

WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

FEBRUARY 10-11, 2024

MAGAZINE



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“
**I FIND
MYSELF
FEELING
POLITICALLY
HOMELESS**
”

He co-founded GetUp! on a quest to fix the nation.
But Evan Thornley has walked away from Labor – and embraced religion

By Damon Kitney

After a dirt-poor childhood, he made a fortune in the dotcom boom then blazed a trail in politics. Now Evan Thornley's life has taken another unusual turn: he's embraced Orthodox Judaism

By Damon Kitney

Photography Julian Kingma

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Higher purpose:
Thornley in the
synagogue

Evan Thornley was always running. The former McKinsey man who became a global internet pioneer with LookSmart – the tech company he set up with his late ex-wife in Silicon Valley – had only one speed: flat out. When the firm earned a billion-dollar-plus valuation on the Nasdaq, he was crowned the founding father of Australian tech unicorns. He rode out the dotcom crash, returned home and threw himself with all guns blazing into politics. A seat for the Labor party in the Victorian parliament ensued, sure enough.

He pursued public policy through another startup, the pot-stirring leftwing activist group GetUp! Armed with a mountain of cash and sporting an air of omniscience, Thornley moved into an even higher gear. He bought houses – his “palaces”, he calls them – in dress-circle Kew and South Yarra, cars and businesses; he strove to fix all that was wrong in his own broken family and the country, no less.

He travelled to Brisbane, where his brother-in-law had tragically shot himself in front of his children, to provide support for those left behind. He ventured to Warrnambool in regional Victoria and tried to talk his 14-year-old niece out of getting pregnant by her boyfriend on his release from jail (their plan had been to get Centrelink to pay for moving out of home). He failed. “I found I had nothing useful to offer,” he says. “The local boy made good had returned home with a patronising attitude and a bag full of money and had never spent the time with them to understand their lives, their fears, their feelings or their dreams. I had been running too fast. I had been running away.”

And then in 2012, reeling from his divorce and a single father of three girls – having never taken the time to process his own trauma-riven childhood – Thornley made the biggest decision of his life. He paused to take a big, deep breath. He stopped running, and found himself.

“I always felt like an outsider through life. I didn’t fit in or belong anywhere particularly. I just got through life as best I could,” Thornley

says. “Suddenly this community just felt like home.” We are chatting over a lunch of poke bowls and freshly squeezed orange juice at his favourite kosher cafe, All Things Equal, in bustling Balaclava in the heart of Melbourne’s “bagel belt”. Specifically, he is referring to his conversion to Orthodox Judaism, which he has never before discussed in mainstream media. Now 59, Thornley has always been a deep thinker, not shy of an opinion. I met him more than 15 years ago when he was working in government and was impressed by his intellect and drive; that much hasn’t changed.

During our catch-up and in subsequent conversations for this story he is charming, thoughtful and at times emotional, whether speaking about his marriage breakdown or the war raging in Gaza. “I finally finished my Orthodox conversion at the age of 57. So the entire journey took me 40 years in the wilderness,” he says, referencing the biblical account of the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land.

piqued at age 17, when, living in the suburb of Caulfield, he met his first girlfriend who was Jewish. But it was his split from his wife of 18 years, Tracey Ellery, that was the catalyst for his conversion. “I had begun thinking hard about converting but Tracey, while very sympathetic, didn’t have an interest in going down that path. When we separated, despite all the other difficulties, the silver lining was I was free to pursue my conversion. So I did,” he says.

So does he have any family connection at all to Judaism? Thornley believes his maternal grandfather, a European property developer and self-declared communist, was Jewish, but there is no formal record of this. Thornley began studying in 2012 under Rabbi Adam Stein at Kehilat Nitzan, Melbourne’s only Conservative synagogue but with a congregation drawn from both progressive and orthodox Jews. He read Jewish history, philosophy and ethics, revelling in the process, and in August 2014 adopted the Hebrew name of Lev Yona-

uncommitted. Rabbi Andrew Saffer, his closest personal Rabbi for the past five years, says Thornley is constantly looking for better ways to do things. “Evan just doesn’t give up. In that sense, he’s really unusual,” Saffer says. “He’s an expert in so many things, but he’s OK with being a newcomer to something that has the potential to genuinely change his life, be that living as a Jew or anything else.”

He notes that Thornley pushes himself hard, professionally and personally. “Not as a gym-shark or meditation-junkie, but on a day-to-day, human level. Every conversation I have with him has a practical angle, but also a deeply thought-out, ‘What does that mean for me and my purpose?’ human angle. He doesn’t just want to succeed as a business-person, he wants to succeed in life as a full human being.”

Mei Ling Doery, a Davos young global leader and GP-turned-startup-mentor, says Thornley is still “the same man at heart” after his conversion. They have known each other since 2017 and Thornley has become one of her mentors. “He is becoming more and more of who he is with every passing year. Character is destiny. His Judaism is not just a brand stuck on from the outside, he lives it,” she says.



On his own quest for meaning, Thornley had delved into different religious, political and philosophical schools over his decades at university, in politics and business, also exploring fundamentalist Christian communities. He became drawn to Judaism for its adherence to the two criteria he was seeking from religious dogma: “It must be intellectually coherent and bring moral clarity,” he says. “Judaism has both.” He adds: “Judaism teaches you to look at every human situation from every single angle.” His interest in the religion was first

tan. But it wasn’t strict enough. Four years later he embarked on a stricter conversion at the orthodox Caulfield Shule, one of Melbourne’s largest and best known synagogues. Thornley had been inspired by the writings of influential Orthodox rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the fragmentation of Judaism. Thornley explains that he “didn’t want to continue the fragmentation of Judaism, I wanted to be part of its reunification, and so the Orthodox conversion made sense for me”. It is a notoriously demanding and intensive process designed to weed out the

Thornley was just five when his father, Jim, walked out on the family, leaving mum Phoebe with four children under the age of seven. They grew up so poor there was rarely enough to eat at home, plaguing the kids with a litany of health problems resulting from malnutrition.

When young Evan was in third grade and Phoebe had to go into hospital for two weeks, his teacher let him stay with her. There were no family or friends around to help. (Jim remarried, and Thornley now has six sisters; some are sole parents now bringing up the fourth generation of welfare dependent children.) But seemingly out of nowhere he was given an opportunity for an education, and he grabbed it. In 1981, at the age of 15, he went to live with his father and stepmother. In an unexpected act of generosity, Jim wrote his son an application for elite Scotch College, which was accepted. It changed the young man’s life. “When I arrived at Scotch, all of a sudden I met all these kids that were going to be doctors and lawyers and I realised that I could do that too,” he says.

When Jim’s business hit hard times and he couldn’t pay the school fees, the school made allowances. Evan was a high achiever. He fin-



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Journey: Thornley as an ALP candidate, opposite; in his twenties; with Tracey Ellery; playing golf with Bill Clinton and others in 2000



ished school but soon fell out with his father and was kicked out of home at 17. With no money and nowhere to live in the middle of the 1982-83 recession, he couch-surfed between mates' places for six months before securing what is today known as Austudy as he embarked on his Commerce/Law degree at Melbourne University, which he completed in 1990.

Three years later he married Ellery. She was also from a working-class family, once telling a newspaper her parents had “struggled to make ends meet”. He had wrangled himself a job at McKinsey, a global management consultancy, which took the couple to New York.

In 1995 Thornley and Ellery launched LookSmart, at the forefront of search engine technology, which became the first Australian tech firm to launch on the Nasdaq. The ensuing dotcom crash punched a hole in the couple's stratospheric wealth but they nonetheless returned home in 2002 with shares reportedly worth more than \$120 million.

Having been active in student politics during his university days, Thornley threw himself into the fray of progressive politics. He became a founding director and financial backer of GetUp! in 2005, which immediately went after John Howard's long-serving Coalition government. The group's campaigning and deep pockets helped propel Labor into power federally two years later under Kevin Rudd.

Thornley had “amicably” stepped down from the GetUp! board in 2006 in a bid to give an air of independence to the venture – it was the same year he entered the Victorian Parliament. He quickly made a mark, and was widely tipped to join John Brumby's cabinet when he abruptly quit in 2008. Mainstream politics was not for him. Instead, he signed on to head the Australian division of Better Place, an Israeli firm pursuing electric car infrastructure development globally. He eventually took over from the founder as CEO but it was too late to save the company from collapse after years of mismanagement. It was too far ahead of its time – and the EV revolution.

Thornley was on more solid ground when he dreamt up a firm called GoodStart, a social venture enterprise that bought the failed ABC Learning childcare centre network.

But over these years and beyond, Thornley and Ellery grew apart. They divorced in 2010 after 23 years together and 18 years of marriage. At the time their twins were 15 and their youngest daughter was 10.

“I grew up in a broken home and I swore to never inflict that on my kids. Ultimately, I couldn't keep to that. But I tried. For a long time,” Thornley says softly. “A friend said to me many years later that Tracey and I were more of a business partnership than a marriage. I thought that was very insightful. We were obviously very effective together in business ... but the emotional content of our relationship was very difficult for both of us and reflected our respective difficult family backgrounds.”

These days he live and breathes his adopted faith. Thornley says 100 blessings daily, wears the yarmulke on his head as well as a tzitzit undergarment, and has given up non-Kosher wine. Last year he auctioned off his formidable cellar of vintage reds. After 25 years of patient collecting and cellaring, it included Penfolds top vintages including Bin 707s, 389s, 407s and aged Grange, as well as top wines from the great 1997 Napa vintage. There were also 1994 and 1995 Moss Woods and Cullens from Margaret River in WA, all the top vintages of Dalwhinnie shirazes, a bunch of old Henschkes and even a 1930 Seppelt Para Liqueur Port.

His Judaism has now given him a new way of living. While he says the ritual of Jewish life has at times been challenging, for an entrepreneur at heart the structure has been welcome. “The



Life of faith: Thornley in the synagogue

point of that stuff is to bring you back multiple times a day to the centre of who you are and the person you are trying to be," he says. "That sense of being in touch with God in your life."

Thornley is on decent terms with his father, who is now 86 and suffering from advanced dementia, and says he holds no grudge for the suffering he endured as a child. "I love my dad and he's a really sweet guy. He is honestly one of the nicest people you'll ever meet. But his childhood was also very complex and messed up. I just don't know that dad ever really fully

had the capacity to develop deep relationships." Phoebe died in 2020, aged 77, after refusing to undergo further treatment for bowel cancer. It was a difficult time for Thornley: the family also lost Tracey that year. His ex-wife was only 57.

He is close to his children. The youngest, Daisy, still lives with him in Melbourne and the twins, Ruby and Emily – who are now 28 – have both found life partners. "It is difficult without the role models and I haven't been the perfect parent by a long shot but I have learned to become better over the years. All my girls have

grown up knowing that they are loved and that we would always be there for them," he says.

He has taken them to Israel on five occasions, so they were not surprised by his adoption of Judaism. In fact he believes his conversion has tightened their bond. His youngest daughter agrees. "Judaism has allowed my dad to be a part of a community that is accepting and supportive. I think overall his conversion has helped him become more in touch with himself as a human and father," Daisy says.

Adds Thornley: "My relationship with Judaism has made me focus on family as the most important and central thing."

He is excited to see the Australian tech scene growing to greater maturity from the embryonic beginnings he helped foster, with the obvious examples of Atlassian and Canva. At the same time, he criticises the limited parameters tech investors operate in. "The latest crop of globally significant companies are really inspiring businesses," he says. "If I have a concern, it is that I think the venture capital industry, while greatly enhanced, tends to be a bit narrow. It's pretty much all SaaS (Software-as-a-Service) platforms all the time. A good SaaS platform is a great investment and they are easy to evaluate as the key metrics are clear. I think a lot of other businesses and business models are worthy of stronger support, but that requires a more diversified mindset and evaluation from the VCs [venture capital firms] and not many do so much of that."

Doery says she has always admired Thornley's vision – including his passion for female entrepreneurs. "The man is one of the most congruent people I have ever met," she says. "Which is why I turned to him as a thought partner to solve the diversity issue in and around entrepreneurship in Australia."

"He is an example of lived experience of what it means to be structurally disadvantaged, while he's also lived the other life as someone who has had access to capital. He is at the nerve centre of this whole situation."

Thornley's own tragic family story is clearly driving his desire to find solutions to Australia's housing crisis, launching his firm LongView in 2021. The company buys and manages investment grade, high capital growth residential property, potentially subverting the housing model the modern Australian economy is pred-

“There has been a slow political inversion across the modern West, from voting being aligned with class and income”

icated on. “The biggest investors in Australian housing by far are landlords, with over \$2.2 trillion invested,” he says. “If you are going to fix housing, that is the only pool of capital big enough to do it. But the problem is our system has individual landlords owning individual properties for individual tenants.”

Managed property funds, rather than bricks and mortar, “do a much better job of providing dignified secure housing and they deliver better returns to investors. By helping them buy a better home sooner, the fund earns a share of the capital growth in the home and that delivers superior returns to investors. Good quality family homes are a much better investment than high-rise investment units. So it is a win-win”.

There’s also a shared equity fund where homebuyers and landlords co-invest to cover the deposit, while professional buying advisors help guide the process. It all sounds incredibly altruistic and socially conscious. Thornley promises superior returns to investors as it steers them toward good quality family homes.

“Nothing matters more than dignified, secure housing. If you are a single mum in the suburbs having to move between rentals every 20 months on average, you can’t put down roots or keep your kids in the same schools. It’s a disaster. Yet the system helps no one – it doesn’t work for landlords either to have such high churn,” he says.

It was this intrinsic commitment to social justice, a community mindset and desire to improve the world for everyone, rich and poor, that led Thornley to politics, namely the Australian Labor Party, and to help fund GetUp!, joining the board alongside John Hewson and Bill Shorten, both one-time opposition leaders on either side of politics. However, Thornley is no longer a member of the

Labor Party. “I don’t think my politics have changed much, but these days I find myself feeling politically homeless,” he says. “I haven’t been a member of any political party for over 10 years. I try to give support and advice to some politicians on both sides of the aisle who I respect and think can make a big contribution.

“There has been a slow political inversion across the modern West, from voting being aligned with class and income to voting being aligned with education level. You can see the entire US electoral map has virtually swapped since 1968, for example.

“My political alignment has always been with working people and I subscribe to the Martin Luther King vision of equality. My personal passion is single parent families getting the support they need – this gets so little of the public spotlight and yet is one of the largest groups of disadvantaged people in our community.”

He has a different touchstone now. “It’s the centrality of intimate relationships – strong families, close friends and close community that really matter to human flourishing. The broad brushes of party politics and identity politics don’t really focus much on this level that has the most impact in our lives,” he continues. “What I’m trying to do at Long-View reflects that – dignified, secure housing is a basic building block to support strong relationships. And I think we’ve got more chance to do something transformative on housing through an innovative business than in politics or empty gestures.”

Asked about federal Labor’s muted response to the October 7 terrorist attacks by Hamas and its growing distance from Israel – historically Australia’s strongest ally in the Middle East – he says: “The political aftermath is complex and

changing quickly. I would hope you don’t need to be Jewish to be horrified by the barbarism of the October 7th attacks.” He condemns the hatred and antisemitism that’s been exhibited in Australia and across the world over Israel’s retaliation, for which it has been accused of genocide. He describes the ongoing debate as “pretty depressing”, before defining the war in Gaza as a battle between Iran and the West. “The long-suffering people of Gaza are the tragic victims of that war. That’s the reality,” he says.

“Anybody who thinks they are commenting on this and doesn’t see the central role of Iran and the Iranian dictatorship in this is just demonstrating their profound ignorance of the facts.”

Putting his lingering anger about October 7 aside, I ask if the Evan Thornley of today is the happiest he has been in his life. His answer is immediate as his eyes light up. “Yeah, I would actually say I am,” he replies, revealing that for the past 12 months he has been in a “wonderful” relationship with his new partner, Suzy. “That is a source of immense joy to me because that has obviously not been the easiest part of my life.”

Rabbi Andrew Saffer says his friend is “much more settled now”, adding: “He is still always questioning, still always searching. But he’s doing it from a place of calm, not existential angst.”

Thornley feels a love from the Jewish community that was missing from his childhood, and at the end of his marriage. To be loved in a way he never was by his parents and in the end, his wife at home. It’s a relief to have finally stopped running, to know where he fits in, where he belongs.

“If maintaining a fabric of strong, beautiful and rewarding intimate relationships is the key to human flourishing, then having a rich, nuanced guidance system for how to be good in those relationships, to have a moral architecture and code for living that enhances those relationships... that is something magic and critical and it doesn’t just happen,” he says.

“Look at the epidemic of loneliness and family breakdown in the modern West. This stuff is hard. It has always been hard. That’s why the whole book of Genesis is really a set of stories about dysfunctional families. So we can learn and meditate upon what is required to treat each other well and build bonds of love that will endure.” ●