

## OPINION

# *I'm Jewish. I live in Bondi. But I take no comfort from Herzog's visit*

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Around the turn of the century, when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict still appeared hopelessly intractable but not yet ruinous to the whole world, I remember having dinner with a group of close male friends up in the hills of Byron Bay.

There were eight of us around the table, two of us Jewish, when the conversation suddenly turned from good-natured to hostile. The talk had somehow veered towards Israel's occupation of the Palestinian people and it was clear that the views of the two Jewish men, one of whom was me, were diametrically opposed.

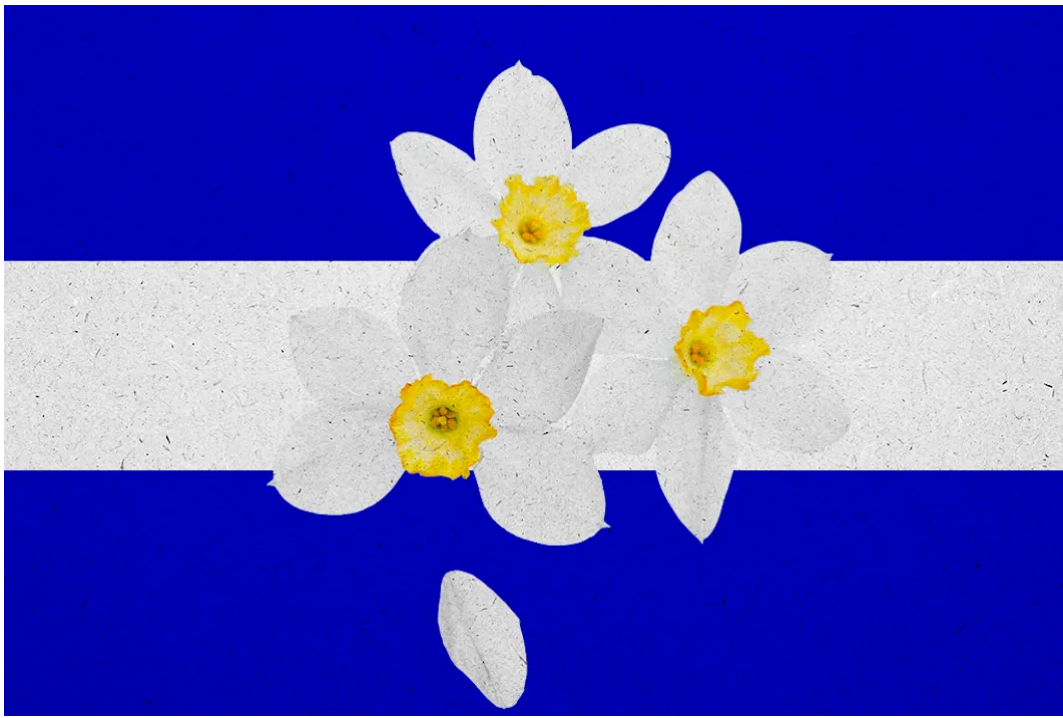


Illustration: The Sydney Morning Herald/The Age

I believed then that the best way to secure peace and security for the Jewish people – within both Israel and the diaspora – was to end the brutal occupation of the Palestinians and establish an independent Palestinian state alongside the Jewish one.

My friend, now a former friend, called me not just a traitor to our people, but a greater threat than the one posed by our obvious enemies. Why? Because I represented the threat from within, the fifth column, the individual who endangered the unity and safety of the group.

Our non-Jewish friends were horrified by what they were witnessing. Three of them were actually in tears. What hope was there for peace in the Middle East – for peace in the world – one said later to me, if one of their dearest friends, a Jewish brother, was at the throat of another Jewish brother over the question of Israel.

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It was the beginning of the end of our friendship circle, but it took another 22 years for the final nail to be driven into the coffin of my relationship with that other Jewish man.

On October 7, 2024, I wrote a column in these pages to mark the one-year anniversary of the horrific Hamas attacks on Israel. I also gave voice to my shredded heart over what Israel had been doing in reprisal during the previous 12 months.

I acknowledged that Israel faced threats that few, if any, nations in the world had to face, and that Hamas and Hezbollah, with Iranian backing, were sworn to its destruction. Israel was justified, therefore, in seeking to counter those threats.

I also wrote that to eradicate Hamas in Gaza, Israel had, during the previous year, “obliterated an entire people’s means of existence: starving them, terrorising them, denying them adequate supplies of food, water and medicine, destroying farmland, while also razing to the ground schools, universities, hospitals, churches, mosques, heritage sites and hundreds of thousands of homes.

“How could one bear to watch a country that claims to represent the Jewish people destroy so utterly the very fabric of a society?” I asked. “I know I can’t, and I know that an increasing number of Jews, here and around the world, can’t either.”

The following day, my former Jewish friend sent me this text message: “I hope never to see your face again. Your [late] father is certainly disgusted.\* Shame on you. You will never have rest. You’re a bad man all the world can see now.”

And then, in a second text, just one word: “Drek.” It is Yiddish for scum.

I have reflected many times on this unfortunate episode, but particularly with the arrival in Australia of Israel’s President Isaac Herzog on Monday. In the aftermath of the December 14 Bondi massacre, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese extended an invitation to Israel’s head of state to come and provide comfort to a Jewish community grieving the loss of 15 innocent lives.

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As a Jewish man, I’d like to say that I draw no comfort from Herzog’s presence in Australia, and not because I am not grieving, like every Jewish person, what happened in Bondi, the suburb where I live.

I am not comforted because Isaac Herzog is the president of a country currently defending charges of genocide before the International Court of Justice. I am not comforted because, in the aftermath of October 7, Herzog made comments about “an entire nation” of Palestinians being responsible for the Hamas attacks, comments which a United Nations Special Commission has found “may reasonably be interpreted as incitement to genocide”. (Herzog insists these comments were taken out of context and that there is “no excuse for murdering innocent civilians”.)

I am also not comforted by the fact that Herzog previously posed to sign an artillery shell destined for Gaza with the words, “I rely on you”. (Herzog later admitted this was “lacking taste”, but said the bomb was a “smokescreen shell”).

You see, here’s the problem. Jewish people are not a monolith. Among us are ardent Zionists, fierce anti-Zionists, religious fundamentalists, rationalists, secularists, humanists, agnostics, atheists, conservatives, progressives and everything in between.

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And since the aftermath of October 7, a growing number of us have found it increasingly difficult – make that nigh on impossible – to support Israel and its actions.

That doesn’t make Jewish Australians who oppose Herzog’s visit “the servile lackeys of Hamas”, as Israeli Opposition Leader Yair Lapid asserted scurrilously last week. It makes us people who believe the very essence of Jewishness is to engage in robust debate and oppose injustice, including the ongoing slaughter and occupation of a desperate people by a state purporting to act in our name.

October 7 and its aftermath created an unprecedented catastrophe for the Palestinian nation-in-waiting, but it also created a moral and spiritual catastrophe for the Jewish people in terms of our relationship to Israel ... and to each other. It also created social

upheaval in terms of how Jewish pain is being exploited to the benefit of those who do – and don't – have Jewish people's interests at heart.

I want Jewish families who lost loved ones in truly shocking circumstances to find as much comfort as possible, but not from the representative of a rogue state who threatens our social cohesion at the very time we need it most.

\* For the record, I believe my father, Bernard Leser, a German Jew who fled the Nazis, would have been "disgusted" not by my writings, but by Israel's actions.

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

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**CORRECTION** — An earlier version referred to the International Criminal Court, instead of the International Court of Justice.

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