

May 19, 2016 Thursday 11 Iyyar 5776

17:54 IST



Select Language ▼

THE JERUSALEM POST



Secret door (Illustrative) (Photo by: ING-IMAGE/ASAP)

Books: Blood diamonds

By AARON LEIBEL

05/19/2016

A novel examines the guilt of profiting from unsavory crimes during unthinkable times.

Is it possible to squeeze the sleaze out of a particularly unsavory crime by using its proceeds to finance something positive? How big a role should that most irksome Jewish invention – the conscience – play in our lives? These two questions dangle over Max's Diamonds like a literary sword of Damocles.

And something else hovers over Jay Greenfield's novel from the first page to the last – the Holocaust and the guilt concerning the Shoah felt by many Jews.

That guilt comes from their knowledge that, for some inexplicable reason, while their brothers and sisters suffered the unbearable in hellholes like Auschwitz, they were safe in their mothers' loving arms in London or Los Angeles, or somewhere in the ether waiting to be born.

To Jews, taught that the biblical injunction tzedek, tzedek tirdof (justice, justice you shall pursue) should be the essence of the way we live our lives, it can be seen as the ultimate injustice.

However, it is made all the more intolerable for Paul Hartman, who believes he has profited from his relatives' suffering.

From the moment that 14-year-old Paul meets his cousin and Holocaust survivor Max – trying his best not to stare at the number tattooed on his arm – and learns of Max's ill-gotten diamonds, those questions and that guilt begin to join together, threatening to destroy Paul and his family.

He becomes a very successful and wealthy attorney, but his education was financed by those gems, which are the ultimate "blood diamonds."

Perhaps as a result, his personal life consists of one misfortune after another.

Paul's conscience is unremitting and thus quintessentially Jewish. He feels guilty about three deaths in his family – when any reasonable person could see that he might share culpability for only one of those deaths.

He feels guilty when he refuses to disclose a secret, and in so doing, puts a family member in mortal danger. Yet when he changes his mind, the guilt is even worse, for now he has compromised his legal ethics.

He calls himself “treyf as a lawyer,” and, he believes, it is a problem that can't be fixed.

“Once treyf, always treyf. If a kosher hamburger becomes a cheeseburger, removing the cheese will not restore it to its kosher state. There is no absolution.”

Later, he thought that having taken “the fruits of Max's diamonds,” and violated his oath as an attorney, “he could never be the lawyer... who had a high calling and practiced a noble profession. In his own eyes... he would be no more than a shyster chasing a buck.”

To Paul, the corrupting influence of the stolen diamonds reached beyond just his profession. When he and his wife divorce, she returns the diamond ring to his mother.

“‘Good,’ Paul thought. It was the only one of Max's diamonds he had actually seen and, on Sybil's finger, it had been a near-daily reminder that he had benefited from the Holocaust.”

The most fascinating parts of this excellent book are the flashbacks to the Holocaust. I will never forget one scene, describing the death of an infant. Its gruesomeness, unfortunately, is forever seared into my memory.

Max's Diamonds began slowly, but soon picked up the pace to the point that I couldn't put it down.

The writer is a former editor at The Jerusalem Post and Washington Jewish Week. His novel Generations: The Story of a Jewish Family, which spans 1,500 years and three continents, is available online.



Print



Print

print

JPost.com: [Arab-Israeli Conflict](#) | [Israel News](#) | [Diaspora](#) | [Middle East](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Premium](#) | [Blogs](#) | [Not Just News](#) | [Edition Francaise](#) | [Green Israel](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

Copyright © 2014 Jpost Inc. All rights reserved •

[Terms of Use](#) • [Privacy Policy](#)