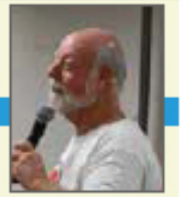
Habonim gets a much delayed HUG



DAVE BLOOM

After nearly five years in planning and several stop-starts because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Habonim Dror Southern Africa gathered in Israel last week to celebrate the past, enjoy the present, and look to the future.

Plans began, and people from the around the world started registering for the gathering in October 2020 when the coronavirus hit in March, and things came to an (almost) standstill.

To maintain momentum and connection with those who had shown interest and current and former members of the movement, Habonim created a series of lectures on Zoom called "HED – Habonim Engaging in Dialogue". That series ended up running for nearly two years with more than 60 sessions drawing more than 2 500 people to register.

Fast forward to 2022, and it was clear there was still a strong appetite for a get-together in Israel.

"Our vision was to mark the 90th anniversary in 2020 by combining the content-rich Kaleidoscope programme with the Habonim Ultimate Gathering (HUG) that would transcend a conventional reunion and look ahead to what we can do collectively to improve the world and support the movement in South Africa," said Stephen Pincus a key organiser and mastermind of the project. "We finally met in Israel for a deeply emotional and highly successful Kaleidoscope and HUG in October 2022. Now the question is, what's next?

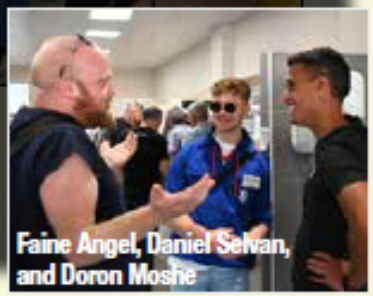
"We were blown away by the places and people we met on the tour," said participant Felicity Swerdlow (formerly of Johannesburg). "Israel continues to develop the most amazing agriculture and industries, which we were shown on the tour." She was one of the participants in the first part of the event called "A-Guard", a three-day tour run by guide and former Habonim leader Mark Kedem.

In the two-day Kaleidoscope programme, attended by 85 people in an Israeli election week, several said they believed the Israeli electoral system was "broken", and the chances of a stable government emerging weren't great.

They also spoke about Arab-Jewish co-existence in Jaffa, especially following the riots and violence of May 2021. "Both the Arab and Jewish residents of Jaffa were scared to be on the street," said Akiva Sygal, who has lived in Jaffa and taught for many years about the multi-religious and multicultural aspects of Jaffa and Israel at large.



Habos learning to do the *Jerusalema*



Faine Angel, Daniel Selvan, and Doron Moshe

"We workshopped methods on how to have healthy arguments with friends, family, and communities, which Sasha Rodenacker, a current leader in Habonim Dror SA, said could definitely be useful in the movement today." Rodenacker was one of eight South African leaders who travelled to participate.

The organisers showed a controversial and disturbing film titled H2: The Occupation Lab about the situation in Hebron. Though the screening shocked and upset some participants, the organisers felt it was important not to shy from difficult issues. The producer and director joined the group, and spoke about the need to reveal these issues to the wider public. "Not many Israelis have ever been to Hebron," said director Noam Shelzaf.

The anniversary culminated in a one-day reunion called the Habonim Ultimate Gathering at Kibbutz Tzora, where about 350 current and former members of the movement gathered. People came from Australia, California, the United Kingdom, Canada, South Africa, and many other locations, with the majority from Israel. "I wouldn't miss this fantastic opportunity of seeing old chaverim," said Howard Dubowitz formerly of Cape Town, now living in the United States.



Akiva Sygal

Old, familiar faces which spoke at this gathering, included the writer (as MC); former Mazkir Klali Benzi Segal, who is a member of Kibbutz Tzora; the current manhig of Habonim, Wayne Susman; former Mazkir Klali Stephen Pincus; and current Mazkir Klali Aaron Kruss-van der Heever.

Participants were shown about nine different projects that former Habonim members in Israel had sponsored, ranging from water development in Africa to supporting African migrants in Israel, to a project which leverages the game of squash to bring young Jews and Arabs together.

Then, they had a good-old reconnect and "schmooze" over lunch. A group of nearly 40 former Zimbabweans sat under a tree on the grass at Tzora, shared stories and connections from the past, and updated each other on their lives as many had not seen each other for more than 50 years.

At the end of the HUG, they clapped and danced to the Jonathan Miller band playing blue grass, and then had a Habonim sing-along led by Tzora members and former shaliach, Howie Gordon, Brad Gottschalk, and Gaby Glass Aizenman. It ended with everyone on their feet, learning to dance to *Jerusalema*.

"I'm so pleased with the outcome of the event we worked so hard for so long to put together," said Hilary Hertzberger (nee Milunsky) a key organiser of the HUG. "It was gratifying to feel the warmth and see so many people with smiles on their faces."

The organisers were overwhelmed with emails, Facebook comments, and WhatsApp messages in the following days including one from Toni Shimoni (the wife of Professor Gidi Shimoni), both veteran Habonim members, who wrote, "What's the secret? Why do we all feel so good together, even after so many years? Why do the young members of Habonim fit in with us old fogeys without reminding us of how old we are? Habo magic some call it. I really haven't got words, but yesterday was one of the happiest days of my life, and I'm still on a high."

- *For more images, reports and responses to the events see www.habo2020.com and https://www.facebook.com/groups/Habo2020*
- *Dave Bloom is a Habonim SA vatik (old boy), and one of the organisers of this anniversary event. He now lives in Kochav Yair, Israel.*