

LIVES, NOT LABELS

Israel: the real stories behind the slogans

The diverse people living in Israel and their individual human stories rarely feature in the falsified post-truth world of social and mainstream media

By **LYNDA BEN-MENASHE**

November 4, 2025, 4:41 pm



Lynda Ben-Menashe (bottom row, 2nd from right) with family in Israel.

I've just returned after spending the month of the chagim in Israel with my family, a rare opportunity for me and my sister, our mother and all our children to be together.

It was my fourth visit since October 7, 2023. Another chance to breathe in the air of the real and multi-layered Israel, instead of choking on the vile one-dimensional fabrications of the country we waded through in the post-truth world of social and mainstream media.

The diverse people living in Israel and their individual human stories rarely feature in that falsified world. Here are just a few:

On our first morning a man greeted me with “Bonjour, Madame”. I was flattered to be mistaken for one of Israel’s many stylish French immigrants. Since the 2006 antisemitic kidnapping, torture, and murder of 23-year-old Ilan Halimi, 10% of France’s Jews have moved to Israel, many to Ra’anana, where we were staying.

22-year-old Omer Shem-Tov is one of them. On October 7 he was abducted, then held for 505 days, 450 of them alone in a tunnel. Omer lives ten minutes away from Ra’anana, in Herzliya. We swam at Herzliya Beach with a group of Arab boys, then a few days later at the Dead Sea with three generations of a Christian Arab family; many fully-covered Muslim women; a Druze family; and the usual assortment of secular, orthodox and ultra-orthodox Jews. Here, in the ‘apartheid’ state.

Also in Herzliya live our friends Ilene and Daryo. Born in Istanbul, Daryo left in the mid- 1970s, fleeing bullets fired into his family’s apartment building between Left and Right extremists, into which gulf the Islamists waltzed and have remained, he warned.

Daryo exports religious jewellery and had a sales spike after October 7 with Jewish people buying Stars of David to affirm their identity and solidarity. But as global Jew hatred and violence have risen, many have become afraid to advertise who they are, and sales have plummeted. Trump’s 15% tariff has also hurt – ironically Daryo’s been hit yet again from both Left and Right.

But his and Ilene’s greatest fear is for the safety of their son Miki, a combat soldier who when we visited had just been called back for a fourth tour in Gaza to fight in a war he didn’t want.

One morning in Jerusalem I met with my Palestinian friend Christina, whose tourism business has been destroyed by the war. She spoke as harshly about the corrupt Palestinian Authority as she did about Hamas; about Palestinians who don’t live here and so ‘have no right to tell us what to do’; and about the Israeli government.

Christina’s two children have left the country to study, which she says keeps them safe from Palestinian extremists and from the IDF, and also from what my Israeli nephews call ‘deliveries from Yemen.’ During our stay those deliveries – Houthi missiles and drones – hit an apartment building, a school and a hotel, killing one and injuring 39.

At the first two Saturday night hostage rallies we attended, calls for the end of the war and the return of the hostages were at fever pitch. The anguish and fury were visceral, and each time the names of Hamas or of Netanyahu were spoken, people drowned them out with hisses and boos, as during the reading of the Megillah at Purim.

In stark contrast another night were the silent tears of a woman sitting next to me at a screening of the film #Nova, a pastiche of October 7 mobile phone and GoPro footage. I put my hand on her arm when her tears turned to sobs as a young man’s face came onto the screen. She told me it was her murdered 30-year-old son, Tomer Segev. Now I know her name is Ayelet.

The mood at the last Saturday night rally was completely different again. With Witkoff, Jared and Ivanka on the podium, and half a million of us breathless with giddy hope, it felt almost like a different country. I’d experienced so many emotions over two years in that place – I even did a stint selling Bring Them Home merch there on one of my volunteering trips. I suddenly realised that for the first time I was smiling. Two days later, as the 20 live hostages were released, I cried tears of elation along with the other 60,000 members of our family pressed against me like sardines.

In his 2024 piece ‘When we started to lie,’ journalist Matti Friedman says that the question to ask about coverage of this conflict is ‘who does this serve?’

Who does it serve to omit the stories of all the people above? Being there I was struck yet again by the contrast between the depth and complexity of the issues and the flatness of their portrayal in our public conversation. By the absence of half the human stories.

Christina derided the empty international declarations of Palestinian ‘statehood,’ which she said change absolutely nothing on the ground. She lashed those blissfully or wilfully ignorant Westerners whose virtue-signalling embrace of the slogan and the lapel pin does nothing to advance the safety or security of her people or ours.

The image that recurs in my mind is the scene in the movie Independence Day where the naïve Americans open their arms to welcome the aliens, about whom they actually know nothing, and are vaporised in an instant by the death beam from the aliens’ spaceship.

So too I see so many of our naïve fellow Australians, opening their arms to and marching under the portraits and flags of those who would lynch them for their sexual orientation and rape or murder them for their uncovered hair.

For the longest time I could only understand this as the result of ignorance, but recently I heard the first explanation that made sense to me: these people do know who they're standing with. By standing with those whom they acknowledge would kill them, by turning the ultimate cheek, their own Christ-like virtue is signalled to the highest degree.

For mere mortal Australians, each new day can be that scene from Independence Day or it can be the one they return to independent thought. They still enjoy the Western freedom to choose.

That choice must be informed by the stories of real people, like Omer and Daryo and Ayelet and Christina, and it's our job to bring those stories to them.

Lynda Ben-Menashe is president of National Council of Jewish Women Australia (NCJWA).