

The Golden Age of South African Jewry

**A remarkable story of resilience
and renewal**



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chief

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A remarkable story of resilience and renewal

I want to make a bold statement. We are living in the golden age of South African Jewry.

I do not say this lightly. I know how strange it may sound to some people. South Africa has many problems. There is crime, unemployment, failing infrastructure. There is also the distress we have all felt since October 7, watching the South African government take such a hostile and immoral position against Israel.

And yet, I believe that in the 185 years since the first Jews, fleeing the persecution of Europe, arrived on the southern tip of Africa and made the first minyan in Cape Town on Yom Kippur 1841, there has never been a better time for our community, a true golden age.

There are four reasons why I say this.

1. The unknown future has been revealed

For the first time in our history, the great fear of the future is over – because the future has arrived.

As a child growing up in the 1970s, and then as a teenager in the 1980s, I remember the conversations around me. Many of you will remember them too. People would say, “Just give South Africa another five years”, or, “Maybe another ten years”. It was as if we were watching sand running through an hourglass, waiting for the moment time would run out.

That fear had a real basis. South Africa was built on the fundamental injustice and instability of white minority rule. That injustice, which began with colonialism, became entrenched under apartheid. Everybody knew it was unsustainable – morally and politically. There was no way a country could forever be governed by a racial minority.

So the question was always: how would it end?

The conventional wisdom was that white minority rule would never end voluntarily. It would end in violent revolution, with all the potential for bloodshed, chaos and mayhem. And so people asked: what would happen to South Africa? What would happen to white South Africans? What would happen to Jewish South Africans?

Then Hashem blessed us. Against all odds, President F.W. de Klerk did the right thing, the moral thing, and began the process of voluntarily ending white minority rule. And Nelson Mandela emerged from 27 years in prison without bitterness, ready to build a new South Africa based on freedom, democracy and human dignity.

But even then, the uncertainty did not end. It shifted.

What would happen after the first democratic elections? What would majority rule look like? Would the country hold? Then the question became: what would happen after Mandela? Would the institutions survive? Would democracy survive?

Now, more than three decades after freedom and democracy came to South Africa, we finally know what that future looks like.

The future has arrived.

We live in a vibrant democracy. Since 1994, South Africa has held seven national and provincial elections, together with regular municipal elections. We have an independent judiciary. We have a free press. We have a constitution that protects freedom of religion, conscience, association and expression. We have seen presidents removed from office, court judgments reverse government overreach, and political parties lose support when they fail the people.

And perhaps most significantly, the last general election showed the strength of the democratic centre. The ANC fell below 50% for the first time. The Government of National Unity emerged because the vast majority of South Africans want stability, jobs, safety, good schools, proper healthcare and a functioning economy.

Polling by the Social Research Foundation (SRF) provides hard data on something many of us experience in daily life:

South Africans are, in general, moderate, practical, decent people. Their research reveals that across race, class, geography and party affiliation, South Africans share much common ground, with a strong degree of trust, and a willingness to work together across historical divides.

Around eight in ten South Africans support the practical reforms needed to grow the economy, including more robust property rights, opposition to expropriation without compensation, labour-law reform to help poor people access jobs, empowerment reform based on disadvantage and need, privatisation, and pragmatic energy policy. Another study found 63% support for replacing BEE with an empowerment policy based on economic status rather than race, including 60% of ANC supporters.

This does not mean there are no risks. There are many. South Africa may yet go down a wrong path. Destructive economic policies could increase unemployment and social instability. Corruption and misgovernance do terrible damage. We must never be naïve.

But, every country has its risks. What is the future of the United Kingdom? What is the future of Australia, Canada, Europe, America? Each faces its own serious challenges: economic strain, social fragmentation, immigration pressures, rising antisemitism, political instability, weakening institutions. Our own uncertainties in South Africa are not unique – they are a normal part of any functioning country.

This, according to our Sages, is the nature of *olam hazeh* – this world. They teach that only in the next world, *olam haba*, is existence purely good and eternal. By its very nature, this world is temporary, unstable and uncertain.

Within the imperfect and uncertain reality of the human condition, the great question that hung like a dark cloud over this community for generations – is there a future here? – has been answered.

There is. It has arrived. We now know what the future looks like.

2. The most comfortable place in the diaspora to be a Jew

The second reason I say that we are living in a golden age is something that has somehow become clear since October 7.

For much of our history, South Africa was viewed as the worst of the options available to Jews who could live elsewhere.

People looked across the oceans to the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, America and other countries, believing that those places offered better prospects, more stability, more safety, and a better Jewish future.

Many people left. Many made their lives in those countries. And for years, South African Jews often viewed them with a certain envy.

But since October 7, we have seen a world turned upside-down.

In an extraordinary turn of events, South Africa has emerged as one of the safest and most comfortable places in the diaspora for Jews to live openly and proudly. This does not mean antisemitism is absent here. It is not. Since October 7, we too have seen an increase, and we must never be complacent. And the South African Jewish Board of Deputies does very important work combatting every incident of antisemitism.

But if you look at the hard, cold stats of antisemitic incidents around the world, the comparative picture is striking – in terms of raw numbers and proportionally, we have the lowest rates of any country in the world. But we don't need statistics to tell us what we already know from our lived experience: antisemitism is simply not a major concern in our daily lives.

With one important caveat. The threat of violent Islamic terror can, G-d forbid, strike any Jewish community anywhere in the world, including here. The absence of a mass casualty terror incident, thank G-d, does not mean that the threat in South Africa is less than elsewhere. The threat is real. And it must be countered constantly. But, we have been spared the daily antisemitism in the streets and at work that for Jews elsewhere in the diaspora has, sadly, become routine.

Jews in countries to which South African Jews once looked with envy are dealing with unprecedented levels of intimidation, hostility, antisemitic rhetoric and fear. In many of those countries, Jews relied for years on their governments and public institutions to protect them and keep antisemitism

at the margins. Now, in a massive way, many feel let down.

In London, little boys wear caps to hide their kippot and jackets to cover the school badges on their blazers so that no one will know they are Jews. In Canada, according to a recent survey, a staggering 96% of Jewish university students have experienced antisemitism on campus.

And here in South Africa – despite the position of the government, despite the ICJ case, despite the anti-Israel rhetoric – Jews can live with dignity, pride and freedom. We build shuls. We run Jewish schools. We walk in the streets as proud Jews. We gather publicly for mitzvahs. We defend Israel. We criticise the government. We speak freely.

That freedom is precious.

And this relatively low level of antisemitism is not a quirk of fate. It emerges from who we are as a country.

South Africa is an extraordinarily tolerant country that genuinely embraces diversity. Our national motto “unity in diversity” is not an empty platitude. It reflects the values and spirit of the people. Outsiders can mistakenly believe that Nelson Mandela was an anomaly. But we know that he reflected something deep in ordinary South Africans across the length and breadth of this country: patience, forgiveness, respect, empathy, faith, and an instinctive understanding of human dignity.

This is also a deeply religious country. In towns and villages across South Africa, churches stand at the centre of community life. Millions of faithful South Africans have a deep love for the Bible, for Jerusalem, and for Israel.

I have experienced this myself. I have stood in FNB Stadium before 100,000 Christians and spoken about Israel and Jerusalem, and received thunderous applause. I have met church leaders whose communities pray constantly for Israel and Jerusalem. This is part of the spiritual landscape of our country.

The ANC's anti-Israel stance is one expression of its deeper alienation from the fundamental values of this country – faith, family, freedom, hard work, responsibility, and respect for human dignity. It is no accident that its support continues to crater, with recent SRF polling showing the party slipping below 50% even among black, rural, township and low-income voters – the very constituencies that were once the foundation of its political dominance. The government's position on Israel does not reflect the values of the majority of South Africans.

And so, for the first time in our history, South Africa has moved from being seen as the bottom rung of Jewish options to being one of the best places in the diaspora for a Jew to live with pride and dignity.

This too is part of our golden age.

3. Our self-reliance and innovation

The third reason this is the golden age of our community is our remarkable innovation, resilience and self-reliance.

A rabbi from the UK recently said to me that South African Jewry may be best positioned to handle the post-October 7 reality, because we have never depended on government in the way other diaspora communities have. For decades, we have learned self-reliance.

With good reason, we have never relied on the government to educate our children, protect our shuls, fund our schools, provide for the vulnerable, feed the hungry, keep our streets safe, or sustain our Jewish institutions.

An apparent obstacle has become one of our greatest strengths. Yes, we know that the government should do its job. But we do not sit back and wait helplessly. We act.

This is the opposite of a victim mentality, which is passive, helpless and resentful. In this context it says: the government should do its job, and if it does not, all we can do is complain helplessly and resentfully.

Our community has taken a different approach – self-reliance, resilience, taking responsibility for ourselves. Not outsourcing our fate to others. We are proactive and always looking to take the initiative.

The CSO protects our schools, shuls and communal events with professionalism and devotion, and works with state security to thwart potential terror attacks. Hatzolah in Johannesburg and CSO Medical in Cape Town respond at those critical moments when every minute, sometimes every second, is the difference between life and death.

The Chevrah Kadisha, Jewish Community Services Cape Town, Yad Aharon, and all our welfare organisations ensure people in our community are cared for with dignity. Our Jewish day schools deliver Torah and general education to our children with outstanding dedication and excellence.

CAP's cutting-edge, intelligence-led security operations, working with police and prosecutors, have dramatically reversed violent crime trends, even as they have surged elsewhere in the country. And CAP Green works with communities and municipalities to renew neighbourhoods, restore parks and public spaces, fix street lighting and transform daily life. And, we have our own vibrant and proud Jewish media, with Chai FM, Jewish Report, Jewish Life and all the regional publications giving voice to everything we do.

We do not outsource our destiny to others. We work with government where we can. But we take responsibility for what needs to be done. At the same time, uplifting the country at large by building businesses, employing many people, growing the economy, leading the way in fields such as medicine, law, technology and innovation, while driving high-impact social welfare initiatives improving access to water, food, housing, education and jobs for all South Africans.

We have built a community that can hold its head high in a free country. A community with the capacity to do what needs to be done in order to protect life, educate children, care for the vulnerable, support families, strengthen neighbourhoods and serve the broader society.

We are doing all of this at a scale unmatched in the history of our community – another reason to call this our golden age.

4. More Jewish than ever

The fourth reason this is the golden age of South African Jewry: the unprecedented flourishing of Judaism in our community.

To understand the scale of the transformation, consider a newspaper article published in the 1930s, which records an interview between a journalist from a secular Jewish newspaper and Rabbi Yitzchak Kossowsky zt”l, the Rosh Beth Din of Johannesburg. The journalist challenged the rabbi, saying that the youth were leaving Judaism in droves and that its future prospects were bleak.

And now, look at the reversal! The sceptics were totally wrong. We have one of the highest rates of enrolment in Jewish day schools of any diaspora community (around 85-90%).

Judaism is thriving especially among our young people, with an extraordinary surge in involvement among high-school

teenagers and university students, and a remarkable return to Torah, mitzvahs and Jewish pride.

Those who remember Jewish life here in the 1970s have told me there were so few people who kept Shabbos fully, they knew each one by name. By 2019, the Kaplan/JPR survey found that 21% of South African Jews were fully Shabbos observant.

That number has continued to grow, and in Johannesburg, is now believed to be over 30%. The upward trend is only getting stronger because it is particularly noticeable among young families, with around half of families with schoolgoing children keeping Shabbos.

That is an extraordinary transformation.

A 2023 study published in Contemporary Jewry under the title “Bucking the Trend” found what we all know to be true: that South African Jews are unusual among Jewish communities today, with more people moving towards greater Jewish observance than away from it. The report referenced “the mushrooming shuls”, noting that Jewish observance in South Africa has become “mainstream” and “more popular” than the alternative, and how the country offers “optimal conditions” for this pronounced Torah growth.

And we see this growth not only in the data, but in the bricks and mortar of Jewish life. Across the country, communities are building, renovating, expanding and investing in the future.

Here are just a few recent examples of what is happening:

Pine Street Shul is building an entirely new home in Orchards, part of a remarkable reinvigoration of a community that is growing again.

Sandton Shul has rolled out astonishing state-of-the-art upgrades, including a youth centre and events venue, padel courts, jungle gyms, recreational areas and spaces for families to gather, the infrastructure that supports the shul's dynamic Torah learning and personal growth programmes and regular trips to Israel, driven by nine on-campus rabbis and five teaching couples.

In recent years, **Linksfeld Shul**, through its major rebuild, has been transformed into a vibrant shul with a growing membership and community centre. **Sydenham Shul** refreshed its campus and built a new youth centre. And the **Yeshiva Gedolah of Johannesburg** moved across town and built a new campus.

More recently, **Shaarei Chaim** has built a magnificent new shul to keep pace with its bustling growth, its grounds jam-packed every Shabbos with prams and young, growing families.

Chassidim Shul has built a stunning new campus on a large piece of land in Orchards for its fast-growing community of young families. Just a few years ago, **Yeshiva College** did a major renovation of its big shul and now has embarked on a major upgrade of the entire school campus.

The Base has expanded, buying a big property next door for an educational centre and recreational facilities. **Sunny Road Shul** has bought surrounding properties to create beautiful rolling gardens for social events and play areas. And the **Yad Avraham** minyan, having outgrown their premises on the Yeshiva College campus, have built their own shul.

New shul buildings are being built by **Chabad of Hyde Park** and **Chabad of Hurlingham**. A new, thriving community in **Sandringham** is breaking ground on a new shul building, after davening for the last four years in a temporary structure.

Bnei Akiva has recently done a major revamp of its shul and HQ in Glenhazel, reflecting its dramatic growth in recent years. **Achim**, an exciting new youth movement, recently built a brand new campus to house its vibrant programmes. **Ohr Somayach Sandton** is growing in numbers and is in the process of upgrading its outdoor children's play area with a multisport court and a brand new playground.

Rabbi Moffson's Shul, one of the most successful startup minyans in the city overflows with young people of all levels of observance growing in their connection to Judaism. And his new weekday shul, **The Arch**, built by the Vatit Group and housed in their offices in Melrose Arch, has become a dynamic hub where Jews who work in the area come daven and learn every day.

There are new developments happening with our schools, with **Torah Academy Girls** now in their brand new beautiful campus. **King David Linksfield** is a particularly powerful

example. In the wake of the closure of the Victory Park campus, investment has poured into the school, transforming its campus into a stunning example of global excellence, including state-of-the-art educational and sports facilities.

Judaism is growing exponentially in Cape Town with many new developments. **Marais Road Shul** in Cape Town has remodelled and renewed one of the city's historic shuls for a new generation. There are many new Torah initiatives in Cape Town, including a new **Yeshiva in Milnerton** that students have moved to Cape Town for. And there is a new **Kollel in Sea Point**, which has four young rabbinic families that are relocating from the US, UK and Israel, to make their homes in South Africa.

Ohr Somayach Cape Town did a major refurbishment and redevelopment of their beautiful shul, a designated national heritage site, and its surrounding campus. **Morasha** rebuilt its entire shul that was destroyed in a fire, and the **Cape UOS** did a major repurposing of its HQ into a multi-purpose community space.

Constantia is building its first dedicated shul building. And **Herzlia** schools has recently invested in major new facilities for its students. **Chabad of the West Coast** has recently put up the city's second *eiruv* and is in the process of building a new mikvah for the area.

Student outreach in Cape Town is thriving, with **Ohrsom Student** now in a new headquarters building in Sea Point for Torah learning, Shabbos and other programmes, while

Chabad on Campus has recently opened a beautifully revamped centre in the student heartland of Rondebosch.

These are only some of the building projects. And the buildings are not the full story. The deeper growth is being driven by amazingly talented and dedicated rabbis and rebbetzins, supported by committed volunteers. The building projects are the outward expression of something more important: people engaging, learning, davening, joining, giving and growing.

I have focused on the building because they show that as a community we are not cutting back and consolidating. We are not holding back. We are spiritual entrepreneurs, looking for the next growth opportunity, investing in the future.

These building projects are a sign of a community alive with energy and purpose, and they reveal something powerful: donors willing to invest, growing young families choosing to stay and build, new and old communities expanding, and institutions planning not merely for next year, but for the next generation.

This is what vibrancy looks like in concrete form: shuls, schools, mikvahs, classrooms, playgrounds, youth centres and community spaces are popping up everywhere, reflecting the vibrancy of South African Jewry.

Our world-class halachic infrastructure is another sign of the strength of our community. The halachic standards of our Beth Din are highly regarded by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate and other rabbinic authorities around the world.

There is a dedicated team of inspiring rabbis and rebbetzins, who lead this community in shuls and schools nationwide, with a shared vision and in a spirit of unity. Kashrut is growing rapidly. Kosher SA, the UOS's nationwide Kashrut department, is considered among the best in the world, certifying a staggering 60,000 products, and overseeing the kashrut of more than 120 food service establishments around the country.

In 2025, *shechita* and kosher meat production rose by 19%, indicating that more people are eating kosher. And in the last year, the number of kosher certified functions jumped by 53%. The number of lulav sets sold has increased twenty-fold since the 1980s.

The signs of thriving Jewish life are everywhere. In the 1970s there were only 2 mikvahs in Johannesburg. Today, there are 8, with a new one under construction in Orchards, and a total of 14 nationwide. Up until the 90s, there was no *eiruv* anywhere. Today, there are *eiruv*s in Pretoria, Sea Point and Blouberg, and 8 *eiruv*s in Johannesburg – the combined area of the latter is more than three times the size of the Jerusalem *eiruv*.

Our connection to Israel is also among the strongest in the Jewish world. The Kaplan/JPR survey found that a remarkable 90% of South African Jews feel attached to Israel, and that 89% have visited Israel, most more than once. Aliyah figures, too, are strikingly good by global comparison.

At its peak, South African Jewry numbered around 120,000, and today we are just over 50,000. But the strength of a community is not measured only in quantity. It is measured in quality.

Measured in these terms, South African Jewry is one of the strongest Jewish communities in the world. In the quality of Jewish life – in mitzvah observance, in Torah learning, in chesed, in unity, in shuls, in schools, in the quality and quantity of rabbis and rebbetzins, in outreach, in youth programmes, in Jewish pride – we have never been stronger.

And here is a particularly encouraging sign: the number of *brisses* in Johannesburg and Cape Town rose significantly in 2025. Birthrates are up. Our community is growing, building and looking to the future.

Now what?

And so, in an unexpected twist of fate, it turns out that South African Jews are experiencing the golden age of our 185-year history here on the southern tip of Africa. We have never had it this good.

We live in a moderate, tolerant society, in the context of an increasingly hostile world for Jews. We are free to pursue our future on our own terms, with pride, dignity, and confidence, and are becoming more Jewish than ever.

Where else in the diaspora do you have that?

What a tragedy it would be to live through a golden age and not to notice, to be surrounded by Hashem's blessings and not recognise them, to spend our days anxious about what is missing, while failing to be grateful for what we have.

But more important than basking in this golden age, we must double down on it. Let us seize this historic opportunity to ensure that our golden age continues, and becomes even brighter, with greater investment, strength and commitment. Let's go all in.

How do we do that?

The starting point is to know how we got here. Let us first acknowledge and give thanks to Hashem for His blessings that have made this golden age possible. Everything we have comes from Him.

Let us also remember our role in how we got here. Our Sages teach that we must strive to be Hashem's, "partner in creation." That means that Hashem wants us to move beyond passive gratitude to become His proactive partners in creating a better world.

This has been the story of South African Jewry. Hashem has blessed us, and this community has responded as His partners by building schools, shuls, welfare organisations, security structures, medical response, youth movements, outreach programmes, Torah institutions and homes filled with Jewish life.

We must remember, also, how we fought as Hashem's partners to help shape the South Africa in which this golden age could flourish. South African Jews played an extraordinary role in the struggle against apartheid, out of all proportion to our numbers.

Since the birth of freedom and democracy, in particular, we have been Hashem's partners in protecting and securing our community, against political intimidation, terror and crime.

We built our community through resilience, self-reliance, innovation, through refusing to be a victim and passively accept our fate. And we have become more Jewish in the process – more connected to Torah and mitzvahs, prouder of who we are.

We fought for our place in South Africa. Post October 7, as a community we stood with pride and dignity to face down a hostile government. We rallied for Israel at countless events so well led and organised by the South African Zionist Federation.

I felt compelled to speak out against the South African government's false, libellous accusations against the State of Israel and, by extension, the Jewish people. And you gave me that strength and confidence.

When a government accuses the Jewish state of genocide in the aftermath of the worst massacre of Jews since the Holocaust, silence is not an option. There's no room for

political accommodation or appeasement, no option to cower in fear.

We had to stand up, and that's why we did. It was the right thing to do. And we are safer and stronger for it.

We have our dignity and self-respect because we bravely stood up for our principles, for our right to be proud Jews who love and admire Israel. For some this has meant making aliyah, answering the call of the ages. For others, this means being a proud Zionist in South Africa, defending the justice of the cause of the State of Israel.

And we can do this precisely because we live in a free country. Our freedom means little if we are afraid to use it. It is because we have stood our ground that we can enjoy the fruits of this golden age.

We must remember this going forward. For the golden age to continue, we must continue to act as Hashem's partners. There's no room for weakness or a victim mentality. There's no room to waver, to lose confidence. We have to stand up for the State of Israel, for Zionism, for Torah, for our values – for who we are. And when we do that with courage and strength, we increase our blessings.

Let us not wait to see what the future brings us. Let us not passively try to predict the future. As Hashem's partners, let us proactively create the future we want.

Three-point-plan for the Golden Age

I believe that to extend and deepen this golden age we need three key things: enough people to make it vibrant, enough money to sustain it, and the right values to ensure its worth and purpose. There are three mitzvahs that guarantee these goals.

1. People: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28)

The future of any Jewish community depends on its birth rate. On the mitzvah of having children. It's not complicated.

As I wrote in this publication last year – if young Jews marry Jewish, have many children, and raise them as Jews, our community will grow. If they do not, we will shrink.

That is it. Nothing more. Nothing less. It is not complicated.

Because this issue is so important, last year I dedicated this annual publication to it, calling on our community to rally around this cause. It starts with marriage. That is why I recently established the Matchmaker Network – to create a network of volunteer matchmakers to make introductions. This is one of the greatest acts of kindness we can do. We all know people. We can all make introductions. We can all help build Jewish families.

And we can all support and encourage families to have as many children as possible to be raised as Jews.

Once children's physical needs are met, the most sacred obligation of any Jewish parent is to provide them with a Torah education. A Jewish day school is not a luxury. It is the lifeline that carries our Jewish identity from one generation to the next. And as a community we must encourage and support every Jewish family to give their children a Torah education at a Jewish school.

Every Jewish child also needs to know how to live as a Jew – how to daven, how to learn Torah, how to keep mitzvahs, how to belong to the Jewish people, how to feel pride and love for Hashem and His Torah.

This happens in schools. It also happens at home.

The future of South African Jewry will not be written in Parliament, or in the courts, or in the newspapers, or at the United Nations, nor in the halls of the ICJ. It will be written in our homes: in the children we raise, and the choices we make as parents, in the Jewish values that permeate their lives, in the schools we choose for them, in the homes we create for them.

Jewish history is made in Jewish homes.

2. Money: Give 10%

The second part of the blueprint for a continued golden age is money. Without it we cannot afford to be self-reliant. Security organisations need money. Welfare organisations need money. Medical response needs money. Schools need money. Shuls need money. Torah learning in yeshivas and kollels needs money. Youth programmes, outreach programmes, mental health support, kashrut, education, care for the elderly, support for young families – all of it needs to be funded.

When used properly, money is holy. The Talmud uses the word *damim*, literally blood, to refer to money: just as blood gives life when it flows through the body, money gives life when it flows through society. This is why the mitzvah of tzedakah is so central, which our Sages define as giving at least 10%.

In the 2023 edition of this publication, I wrote about this halachic obligation. At the time, I claimed – and I still stand by it – that if everyone in our community gave their 10%, we could meet every need, and still have so much surplus we wouldn't know what to do with it.

I based this on what I've witnessed within our community, and on what the Vilna Gaon said hundreds of years ago: that if everyone gave their 10%, there would be no poverty. There is enough money in the world to meet all needs, if it is given in the way Hashem has instructed us to give.

As a community, we can afford to solve every problem that money can solve. When we give tzedakah, we become Hashem's partners in creation. We refuse to accept the world as it is. We help build the world as it ought to be.

As we approach a new year, each of us can do this in a practical way. Calculate your 10%. Set it aside. Plan it seriously, as you would plan any other major financial responsibility. Speak to your rabbi if you need guidance. Make tzedakah not an occasional act, but a foundation of your life.

If we do this, we will unleash a wave of blessing and growth in our community.

3. Values: Keep Shabbos

The third part of the blueprint is keeping Shabbos – the G-d-given source of our Jewish values, and the key to extending and deepening our golden age.

It's an established fact of history: only Jewish communities that keep Shabbos continue to exist as Jewish communities. You can test that hypothesis. Without Shabbos, Jews disappear. You'd be hard-pressed to find a self-identifying Jew today whose family has remained Jewish after five generations of not keeping Shabbos.

Throughout Jewish history, up until the 19th century, the vast majority of Jews kept Shabbos. That's just how it was. And so

we continued as a nation. But then, in the 19th century, with emancipation and the forces of assimilation that it brought, a great rupture happened within the Jewish world, to the point where, from having 90% of Jews in the world keeping Shabbos, it went in the opposite direction, with 90% not keeping it. The results have been catastrophic.

In America today: the assimilation rate outside of communities that keep Shabbos is more than 70%. That means that 70% of young Jews are marrying out of the faith, which, left unchecked, will decimate American Jewry. And that impacts everything.

Incredibly, 33% of New York's Jews voted for Zohran Mamdani as mayor, despite his obsessive anti-Israel activism, support for BDS, refusal to affirm Israel as a Jewish state, and horrific statements blaming Israel for the October 7 massacre. And half of American Jews aged 18-34 believe Israel is guilty of genocide.

It all comes down to Torah values. When you lose those values, everything falls apart: Zionism, connection to Israel, connection to Jewish peoplehood, Jewish identity itself.

Because without Torah values, the big existential question is: why continue to be a Jew? What is the point? If we're just an ethnic, cultural minority, with our foods, and quaint customs and traditions, why continue the fight? What is the meaning and the purpose of being a Jew? Why should we not marry out of the faith? Without values, marrying Jewish is a form of narrow chauvinism.

But if we believe that being a Jew is not just about surviving as an ethnic, cultural minority, but as a nation with a divine mission and a G-d-given purpose, that changes everything. The only true answer to apathy and assimilation is to understand why we should be Jewish in the first place.

And Shabbos is the source of our values, of our vitality as Jews. It is a fortress of faith, reminding us every week why we are Jews. It contains all of our most precious, sacred, and eternal Jewish values. It teaches us that we have a Creator, and our lives have purpose, and the power of Jewish destiny.

Shabbos is the only guarantee that our children and grandchildren remain Jewish, and that our community continues to thrive. And it creates a space for families to bond and connect and nurture loving relationships. It builds community. And it is the ultimate formula for happiness and quality of life, so that we do not become consumed by work, the emptiness of a virtual existence and the stress of surviving in a turbulent world. It is an island of peace and goodness.

And that is why I have dedicated so much time and effort as Chief Rabbi to bring Shabbos to our community. I founded the Shabbos Project in 2013, and now we are preparing for a major revamp and reboot for the project to engage participants throughout the year and not just for one Shabbos. Other projects, which made a contribution for a time, have come and gone.

But the Shabbos Project is not just a project. It is the very life force of our community, not because of the project, but because of Shabbos. We can't give up on Shabbos, it must remain central to who we are.

I would like to suggest that we set ourselves an audacious, history-making goal – to become the very first Jewish community in the world, since the great rupture of Jewish life in the 19th century, in which the majority keep Shabbos every week. If we achieve this, we will guarantee a vibrant and inspired future for our community.

Our Ultimate Destination

If we live by this three-point plan – have many children, give 10% and keep Shabbos – then we will find the golden age of South African Jewry has barely begun.

As we reflect on this golden age, we should remember that 185 years of our community's history is a relatively short moment in the nearly 4,000-year sweep of Jewish history.

We must never lose sight of the fact that we are an ancient people. Our roots go back 3,838 years to Abraham, 3,338 years to when G-d said at Mount Sinai, "I am the Lord your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt." (Exodus 20:2)

This is not just a matter of historical curiosity. It is the source of our identity, and the meaning and purpose behind everything we do. It reminds us that our ultimate purpose is not to create an eternal South African Jewish community, that our eternal destiny is bound up with *Am Yisrael*, an

eternal nation who received our sacred mission from the Creator Himself, bound by a sacred covenant to be His people, to reflect His light in the world, and carry His Name through history.

Let us remember that our time on the southern tip of Africa is just one stop along the journey of millennia. And in this journey through history, the ultimate destination of every Jewish community is the final redemption with the ingathering of our people to Israel. When that happens, the Talmud (Megillah 29a) records a Divine promise that all the shuls and places of Torah learning will be miraculously transported to Jerusalem.

All that is sacred which we have built here over the last 185 years will come with us as we return and prepare for the new and glorious era of the final redemption for the Jewish people and all of humanity, when “nation will not lift up sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore... the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the oceans.” (Isaiah 2:4, 11:9)

The road to this destination is bumpy and challenging, with many twists and turns. The convulsions of the Jewish world today since October 7, in Israel and across the diaspora, are part of a much longer story, one that has included periods of sovereignty and stability, as well as exile, persecution and upheaval.

Our generation has been blessed by G-d with a return of Jewish sovereignty in the land of Israel, with many great trials as well. But in the end, Hashem has promised the long and winding journey of our people will reach its ultimate destination.

Until then, our job is to be loyal and brave, to live according to the Torah and its mitzvahs, to stand ready to defend the Jewish people and the State of Israel, to contribute to the upliftment of humanity, and above all to ensure that the next generation of Jews carries forward the faith and vision of Sinai, our Torah and mitzvahs, so that we can make it to the end of history intact.

If we do this, we will have played our historic part in the long journey of the Jewish people, etching our place in eternity en route to our glorious destination. May that time come soon.

chief

Rabbi Warren Goldstein

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