

OPINION

Yes, we feel unsafe, but many Jews know we always will while others live in peril

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Earlier this week, federal Liberal senator James Paterson confirmed he had referred the AFL to the Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion because of “evidence of deeply ingrained cultural problems in our sporting institutions”.

The AFL’s apparent transgression was that on March 5, at the season-opener at the SCG, the Sydney Swans failed to name the Jewish community in its tribute to the victims of the Bondi shooting, altering the script before the speech to make it “more inclusive”.



Palestinians mourn at the funeral of four members of the Odeh family, who were killed in their car by Israeli security forces in Tammun, West Bank, on Sunday. MAJDI MOHAMMED/AP

Instead of naming Jewish people specifically, Swans chief executive Matthew Pavlich paid tribute more generally to the victims, their families and the emergency services who responded to the December 14 massacre. He later issued a heartfelt [apology](#) for the omission.

Paterson accused the AFL of insulting Jewish victims of the Bondi shooting and “erasing their Jewish identity”.

Mercifully, the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies rejected Paterson’s call for the AFL and Swans to be scrutinised, with its president David Ossip declaring: “The royal commission is charged with addressing serious and substantive issues of antisemitism in this country. The tribute by the Sydney Swans to the Jewish community and the victims of the Bondi terrorist attack – as well as the care extended to the Jewish community more broadly over the past three months – was motivated by the purest of intent and warrants gratitude, not sanction.”

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What this overblown episode highlights, however, is the extent to which some of our leaders, political and non-political, continue to genuflect to so-called Jewish sensibilities, as if Jewish people speak with one emotional voice.

We don’t – and that doesn’t mean the vile acts of antisemitism that have flourished for more than two years, culminating in the horrific slaughter of 15 people in Bondi on December 14, haven’t shaken us to the core, whatever our political or philosophical leanings. Same, too, with the outrages perpetrated by Hamas on October 7, 2023 in Israel – crimes that were to unleash everything that has followed.

As the ABC’s hopelessly inadequate (for its lack of diverse views) *National Forum* on antisemitism showed last week, many Jewish Australians are more [distressed](#) and afraid than they have ever been. That is a truly terrible thing. But the problem with the public conversation we are not having is that people who believe – as I and thousands of other Jewish Australians do – that Jewish safety is inseparable from Palestinian safety are not being heard enough.

Nor the fact that our Jewish identity is not as Bart Shteinman, executive member of the Jewish Council of Australia, put it this week, [“a political loyalty oath to a foreign state”](#).

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How could it be when, earlier this week, Israeli forces killed a Palestinian father, mother and two of their four children – one of them blind and disabled – as they were returning to their West Bank home from a shopping trip in Nablus? According to Israel’s leading English-language newspaper [Haaretz](#), one of the two surviving children, Khaled Bani Odeh, 11, said he and his five family members were in the car when they were shot through the windscreen, his two brothers killed instantly, his parents dying soon afterwards. Khaled said that after the shooting an Israeli soldier removed him from the vehicle, saying, “We killed some dogs”, before beating him.

I’m more upset about that than I am about Pavlich’s failure to mention “Jewish victims” in his tribute speech. I’m upset, too, that we keep talking mainly about Jewish victims, without duly recognising Palestinian victims or, indeed, Syrian, Lebanese, Muslim, Arab or Persian victims, as if there’s a hierarchy of victims here, which there quite patently is.

On the same day Khaled’s parents and siblings were murdered, Israeli airstrikes [killed 13 Palestinians](#) in central Gaza, including two boys, a woman pregnant with twins, and nine police officers. That brought the number of Palestinians killed since the October 2025 “ceasefire” to 650, with [more than 75,000 killed](#) between October 7, 2023 and January 5, 2025. That’s 3 to 4 per cent of Gaza’s pre-war population.

Among the dead: aid workers, aid seekers, emergency workers, educators, academics, journalists, medical staff, paramedics, entire families and tens of thousands of children. I’m rather upset by that too.

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Earlier this week, Israeli forces erased the lives of [12 medical workers](#) – doctors, paramedics and nurses – in a [strike on a primary healthcare facility](#) in southern Lebanon. The Lebanese Health Ministry said that ambulances carrying out rescue missions had been deliberately targeted, a chilling replay – it would appear – of Israel's repeated attacks on Gaza's now-crippled healthcare system.

And all this while more than 1 million Lebanese – more than 15 per cent of the population – have been [forced](#) from their homes under relentless Israeli bombardment, this following Hezbollah's rocket attacks on Israel in retaliation for its February 28 assault on Iran.

I was born into a family where, on both sides, people died at the hands of the Nazis, or were forced to flee. This story of victimhood surges through my bloodstream, as it does most Jewish people.

But, today, we live in a divided moral universe where Jewish victimhood seems to take precedence over all others, even though Israel, the country that claims to be the embodiment and political expression of Jewish interests worldwide, is a nuclear-armed nation that has been brutally occupying another people with impunity for nearly 60 years.

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Israel also happens to be a nation which, according to the independent conflict monitor Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), carried out more than [10,000 attacks on six different countries last year alone](#). And it appears Israel's invasion of Lebanon has only just begun.

None of this make me as a Jewish man feel safer, not when Israel is waging a never-ending war on multiple fronts that is terrifying, alienating and igniting the global community, not to mention entangling Jewish identity ever more deeply in state policy. Neither, too, when pro-Israel groups publicly – and not so publicly – continue to pressure governments, media organisations, arts organisations, academic institutions, writers and film festivals to curtail legitimate conversations around the hellishly complex subject of the Middle East, all in the name of bolstering Jewish security.

That won't solve the all too real and perennial hatred that is antisemitism. Actually, it will [fuel it](#). It [already has fuelled it](#), and the sooner our public conversation reflects this the better.

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

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