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'I FELT MY BODY SHAKE AND THE BILE RISE IN MY THROAT'

Us Jews count too, Roger Waters

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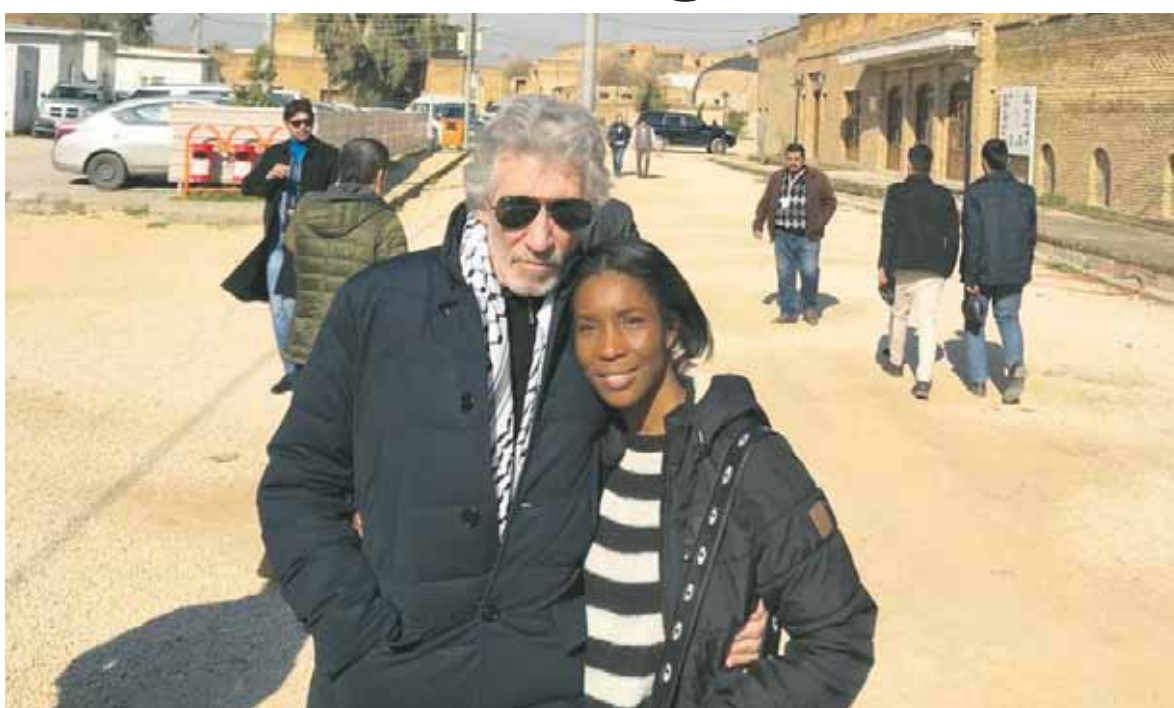


IN December 2018, I was called upon to help in a coordinated mission in Iraq and Syria, to rescue and repatriate Mahmud and Ayyub Ferreira, ages 11 and seven. They were then the same ages as my boys are now. I had been involved in cases of children at risk of death in the past, but these two and their rescue operation were different to my typical work.

For about 13 years my work has focused on overseeing legal assistance and advocacy for individuals at risk of execution and state-perpetrated extreme rights abuses. Mahmud and Ayyub didn't have execution warrants and they hadn't been accused of committing any crimes. But they were stranded in Camp Roj in northeastern Syria, following the death of their father – an ISIS fighter from Trinidad – and I believe that if we had done nothing then they would have died there.

These children were grains of sand in the humanitarian disaster caused by ISIS' reign of terror in Syria and the bloody war that pitted it against the evil Assad regime, but those grains were each a world to me. As a Jewish human rights lawyer I have always been motivated by the values of Tikkun Olam and Pikuach Nefesh.

Enter Pink Floyd bassist Roger Waters. Clive Stafford-Smith, the founder of the organisation I was working at, had been approached by Waters who was willing to charter a private plane and assist in the rescue operation. Truth be told, adding Waters into the mix in a high-risk operation in Iraq and Syria massively complicated the situation for all kinds of reasons. He was a kidnapper's dream with a potentially huge ransom on his head, and he could not be trusted to follow protocols. That said, we assessed that without his involvement (and for reasons I cannot get into) we could not have carried out the rescue operation. Like many who my former organisation



Roger Waters wearing a keffiyeh, with his wife Kamilah Chavis.

Photo: Supplied

had worked with, Waters was no stranger to antisemitic discourse and had even dressed up as an SS-officer at a concert in Berlin, but as I saw it then, his involvement was a means to achieving a just end.

As Waters subsequently said in an interview with NPR: "A mother and a couple of kids separated. It's simple; you have to put them back together."

I would have hoped you would see the Bibas brothers for what they are – little jewels whose souls each represent a whole world.

On this I agree.

So when I heard Waters's interview with Piers Morgan last week in which he denied the atrocities of the October 7 massacre, or that brothers Kfir and Ariel Bibas – aged nine months and four years old at the time of their abduction by Hamas during the October 7 massacre in Israel – were being held hostage in Gaza, I felt my body shake and the bile rise in my

throat. For over a day I couldn't eat and I felt physically sick. My mind constantly flashed back to the four days when I had not slept a wink, tracking those on the operation to save the Ferreira children as they crossed from Irbil to Roj to Qamishli to Irbil to Zurich to London. There were so many points of risk on that operation – it could so easily have gone wrong so many times – and I lived, breathed and sweated it, as did the others who helped in all sorts of ways.

How could someone who had spent an untold fortune and put their physical safety on the line to rescue two brothers in Syria have absolutely no feeling for the Bibas boys?

For nine months now, the entire Jewish world has prayed for the survival of these two redheads, their mother Shiri and father Yarden. Every passing day we have felt the pain of what they must be experiencing, along with the pain of the suffering of the other hostages, families and friends of those massacred or kidnapped on October 7; and, no less, the pain and suffering of Palestinian civilians caught in the cross-hairs of a cruel war caused by a cult of death called Hamas.

Roger, I kept my mouth shut then, and there are many like you who I have worked with, who

didn't know I was Jewish, for whom I shut up and smiled. From Guantanamo Bay to the death rows of Egypt, Bahrain, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and so many other places, sometimes the price of a person's life or their freedom is that you work with anyone to make it happen. Sometimes you even see evil in the face of someone who does something good.

Just as Clive Stafford-Smith has always said, we are all better than our worst act, so too we are all worse than our best act. You did the right thing with the Ferreira brothers, and for as long as I live I will continue to do everything I can to help others whose liberty has been denied, and whose lives hang in the balance. It does not matter to me that most of the beneficiaries of that work are Muslim. Their lives are just as valuable as anyone else's.

I would have hoped you would see the Bibas brothers for what they are – little jewels whose souls each represent a whole world – that you would not deny their suffering, their humanity, or their existence, but I suppose that was asking too much because they are Jews.

Simone Abel is a human rights lawyer and activist, and the Head of Legal at the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.



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