

LIVELY OPINION

Transparency is needed in the case of missing Israeli children

By REUT RORY COHEN

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In March, 1956, Leah Zaki, 27, gave birth to her fourth child in Kfar Saba, Israel. The baby was the fourth boy in the family and weighed more than seven pounds. In the five days he was at the hospital, the baby was breastfed and determined to be healthy. Just before Leah was to be released, a nurse came to take the infant, who had just been fed, for a final checkup. In less than a half-hour, the same nurse returned to notify Leah, my grandmother, that her child was dead.

The cause was indeterminable, she said.

My grandmother and grandfather refused to leave the hospital without seeing a body. They begged, pleaded and wept. Hospital staff told them that police would come to arrest them if they didn't leave. Eventually, fearful for their three children at home, they left. They felt that they had been mocked and humiliated, and robbed by the very country they had helped to build.

For the longest time, I thought my mother simply didn't want to accept the truth that her brother had died. Whenever she would allege that babies had been stolen for profit in the early years after the country's inception, I would ask her if there could be another explanation. It was when I realized that records had been eliminated or, worse, never entered into the system that I began to see that gross misconduct had been going on.

There was never a death certifi-

cate issued, nor a birth certificate. I checked with an associate who works in the Misrad Hapnim, Israel's Ministry of Interior. I confirmed that there was no record of my grandmother giving birth in 1956.

I started to gather anecdotal exper-

iences I heard from other Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, including an aunt by marriage of Moroccan origin who had a brother she said was stolen.



The Zaki family, l-r: Aryeh, Moshe and Eli with their mother Leah, and Ruth, the author's mother.

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In Israel, I met with relatives around my late grandmother's age who remembered her pregnant. They

all confirmed that she had given birth to a healthy baby in 1956. I knew my mother was telling the truth, but I didn't want to believe it. A country that I love so much — that means so much to me —

could not possibly have been involved in such a conspiracy to sell babies for profit or give them away in fraudulent adoptions.

True, many of the early Ashkenazic founders of Israel, even David Ben-Gurion himself, did not consider

that Jews of the Orient had much of a culture or education. But could they have been part of a massive cover-up? Perhaps early players within the government were involved?

Three separate inquiries have examined what the media in Israel has called the "Yemenite Children Affair," since a bulk of the families who have come forward are of Yemenite origin.

My grandmother, however, was a Damascene Jew, and allegations of thefts of children have come from large segments of Middle Eastern Jewry in Israel. All of these government inquiries have concluded that the bulk of missing babies died of diseases, and that their parents were not involved or informed. Where those children were buried, however, remains a mystery, as there are also allegations that these children's purported graves are empty.

Occam's razor tells us that when we are given competing hypothetical answers to a given issue, we should accept the one that makes the fewest assumptions.

Perhaps these babies became sick and died because the country was so new, so poor, and medicine was not readily available? Yet there are too many inconsistencies and contradictions.

While Israel was a new country, we are told to believe that a disproportionate number of Sephardic and Mizrahi babies became sick. Even stranger, they were often male children. Further, the children's graves weren't marked. That's bad enough. It's worse when countless testimonies from parents suggest they never saw a body.

These are questions Israeli society continues to grapple with.

To his credit, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu set out to "right an historic wrong." In December, 2016, the State of Israel declassified some 200,000 documents that claim



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to address the adoptions, often illegal, of babies of predominately Jewish immigrants from Yemen and the wider Arab world. The full archive is set to be available in 2066. What has been released so far is progress that has not been seen before on the issue. Yet so much more must be done.

Unfortunately, article after article in North American mainstream Jewish publications have often painted a story of mostly conspiracy-driven families who could not accept that their children were dead after three separate state commissions.

The same stereotype is subconsciously perpetuated — that poor Middle Eastern Jews who lost their babies continue to cling to conspiracy theories. It's a tough argument to swallow; a bunch of mostly Sephardic and Mizrahi religious nationalists who continue to build families in Israel are hardly the type to peddle conspiracy theories.

In Israel, it's a different case altogether, as the issue receives considerably more attention from media and politicians alike. It's common knowledge and part of the pop-culture lexicon, even becoming the subject of memes.

Indeed, it's not conspiracy theorists or Israel-bashers who talk about the stolen babies in Israel. It's concerned families and citizens.

Hours before her newborn was taken from her, my grandmother

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HILLEL GOLDBERG: VIEW FROM DENVER

Two minutes with President Trump

The so-called fake news media missed a really important step in the dismissal of Rex Tillerson and the hiring of Mike Pompeo as Secretary of State. Actually, there was an intervening telephone call between the two events. Shocking how it's been missed by all the media.

The call was from President Donald Trump to me, Rabbi Hillel Goldberg.

"Donald Trump's on the phone," came the message from my secretary.

I wondered who this was. That's the way we joke around the office, announcing ourselves to old friends or special clients with a sense of humor.

"Who is this?" I am asked when I make a call.

"George Bush," I used to say in order to get past the gatekeeper.

That got a chuckle — and got me past the gatekeeper.

Then I used to say, "This is Barack Obama."

Now it's "This is Donald Trump."

So I figured my secretary's reference to the President of the US was some kind of variation on the joke.

I picked up, ready for a quick comeback to some close buddy I usually joke around with.

Imagine my shock when it was actually Donald Trump's voice — the Donald Trump — on the other

end of the line.

"Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, well we know each other already, so I'll just call you Hillel, you're in at State."

"What?" I could barely squeeze out. I didn't get it.

"Look, the confirmation will be a breeze, we checked you out.

"You're terrific, wonderful, w-o-n-d-e-r-f-u-l, for this job. Much better than the guy who's gone."

great. Like everything we do. It already *is* great. Be in Washington tomorrow. You'll have your first press conference."

What? Me? Secretary of State?

In the background, there is an argument. It's about the tweet that President Trump sent out firing Tillerson. Some said it humiliated the man.

Some said that things were so bad

our whole phone call is, by now, not more than two minutes or so.

Keep in mind, it's just registering on me what the President is saying. I haven't even had the proverbial 20 seconds to think about it, let alone give a response.

Trump, I guess, saw this as hesitancy.

Then I hear President Trump in the background.

'Rabbi Hillel Goldberg, well we know each other already, so I'll just call you Hillel, you're in at State'

I hadn't heard that Rex Tillerson had been fired just minutes before.

I don't follow the president's Twitter account, and in any event I try to stay focused on what I am supposed to do today and not get distracted by the endless social media stuff.

"Uh, Mr. President, State? . . ." I just didn't get the flow, nor had any president of US ever placed a personal call to me before. I was still in shock.

"We know where you stand on Iran," said Trump. "We know where you stand on Israel. Besides, Jared will enjoy having another MOT around, observant, too! Yeah, you'll like Friedman, and Jason. It'll be

that it was just better to cut the pain and get it over with. This went on for a half minute or so.

Then President Trump is back on the line.

"The security detail is already outside your office. Pack. Dinner tonight at the White House. Kosher.

"I can't wait for you — somebody who's got the right ideas and knows how to build a team. You know that State is in a shambles. . . ."

Just now my secretary runs into the office with a news feed on the internet about the cold "Thank you for your service" tweet to Rex Tillerson.

By now, word is getting out around the IJN office that something very unusual is going on, even though

"You know this Goldberg thing, just save the tweet. We're not going to appoint him, so we don't need to fire him. He can't even make up his mind!"

Then it's the President on the line again.

"Thank you. Thank you."

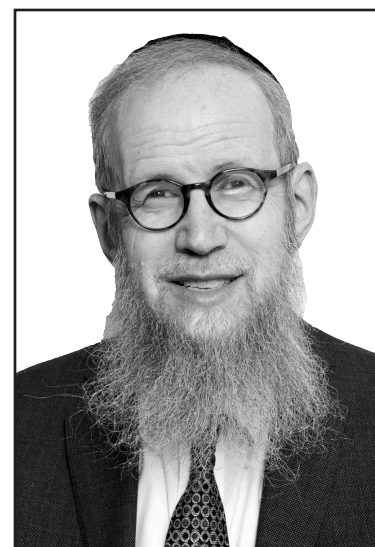
Click.

That was the intervening telephone call between Tillerson and Pompeo.

I was next in line for Secretary of State.

I hardly knew it while it was happening. It all happened so fast. Two minutes, tops.

I guess I should be grateful that the announcement never went out, because that meant that the tweet



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firing me also never went out.

Just curious, I left my office for the front door of the building and noticed this huge phalanx of limousines, of cops, of other scary security-looking guys turning around and heading off.

"Hah, hah, so it was Donald Trump on the phone," a member of the IJN staff smiled at my expense, poking fun at the obviously ridiculous rumor going around the office.

Little did they know.

Actually, little did I know.

In fact, little does anyone who works for President Trump know whether he or she will be in the saddle for two four-year terms, for one four-year term, for one year, for one month, for one day or for one minute.

Me? I had about two minutes with President Donald Trump.

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