

The BIG QUESTION

Crime. Corruption. Utility outages. Affirmative action. Employment equity. Should we stay or should we go? **I** BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

WE REACHED OUT TO MANY BUSINESS AND community leaders to hear their thoughts on the future of South Africa. Bravely stepping forward to share some encouraging words are: Arnold Garber, CEO of CompuClearing; Paul Harris, former CEO of FirstRand Bank; Mary Kluk, chairman of the SAJBD, Roland Sassoon, Group CEO of Sasfin; Jonathan Schlosberg, chairman emeritus of Bowman Gilfillan; and Michael Sieff, CEO of the Chevra Kadisha.

From the outset, Paul Harris waxes philosophical, "Somebody once said to me that the difference between living in South Africa and in first world countries is the difference between living in a zoo and living in the wilderness. If you live in a zoo, you're going to be fed, the lights get switched on and off, if it's too cold you get a heater, if it's too hot you get air conditioning – so things are pretty easy and safe and so on. However, in the wilderness, you have to be on edge, there's a bit of danger around, but you do see the change in seasons and the thunderstorms, the dawn in the morning, and you can run free. On the other hand, if you're an antelope and you break a leg, you're going to get eaten by a lion. But, at the end of the day, life is much more interesting. Where do you want to live: in the zoo or in the wilderness? The difference in life expectancy between the two is something like 74.5 years for the zoo vs 73.25 years for the wilderness – for that extra year, give me the wilderness!"

It was only a few years back that Harris saw one of his private emails, which admonished a friend in Australia to stop worrying about the future of South Africa and highlighted how special a place it is, go viral – and that email continues to make the rounds, especially during times of negativity like the present.

PERSPECTIVE

To begin with, everyone agrees that we need to place our present circumstances within a historical context and, as a result, hopefully get some much needed perspective. "If you go back in our history, we've put up with a lot more and survived much more difficult times than we're looking at now," explains Harris, while highlighting the incredibly dire circumstances that followed the Boer War, WWI, WWII, the atrocities of the apartheid era, as well as the chance of revolu-

tion and political chaos that came with the fall of apartheid. "The present challenges are nothing like the challenges that we've survived and overcome. That doesn't mean to say that there aren't problems in our country – but there are problems in every country."

Garber, who emigrated to South Africa over 50 years ago, notes that people have always questioned the future of South Africa. "Times have always been challenging and they are certainly challenging now. But South Africa has a certain resilience which makes it pull through the various crises it endures."

Sieff reminds us, "This is an infant democratic society – barely 22 years old. It will grow up and become older, wiser, and better. We will probably never solve our problems fully, but things will improve in some areas and worsen in others – like they do in all countries. Our ancestors, who came to this country fleeing persecution, not knowing the language or culture, often having left their families behind, worked hard and made it. I think we need to get over ourselves, put in the effort, and make amazing things happen."

Schlosberg echoes this sentiment, "Where we are now compared to where we were just over 20 years ago is quite remarkable. We are a resilient country with forgiving and good people. I see these as very important factors which, in this age of horrific acts taking place all over the world, should not be taken lightly."

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

All of the respondents agreed that developing a positive attitude is essential to liv-

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PHOTOGRAPHS: SUPPLIED

ing in South Africa. Garber notes that while crime may be up, political violence is down, and we aren't "the pariah of the world" anymore. We "can [now] count ourselves among the nations".

"If one would remain in South Africa and spend his time moaning, nothing will be achieved, he'll make himself miserable, and he'll make everyone around him miserable and despondent." The fact is that "there is far more good than bad going on in South Africa," as there are still plenty of opportunities for one to make the best of. "For me, my motto is 'stay home or go home' – stay in South Africa, or go home to Israel. I don't see the sense of facing new Diaspora challenges."

Schlosberg thoughtfully reminds us, "A significant amount of the negativity and pressures which we are experiencing at the moment are due to the present administration and leadership. One of the great things about a democracy like ours is that there are term limits and, in a few years,

we will have new leadership – and things can turn around quickly."

And Kluk emphasises, "We are all free and equal citizens of a robust democracy and, therefore, the solution to the problems our nation faces lies in our own hands."

Sieff also advises a positive outlook, "It's easy to forget how much this country has to offer in terms of culture and quality of life. It's easy, amid all of the challenges, to be bogged down and unable to see the beauty that surrounds us." Those of us who are here must "be positive, surround ourselves with positive people, and, please G-d, make a positive impact".

As Harris puts it, "Take all of the energy that you spend worrying, whinging and complaining about things – and ask what can I do to take this magnificent country

and all it can offer and create a place for me here and for my children? Can I be a contributor rather than a complainer?" As Schlosberg puts it, "We should always try to be constructive and to improve a situation and, if we can't do so, it may be better to just keep quiet."

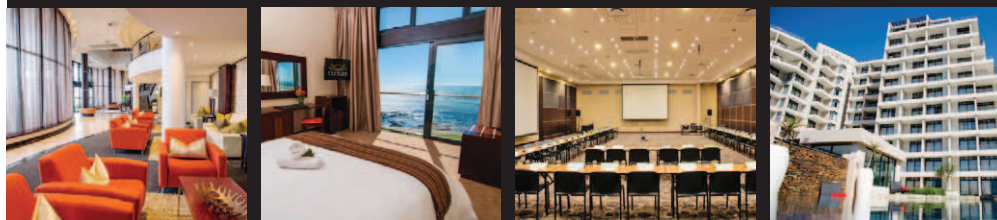
OPPORTUNITIES ABOUND

Our panel also agrees that we need to open our eyes to the tremendous opportunities that exist here. Schlosberg explains, "I believe that a very good place for entrepreneurs to be in the short, medium and long term is to be close to emerging markets, of which Africa is a huge and integral part. Therefore, there is a real opportunity for entrepreneurs who operate in South Africa, which has an economy and infrastructure



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MARY KLUK



"The nature of entrepreneurship meant that at the beginning I was focused on building a business – now I focus my time on building the people and supporting them as they build the business with our customers"
- Samuel Nassimov, Managing Director Premier Hotels & Resorts

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LEADERSHIP

which are well developed and sophisticated, compared to the nearby countries and markets where there is such potential.”

Sieff agrees, “There is a huge and growing market of consumers on this continent and South Africa leads the way on many levels.”

Sassoon adds, “There’s definitely a future for the entrepreneur in South Africa. While BEE and affirmative action provide challenges, the opportunities in business are still excellent, especially as there is a shortage of skills and privatisation is taking place by default in many industries, such as security and education.”

And Garber explains, “BEE is a good thing from a national viewpoint. A massive new black middle class has been created and this can only be good for the economy, which ultimately is good for all of us.”

Harris notes there are “environmental business factors” everywhere. In South Africa, BEE is one such environmental factor, but he contrasts that with the situation in the USA, where litigation is a significant environmental factor. “Litigation is far scarier than BEE. I’ve seen people shut down start-up businesses by tying them up in litigation.” He also notes that BEE is “a small price to pay for the transition that we’ve had and that it’s a moral thing to. We didn’t share very much in SA before – now we’re sharing. It’s part of what we have to do to make this country successful – we have to broaden the base of people who are privileged. It may not stack up entirely from a business perspective, but in terms of what it can achieve, it’s a moral thing and we shouldn’t run away from it.”

Schlosberg agrees, “Business people have



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to cope with and work around lots of unpleasant and trying things which they would prefer not to have to deal with. One can choose to harp on the negative features or concentrate on and leverage off the positive aspects. BEE is a necessary and positive development for the country and can be embraced as a practice which has the potential to improve one’s business opportunities, enable the business to operate in a more diverse environment and make a contribution to the welfare, stability, sustainability, and future of the country.”

GRASS ISN’T NECESSARILY GREENER

The respondents also agree that, although there are problems in South Africa, the grass is not necessarily greener in other places, and there are many factors to consider for anyone seriously thinking about leaving: family, emotional and cultural issues, and the ability to earn a living, just to name a few. As Schlosberg cautions, “Anyone who is considering moving to another country should look at the situation

in that country in its entirety, not only seeing the positives.”

Harris adds, “Very often, people say that they’re going to go work abroad and they wind up with a job that’s on a much lower level than they’d have had here in SA. The grass isn’t always greener on the other side. It’s just as difficult. You have to jump through the same hoops. You have to be just as good.”

Sassoon emphasises, “The world is becoming more volatile – just look at the ‘Arab spring’ and the boat people migrating to the West, the rise in terrorism and anti-Semitism and the cost of living and the displacement of workers by technology in the Western world.” Having had the experience of emigrating to Australia and deciding to return to South Africa just a few years later, Harris advises, “At the end of the day, remember that it’s very, very difficult elsewhere – it sets your life back, it consumes you.” Sieff seconds this, commenting that many of the Jews who have left South Africa for other countries have been “unable to match the quality of life that they had here”.



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THE CREAM STILL RISES

Top schools and careers are incredibly competitive no matter what country someone lives in. Schlosberg explains why the change has been so keenly felt here, “Only 20 years ago, a white child, especially a Jewish child, who wanted to go to a university of his choice, was pretty much guaranteed of being able to get in. And, similarly, such a child was pretty much guaranteed of being able to get the particular job that he wanted. All of this has now changed.” But

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PAUL HARRIS



Schlosberg says, in all likelihood, children who have difficulty getting into the courses of study and universities they want in South Africa would almost certainly not be accepted into similar programmes elsewhere in the world, as such things are very competitive everywhere. Harris compares the situation to playing a match on an uphill field – one team starts out playing uphill, but at the half, the teams switch sides and then it’s the other team’s turn to have that uphill disadvantage. And Harris echoes Schlosberg’s sentiments, “The really exceptional people do get into university programmes. In most overseas environments, you have to be exceptional to get in – it’s not a cake walk anywhere.”

Garber says, “In the private sector, top people have no difficulty in finding employment. Yes, the bar has been raised and the challenges are higher, but it’s still possible to get into universities and get the right jobs with the right experience, qualifications, skills and, above all, tenacity.” Sieff agrees, “There are a multitude of options and opportunities for good students and the world is increasingly a small place... online local and international universities offer a high standard of education,” and are another option that can be pursued.

APPRECIATE WHAT WE HAVE HERE

We also need to focus on how good we’ve got it here in many ways. Sassoon maintains, “South Africa is a great place to raise children. It has so much to offer in terms of community, open spaces, climate, domestic help, affordability, etc.”

“It’s the warmth, the cohesiveness, and the harmonies that exist within the Jewish community of South Africa that separates us from the rest of the world,” explains Garber.

And Schlosberg adds, “With the exception of Israel, there’s not a Jewish community anywhere else in the world which operates in greater freedom, with less interference, with less general expressions of anti-Semitism and under more respect than ours in South Africa. Perhaps, the American Jewish community may, on the face of it, have similar advantages, but there’s a huge assimilation rate there and, for that reason alone, I rate our community as being far superior.”

Sieff notes, “We are blessed to have a highly competent and effective community structure looking after our current and future needs.”

And Kluk echoes this, “South Africa continues to be a very good place for Jews to be,” with levels of anti-Semitism that are “strikingly low in comparison with other major Diaspora communities, and a place where Jews can with relative ease

and safety... live full, open Jewish lives while still fully participating in the affairs of the wider society.”

Harris tells his own children, “I give you roots and I give you wings. The wings can go wherever you want, but at the end of the day, there’s a lot to be said for having roots. Roots make for happiness, stability, and camaraderie. Don’t forget your roots.”

THE MARTIANS ARE COMING... TO DINNER

Schlosberg tells how some time ago, he and his wife were having dinner in a garden with some other couples. Throughout the evening, at one time or another, they spoke about “the many negative issues that we have to deal with in South Africa, which on their own, are very irritating and all of which, with decent governance, could have been avoided or improved”.

It was a beautiful summer evening. Either one or both of the spouses in each couple had good, safe jobs. All of the families were going on nice summer holidays, some local, some abroad. They all drove nice cars, which were parked in the street. They were sitting outside in a garden with no armed guards hovering around. None of them were going to be escorted home by armoured vehicles. All of their children were in good schools – mostly private, but at least one was in a government school. All Schlosberg could think of was, “If a Martian suddenly landed next to us and heard our complaints and knew about what the rest of our lives were like, the Martian would think he’d landed in a lunatic asylum!”

Maybe we just need an alien invasion to help us see things more positively. **IL**

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JONATHAN SCHLOSBERG

