

NELSON'S COLUMN, ZEDDY'S COLUMN AND A DOUBLE DOSE OF TRAFALGAR

A tale that spans 25 years



ZEDDY LAWRENCE

TWENTY-FIVE years ago this month, I walked through the doors of Trafalgar House, a grandly named but otherwise unimposing and unremarkable office building in the north-west London suburb of Edgware. That step I took inside would turn out to be the first step of a 25-year journey that led me to the other side of the world, to Melbourne, Australia, and to this very moment, right here, right now – penning this very column for *The AJN*.

It was a journey that saw me become editor of *Jewish News UK*, editor of the *Australian Jewish News*, executive director of Zionism Victoria and then, just as I stepped into a building a quarter of a century ago, it saw me ending the journey as I stepped out of a building – the Beth Weizmann Jewish Community Centre in the south-eastern Melbourne suburb of Caulfield – precisely 25 years later.

That initial step back in May 2000 was into the office of Totallyjewish.com, the first website of its kind in Europe, catering to the news and lifestyle needs of the Jewish community.

For a seasoned TV scriptwriter and radio journalist, it was quite an exciting career move. Remember, this was in an age before Facebook, Google, eBay, Amazon, YouTube and Tinder – a time when “swipe left” or “swipe right” was nothing more than what you’d expect Mr Miyagi to say in *The Karate Kid*.

But I’m not here to get nostalgic, or to talk about myself.

I simply wanted to preface this piece by noting that I’ve just celebrated my silver jubilee – or jubilee if you will – working for the Jewish community. And, as I read in last week’s *AJN*, that’s now come to an end – or at the very least is on hiatus.

So I thought having been a communal professional in both the



From left: Then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat enjoy a moment at Camp David in July, 2000. Photo: AP Photo/White House

UK and Australia for quite a long stint, maybe that qualifies me to share some reflections.

Of course, the world is very different now to then. Back in 2000, depending on your pronunciation, Abbas was what you caught if you couldn’t afford a taxi or what you caught if you went fishing in Gippsland. The Houthis, meanwhile, sang with the Blowfish and Net ‘n Yahoo was a tech magazine about the World Wide Web.

“The world is very different today to 2000.”

Jokes aside (did those even qualify as jokes?), it’s astounding to think that one of the first stories I wrote at Totallyjewish.com was about how well Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat seemed to be getting on at Camp David in July 2000. There were photos of the two of them laughing in an “After you – no, after you moment” over who should walk into the lodge first. I even remember my headline above the picture, “Camp comedy”.

How quickly the mood changed as Arafat walked away from the greatest chance to secure a state for the Palestinian people, and instead opted to launch the Second

Intifada. How many thousands of innocent lives could have been spared over the past 25 years if he’d simply had the sense or the courage to try to build rather than to destroy and chosen statehood over victimhood. And how different to our own forebears who were prepared to accept whatever tiny scrap of mosquito-ridden swamp or barren desert was offered to them to create a place they could call home.

Tragically trigger-happy, Arafat’s heirs in Fatah and Hamas are no better. Afflicted with terror tunnel vision, they resolutely refuse to recognise the potential that peace offers the Palestinian people they pretend to be fighting for.

Another memory. This time from May 2002. Forty thousand British Jews flocked to Trafalgar Square (yup, Trafalgar again – pure coincidence) in what was billed as a peace rally. Yes, as a sick suicide bombing campaign claimed the lives of hundreds of Israelis – among them Melbourne teenager Malki Roth – then as now, we raised our voices calling for an end to hostilities, an end to violence.

Well, that was the idea. But there was one dissenting voice. Appearing on screen after a string of community leaders and politicians had stood on stage in the shadow of Nelson’s column, emphasising and reemphasising our yearning for

peace, the former firebrand prime minister of Israel, one Benjamin Netanyahu, who clearly hadn’t read the memo, spoke proudly of the “biblical battle” against Arafat who he compared to Hitler, adding, “We have chosen to fight, we have chosen to win”.

If doves had been released at the rally, and they wouldn’t have been out of place, it was as if the speaker on screen was pulling out a shotgun and blasting them out of the sky.

Now I don’t know what happened to this Netanyahu fellow, but there are certainly some who feel that the current Israeli Prime Minister is similarly inclined, and that certain members of his cabinet are a little too fond of beating their battle drums.

Is it just me, or can you also hear Messrs Ben Gvir and Smotrich singing everyone’s favourite *Lion King* song Hatorah Kahane?

All of which is to say, as they do in France, plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose.

Although given Nelson and us Brits beat the French at the Battle of Trafalgar, I should say it in English – 25 years on, it’s pretty evident, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

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