for the strongest first, this is basic military strategy."

And yet, we know that the operation was never carried out. The reason? Political paralysis. Netanyahu, upon hearing the plan, immediately deferred to Washington. "The moment he said that, I knew he wanted to avoid making the decision," Gallant said. "You don't ask the United States president, who opposes escalation, for permission. The answer was predictable."

Gallant's frustration was quiet yet palpable as he talked to Senor. "I returned to the prime minister and told him we had to act. He pointed to the [Tel Aviv] buildings around us and said, 'None of this will survive

greater cost. True, the IDF still managed to dismantle Hezbollah's military power and eliminate its command, but only after enduring prolonged missile barrages on Israeli population centres and towns and more than a year of displacement from the north, leaving more than 60 000 residents homeless, more than 60% of agricultural land decimated, and a war that stretched Israel's military resources across two active fronts, with a direct impact on the IDF's capacity in Gaza.

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Days of war leave SA Jews in fighting spirit

LEE TANKLE

"The past 500 days have been a time of grief, defiance, and resolve for the Jewish community in South Africa," says South African Zionist Federation National Chairperson Rowan Polovin, marking the period since 7 October 2023 when Hamas terrorists invaded Israel and killed more than 1 200 people and took 240 hostages, of whom they are still holding 73.

Polovin said that in that time period, the local Jewish community also had to face the stark reality of the South African government's response to what happened in Israel on 7 October.

"Our government's swift abandonment of the South African Jewish community and its destructive hostility to Israel in the wake of the attacks have left an indelible mark on our community," he said. "Yet this period has revealed the true mettle of South African Jewry. Our response has been emphatic and clear. We are one of the world's most active and proud Zionist communities."

Some believe this experience has strengthened local and global Jewry, with Josh Pimstein, Bnei Akiva national chairperson saying, "Despite the challenges world Jewry has faced, there's a prevailing sense of faith, determination, and optimism. The South African Jewish community has not only adapted but thrived, ensuring that its values remain strong for generations to come."

Brad Gottschalk Habonim *Mazkir Klali* said, "Although this conflict has been going on longer than many of us have lived, it feels like there has been a fundamental shift. It's still hard to understand 7 October. We're still in the middle of a sandstorm."

Former United States diplomat and writer, Brooks Spector, said he believed the "sequence of events that happened on 7 October was both unexpected and horrifying in several ways, and we are still living with the effects of that day 500 days later. It's still a circumstance in motion. We can't quite see the mountains yet because there's too much in the way."

Political analyst Daniel Silke said that although the relationship between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Israeli government was weak 500 days ago, the effects of 7 October and South Africa taking Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had only weakened the relationship.

"The ANC's relations with Israel have been strained ever since the ANC came to power," Silke said. "The ANC has never really been able to move beyond suspicion and animosity towards Israel resulting from that particular era when Israel and South Africa moved closer together when they were both seen as pariahs in the international community."

Silke said that it was precisely this backdrop that made 7 October a window of opportunity for South Africa to be seen to be leading the critique of Israel's response to the terror attacks from Hamas.

Spector said the events over the past 500 days between the South African government and Israel, including the ICJ case and the recall of Israeli Ambassador Eli Belotsercovsky – in November 2023 – merely exposed the fault lines that were already there.

Said Polovin, "The ANC government's alliance with Israel's adversaries, culminating in the ICJ case challenging Israel's fundamental right to self-defence against Hamas has met with our community's determined opposition.

Despite sustained anti-Israel narratives in South African media, our support for the world's only Jewish state remains uncompromising and clear."

Likewise, Silke said that because of the actions of the South African government in the past 500 days, "It looks likely that South Africa may face the consequence of a resurgent Trump administration."

Daniel Yakcobi, the chief operations officer of the South Africa-Israel Chamber of Commerce, said trade between South Africa and Israel had decreased drastically because of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) lobby. Many Israeli companies would like to trade in South Africa, he said, but because of the viciousness of the BDS lobby against Israel, they are unable to provide services to South Africans.

"The people who have been the most impacted are the average South African citizens who suffer from lack of services, a lack of advanced economy, and a high



rate of unemployment," Yakcobi said. Rabbi Moshe Silberhaft, otherwise

known as the "travelling rabbi" said that in the smaller communities he serves,

he has witnessed the devastation the past 500 days have wrought, with Jewish communities feeling more vulnerable than ever.

"People are feeling vulnerable that it's taken 500 days and it's still not resolved," Silberhaft said. "People in the diaspora always had the belief that if they were ever at risk, Israel would come and save them. That's no longer a reality. If Israel can't save its people on its doorstep, how is it going to come and save Jews in the diaspora?"

Analyst Adam Charnas believes that the past 500 days have made the local Jewish community more adamant in their resolve.

"October 7 cemented the Jewish identity of many, who have never felt prouder or more Jewish," he said. "The engagement of the community in cultural and communal events is a strong testament to the continued pride and strength of South African Jews."

Women lead charge of Jewish students on campus

LULA PENCHARZ

The South African Union of Jewish Students (SAUJS) this year is predominantly led by passionate and committed young women.

Sasha Said is SAUJS national chairperson; Ruby Kurgan chairperson of Stellenbosch University (SU); Amy Snaid represents the University of Johannesburg; Rachel Segal is now leading SAUJS at the University of Cape Town (UCT); and Shira Bome is representing all Jewish youth at private universities. There's a sprinkling of young men at the helm, with Jacob Boner chairing SAUJS at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and Jodan Sweidan in the hotseat at Pretoria University, but five out of seven top positions are held by women. The *SA Jewish Report* spoke to these female powerhouses about the upcoming year.

Said, an alumnus of King David Linksfield who is doing a double major at the University of Pretoria, said she hit the ground running this year to ensure that SAUJS empowered, protected, and nurtured Jewish life on university campuses around South Africa.

Through co-ordinating events, fighting antisemitism, and promoting Jewish life, SAUJS provides a space on campus for young Jews to explore and express their Jewish identities safely, she said.

The five women have put themselves in the frontline. Universities, as a rule, are hotbeds for radical advocacy, especially during the annual Israeli Apartheid Week (IAW) on campuses around the world.

Though from a Jewish perspective, the week is an opportunity for constructive dialogue and freedom to express one's viewpoint, since 7 October 2023, demonstrations have been rife with antisemitic retaliation and intimidation.

It now rarely allows for productive conversation, as has been seen on campuses around the world. In the United States, universities last May were preoccupied by large-scale pro-Palestinian protests. Students demanded divestment from Israel by demonstrating and camping out on campus for weeks on end. Encampments on campuses in solidarity with Gaza resulted in outbreaks of violence and arrests. In South Africa, however, though anti-Israel protesters did create encampments, there was little disturbance at Wits or UCT.

UCT SAUJS experienced the brunt of the IAW protests in South Africa. Its stand was surrounded by volatile students claiming to be Palestinian advocates, who used it as a platform to hurl antisemitic remarks at fellow Jewish students and further intimidate them online.

Based on these international and local experiences, these women are taking a stand to ensure that Jews are able to express their Jewishness and are protected on campus against those with nefarious intent.

They are determined that no Jew will be targeted either for being a Zionist or for being Jewish. Said Segal, "I have had some uncomfortable conversations and experiences on campus," but "my Jewish pride and passion for my community is stronger than any hostility that I may receive".

SAUJS hopes to instil that sense of pride in all its Jewish students to ensure that uncomfortable conversations don't leave them wounded but able to stand up for themselves and their heritage.

Though Jews have been ridiculed and suffered attempted "cancelling" by their classmates online and on UCT's campus for being Jewish, SAUJS ensures that their voices are heard and their right to Jewish expression protected.

Young Jewish Witsies were ostracised from a student-fee march after it was hijacked by "campers" to boycott Israel. A lecturer was even captured on video intimidating Jewish students. SAUJS removed Jews from the protest and escalated the matter with Wits' management.

Said said she was passionate about "creating an environment where our students feel supported in their identity and rights". Alongside her "if not me, then who?" attitude, her desire to be proactive and not a passive observer and to "ensure that our community's needs and voices are represented and heard" is what guides her as national chairperson in 2025.

Stellenbosch University has only recently opened a SAUJS space, and Kurgan says how "strange and ostracising" it was to arrive on campus without representation before this was the case. "It felt like we were left off the radar," she says. Kurgan's aim for the year is to "create the starting point for SAUJS to thrive at SU" through "fun environments where Jews can interact" and not to "feel threatened about our identity".

"As Jews, we will never not have to stand up for ourselves, especially regarding Israel," Kurgan says, but "university is the best time to get involved, educate ourselves, and make our presence known." She also feels

she has a responsibility to "educate" her fellow students and create "a good representation of Jews" with the goal of "changing minds about us".

Segal believes that promoting Jewish life on campus "extends beyond our immediate

community". SAUJS UCT aims to "foster understanding and respect for Judaism within the broader UCT community by encouraging meaningful engagement, dialogue, and education", she says. IAW at UCT was particularly ferocious last year, with Zionists being berated for being Jewish. By nurturing "unity" on campus where "diversity is celebrated" and "mutual respect flourishes",

Segal says she's committed to challenging antisemitism by addressing it with "education and solidarity".

Bome was compelled by the impact of the events of 7 October 2023 to take on leadership roles on campus as she saw "how much Jewish students needed support, advocacy, and a sense of community". She couldn't just sit back and do nothing for herself and other Jewish students. She recognised the challenge of Jewish students feeling unsupported, and if she can "make it just a little bit easier for everyone in this respect" then she wants "to be there to do that", she says.

Snaid's campus experience has been a "mix of rewarding and challenging" interactions. Though she enjoys sharing her heritage and culture with others, "there have been moments of misunderstanding or tension", usually around "issues affecting the Jewish community".

These interactions have only reaffirmed her commitment to education, advocacy, and unity within the Jewish community on campus, Snaid says, and she hopes to promote mutual understanding by strengthening partnerships with other student organisations.

Said is proud that her leadership dismantles societal stigmas around women in leadership while ultimately tackling the task of what it means to be a Jewish leader in uncertain times.

SAUJS's leadership is committed to its responsibility of "leading by example" and protecting Jews against antisemitism. Simply put, it's about allowing Jews to wear their *chai* necklaces and *kippot* proudly on campus and engage in dialogue without feeling threatened as SAUJS provides a sense of security and community.



Sasha Said



Amy Snaid



Ruby Kurgan



Rachel Segal

Following kids' footsteps – parents weigh emigration options

GILLIAN KLAWANSKY

When they're rooted in South Africa but their kids are emigrating, parents often face a dilemma. Three mothers describe the impact of their children's decisions to move countries.

Though one of her sons has been living overseas for the past few years, Linda Goldberg's other two children are still in South Africa. "For now, my husband and I are happy here, leading rich, fulfilling lives," Goldberg says. "However, we would eventually like to be in Israel. That's not because we want to leave the country but because we want to be in Israel when we get older. As Jewish people, and especially after 7 October, we know that's ultimately where we need to be."

Like many South African parents, Goldberg is unsure where all her children will eventually land up. Yet, for now, she says, she and her husband are happy and working hard in Johannesburg. A paediatric physiotherapist in practice for 33 years, Goldberg feels that she still has a lot to contribute to South Africa.

Goldberg also does student supervision for the physiotherapy department at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), passing on her passion. She points out that it's not easy to get work if you emigrate later in life, even if you're still committed to your career.

Yet, Goldberg says that if she does eventually have grandchildren overseas, she would want to live close to them. "I'm under no illusions though," she says. "You can't just follow your kids. If you're not going to be happy where your children are living, you can't rely on them and become a burden. You have to want to go where you're going."

For Joburg-based single mother Vanessa Gruskin, having all three of her beloved sons



Michael, Vanessa, David, and Jason Gruskin

living in Israel has been a difficult adjustment. "My eldest went in 2022. He wanted to pave the way for his younger brothers to go." Her other two sons followed in 2023, and all three have successful careers in the technology industry and live in the same apartment building.

While initially Gruskin was considering joining her sons in Israel, her parents are in South Africa. She'd also reunited with her former long-term boyfriend when he was tragically killed last year. "That was the decisive factor for me," she says. "Not to have had my boys around and go through everything alone has been difficult on every level. It's been the push I needed to go. I don't see much of a future here anymore. My

parents want me to go too."

While Gruskin, now 53, feels that she may have been better off if she'd gone 10 or 20 years ago, she believes success in a new country has a lot to do with one's mindset. "I have a friend of almost 60 who made aliya a few months ago, and she's loving it. I love Tel Aviv, it's the most amazing city." While she doesn't speak any Hebrew, she has qualifications and work experience that she's heard will make finding a job easier. "It's been absolutely devastating to leave my sons each time I visit, so now I won't have to," she says.

Gruskin was visiting Israel on 7 October 2023, and describes it as the most frightening day she has ever experienced. But she still believes that Israel is where her future lies. Though what's happening there scares her, she says it's worse knowing what's happening and being so far away from her sons.

"It's so much more frightening being here because I have the rocket alert apps on my phone so I'm here knowing that they're having to run to a bomb shelter and trying to get hold of them. Now at least we'll be together."

Though she's independent and has raised her sons to be this way as well, they're all very close. "I've always believed that you don't follow your children," she says. "My concern was that they're all in Israel now, but then what? But Israel is such a good stepping stone to the rest of the world. Life is very short, so if you have the opportunity, grab it. It's hard in Israel, but I think there's a much better

quality of life there."

Though Danielle Fine* has only one of her four children living in Israel, two others plan to go over in the next year. "It leaves a void," she says. "When your child leaves school, it's the most beautiful and exciting thing for them. Yet there's this hollow that you feel that cannot be filled. It's like you've been retrenched, especially because I didn't choose to have a career, I chose to be a parent."

"You then have to reinvent yourself," she says. "With my children living overseas, it's that much harder because you don't get to see them. You know they're grown up and fulfilling their dreams, but it's an empty feeling. You're not a complete family."

While for now she's staying put, Fine knows that she wants to be there one day when her children have babies. "So, I guess, we have to make our plans to follow them, but to leave my siblings behind is hard because, other than my husband and children, they are my everything, my network, and my go-to people. Not having them around going into old age is going to be hard. My mother-in-law also relies on us."

She also notes the financial sacrifices one has to make when emigrating, going from living in big spaces to what will probably be a tiny apartment. "You've now got to do everything for yourself, probably in your 60s, having to create a new life in a new language. Yet, I've seen a lot of older people struggle, and there's nothing sadder than seeing an older person on their own."

**Those who asked for their names to be changed were happy to discuss how they felt, but didn't want their nearest and dearest overseas to know.*

Author John Irving's new novel, *Queen Esther*, deals with Israel and antisemitism

PHILISSA CRAMER – JTA

The novelist John Irving is famous for telling stories set in his native New England and in Austria, the site of a pivotal adventure in his young adulthood. Now, the two settings will collide in a new novel, one that focuses on a Jewish orphan from Vienna who winds up in Maine before making her way to Israel.

The novel, *Queen Esther*, will be Irving's 16th when it is published in November.

Simon & Schuster, his publisher, announced *Queen Esther* on Thursday, 6 February, and revealed its cover, which shows a young girl with a suitcase arriving on a snowy night to a light-filled home.

The short description offers clues about her identity, explaining that the book is set at St Cloud's, the orphanage – and, later, illegal abortion clinic – operated by Wilbur Larch in *The Cider House Rules*, released in 1985.

"Larch is younger than you remember him, and the unadopted orphans at St Cloud's are a different cast of characters – Esther Nacht, a Viennese-born Jew, among them," the description says. "The story begins when Esther, not yet four, is abandoned one winter night. At age 14, she is taken in by a philanthropic New England family, becoming both a mystery and a guardian angel to them."

In keeping with Irving's famous secrecy about

his work pre-publication, the description is light on additional plot details, saying only that antisemitism plays a role in Esther's life; that "Esther's story is fated to intersect with Israel's history"; and that the novel ends in Jerusalem in 1981, when Esther is 76.

Irving visited Israel in 1981, which was also the year of a deadly attack on a Vienna synagogue by Palestinian terrorists.

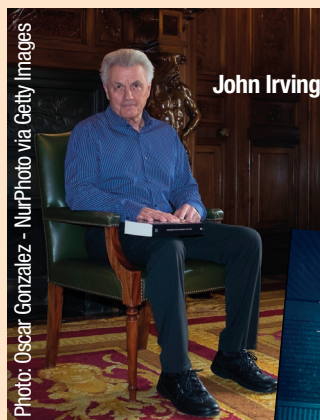
Irving said that while Israel had been in the news because of its war with Hamas, the story was conceived long before the war's start, and didn't have anything to do with the current conflict.

"The novel always ended in Jerusalem in 1981.

You can't revise or rewrite history. The construction of this novel long predates the events of 7 October, and everything that has happened in Israel since those terrorist attacks and the hostage-taking," Irving said. "With hindsight, it's easy to say that what I saw and heard in Israel in the early 1980s serves as a precursor to what has developed since that time, but this is what historical fiction is for."

Irving, perhaps most famous for his 1978 novel, *The World According to Garp*, visited Israel last year for the first time since his 1981 trip, and made an appearance in Jerusalem in which he explained why so many of his books have Jewish characters.

"I'm not Jewish but I've always been pro-Israel, and I've always been pro-Jewish," he said, according to a *Times of Israel* report. "My earliest exposure to Jews were the wrestling teammates I had. And they had a hard time too. But we were all doing the same thing together, so it was natural, or it seemed natural to me, that I sort of stayed with them."



John Irving

Photo: Oscar Gonzalez - NurPhoto via Getty Images



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At a Jaffa community centre and beyond, tragic news of Bibas family's fate sparks confusion, mourning, and rage

DEBORAH DANAN – JTA

As she watched a cascade of seemingly conflicting news reports about the three highest-profile Israeli hostages, Noam Nisim didn't know what to think.

First, a popular Israeli news programme posted on Instagram that the Bibas family had received official word that its relatives, Shiri and her children, Kfir and Ariel, had been killed in captivity. The dismal news appeared to confirm a Hamas announcement that the bodies of the mother and two young boys would be returned to Israel on Thursday, 20 February. Then the post was deleted.

Around the same time, relatives of the Bibas family issued a statement that they had not, in fact, received confirmation of the three hostages' fate. The Hamas announcement about Shiri, Kfir, and Ariel, they said, had thrown them into "turmoil".

For Nisim, a Pilates instructor at a Jaffa community centre, the whirlwind of news just created more uncertainty coupled with a sinking feeling that the Bibases wouldn't



A rally marking 500 days since the 7 October attack, held at Hostage Square in Tel Aviv on 17 February 2025

Photo: Tomer Neuberger/Flash90

be coming home alive.

"I don't know how to react yet because I don't even know what to react to," she said on Tuesday. "I'm in shock. But on the other hand, it's not like we didn't know. We've prepared ourselves for this. Still, it doesn't make it hurt any less."

Nisim was one of many Israelis left reeling on Tuesday after the Hamas announcement, which appears to portend a tragic end for a family that has come to symbolise the intractable pain of the

hostage crisis both in Israel and around the world.

A video of Shiri, tearful and desperate, being abducted into Gaza while clutching her sons became an indelible image of Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack. The pain was compounded that November, when Hamas released a video showing Shiri's captive husband, Yarden, sobbing after he was told that his wife and children had been killed in an Israeli airstrike. Israel investigated that claim, but hasn't

confirmed it.

Yarden was taken captive separately and released earlier this month.

Still, Israeli pronouncements about the family have become increasingly dire, with an official expressing "grave concerns" about their fate last month.

Some Israelis are holding out the slimmest of hopes. Liz Peretz, a nurse at the nearby Wolfson Medical Center who was also at the Jaffa community centre, said she was still clinging to the chance that the reports weren't accurate, and predicted a harsh reaction if they are.

"If it turns out to be true, the people of this country will create a huge uproar against the state, which abandoned that family in the worst way possible," she said.

Peretz's son, Nehorai, 11, assured his mother that the Hamas statement would turn out to be "fake news". He suggested that the announcement amounted to psychological warfare.

"They're lying," he said of the terror group. "They want us to cry, and then they'll bring them back. They just want to make us suffer. They're never going to send back

bodies."

As Israelis coped with impending grief, some also turned to anger and thoughts of vengeance at the murder of a mother and two boys, who were nine months and four years old when they were taken captive. Or Benaroya, a cashier, said that everything should be done "to find justice for them".

Asked what that "justice" looks like, she said, "Killing everyone who is involved. Even those not in Hamas, the people who support them. They all have to pay."

Outside a soccer stadium in the area, one of the harshest reactions came from Sagi Vanunu, a local restaurant employee. He said Israel should "declare a world war against Gaza" after Hamas's next release of living hostages on Saturday. Otherwise, he said, "it means that the country no longer values life and does not have the right to exist".

Feelings of anger at the news extended beyond the Jaffa neighbourhood. Dan Shapiro, who served as United States ambassador to Israel under President Barack Obama, said he was feeling a mix of emotions, and called for the dismantling of Hamas.

"The news about Shiri, Ariel, and Kfir Bibas is devastating," he wrote on X. "The mourning of their deaths is accompanied by a barely suppressible rage. Their killers are monsters. This war will not end until Hamas is fully removed from power."

The mercuriality was heightened with the understanding that in exchange for a total of four deceased hostages to be returned on Thursday, Israel would release 47 Palestinian security prisoners. The idea that Israel had compromised with a terror group ate at 15-year-old Shalev Shaki.

"We have to do everything to bring them back," he said. "But at the same time, giving in to terrorists isn't right. I think we need to hit them hard so that all the hostages come home now, without making concessions."

Kira Dan Or, a parenting consultant nearby, considered how the return of the bodies of Shiri, Ariel, and Kfir would affect their father and husband, Yarden.

"Poor Yarden, there's no consolation, no closure in this. He will never know what fate befell them, how they died," she said. "He'll be left with questions for the rest of his life. And what kind of life will that be?"

Tuesday's dismal announcement came alongside some good news: The families of the final six living hostages to be released in the first phase of the Israel-Hamas ceasefire, namely, Omer Wenkert, Omer Shem Tov, Eliya Cohen, Tal Shoham, Avera Mengistu, and Hisham al-Sayed, were informed by Israeli authorities that their loved ones would be released on Saturday.

But that news also led to more ambiguity. Fourteen hostages are left to be released in the first phase, which will last until early March, eight of whom are confirmed to be dead, and six who are alive. The news that six living hostages are due to be released on Saturday left Israelis, including the relatives of hostages, to decipher on their own whether their loved ones were among the living.

"Do I have to draw my own conclusions?" the Ynet news site quoted Danny Elgart, the brother of 70-year-old Danish-Israeli hostage Itzik Elgart, as asking. "If you publish the names of six people who are alive, it means that the rest aren't alive, but we in the family weren't informed of anything. We've become objects, not people," he said.

Burned trees, traumatised animals: nature is revealing the unseen effects of Israel's wars

DEBORAH DANAN – JTA

The trees abutting the road leading to Biriya Forest, a nature preserve in northern Israel, at first resemble spruces turning autumnal shades of red, a sight reminiscent of landscapes in America or Europe but rare in Israel.

A closer look, however, reveals that the trees are only charred remnants, the devastating result of rocket-induced wildfires that destroyed thousands of acres of forest while Israel battled Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Fires break out every year in this forest, which like many others across Israel was planted by the Jewish National Fund, known today as KKL-JNF, but they are usually brought under control quickly. Last year, with the local population evacuated and weather conditions unusually extreme, things played out differently.

Starting around May, as temperatures rose, nearly every rocket fired from Lebanon was likely to ignite a fire. And it wasn't just the rockets themselves. Israeli interceptors exploded overhead, scattering fragments that ignited at multiple points within the forest. The combination of unusual winds, scorching heat, and low humidity created a perfect storm that has disrupted entire ecosystems, affected wildlife habitats, and undone years of work.

"We literally witnessed their life's work go up in smoke," said Eli Hafuta, the director of the Upper Galilee and Golan Region at KKL-JNF, which was founded in 1901 to cultivate Jewish-owned land in the region and today owns 13% of all land in Israel.

"It's a devastating sight to watch trees that have stood for 70 or 80 years go up in flames," Hafuta said. "Even younger trees, ones my team and I planted just a decade ago, can be reduced to ashes in just 15 minutes."

The scorched earth in Biriya Forest reflects just one of many environmental effects of nearly a year and a half of war for Israel. Less visible than the lives lost, injuries sustained, and homes destroyed has been devastation to flora and fauna in both Israel's north and south.

The cascading effects continued this week as the splashy kickoff for a new forest in the western Negev to honour war victims, timed to Tu B'Shvat on Thursday, 13 February, was cancelled amid rising security threats. A handful of Israeli officials are instead holding a smaller planting ceremony in the western Negev.

Perhaps nowhere has the war's effect on Israeli ecosystems been more pronounced than at the Agamon Hula Valley Nature Reserve, famed for its mesmerising bird migrations.

Twice a year, hundreds of millions of birds, including cranes, pelicans, and storks, pass through the valley, in a normal year turning it into a hotspot for ecotourism.

During the months it was closed – from 7 October 2023 until well after the ceasefire on Israel's northern border took hold in late November – the Agamon Wildlife Rehabilitation

Center on the reserve turned into what staff call the world's first wartime field hospital for animals.

When rockets pounded the north, Dr Rona Nadler-Valency, the centre's head veterinarian and director and her team were evacuated from their communities, forcing the centre to operate remotely, with staff caring for injured animals at home when possible. After three months, the team began returning, resuming treatment at the centre under a chaotic new normal.

"We would be in the middle of surgery, an animal on the operating table, when the sirens would go off," said Nadler-Valency. "We'd have to leave everything and run to the shelter – sometimes dozens of times a day."

At other times, Nadler-Valency and her team were caught outdoors when sirens sounded, forcing them to drop to the ground for cover.

With so few civilians remaining in the north, many of the wounded animals were brought to the centre by soldiers.

In one case, Lilit, a tawny owl brought in after being hit by a military vehicle, suffered a severe head injury that temporarily left her blind and deaf. Lilit was carefully monitored and rehabilitated in a specialised acclimation cage. Treatment was complicated by the ongoing missile fire, requiring the team to time their visits to her carefully, but eventually the team managed to restore her sight, hearing, and flight. After a month and a half, Lilit was released back into the wild with a transmitter on her back, allowing the team to track her recovery and ensure she could hunt and survive, as well as gain insights into how owls adjust to life after similar injuries.

"Cases like Lilit's," Nadler-Valency reflected, "were rays of light amid the madness."

The disruption fuelled other changes that scientists are now tracking. Yaron Charka, chief ornithologist at KKL-JNF, which manages the reserve, observed an increase in wintering bird species this year.

"I'm seeing a great variety of birds this winter compared with last winter, where there were few," he said.

Every winter, about 50 000 common cranes settle in the Hula Valley, pausing their southward migration to Africa. But last year, that number dropped 70% amid rocket fire from

Lebanon, just 30km from the valley.

Still, Charka cautioned against attributing all of the changes to the cross-border clashes.

"During wartime, birds can change their route in isolated instances – we saw this with Ukraine – but it's not the whole picture," he said, noting that the ceasefire came at the end of the migratory season and emphasising that climate change is also causing changes in the cranes' migration habits.

According to the reserve's director, Inbar Shlomit Rubin, far fewer bird nests were observed in the spring, a trend for which she saw two immediate explanations.

"The unrest and insecurity led many birds to migrate further south to quieter areas of Israel," she said. But mammals and smaller animals had no means of escaping the area.

"The noise of the war caused immense stress," Rubin said.



Israeli firefighters try to extinguish a fire in the Biriya Forest in northern Israel

Photo: David Cohen Flash90

"Stress negatively affects fertility."

Since the ceasefire, KKL-JNF has launched an extensive survey of the areas burned over the past year to evaluate their potential for natural regeneration. For now, most of the organisation's efforts are focused on urgent interventions in visitor-accessible areas.

While the restoration of the affected areas is expected to be a long-term endeavour, Hafuta expressed optimism, highlighting forests' remarkable ability to regenerate. He said he estimated that as many as 70% of burned trees would begin to regenerate naturally in the next year and a half.

According to Rubin, in recent weeks, wildlife, too, has begun returning to the affected areas.

"We've noticed a subtle, minimal return. While the long-term effects are still uncertain, we remain hopeful that [the war] won't have a significant impact in the years to come," Rubin said.

Historian exposes Treblinka death machine through testimony

LEE TANKLE

More than 900 000 mostly Jewish people were murdered in Treblinka Death Camp, and there are no physical remnants of this hell hole. However, historian Jacob Flaws tells how he painted a picture of what the camp and its surrounds were like in his book, *Spaces of Treblinka*.

Author and assistant professor of history at Kean University, Flaws' book was launched at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre on 17 February, where he explored the sights, smells, and sounds of one of what he describes as "the black holes of the Holocaust".

Flaws said the three camps established under Operation Reinhard: Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka, were created exclusively to be places where Jewish people were sent to die. There was little to no chance of avoiding death at these camps.

This is why, he said, out of the one and a half million people murdered at all three camps, there were only 150 survivors.

In telling the story of what Treblinka was like, Flaws sought to get the voices of everyone who experienced the camp. This included Polish people who lived in the areas surrounding the camps, the Nazis who worked in the camp, as well as

The memorial at the site of Treblinka Death Camp



his research, both survivors and people in surrounding areas, the Nazis' image of Treblinka crumbled. It wasn't a sanitised place but a place where people were sent to their death in the most inhumane and violent way possible.

Flaws said that to keep up the sanitised image, the Nazis commandeered a Jewish orchestra to play while others in the camp were being violently exterminated. This was done so that people in the surrounding areas

Kanye's fine art of antisemitism divides critics

LULA PENCHARZ

Kanye West is a "delusional", "attention seeking", "unreputable geopolitical" rap artist stirring the pot with his rampant fire of blatant antisemitic posts on X and offensive T-shirts advertised to his more than 20 million followers, according to local critics in the music industry.

While some may say that vomiting out antisemitism is a strange way of drawing people to his music, others are horrified that anyone can say what he does and get away with it.

Two weeks ago, West bombarded X with antisemitic remarks. Among them, he posted, "I'm a Nazi" and "I love Hitler." His provocation continued on his online store, Yeezy, where the only item on sale was a T-shirt with a large black swastika on the front.

This isn't the first time that West, a Grammy Award-winning artist, has spewed hatred. He was initially banned from Twitter for eight months in 2022 after writing, "I'm a bit sleepy tonight but when I wake up I'm going death con 3 On Jewish People." West said his heightened awareness of Jewish people resulted from Jews trying "to black ball anyone who opposes" the Jewish "agenda".

West has a massive international fan base praising his artistry and musical genius, and critics say there's a danger of his followers taking his word as gospel.

Members of the music industry and Jewish community are, however, split over whether it's essential to separate the art from the artist, and if that means ignoring his comments.

"You can still enjoy their writing, their music, their creations without having to endorse them as people," said Gareth Cliff, one of local radio's most prominent personalities.

"There's a complicated relationship between an artist, their art, and how society understands their art," said acclaimed musician Jesse Clegg.

But, said former music producer and songwriter, Alan Glass, "The average person who follows Kanye for his music, by default, or ignorance, his opinions are likely to be of value to them."

Said Cliff, "There's probably not a lot that I like about so many people in history because they're all so fallible," pointing out the imperfections of even impressive people and how he believes that two sides can exist in one person. He believes that the "mature,

opinion that, "When you know so much about a person and they spew the kind of vile hatred that Kanye West spews, then you have to think carefully about how you support that person's work in any way or form."

West is known for "doubling down on hatred", Goldstuck said, "and anyone who supports his work is in effect enabling him to double down".

His actions have had consequences. Said Cliff, "He was some sort of savant, creative genius, but he's ruined his reputation with sensible, generous people." His talent agency, 33 & West, removed him from its roster by no longer entertaining a working relationship with him. The online host for his store, Shopify, took the Yeezy website offline. His antisemitic rhetoric caused him to lose lucrative business deals as well. Adidas dropped its Yeezy collaboration after West's remarks in 2022.

Greg Landau, an up-and-coming 20-year-old DJ, said he "can't dispute that Kanye's early albums are masterpieces". However, having once been a fan, he no longer listens to West's music or plays it as a DJ after his "disgusting" remarks.

"Obviously you want to separate the art from the artist, but at the end of the day, the art is a product made by this person who's said despicable things," Landau said.

Clegg recognises how "offensive" to himself, his family, and community West's thoughts are, but at the same time, the artist's goal of garnering attention isn't lost on him. This is nothing new when it comes to West, he said, and it's "important to note that he often makes these kinds of statements before an album release. The more attention it gets, the more we play into his media strategy."

He's achieving his agenda, Clegg said. "The more publicity he gains, the more he is part of the cultural conversation even if it's in a negative light. There's a whole ulterior motive that Kanye West has to get his album to number one."

"Once art is out in the world, it's up to the audience to interpret that art typically," Goldstuck said. However, he believes it's different for someone like West when his "persona is tied to his music, and it drives his statements and therefore his art".

Cliff, however, believes that too much attention is given to the likes of West. "Too much of a focus on unimportant people saying unimportant things tends to trivialise the important stuff," he said.

In a post-7 October world, Cliff said, there are far more dangerous and threatening members of society who have gone to greater lengths to harm Jews than West has. West's following isn't a vindictive or volatile force endangering Jewish existence, he said. Rather, at the very most "we know where we stand with them".

Glass isn't so convinced, saying the danger with West is that he has a far-reaching platform and the influence of a pop culture celebrity.

"Unfortunately, the fame and notoriety of the performing artist is going to be followed blindly, and his opinion taken as being of value even though it might be slanderous," Glass said.

"We have always been the scapegoat," Glass said, and West is relying on his rants against Jews to gain traction in the media. Unfortunately, antisemitism is always a quick and easy go-to for people to get others to listen to their voice.

Goldstuck maintains that "streaming his music or buying his merchandise is in effect supporting him financially, and therefore endorsing and normalising his behaviour", which he doesn't believe people should do.

However, Cliff said, "If you think a pair of Yeezys are nice shoes, you shouldn't not buy them in solidarity with Jewish people. No-one will see that or care."

While West is using hatred towards Jews to cause controversy, he has yet to release music that expresses this opinion. However, many local critics believe nothing could excuse the hatred he spews.

testimony from Jewish people in the camp.

Flaws found getting testimony of what happened inside the camp to be difficult as the majority of the people there were murdered. To create a realistic picture, he had to try and get a sense of what the space around Treblinka was like through those who survived as well as from those around the camp.

"When starting to research the camp, I got interested in spatial theory, the idea that a space is created by the people who inhabit the space," he said. "So I needed to get the voices of everyone who interacted with the camp in one way or another to recreate this space in the most realistic way possible."

Treblinka was built by the Nazis to be a clean, industrial killing facility where the mass murder of Jewish people was kept out of sight and out of mind, Flaws said.

Since the Nazis created the image of an efficient cleaning machine, and because the camp was destroyed by the end of the war, the camp itself was shrouded in secrecy so that nobody outside of it would know that 900 000 people would be murdered there. However, those around the camps couldn't avoid what was happening.

"The Nazis wanted this human slaughterhouse to be represented as a sleek, streamlined building where there was no actual human killing," said Flaws, "but the reality of what Treblinka was like is at odds with this."

Survivors of the camp also tell an unsanitised version of events.

It was a case of hordes of Jewish people being kept in cattle cars and upon reaching their destination, immediately going into the fields by the camps and being shot and put into mass graves, which were eventually dug up and then burned. Or masses of people being sent to gas chambers, where their bodies would be burned to dispose of the evidence.

Flaws found that as he heard more and more diverse voices in

wouldn't be able to hear the gunfire, screams, and drone of digging machines, but rather the sound of beautiful classical music.

However, he said that for locals living in the area, the knowledge that they were near a death camp was unavoidable. Their days were populated by the sight of smoke and sounds of Jewish people screaming and gunshots. "One woman said that the sound of gunfire was so close that it would make the whole village run," he said.

Similarly, local Poles living near the camp said that they couldn't avoid the smell of burning bodies. "One witness I found said, 'The smell alone of burning bodies, burning tens of thousands of bodies out in the open every day, was unavoidable. It squeezed through the homes, through the porous wooden walls, windows, and doors of the country houses of which we lived,'" Flaws said.

Similarly, Flaws found that even the Nazis who worked in the camps couldn't handle the smell of the burning Jewish bodies, and that one commander at the camp doused his walls in perfume. Treblinka was shrouded in secrecy as it was surrounded by two fences, one interlaced with pine leaves so that people couldn't see through it.

"So, though people in surrounding areas could hear and smell what was happening in the camp, they couldn't see inside," he said, "This isolation created a space where the laws of morality no longer applied so they were able to do the unimaginable."

Furthermore, though the Nazi soldiers did the killing, they would separate themselves as much as possible from the people they were killing and the reality of what they were doing. Flaws said that in the confines of the camp there was a petting zoo so that those involved could detach themselves from the killings.

No matter how much those who perpetrated the crimes against humanity in the camp tried to hide it, the truth is out, thanks to Flaws.



Historian and author, Jacob Flaws

Photo: Screenshot

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@kanyewest

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sensible approach" is to be able to separate art from artist.

Clegg said that, like many, he didn't look to West for his "geopolitical commentary". He spoke of "being able to hold two thoughts at once" about a person, and said one can acknowledge that West's personal behaviour is "disgusting and worthy of criticism" but "his music has already had an impact on a generation of musicians.

"It's up to each individual to have a perspective on how they want to engage with the art," he said. Though he doesn't believe someone should be "ostracised for listening to Kanye West", Clegg said he could also "understand how people, especially in the Jewish community, can feel about not wanting to listen to his music". He believes "it's a difficult thing to draw a red line on, and we have to respect people's preferences".

Arthur Goldstuck, media analyst and commentator, is of the

A column of the SA Jewish Board of Deputies

Signs of regeneration

ABOVE BOARD

Karen Milner



a rich shared history, and we are proud to count a historic Greek Jewish community, including some members in South Africa, among our extended communal family. As I have often emphasised in this column, dialogue offers far more than conflict ever could. Continued efforts by our friends to engage with our community show us that we aren't alone.

In another effort to build a secure Jewish future, our national director, Wendy Kahn, is in Israel attending the Conference of Presidents of the American Jewish Committee. There, she is meeting with counterparts from the global diaspora and Israel to address the many challenges facing international Jewry today. Despite the relatively small size of our community, we take great pride in participating in global discussions that shape the future of world Jewry. We will continue to share our experiences and insights at these important forums.

Poignantly, as part of the conference, the delegation planted trees at Kibbutz Nahal Oz, one of the worst affected kibbutzim on 7 October. At Nahal Oz, in addition to murder and kidnapping, the terrorists deliberately planned to destroy all the agriculture, burning fields, tractors, cow sheds, and chicken coups, and destroying all the kibbutz's farming technology. Kahn also returned to Kibbutz Nir Oz to view plans for its rebuilding. Truly an inspiring sign of resilience, strength, and regeneration.

- Listen to Charisse Zeifert on Jewish Board Talk, 101.9 ChaiFM, every Friday from 12:00 to 13:00.

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

Trump not clutching at straws with paper ban

I was never quite certain what delinquent turtles were doing with plastic straws, but I know that whatever it was, it was bad enough to get them banned. Now, it would seem, following the signing of a presidential order by Donald Trump that reversed a federal policy favouring paper straws, turtles are once again free to get back to their wicked ways.

I blame paper straws. It's like they didn't even try. Not only did they do little to deserve the appointment, but they seemed to assume that their tenure was secure, would never be challenged, and that no matter how soggy their service, we would suck it up and accept that they were here to stay. Even though no-one liked them.

Paper straws are the limp hand shakers of the beverage world. They are the dull guests that no-one wants to sit next to at dinner. They are the tedious do-gooders who when we laugh, remind us that there are hungry children in Sudan.

Paper straws are allergic to gluten, have asthma, and get a splotchy neck after drinking a glass of red wine, which they really "shouldn't have" had. They need safe spaces, suffer from anxiety, and might well be vegan. They identify as something that they clearly are not, and are in desperate need of a cause. Any cause.

Thanks to Trump, the reign of paper straws has been curtailed. He criticised them as being ineffective, stating they "don't work", and that they "don't last very long". Something, I imagine no straw ever wants to hear.

Although not much was said about the Trump announcement, probably because of the magnitude of changes he

INNER VOICE

Howard Feldman



enacted in his first few days in office, this is one of great significance. Not because of the straws themselves, but because it captures the essence of his focus and agenda. Do your job, or be replaced. And stop "guilting" us into accepting mediocrity because of your claim to care about the turtles. Paper straws are the perfect symbol of what we have been forced to accept.

They claim to care about turtles and marine life, but clearly, their primary agenda is to bring misery and sadness into the world. They won't be happy, and won't rest until everyone is drinking their iced coffee through a glorified toilet roll while self-righteously nodding at each other about saving the planet – one disintegrating sip at a time.

Meanwhile, the turtles, whom we have all so valiantly suffered for, are probably out there somewhere throwing wild underwater parties, double-fisting plastic straws like they're VIP passes to the ocean's hottest nightclub.

But now, thanks to Trump's decree, we no longer have to endure the tyranny of soggy straws pretending to be heroes. The real lesson here? If you want to keep your job – whether you're a straw, a government official, or an underwhelming dinner guest – you'd better do it well. Otherwise, like your waterlogged paper replacement, you'll find yourself swiftly discarded, limp, and useless in the hands of a disappointed public.

South Africans dispel anti-Israel myths in education drive

A stand-out moment of the South African Zionist Federation (SAZF) and Israel Centre's Edu-Israel programme was a visit on 12 February by Klaas Mokgomole and Bafana Modise to King David Linksfield schools to dismantle myths about Israel and foster support for Israel among the youth.

Mokgomole, head co-ordinator of Africans for Peace, was once an African National Congress Youth League member and a leader at the University of the Witwatersrand. Modise is head of media at South African Friends of Israel. The Edu-Israel programme has made significant strides in promoting a nuanced understanding of Israel, particularly through its Forever Israel initiative.

Mokgomole shared his transformative journey. Initially swayed by anti-Israel rhetoric, his perspective shifted dramatically after a trip to Israel in 2015. What he expected to be an "apartheid land" turned out to be a place of inclusivity, where he found no evidence of racial

segregation, contrary to what he had been led to believe by BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) advocates back in South Africa.

During his speech, he recounted his experience of playing beach volleyball in Tel Aviv and feeling welcomed and valued by the locals. This visit, coupled with the realisation that much of the information he was exposed to was misleading propaganda, prompted a profound change in his views. He now advocates for reading beyond headlines, engaging in informed

debate, and understanding the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian narrative firsthand.

Modise emphasised the importance of biblical prophecy regarding a Jewish homeland, adding a spiritual dimension to the pair's educational outreach.

Through guests like Mokgomole and Modise, the Edu-Israel programme inspires students to question, learn, and advocate for truth over stereotypes, making it a pivotal part of the SAZF's efforts in education and community building.



Klaas Mokgomole and Bafana Modise

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Yeshiva appoints house captains and school leaders

Yeshiva College Primary School appointed its house captains for 2025 at an assembly on Friday, 14 February. The house captains are voted for by their grades and coaches based on leadership and sportsmanship. Their role is to lead the school at internal events and represent the school at external events.

Tzion (green): Sienna Epstein, Sarah Lieba Sacks, Ben Klotz, and Gavi Friedman; Israel (blue): Dani Topol, Ella Shirazi, Cayleb Assness, and Ben Schmulian; Judah (yellow): Olivia Rubenstein, Ora Sher, Elchanan Mandelberg, and Chaim (Groovy) Chaimovitz.



Hirsch Lyons magnifies seven species

As part of the Tu B'Shvat programme on 13 February at the Hirsch Lyons Torah Early Learning Centre, the children enjoyed a "science station", where they were able to explore the colours and textures of the *shivah ha'minim* (the seven species) up close with a magnifying glass.

Accidental entrepreneur transforms Rosebank Market

The debut episode of the ORT Jet Business Show, hosted by David Zidel, showcased the remarkable story of Dana Druion's work to save the Rosebank Sunday Market.

Originally a social worker, Druion never imagined stepping into the business world. But when the market faced imminent closure, threatening the livelihoods of 350 vendors, she refused to let it disappear. She took action to preserve jobs, revitalise the space, and transform it into a thriving hub for unique, handmade goods. Her unwavering commitment to the market and its people earned her the title of ORT Jet Business Winner in 2024.

Druion's unexpected transition from social work to business leadership was driven by her passion for people. She recognised the devastating impact the market's closure would have on local vendors and refused to stand by. Instead, she applied her skills in empathy, problem-solving, and resilience.

ORT Jet mentors gave Druion support and insights, helping her to refine her strategy, understand financial sustainability, and make informed decisions in a competitive market.

Druion's journey offers invaluable lessons for entrepreneurs:

- Proactive problem-solving. Druion's ability to seek solutions rather than dwell on obstacles demonstrates the



- power of resilience and decisive leadership;
- Community. The Rosebank Sunday Market thrived because of its spirit of collaboration. Vendors supported one another, proving that success is often built on relationships;
- Niche market strategy. Instead of competing with corporate giants, Druion carved out a unique space, focusing on artisanal, handmade products that resonated with customers;
- The power of mentorship. By leaning on ORT Jet's network of mentors, Druion gained the knowledge and confidence to make strategic business decisions;
- Learning by doing. Entrepreneurship isn't just about theory, it's about action. Druion's experience underscores the importance of taking risks and adapting.

DEALS OF THE WEEK

Offers valid till 26 FEBRUARY 2025 or while stocks last



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