

Rethinking my Zionism

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The death of a public figure usually affects me in a distant way. My interest may be piqued for a day or two, eventually becoming just another news story fading into the background of everyday life. However, the death of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin very literally changed the course of my life and that of my family, my relationship with Israel and my leadership.

Rabin's assassination on 4 November 1995 was a pivotal moment in history. The extent and nature of its impact on Israel's security, society and the peace process has been the subject of much conjecture. Twenty-five years later, the effects are still complex, enduring and fiercely debated.

Whilst the macro impact of Rabin's death is reflected in policy decisions and public discourse, it is also evident in millions of micro impacts in Israel and around the world. In fact, sometimes the macro can be more deeply understood if we look through the lens of individuals and families. In this context, I share my very personal experience of how Rabin's assassination affected my life.

Back in 1995, I was a young lawyer working at a large Melbourne law firm. My husband and I were both very Zionist and planned to move to Israel, to make aliyah. We were grappling with various aspects of the decision, including leaving careers that were on good trajectories and moving away from ageing parents. Our deliberations were mostly about 'when' we should leave, not, 'if' we should go at all.

Our intention to move to Israel instantly evaporated with the shot of Yigal Amir's weapon. Rabin's assassination metaphorically winded me; I simply could no longer see the logic in making sacrifices for an ideology that appeared suddenly broken.

The shocking realisation that Rabin was assassinated by a fellow Jew struck deep in what could be termed my 'naïve' Zionism.

My ideological beliefs emanated from a combination of my upbringing and Jewish day school education. My late father, George Szalmuk, was one of the ma'apilim—illegal immigrants—who, in March 1947, crossed post-war Europe to reach Israel illegally on a converted cattle transport ship called Moledet—Homeland. Caught by the British, my father, his brother Mordechai and Mordechai's wife Pesia were interned in Cyprus. In the detention camps, my father trained in the underground Haganah. On his third escape attempt from Cyprus, my father successfully travelled to Israel on a small fishing boat in the dark of night with 20 others. They landed on the shores of Israel near Netanya. It was October 1948 and the War of Independence was raging. My father headed straight to the Palmach base Machaneh Yona. The Palmach was the elite fighting unit of the emerging Israeli army. Whenever recounting his story, my father would always proudly emphasise that the great Israeli heroes such as Rabin fought in the Palmach. My father fought in the Yiftach Brigade involved in dangerous missions such as Operation Yoav, an operation to free the Negev from Egyptian forces and to connect it with the rest of the Jewish state. He fought until his tank hit an anti-tank mine. He awoke from a coma to learn that he was the only soldier in the tank to survive.

Uncle Mordechai was a colonel in the Israel Defence Force. My earliest memories of visiting Israel were of being greeted by Uncle Mordechai in uniform at passport control—with a rank of colonel, Mordechai was permitted to enter the restricted arrivals area of the airport and was treated with the utmost respect everywhere he went. I learnt to ride a bicycle on the Ramat David Airforce base where my cousins lived. Their father was a pilot whose plane had been hit twice during the Yom Kippur War. He had still managed to land it, in order to save the precious aircraft.

As a child of survivors, I grew up hearing gruelling stories of survival from Auschwitz, Siberia and Cyprus, and heroic stories of my family's military bravery in Israel's many wars. I felt proudest and safest in Israel and could never quite understand why my parents chose to live in Australia after all they had experienced.

Throughout my schooling, the narrative about the establishment of the modern State of Israel was very black and white—there were those who were indisputably right and those who were wrong. The only glimpses of grey were discussions I had with my father about the details of the War of Independence and his stories of battle. At university, against the backdrop of the intifada, I became more aware of the complexities of war but I was still fiercely supportive of Israel and proudly viewed Israel as an exemplar of democracy—‘the only democracy in the Middle East’.

And then Rabin was shot. My idyllic picture of Israel vanished.

Ironically, the words of Rabin's final speech that fateful night spoke exactly to that picture:

Violence is undermining the very foundations of Israeli democracy. It must be condemned, denounced and isolated. This is not the way of the State of Israel. Controversies may arise in a democracy, but the decision must be reached through democratic elections...

On the night of 4 November 1995, in the centre of Tel Aviv, the principles of democracy were deposed by the gun.

I attended the Melbourne communal memorial service for Rabin. I listened and I cried as if I had lost a close friend or family member. I cried for Rabin and for what I felt Israel had become.

Our plans to move to Israel were shelved and our lives were built in Melbourne. So strong was my reactive disillusionment that I barely travelled to Israel for a decade and refrained from engaging with

Israel through Jewish community events. My only connection was with my Israeli family, Israeli literature and music.

As the years passed, time healed, I matured and gradually became adept at living with a more complex, more real, Israel. When I started visiting again with my young children I felt a connection and pull as strong as ever. But now my eyes were wide open. My father had always espoused the view that one should not criticise Israel unless one lives there. This view was also commonly shared by the Australian Jewish communal establishment. However, as Israel was no longer a fledgling state where its very existence was in question, I found that my connection to Israel only grew deeper and more meaningful through discussion and debate about the country's politics, policies and society. Learning about the real—rather than idyllic—Israel strengthened the prominence of Israel as the core of my Jewish identity.

I sought and found where I could engage with and contribute to Israel in a valuable way whilst not living there. I spent many years in the leadership of JNF Australia, helping to build bilateral relationships between Australian and Israeli urban water experts and researchers, as well as develop and grow partnerships between communities in Israel and Australia. I was committed to providing younger generations of Australian Jews with a meaningful vehicle and narrative through which they could engage with Israel.

My philanthropy and leadership remain strongly focused on building partnerships between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. My own visceral experience of Rabin's assassination continues to inform the way I seek to strengthen that partnership. I firmly believe that Israel and Diaspora Jewry are in a symbiotic relationship in which we are each stronger because of the other. In order to secure that relationship in today's world, we need to accept each other's differences and reconcile ourselves with the existence of imperfections, all the while striving to improve. At the same time, we need to make space to discuss, debate and learn to understand our respective challenges and find ways to hear each other.

Rabin's death was the monumental event to which I reacted by locating my life and that of my family in Australia, rather than Israel. It was the event that removed my rose-coloured glasses and forced me to see the real Israel comprised of both a multitude of challenges and brilliant achievements. As a consequence, I hold an unconditional commitment to Israel and have spent many years working on that commitment and leading others to do so. Rabin himself was a leader who, in the opinion of some, embodied the contradictions of being the brave Israeli warrior on one hand and leading peace, on the other. Twenty-five years later, as the soul of Israel is arguably being challenged now more than ever by intense polarisation in all its parts, ironically, the aftermath of Rabin's assassination equipped me with the tools I need to preserve that commitment.