

How Aussie Jewish barristers banded together after Hamas attacks

Working long hours, usually alone, it can be a lonely life. In the days after the bloody attack on Israel, a WhatsApp group helped Jews at the NSW Bar come together.

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In the hours after Hamas' bloody incursion into Israel that left 1400 men, women and children dead, a group of Jewish barristers at the NSW Bar created a WhatsApp group.

Working long hours, usually alone, barristers often lament that the Bar can be a lonely place, particularly during times of distress and pain.

David Knoll, a 25-year veteran of the Bar at chambers 9 Selborne, tells *The Australian Financial Review* that for the NSW Bar's Jewish members, the pain is intensely personal and communal.

"Many of us are children of Holocaust survivors," Knoll says. "I am one. The idea people can be rounded up, murdered, raped, killed and kidnapped simply because they are Jewish is horrendous

[<https://www.afr.com/world/middle-east/released-hamas-hostage-was-held-in-spiderweb-of-damp-tunnels-under-gaza-20231025-p5eerl>]."



From left, David Knoll, David Baran, Dr Eli Ball, Mark Sheldon and Jason Lazarus. **Wolter Peeters**

Jewish members who spoke about their experience over the past three weeks shared a similar story. It was one of feeling singled out, of being worried about loved ones in Israel and, for some, of being fearful.

The fear is mixed with anger, particularly after NSW Police stood by, days after the Hamas attack, as protestors burnt the Israeli flag under the sails of the Sydney Opera House and chanted “f--- Israel” and “gas the Jews”.

“It is a topic of conversation for everyone. Some people are angry and there is incredible disappointment,” Knoll says, although he acknowledges the response has since improved.

Mark Sheldon at 7 Wentworth Selborne says he has never felt scared to be a Jew in Australia “ever”. But with a three-year-old son in a Jewish school, this time, the conflict hits differently.

When tensions flare, Jewish schools are regularly targeted by antisemitic attacks. In recognition of this fact, Attorney-General Mark Dreyfus last week announced \$25 million to help bolster security

[\[https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/50m-security-boost-for-religious-facilities-as-violence-fears-flare-20231018-p5ed6s\]](https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/50m-security-boost-for-religious-facilities-as-violence-fears-flare-20231018-p5ed6s).

“This was the first time I was worried about the safety of my son at school,” Sheldon says. “It took a personal toll.”

Mutual support

That’s where the WhatsApp group comes in.

“It is a mutual support network,” says Knoll. In a profession involving long days in the courtroom and long nights alone in the office, it was a digital outreach for Jewish barristers seeking solace.

Starting with six members, it quickly grew to more than 50, adding not only barristers but also spouses and supporters. It includes, for example, Joanna Davidson, the wife of former shadow attorney-general Julian Leeser, the first Jewish member of the House of Representatives for NSW.

Along with the WhatsApp group, a regular 4.30pm Monday Zoom call was established. “We have a chat about issues that are raised and try and help each other,” Knoll says.



Palestinian supporters gathered outside the Opera House on October 9 after it was lit up in Israeli colours after the Hamas attack. **Louie Douvis**

Sheldon says the response from Jewish barristers has been “amazing”.

“I am someone who identifies strongly with my Jewish heritage, but what has been most striking is the people who don’t usually associate as being Jewish who have come out of the woodwork to really band together.

“It has been really great personal support and a pleasure for me to see such a diverse group of people by age, practice areas and political views all come together in commonality to express sympathy and support for each other.”

And it has not been only Jews reaching out. “People talk about isolation at the Bar, but a significant number of people have really gone out of their way to check in. It really was appreciated,” Sheldon says.

Intergenerational trauma

For many in the Jewish community, comparisons between the October 7 attacks and the Holocaust bring up an intergenerational trauma.

The distance between that tragedy and today is only a generation or two. The stories of Jews being exterminated don’t come from textbooks, they come from parents, grandparents and great-grandparents.

David Baran at Jack Shand Chambers recounts the story of his grandfather, Zindel Baran, who lived in Poland before the outbreak of World War II. He was a tailor and could not speak English or Polish, only Yiddish. “But he kept a keen eye on politics,” Baran says, telling the story as it was told to him.

Zindel Baran could see what was happening in Germany and the direct attack on Jews, and with a clear picture of what the future held, decided to leave. He took the first ship he could find, which happened to be to Australia.

“He set up as a tailor and then went back to Poland for his family. He begged everyone else to come, but they didn’t believe him,” Baran says. “He and his family survived and everyone else went to Auschwitz.”



Photographs of some of those taken hostage by Hamas are posted on a wall in Tel Aviv. Getty

Knoll was told the story of his late father, Alamar (Ali) Knoll, hosting Passover in 1938. It was a huge event with 115 people. After the war, when Alamar tried to reconnect with those who attended, just 18 remained alive.

“All of those were killed simply because they were Jews. Victims of barbarism,” Knoll says, adding that what happened in Israel was no different.

“Over 200 hostages held incommunicado, including children as young as four who were taken away in cages. We are dealing with barbarity, and unless the barbarians are put out of business it will happen again,” he says.

Barak, Knoll and Sheldon all have family, friends or know people who have been called up to serve in the Israeli military ahead of an anticipated ground invasion of Gaza [<https://www.afr.com/world/middle-east/paralysis-chaos-as-israel-delays-invasion-20231024-p5eeml>] that is expected to have a steep death toll.

Knoll acknowledges the tragedy in any conflict of innocents being killed, but he fears if Hamas is not destroyed, the cycle of violence will only continue.

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