

WITH ACHDUS AND SHALOM

The South
African
Kehillah's
Pandemic
Response

by **VICKI BELOVSKI**

On March 23, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa imposed a nationwide three-week lockdown on the country, effective from midnight on March 26. Shuls across the country had already closed the previous week, amid rising numbers of coronavirus cases. This all sounds very familiar — a scenario sadly repeated around the world. But what makes the South African *kehillah* special was their unified response to the lockdown, and the way in which they reopened their shuls, mostly by Rosh Chodesh Elul.



Hamodia spoke to **Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein** to discover what is special about the South African *kehillah*. Rabbi Goldstein's repeated refrain during the conversation was, "Everything was done with *achdus* and *shalom*," which seems to characterize the running of the *kehillah* in general.



RABBI GOLDSTEIN IS THE FIRST SOUTH AFRICAN-BORN CHIEF RABBI OF THE COUNTRY,

and the youngest to be appointed to the position, at age 32, in December 2003. During his time in office he has created a number of programs that have been shared worldwide, the most well-known of which is The Shabbos Project, which he launched in 2013. But leading a *kehillah* of around 60,000 Jews and 90 shuls through a global pandemic was a completely new and difficult challenge.

How did Rabbi Goldstein manage? He explained that the rabbinate works together, across *hashkafos*. There are shuls in South Africa led by Rabbanim from all parts of the religious spectrum, and Rabbi Goldstein put a lot of effort into making sure everyone works as a cohesive unit, “*b’achdus u’v’shalom*.”

Lockdown

The week before the President announced the lockdown, shuls had already shut on the advice of the Chief Rabbi and the *Beth Din*. Unlike in some countries, where shul umbrella organizations told their constituent members that they must close, in South Africa, each shul could make its own decision, but closure was strongly recommended. Jewish schools also shut down before the Ministry of Education closed the whole school system. This put the *kehillah* slightly ahead of the curve in terms of minimizing exposure to the virus.

As the virus began to spread, even before the shuls closed, Rabbi Goldstein and the South African community turned to expert doctors for their advice, calling on such eminent medical professionals as Dr. Richard Friedland, CEO of Netcare, a leading health care provider in South Africa, and Professor Barry Schoub, emeritus professor in virology at the University of the Witwatersrand, and



founder and former director of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD). All three men are *shomer Torah u'mitzvos*, which gave them the unique ability to balance the needs of the *kehillah* with the medical imperatives.

Prior to the shul closure, at the beginning of March, guidelines about hygiene, social distancing and quarantine were sent to all shuls in South Africa. The situation worsened so quickly that in less than a fortnight, shuls were requested to close.

The letter requesting the closure, signed by the Chief Rabbi, the *Beis Din*, the South African Rabbinical Association and the Rabbinical Association of the Western Cape, said, “In consultation with and support of world halachic authority Rabbi Osher Weiss, it is with a heavy heart that we recommend that people *daven* at home, on their own, without a *minyan*, and that shul services no longer take place at this stage.”

It would be only another week until all places of worship were forced to close, as the lockdown began.

PROFESSOR EFRAIM KRAMER SPEAKS TO HAMODIA



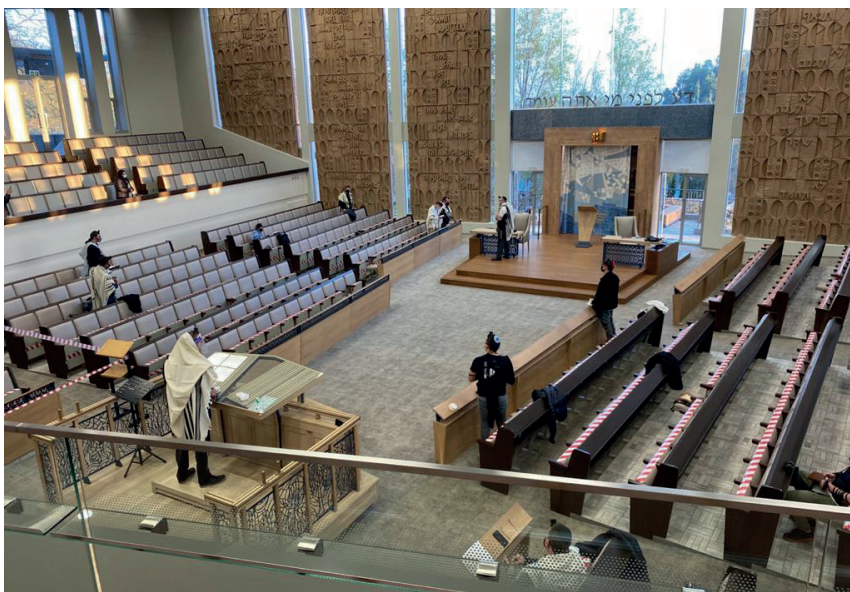
Professor Kramer kindly answered some questions from *Hamodia*.

How did you get involved in the *kehillah* project?

I wrote a protocol for Return to Shul for my shul which was forwarded to the Chief Rabbi, *shlita*, who then gave me a call, and that is how I became involved. The Chief Rabbi needed an urgent protocol on how to safely begin weddings again and that was the first protocol I wrote; *baruch Hashem* it was for a *simchah*. Then came a Return to Shul protocol, Yom Tov Services protocol, Bar Mitzvah Protocol and then a Safe *Seudah* Suggestions protocol. I'm now busy on Sukkos/Hoshanah Rabbah/Simchas Torah protocols.

You are a specialist in Emergency Medicine and Sport Medicine. How did you bring your expert knowledge to bear on this issue, which is a different sort of situation?

There is a history to this. I am an Emergency Physician with a particular interest in Mass Gathering and Disaster Medicine over the past 35 years, a non-rehabilitatable adrenaline junkie. That has taken me to earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and floods. The Mass Gathering Medicine introduced me to football, then FIFA [Football World Cup], and I became a medical consultant for FIFA on Mass Gathering Medical Servic-



es. I've attended seven different FIFA World Cups, the last as Chief Medical Officer for the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018. It's with this background where I am used to arranging and organizing Mass Gathering Events that I wrote the initial protocols on how to get people back to doing various events in safety.

Because the Return to Shul protocol was 31 pages long (initially) I realized that it would be necessary to visit the shuls and have an onsite inspection and audit, to make a personal plan for each one and explain the protocol to each shul Rabbi and Chairman.

So, I visited 69 shuls in Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria and on the first night of Rosh Hashanah, it became operational, *baruch Hashem*. [As explained in the article, shuls in South Africa opened by region from August, but they were all open, *baruch Hashem*, for Rosh Hashanah.]

How did it feel when the shuls reopened and you had been part of the team which facilitated that?

I have been privileged by Hashem to have been given an opportunity of undertaking a rare *mitzvah* that comes to a few people every 100 or more years by trying to make the shuls safe for everyone to return to, in order to be who we are, do what we need to do and just come together as one. It can only be in the merit of those who came before me in Lithuania that I have such a *mitzvah* to perform.

Do you have any other thoughts to share with us on this amazing process?

After visiting 69 shuls, and attending to *mikveh* operational safety, weddings on-site as supervisor, consulting catering firms on how to function safely, informing families how to make a *seudah* safe for guests, helping to put the chicken *kapparos* plan into place and many more questions, queries, concerns and considerations, I have come to see just how special, unique and blessed the Jewish Nation is and how, when we need to, we come together and we make it happen...we make a plan. Blessed are we.

Professor Kramer is Adjunct Professor: Division of Emergency Medicine, University of the Witwatersrand; Extraordinary Professor: Section Sport Medicine, University of Pretoria; Specialist Emergency Physician: Emergency Department: Thelle Mogoerane Regional Hospital.

Tefillah: Together From Our Homes

South Africa is a religious country: the President himself described the nation as “a people of deep faith.” On the eve of the lockdown, President Ramaphosa called for a period of national prayer, in the early evening, before the closure began at midnight. The President made this decision, following discussions with religious leaders, including the Chief Rabbi. Rabbi Goldstein observed that the religious leadership had several meetings during the lockdown with the President and cabinet ministers, in which he participated.

“These are challenging times. We are traversing a path we have never traveled before. There are many amongst us who are fearful, uncertain and vulnerable. I call on our people to offer a prayer and a thought for the protection and healing of our land and its people from this disease,” President Ramaphosa said.

The *kehillah* responded by setting up *Tehillim* groups, and Rabbi Goldstein publicized this, saying, “Today, together, let us join people of all faiths across the breadth of this country, in praying to G-d for health and healing and for an end to the pandemic.” He had previously called for *kehillah* members to undertake a half-day fast on *Yom Kippur Kattan*, Erev Rosh Chodesh Nisan, the previous day, in combination with an ongoing recital of *sefer Tehillim*.



Giving out literature on how to stay safe in South Africa.



Chizuk

Although the closure was after Purim, Pesach and Shavuot both fell during the lockdown and it was necessary to provide *chizuk*, resources and practical help to the *kehillah*. Before the first Shabbos of the lockdown, Rabbi Goldstein urged everyone to “keep it together,” the slogan of The Shabbos Project. Before *Shabbos Hagadol*, he led 10 other Chief Rabbis including Chief Rabbi David Lau and Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Yosef of Israel and Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis of the U.K., in a call to the Jewish community around the world to join together by keeping Shabbos, calling someone before Shabbos to wish them a good Shabbos and adding an extra *tefillah* during *licht bentchen*, making it “a Shabbat of kindness, a Shabbat of prayer and a Shabbat of connection to the Divine.”

For Pesach itself, the community produced “All Together Now — A Unity Haggadah Companion,” with contributions from Rabbanim and Rebbetzins around the country, available for free download. As Rabbi Goldstein said, “We may be apart, but we can still make this year’s *Sedarim* the best and most meaningful we have ever experienced.” This continued the theme of communal *achdus*, which the Chief Rabbi said is “a well-established value in the country for many generations.”

Before Shavuot, there was another joint initiative



COMMENT FROM RABBI YECHESKEL AUERBACH, RAV OF OHR SOMAYACH, JOHANNESBURG

Ohr Somayach opened up on Rosh Chodesh Elul with *davening* in the parking lot, and after two weeks moved into the shul. On Rosh Hashanah, we had three separate *minyanim*. There is a feeling of elation and gratitude to *Hashem Yisborach* that we have come this far. During the lockdown, all the *shiurim* carried on via Zoom, and actually we had more people participating in the many *shiurim* than before the pandemic, because it was easier for people not to go out of their homes to participate!

We tried to reach out especially to people who are on their own, and we gave out gifts from time to time to maintain contact with them. The Chief Rabbi held weekly seminars for the Rabbanim and the South African Rabbinical Association organized many wonderful videos of *shiurim* and music from overseas and local people which were a great success and support to the South African Jewish community. The fact that there is one Chief Rabbi and one *Beis Din* proved to be an incredible asset in unifying the community during this very difficult time.

of Chief Rabbis, calling for Jewish unity, reflecting the theme of “*k’ish echad b’lev echad*.”

Medical Advice

As the weeks passed, the *chizuk* continued. Each week during the lockdown, Rabbi Goldstein hosted a webinar for the whole *kehillah*, which combined a briefing or question-and-answer session with medical experts, followed by a special guest speaker. The guests ranged from frontline doctors, through prominent politicians and business experts, to well-known Rabbanim. As everything was carried out by video conference, it was possible to interview international speakers such as Rabbi Berel Wein, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and Harav Yisrael Meir Lau, *shlita*.

Rabbi Goldstein stressed the importance of the regular medical briefing. This enabled the *kehillah* to be fully up to date with the COVID-19 trends and figures, and set the stage for the shuls to reopen when the lockdown eased. Dr. Friedland had a team of epidemiologists study the situation in Vietnam, where the virus hit earlier than in South Africa, and produce graphs accordingly, to model the expected pattern of events.

One of the key features that stood out during the conversation with Rabbi Goldstein was the clear lines of communication between the Chief Rabbi, the Rabbanim, the lay leadership of the shuls and the *kehillah* as a whole. This meant that when President Ramaphosa announced toward the end of May that places of worship would be allowed to open from June 1, the Chief Rabbi was able to share openly with the *kehillah* the decision-making process which went on, as to whether it was really safe for shuls to open or not.

To begin the process, Rabbi Goldstein consulted his team of medical experts, Dr. Friedland, Professor Kramer and Professor Schoub, who set clear criteria as to when they felt it would be safe to reopen. They said this would be when the rate of infection (the R number) was less than one.

Moratorium

Consultations with the *Beis Din*, the Rabbanim and lay leadership followed, and



the difficult decision was taken not to open the shuls immediately, even though it was legal to do so. A letter was sent out, announcing a two-week moratorium on the shuls opening. *Chuppahs* were allowed immediately from June 1, on the shul premises and with very strict conditions.

The extra time enabled the *kehillah* to get clarity on the impact the release of lockdown would have on the number of coronavirus cases, and to formulate clear safety protocols for running shuls in the new circumstances. In fact the moratorium was extended for a further week, as the rate of infection did not fall quickly enough. During this time, there were regular meetings with doctors, Rabbanim and lay leadership. Rabbi Goldstein said that he wanted to preserve the *achdus* which had served the community so well during the lockdown. There was nothing to stop an individual shul from opening, but they all held strong and waited till the Chief Rabbi gave the go-ahead. Rabbi Goldstein credited this to having been upfront and gotten everyone on board by setting out objective criteria for the reopening.

Although some objections were raised to staying closed for longer than might seem necessary, when it came down to it

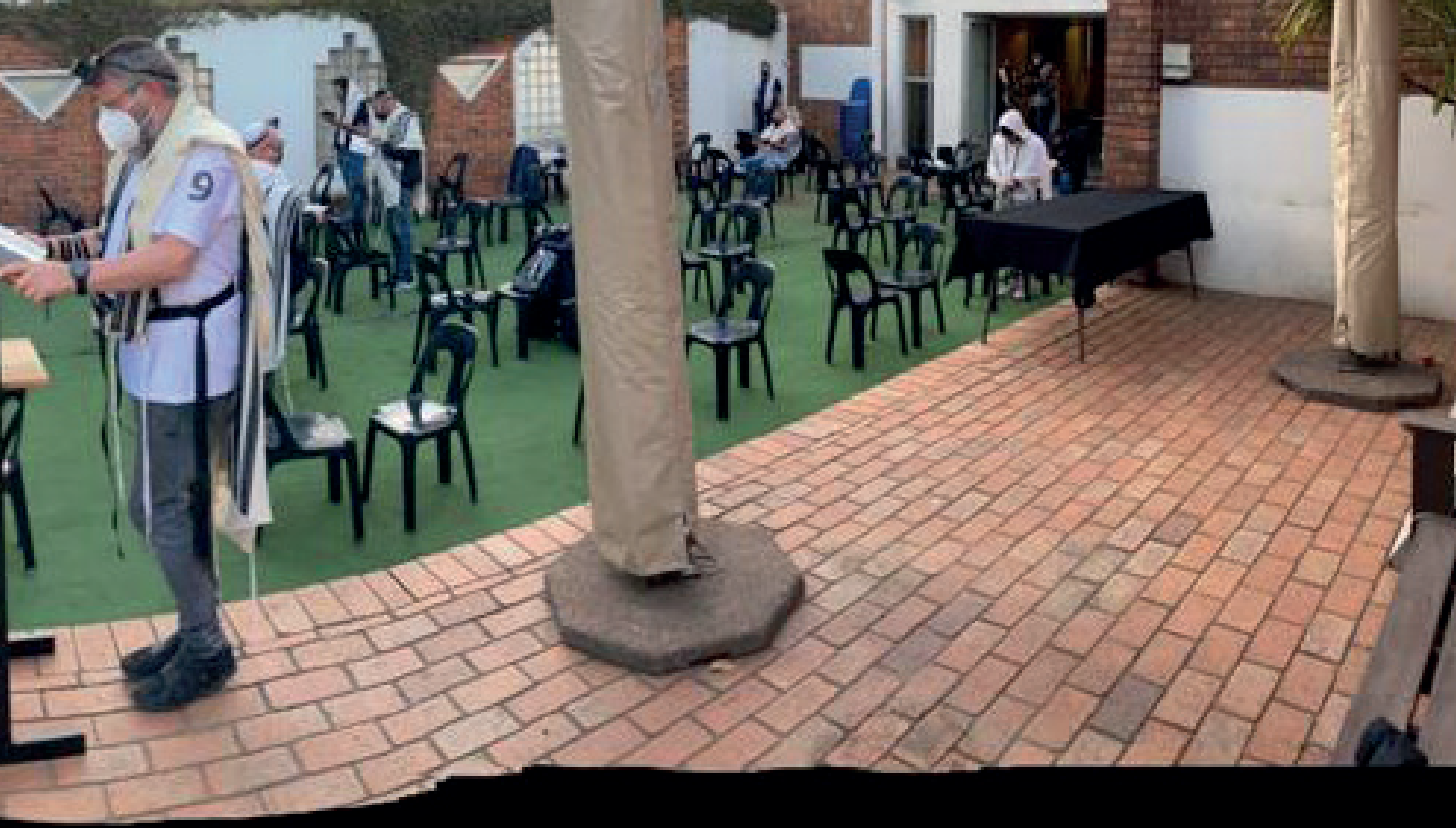
no one could argue with the numbers. Rabbi Goldstein said that “teamwork and rational discussion” saved the day.

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South Africa is a large country, divided into provinces. The majority of the Jewish population lives in Johannesburg in Gauteng province, with Cape Town in Western Cape the second *kehillah*. After that, there are a number of small *kehillas* in other provinces. The reopening advice was regionally based, to accommodate the difference in the rate of infection in different areas. Cape Town opened earlier than Johannesburg, as the virus struck there first, and peaked earlier. In Johannesburg, shuls remained shut throughout June and July, and were able to begin opening by Rosh Chodesh Elul. By Rosh Hashanah, all the shuls in the country were open.

A New Normal

The government set out strict guidelines for reopening places of worship, and these were augmented by extra health and safety protocols, drafted by Professor Efraim Kramer, a renowned expert in emergency medicine with a specialty in mass gatherings and endorsed by Professor Schoub and Dr. Friedland. They are similar to those found in many



other places — initially the *minyanim* took place outdoors (although it was winter in South Africa, which may be rainy, it does not get very cold there), with restricted numbers. A shul support team was set up, led by Professor Kramer, and made up of representatives of the *Beis Din*, Rabbinic organizations and Hatzolah. The team gave advice to shuls in terms of halachic, security and medical guidance, but each shul was ultimately responsible for its own opening.

Gradually the numbers of people attending was allowed to climb, until they reached the 50 participants allowed by the government. Temperature checks, masks, hand sanitizing are all compulsory.

The Yamim Nora'im posed some difficulties — for a start, under the government regulations, no religious service is allowed to last for more than two hours. Rabbi Goldstein said that in order to accommodate as many people as possible, shuls are running multiple *minyanim*, for example with some people coming for two hours, then a break while the shul is closed and cleaned, followed by another two hour service. Others will have *minyanim* in several locations, simultaneously.

Before Rosh Hashanah there was still a curfew in place, and Rabbi Goldstein spoke to the President to obtain special permission for the *kehillah* to hold midnight *Selichos* on Motzoei Shabbos.

Practical Help

As in other countries, the pandemic has not only had a health impact, but also a financial and economic one. The community set up a fund, the Geshher Fund, to offer interest-free loans to Jewish-owned small businesses to enable them to sit out the crisis. Funded by generous donors, it is chaired and run by business leaders, assisted by a team of

expert volunteers.

The Geshher Fund, named because it will provide a bridge to struggling businesspeople so they can reach the other side of the crisis, is a “last-resort lender,” for applicants who have pursued all other options, including the government-backed pandemic-based bank loan program.

Around 75% of Jewish children in South Africa attend Jewish schools. Most of the schools continued their studies during the lockdown with online provision. They opened when they were legally allowed to do so, some earlier than others, and inevitably, as many places are finding out for themselves, they had to close again, as children and staff became ill. By now, virtually all the schools are open and the children are back at their studies.

Going Forward

No one knows what the next few months will bring. South Africa still has a significant number of coronavirus cases. To date, over 15,000 people have died, but the recovery rate is nearly 90% overall. The *kehillah* also sadly suffered the loss of around 100 members.

As of this writing, there is still a partial lockdown in place, for example there is a curfew from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m., and a limit of 50 people at any gathering. However, the country looks and feels very different from how it did in March at the time of the very stringent initial lockdown.

Rabbi Goldstein has been quite upbeat. He and his team of medical and halachic experts, the Rabbanim, together with dedicated volunteers have safely steered the *kehillah* through the worst of the crisis, reinforced their *emunah* with constant *chizuk* and, most importantly, maintained the community as a united entity — everything with *achdus* and *shalom*! ■