**MY PERSONAL REFLECTIONS**

G Cohen

October 7 was a day that changed the world as we have come to know it. This catastrophic event did not only change the world for Israelis but also for Jews around the world. This was not an Israeli Event; it was a Jewish Event.

Within days, instead of the world condemning Hamas for their sheer barbaric, monstrous and genocidal massacre of our people, we started to witness the largest antisemitic uprising since the Holocaust. In fact, I think, because of social media, it became even more widespread than during the Holocaust as countries where Jews felt safe, suddenly found themselves the target of blatant and often violent antisemitic behaviour in cities all around the world.

New York, London, Paris, Melbourne, Toronto, Los Angeles, Montreal, Dublin, Glasgow and of course right here in our own backyard in Cape Town these cities where Jews flourished and felt they belonged, became cesspools of Jew hatred that hasn’t been seen since the 1930’s and 1940’s.

After our brothers and sisters in Israel had been murdered, mutilated, raped, burnt and beheaded the world refused to believe or just did not care, Why? Simply because they are Jews and Jews don’t matter.

The world has now shown its true colours.

1200 Israelis were massacred on October 7 and over 230 hostages taken into Gaza. Today there are still 136 hostages, in the tunnels of Gaza including men, women, the elderly, infants and bodies.

And then to top it all, our Minister of Foreign Affairs makes a call to the Head of Hamas, Ishmeil Haniyeh, and takes a trip to Iran to gloat with the very people who are calling for the annihilation of Israel and the Jewish people.

Our President stood smiling and chuckling with his ministers, wearing Keffiyeh scarves and declaring to the world where their loyalties lay. What a disappointment he has turned out to be.

But that too was not enough for shortly after, South Africa took Israel to the ICJ accusing it of genocide when the very charter of Hamas calls for the genocide of the Jewish people. The irony is insane.

South Africa, our country, had the ultimate temerity to take Israel to the International Court of Justice when the situation in SA is in such dire straits. What a travesty that our morally corrupt ANC government should have the audacity to do this, is unfathomable.

Once again, our government has chosen the wrong side and will be judged accordingly as time unfolds.

At the conference we were asked the following question:

Where did you start your journey that brought you here today?

My journey started on 7 October shortly after the world became aware of the atrocities perpetrated by Hamas. I attended an emergency meeting with our chairperson together with the Board of Deputies and CSO (community security organization) to plan how to keep our children safe, knowing already that the pro-Hamas and pro-Palestinian hatred would surface once again.

Any event that takes place in Israel reverberates around the world and the Israel and Jew haters in Cape Town are always quick to take advantage of the situation.

And so started our plan to keep our pupils safe and to find ways of dealing with the situation and the outrage, fear and distress that was felt by our community.

We all agreed that we would keep our thoughts, our feelings and our determination to keep our community safe within the school community and its stakeholders. We would try not to publish our anger and our solidarity with Israel.

This caused problems of its own as many of our stakeholders and alumni around the world did not feel that we had shown our commitment and our solidarity with Israel strongly enough.

What they didn’t understand was the enormous pressure that we as a school had to face, with threats in the Provincial Legislature to deregister our school.

Horrific rhetoric was shouted from loudhailers at pro-Palestinian rallies saying that our school was recruiting IDF soldiers to murder Palestinian babies in Gaza.

The way things are twisted by these people is astounding and further enhances my feelings of anger and frustration and my strong desire to do something more than just wear an Israeli “dog tag” around my neck.

I felt torn between the need to keep our children safe at all cost and my need to do something tangible.

During the mission to Israel, we spoke about the Jewish Story and the Jewish Narrative.

The Jewish narrative is very much about being an oppressed people who have gone through wars, exile, disasters, pogroms and the holocaust.

We shouldn’t perpetuate or react to this narrative. We need to stand strong, resolute in our belief that we have the right to a Jewish State, the right to be a Zionist and the right to practice our religion in a safe and protected way.

We need to reconstruct our narrative. We must seize the opportunity to change this narrative. We need to stop being so focused on our tragedies.

The mission to Israel gave me the opportunity to express my solidarity. It presented me with the opportunity to see for myself, to stand on the sites of the massacre of civilians. It gave me the opportunity to interact with colleagues from 12 countries around the world and to understand the issues that they were dealing with and allowing conversations that helped me gain perspective of how the Jewish world was dealing with the war.

I arrived in Israel feeling a deep sense of loneliness and isolation as a Cape Town Jew at the tip of Africa. I felt that as a South African Jew I was being let down and betrayed by an ANC government that had shown their loyalty to the Palestinian people and to Hamas itself.

I expressed my feelings many times to the group during the mission and felt supported and heard by my colleagues.

Did it change my feelings and outlook? Not really. I still feel that we are in a very different arena to most Western countries whose governments publicly support Israel and its right to defend itself and indeed to exist as a Jewish state.

The most important lesson I learned while on the mission was our task as educators to lead calmly and assuredly, to stand tall and resolute and without fear in our support and solidarity with Israel and to be a beacon of light in our small community in Cape Town.

We as educators have the task to ensure that our pupils are taught the history of the Jewish people, of our Jewish civilization, to know and understand the historical facts of both biblical and modern Israel, to teach our children how to stand up for Israel, how to argue the case for Israel and to have the skills to debate with those people who oppose us and create their own facts.

At the same time, we have to ensure that our pupils understand that alongside us in Israel, are people who have a genuine need to feel safe and secure and lead normal happy lives. Israeli Arabs, Bedouins, Druze, Muslims, Christians and many Palestinians have the desire to live side by side with Israeli Jews in a thriving country in peace and prosperity.

Finally, we have to continue to teach our children to be proud Jews, moral and upright global citizens who understand their role in society and who can make a valuable contribution to the world at large.

**Thursday 8 February**

I add this paragraph in to my report having read the article in the “Middle East Eye” of

8 February 2024.

[Middle East Eye article.pdf](file:///C:\Users\geoffc\Desktop\Middle%20East%20Eye%20article.pdf) (Ctrl and click to view)

I feel betrayed and angered at the stupidity and recklessness of the 3 ex-Herzlian pupils who have trashed their school, fabricated facts and endangered the lives of our children, staff and parents.

It is so sad to witness how these young adults have become so twisted in their ideology that they cannot hear, or do not want to hear the actual facts.

I have no issue with their support for a better life for the Palestinian people. I too wish for a peaceful solution to the Middle East conflict so that Jews and Palestinians can live side by side together in peace and security.

I do have issues with their support for a terrorist organization that has in their manifesto/charter the complete annihilation of Israel and the Jewish people.

How do these kids not see what Hamas did in their invasion of Israel? Is the murder, rape, mutilation and destruction forgotten, ignored or not believed. How can anyone with any sense of morality, not be horrified by the inhumanity of Hamas on Oct 7.

Did we fail as educators in teaching these kids the basic tenets of respect, morality, dignity and empathy?

Did their parents fail to bring them up as upstanding individuals of whom they can be proud?

Do they think that that they will be spared from the antisemitic rhetoric and the spewing of hatred towards Jews?

I don’t have the answers to these questions and I guess I never will. But my determination to continue doing what I do as a Jewish educator has not wavered, in fact it has only strengthened.

AM ISRAEL CHAI