

A Story Bridging Yom Ha'Shoah, Israel Memorial Day & Independence Day

By **Toby Klein Greenwald**

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The extended family gathers on Pesach 2016. Photo by Roni Shilo

On the eve of Israel's Memorial Day (Yom Hazikaron) last year, at 11:30PM, our daughter Ephrat called to notify us of the birth of their little boy. She had given birth at St. Joseph's Hospital, which is located near to what used to be the border between East and West Jerusalem, next to the Israeli Police Headquarters, on the way to Mt. Scopus.

I told her that Savta Leah (my husband's mother) was smiling down on her from heaven.

This is a story that combines the Shoah with the founding of the State of Israel, and has many interlocking circles and the building of bridges.

The full name of that day is "Memorial Day for the Fallen Soldiers of the Wars of Israel and Victims of Actions of Terrorism." It comes one week after Yom HaShoah.

In Israel, the Holocaust is commemorated not on January 27th, but on the 27th of the Hebrew month of Nisan (which falls in April or May), corresponding to the time in 1943 that the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was still in progress. As Memorial Day is immediately followed by the joyous celebrations of Israel's Independence Day, it is a time period fraught with many mixed emotions.

Ephrat and Tzachi Cohen's son is descended from Aaron HaCohen (the high priest), on Tzachi's side, and also has a connection to the ancient priesthood from two other lines, as I am a "bat Cohen" (daughter of a Cohen) and so is my mother-in-law.



Toby holding Ephrat and Tzachi's new baby, Yanai. Photo by Ephrat Cohen.

How did a daughter of ours come to give birth in St. Joseph's, and why did I say my mother-in-law would be smiling?

The hospital was founded in 1948 but the maternity ward was opened in 2015 by Sister Valentina Sala, the head midwife, who came from Italy to establish it. Israeli hospitals treat patients of every religion and nationality but it was assumed that St. Joseph's maternity department would serve mostly Christian and Moslem Palestinian mothers. However, its name spread as a warm, inviting hospital with an intimate, holistic atmosphere. Among other things, they offer water births and

say they have the fewest C-section procedures in the country. Today, many Jewish women also give birth there. They also have an option for ordering kosher food. So the bridges built by Israeli medicine now go in two directions, at least for some women.

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My mother-in-law had been a teacher in a Catholic school in Slovakia in the 1940s. The nuns knew her well. Even though she came from a strictly Orthodox family, she told me that her father wanted to be sure she got a top-notch secular education as well, and that was the best high school in the area. It accepted only one Jewish girl every four years, and she was the one. They did not require her to attend any of their prayers or religion classes. She also graduated their teachers' seminary and went on to teach in that school.

It was the nuns at that school who found a hiding place for her and for my father-in-law during the Shoah; that's what saved their lives. For months they lived in an underground storeroom in the home of a non-Jewish woman in a small village. Their toddler son, whose cries would have revealed their hiding place, was watched by the woman who owned the home, who told her neighbors he was her nephew and she was helping out her sister.

To add another link to the chain bridge, the name of the private midwife I hired who saw to my pre-natal care and attended Ephrat's birth in Toronto, in 1982, while we were emissary teachers on "shlichut," was "Chris," a lovely Christian lady. Ephrat was born the evening before Chanuka, on the eve of the holiday celebrating the Jews recapturing the Holy Temple from the Greeks.

The Name of a Cohen

Ephrat and Tzachi named their son Yanai. My son-in-law told me they chose this name because, in addition to liking it, he feels very connected to his "kehunah." Rabbi Yanai HaCohen was one of the first generation of the "[amoraim](#)." They lived in 220-250 CE, in the [Land of Israel](#).

He is mentioned, among other places, in Midrash Tanhuma Masei 5:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "The land of Israel is more dear to Me than everything. I am the one who sought it out, as stated (in Ezek. 20:6), 'On that day I swore to them that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt unto a land which I had sought out for them.'"...Rav Yanai the Priest said, "There were sixty-two kings, thirty-one at Jericho and thirty-one with Sisera. When he went to fight with Israel, they also were slain along with him. Why? Because they yearned to drink water from the waters of Israel. They made a request of Sisera and said to him, 'If you please, let us come with you to war... we will come for free, because we yearn to fill our stomachs with water from that land.' Thus it is stated (in Judges 5:19), 'The kings came, they fought; to inform you that nothing was more beloved than the land of Israel.'" ...**The Holy One, blessed be He, said, "I will bring My sons, who are beloved to Me, into a land that is beloved to Me."** [Translation from Sefaria.org.il]

On that eve of Memorial Day, while Ephrat was experiencing contractions, they watched a TV program which included the mention of a soldier who some years earlier, while off-duty and without a weapon, had been killed while trying to stop a terror attack in a supermarket. His name was Tuvia Yanai Weissman. Even though they had already chosen the name, Tzachi said they were also happy that this child would continue the name of that heroic soldier.

Seeking reconciliation

During the time period leading up to the birth of little Yanai, I was concluding the writing of our Raise Your Spirits biblical musical, "REBECCA! Mother of Two Dynasties," and had been researching, along with Tamar Kamins, my co-author, the subject of the descendants of Eisav and of Yaakov (Jacob). Our burning question was: is there a chance for reconciliation in the future?

Eisav was the father of the nation Edom, who are considered by the Jewish sages to be the forerunners of the Romans, many of whom converted to Christianity (as did many Jews) and thereby became the forefathers of the many Christians who persecuted the Jews, but also the forefathers of those who, like my mother-in-law's Catholic colleagues, saved them.

Tamar found the answer to our quest in two quotes, one by the Netziv ([Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin](#), 1816-1893), and one by Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook (1865-1935), and we placed their words in the mouth of our Wandering Troubadour before the Finale:

“The Netziv said that when the descendants of Eisav awaken in a pure spirit to recognize the descendants of Israel and their nobility, then we too will awaken to know Eisav, for he is our brother. Rav Kook writes that at the end of days the love between the two brothers – Yaakov and Eisav – will return.”

We followed this by having our narrator of biblical verses sing a line from the prophet Tzefaniah (3:9): “For then I will convert the peoples to a pure language that all of them call in the name of the Lord, to worship Him of one accord.”

I would add now: the antithesis to the [Tower of Babel](#). A true tikkun olam.

My in-laws made aliya to Israel in 1949, by the grace of God, just a few months before the Iron Curtain was erected. Of their five children (three of whom were born in Slovakia), the two sons served in the IDF. My brother-in-law was a paratrooper who was wounded at Ammunition Hill during the Six Day War. My husband was in the Jerusalem Brigade, in the same war, and among the defenders and liberators of Jerusalem. Thanks to those Slovakian nuns, they were able to defend the Jewish people in the State of Israel, are here on this blessed upcoming Independence Day, and Ephrat (and our other children) and Yanai (and her other children) could come into the world.

I sent a short version of this story to Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein, Director of The Elijah Interfaith Institute, with the comment, “I wonder what lies ahead for this little *Cohen*.”

He replied, “Obviously an internship at Elijah’s eventual house of prayer for all people. He will give the priestly blessing to one and all.”

May it be so in our day.

Toby Klein Greenwald is an award-winning theater director, a recipient of American Jewish Press Association Simon Rockower awards for Excellence in Jewish Journalism, and editor-in-chief of [WholeFamily.com](#).

