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OPINION

Do you stand with Israel or Palestine? I'm Jewish, and I stand with both



David Leser

Senior freelance writer

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I first visited Israel in 1977, the same year the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made his historic visit to Jerusalem to offer Israel his hand in peace. It was a breathtaking moment in global history – one that would cost Sadat his life – and it suddenly transformed the Egyptian leader from Israel's arch enemy to peacemaker.

In an impassioned plea to the Knesset (Israel's parliament) and, by extension, to Jews around the world, Sadat extended an olive branch that would result in the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty two years later. He also warned his hosts not to forget the Palestinian people.



Illustration: Simon Letch.

“The Palestinian problem is the core and essence of the conflict,” he said, “and ... so long as it continues to be unresolved, the conflict will continue to aggravate, reaching new dimensions ... there can be no peace without the Palestinians. It is a grave error of unpredictable consequences to overlook or brush this aside.”

That is a very dangerous passage to quote at this terrible moment. Dangerous because it could be read by some as an apologia for the heinous acts we have witnessed in Israel in recent days. It is not.

I am the son of a German-Jewish father who fled the Nazis in 1939, just before it became impossible to leave. I am also the son of a Jewish mother who lost her extended family in Latvia two years later to the Nazis.

I have grown up with the intergenerational pain of being Jewish. I have – like most other Jews on this planet – carried the trauma of persecution, exile, wandering and extermination deep in the marrow of my being. I have read with horror – and horror doesn’t even come close to describing this – what [Hamas militants have just wrought](#) in a place that I love; a revered, ill-fated place that is contested by two peoples with conflicting claims to the same land. A land where the children of Abraham continue to face each other across the fault line of history, not just with weapons but with crude and vulgar stereotypes.

This may seem all too quaint now to remember, but in 1997, 10 years after being caught up in the first intifada [Palestinian uprising] in Gaza, I sat in a room with 25 Israelis and Palestinians listening to people scream at each other over a conflict that they were born into, but was not of their making.

We were at a peace workshop high in rolling hills of olive groves and Jerusalem pines, above the old “armistice line” of 1949 and these Palestinians and Israelis were meeting each other for the first time. I was there as a journalist.

“We live in a prison,” one Palestinian boy cried. “We don’t have any rights; we don’t have any peace.”

“It’s not our fault,” an Israeli woman replied. “We’re looking for peace ... but we’re victims too. Why are you blaming us?”

“Because you’re Jews,” he said

For four days and nights, these people – left and right, secular and religious, Arab and Jew, occupied and occupier – fought each other’s history, language and culture. They traded wound for wound, memory for memory, loss for loss. They shouted and wept and doubled down on their positions, and then, when they’d had enough, and they were obliged to resist their urge to leave, they began, slowly, to share stories about their lives, their interests, their families and friends. In a slow dawning, they started to confront the dark images they had formed of each other, and began to see each other not as demons but as human beings.

That feels more impossible today than it has ever felt in my lifetime – to call anyone who would engage in this week’s slaughter of children, the elderly, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, revellers, civilians at home and at work, as someone still possessed of humanity.

Perhaps they are not. Perhaps these marauding men who were once little boys in all their sweet innocence and tenderness, have lost their right to this claim. But as with any men who rape and kill and violate, one of the many questions I have is “What turned them from children into monsters?”

Under Israel’s iron-hard 56-year occupation, Palestinians in their millions have been denied basic human rights, such that human rights organisations around the world – including within Israel – have labelled Israel an apartheid state.

Yes, I hear well that this is no time for moral equivalence, not when people’s loved-ones have been slaughtered or are facing execution. But what is the cost of averting one’s gaze from the longest occupation of a subject people in modern history? Or from the millions of Palestinians who now have their electricity, food and water cut off in Gaza? Or from the thousands of Palestinians who have already died, and the thousands, possibly tens of thousands, who may yet die at the hands of an invading army being urged on by millions.

Yes, Hamas is a murderous, militant resistance force, but that is not the same thing as the Palestinian people. Nor is a punishing and extremist government under Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the same thing as the Jewish people.

Are we able to hold both peoples’ catastrophic circumstances in our hearts? I don’t know. I hear and read people saying “I stand with Israel” or “I stand with Palestine”. Is it possible to say “I stand with both?” And by that, I mean the innocents on both sides whose lives and hearts have been shattered.

In all my naivety, that’s what I ache for.

I have been accused at various times in my life of being a self-hating Jew because I have endeavoured to present a competing view of history, one where Palestinians also have rights to their homeland, one where they have also suffered unbearably. “Go to your Palestinian friends!” my beloved grandmother once scolded me.

I have also been accused of being a Zionist and defending the Israeli occupation (which I am deeply opposed to) because I have always felt that a people who have known mass murder – as

the Jews have, and who live in a complex and perilous region, as the Israelis do – are deserving of our understanding, compassion and support.

But that is not the world we seem to live in. We seem to live in a binary world where one's allegiance can only be for one side or the other, rather than for a common humanity.

Esther Perel, the internationally renowned psychotherapist, urged this week that we take care not to allow grief for one side to "[mean hate for the other](#)", or that we lose our empathy for those with whom we disagree.

Is it wrong to wish into being a world where there is room enough in our hearts to carry the anguish of two peoples locked in an ancient battle for the same homeland?

The great Irish poet William Butler Yeats said the world was "more full of weeping" than we could understand. Yes it is, and at this moment of unbearable agony for two nations, I can't help but weep for both.

David Leser is a former Middle East correspondent and regular contributor to *Good Weekend*.



David Leser is an author and journalist. He is a regular contributor to and former staff writer with Good Weekend.
