

# Living with PURPOSE

Seniors share their stories and their secrets to longevity.

BY LAUREN SHAPIRO

AS THE BLESSING GOES, “MAY YOU LIVE UNTIL 120 YEARS!” HOWEVER, IT’S not just about reaching a numeric milestone, but about making the most of every day along the way. *Jewish Life* speaks to some extraordinary seniors who are still living their lives to the full.

## STILL HELPING AND CARING

Fania Hurwitz, 102, Israel

Fania Barash climbed off a boat in South Africa with her parents. It was 1929 and Fania, who had already lived through two Russian Revolutions and a World War, was just 20 years old.

When her father died suddenly two years later, Fania worked in her mother’s dairy-cum-café in Doornfontein. This was the start of a lifetime of hard work with an amazing positive attitude.

In 1934 she married Philip Hurwitz and worked at Crystals delicatessen while she raised her young family. In 1975, after her husband’s unexpected death, she took the courageous decision to make aliyah, alone, at the age of 66. “My father was passionately Zionist,” says daughter Shirley Ancer. “It’s what he would have wanted.”

Fania joined her other daughter Rina on Kibbutz Yasur near Akko, and wasted no time making herself useful. She learnt to sew and worked in the machsan begadim. In addition to her Yiddish, Russian and English, she now taught herself Hebrew by reading the subtitles on TV and reading children’s books. She kept elder kibbutzniks company and took new Russian immigrants under her wing with her newfound language skills.



Fania Hurwitz with her grandchildren on arrival in Israel in 1967



Fania Hurwitz with her mother, husband, and four children

“WHAT KEEPS HER GOING? HER GREAT LOVE OF COMMUNITY AND HER DESIRE TO CONTRIBUTE FIRE HER PASSIONS.”

She even took on the self-appointed duty of checking up on anyone who missed more than one meal in the communal dining room, in case they were not well.

She also worked for many years in the kibbutz factory making electronic toys for the export market. When the kibbutz sold the company in 2004 (Fania was 95), she lamented the loss of her job. “Who’s going to give me a job now?”

But Fania, who doesn’t know how to sit idle, quickly found herself a new job in the kibbutz laundry. She folds sheets and clothes, and does so to this day. She also befriends and cares for the 38 residents in the kibbutz’s frail care facility.

What keeps her going? Her great love of community and her desire to contribute fire her passions. “People are important,” she says. “You must always >

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Fania Barash with her parents as a young girl

consider people first. Care for people first, and things after.”

She has passed down these values of hard work, independence and caring for others to her children and grandchildren.

From being an only child, Fania now has a family of 45, including 21 great-grandchildren. She flew to South Africa to celebrate her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday with her extended family, and on the day she returned to Israel she braved the rain to cast her vote in the elections.

Her son and three daughters all look up to her. “She’s an amazing woman, my mother,” says Shirley. “She’s full of vitality and she’s built a fulfilling life for herself and for all the people around her.”



Fania Hurwitz surrounded by her family on her 100th birthday

## STILL CREATING

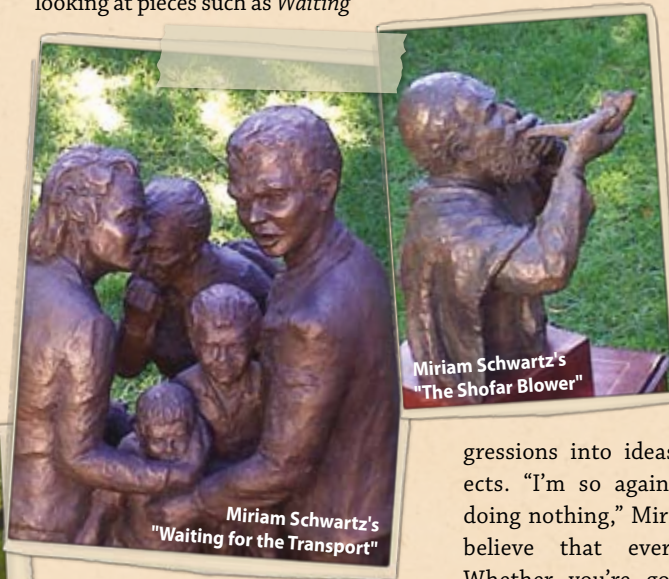
Miriam Schwartz, 79, Cape Town

When Miriam Schwartz signed up for an amateur sculpture course in 1965, she had no idea that she would be unleashing a life-long artistic passion.

Having worked under big names like Michael Barberton, Nell Kaye, Caroline van der Merwe and June te Water, Miriam has developed her own distinctive style and a reputation for beautiful pieces that capture human emotion.

Her pieces have featured in exhibitions and museums, and in 1998 she won the Best Sculpture Award at Bellville Art Association Competition. Capetonians will be familiar with her cement fondu sculpture, of a reading family, at the Gitlin Library at the South African Jewish Museum.

“My work is simplistic, but not abstract,” Miriam explains. “I put a lot of emotion into it.” This is obvious when looking at pieces such as *Waiting*



Miriam Schwartz's "Waiting for the Transport"

Miriam Schwartz's "The Shofar Blower"

for the Transport, her interpretation of the fear and anxiety of a Jewish family waiting for the train to take them to a concentration camp.

*Ma'alot* – her response to the massacre of school children in Israel in 1974 – also captures the anguish and grief felt by the Jewish people, expressed here through the face of one bereaved mother.



Miriam Schwartz with a cat she carved from camphor wood

Miriam’s work includes carvings of wood and stone, and experimental pieces with wire, steel wool and even gutter sealant. “I’m always exploring new ways of creating things,” she chuckles. Her latest creations will be on show at the Wildlife Exhibit at the Cape Gallery, in Cape Town, until 10 September.

With such a varied body of work under her creative belt, Miriam has earned

the right to spend her retirement in quiet contemplation. But that’s not Miriam! I interviewed her on her 79<sup>th</sup> birthday and had to squeeze in my questions between other phone calls, visits from family, and di-

gressions into ideas for future projects. “I’m so against sitting around doing nothing,” Miriam says firmly. “I believe that everyone is gifted. Whether you’re good at sewing or knitting or flower-arranging or art – that’s a gift. Give that back to people; teach them what you know so that they can develop. It’s so good to be able to help people.”

She now teaches weekly sessions at the Avital Gallery, in Mouille Point. “When I teach, I become rejuvenated. It gives me enthusiasm for life. That’s why I know I’ll never stop!” >

## STILL TEACHING – AND LEARNING

Dr Issy Fisher, 83, Durban

Like any other barmitzvah boy, Issy was a little apprehensive before he stepped up to the bima. But unlike most, he had the wisdom of 83 years of study behind him to give him confidence.

Celebrating a second bar mitzvah, 13 years after the allotted “three score and ten”, is no mean feat. “It’s a very humbling experience to reach this age with all my faculties and health. One often wonders if you’ll reach this milestone – I’m very grateful that I have,” he says thoughtfully.

His first memory of study is at age six, at the feet of his grandfather, in front of a bookcase filled with volumes of Talmud. “My late grandfather was a scholarly man, and he taught me the basics of Judaism.”

Since then, Issy has gone on to return the favour to hundreds of Jewish and non-Jewish students, teaching in various schools and chedorim around South



Issy at the age of his (first) bar mitzvah – a bicycle was a typical barmy gift

Africa. Major posts have included many years at Durban’s former Jewish day school, Carmel College, and a decade heading up the Department of Hebrew



Issy Fisher earned his PhD in 2000 at the age of 72

and Jewish Studies at the (then) University of Natal, Durban. All the while that he was teaching, he continued learning, earning certificates from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and a PhD from the University of Westville.

Over the years he has taught many, many barmitzvah boys, including >

Dr Issy Fisher still teaches shiurim at 83 years old



prominent New York stock broker David Berman, and recently appointed editor of the *Jerusalem Post* Steven Linde. He is also particularly proud of world-renowned academic, Professor David Kolitz, who has just been selected as Professor of Accounting at Exeter University. "At one point he was considered a write-off, academically. I coached him in Hebrew and he realised that if he can do well in his weakest subject, imagine what he can do in his best subjects! He represents what any student can achieve, given some encouragement."

Issy in his study



**“ LEARNING IS A LIFELONG PROCESS. SOMETIMES, WE ARE BLESSED WITH A SECOND CHANCE TO LEARN THE SAME LESSON. ”**

Issy officially retired in 1996. "So why do you keep teaching?" I ask. He looks at me like I've asked a very strange question. "I don't know," he says. "You just sort of carry on!" Issy teaches several regular shiurim for the community, covering topics ranging from Hebrew to Jewish history to the weekly Parsha.

Learning is a lifelong process. Sometimes, we are blessed with a second chance to learn the same lesson. "At my first barmitzvah I didn't really understand the sidra. This time I understood it, and that made the whole experience so much more meaningful."

## INSPIRED? GET INVOLVED!

Retired, with time on your hands, but not sure how to give back to your community? Call one of these organisations and volunteer for their many programmes that'll lift your soul while you uplift others.

### JOHANNESBURG

The Second Innings Care Group performs the mitzvah of befriending isolated members of the community, while its School Project facilitates weekly English coaching in 11 schools across the province. For more information or to volunteer, call Grecia Gabriel on 011 532-9718 (Mon-Thurs, 8:30-2:30).

Chabad's Chai Seniors Programme offers a growing programme of daily, weekly and monthly activities to help seniors live their lives with "Less oy! - More joy!" Many of these projects depend on volunteers' time and effort. To get involved, call Rabbi Ari Kievman on 011 440 6600.

### CAPE TOWN

The Cape Jewish Seniors Association provides ample opportunities to interact meaningfully with members of the community, especially those whose mobility is limited. Volunteers improve these members' lives through befriending, reading, shopping and schlepping. For more information or to get involved, contact Diana Sochen on 021 434-9691.

### DURBAN

Join the Chaverim Project and get involved in one of its exciting initiatives like the Classroom Assistants Programme (providing help to teachers and students in large classes), manning the Beth Shalom Thrift Shop, or perform the mitzvah of delivering eggs and bagels to mourners. For more information or to sign up, contact Shelli Strous on 083 775 0530. **IL**