

## In Memoriam: Ilana Tahan, OBE, Z"l

When we all look at the formidable portrait of our beloved Ilana, what do we see? A unique blend of external beauty and internal radiance, strength mixed with tenderness and a deep curiosity to gain knowledge. We see someone who held deep convictions of right and wrong yet listened attentively with respect to the other, filled with wisdom yet overwhelmingly modest.

The meaning of the Hebrew word *Ilan* is a beautiful tree, one with deeply embedded roots, a sturdy trunk, a widespread canopy providing shelter from the scorching sun and finally, an abundance of fruit. Trees are central to the universal concepts of *The Tree of Life* and *The Tree of Knowledge*. Ilana loved life and all the good it can offer, and accumulating knowledge was a key characteristic of hers.

The Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, uses *Ilan* as one of its most important metaphors, relating it as a symbol of human life:

כי האדם עץ השדה (Deu.20:19-20. "For a person is like the tree of the field").

The roots of the tree can be interpreted as our identity, our source of understanding who and what we are, sustained by the knowledge acquired through tradition passed to us by our ancestors and our cultural heritage. It is the substance of our core without which we have no protection against our vulnerability in an ever-oppressing world.

The trunk is our spine, firm, and sturdy. Our strength is to stand by our moral principles, not wavering by threats or temptations withstanding outside social, political, or economic pressures, not letting us be like leaves blown by the wind.

The spreading branches are the symbol of being willing to spread our knowledge and values as far and wide as we can.

The leafy canopy gives protection and calmness, security to the body and tranquillity to the soul. It is generous because many can come and find shelter and peace under it.

And the good fruit it produces represents an abundance of spiritual strength, which can be shared with and give pleasure to many.

Like the connection between the roots and the towering treetops, so are we, humans, grounded firmly, yet striving to achieve heights.

Ilana so obviously, represented and embodied all these qualities.

Let me now end by adding a little background to my own contact with Ilana which brings to light all the above:

It goes back to when as a postgraduate student at Oxford University and later on throughout my academic journey and working life, I was always struggling to find new material to support my thesis and my ideas. Inevitably I started to look at possible source material and turned to the British Library. My meeting with the librarian of the section of Hebraica changed my life, quashing my panic and anxiety. Ilana demonstrated all the qualities described above and far more. She became a passionate partner, directing me to source material I did not know existed, with empathy, generosity of sharing and humility of presenting her advice as just "doing her duty". Her knowledge of the vast material under her care was simply breathtaking. The academic connection between us turned soon into a firm friendship. Through my later work, I met so many academics who never failed to tell me how amazingly generous and useful their contact with Ilana was. It became obvious that she shared all parts of her knowledge to assist others with charm and humility.

And there is far more. Ilana organised group tours of the British Library for our Spiro Ark followers. Whilst there are endless guided tours of the library- Ilana presented something notable and worthily different: For small groups of 15 people at a time, Ilana organised thematic journeys through Jewish history via the rich materials available in the vast collection of the early medieval period - manuscripts and early printed books - topics of Jewish familiarity with what was known and used by Jews of the time in medicine, Jewish superstitions, writings about astronomy, fashion, food, family relationships, illuminated marriage certificates (*ketubot*) beautifully illustrated, collected from different parts of the Jewish diaspora and many more topics of fascination. During such visits, we were privileged to listen to Ilana's erudite talk, that could have not been better presented by a top scholar on the topic of his expertise- but always delivering her talks in a way that was well understood by the layperson. Included in these visits was an incredible exhibition of rare materials, the preparation and thought behind this must have taken hours and were extraordinarily curated. Yet, Ilana refused to be praised for it, insisting it was her privilege to share.

When I had the special fortune of preparing future British Ambassadors and Cultural Attaches to Israel, teaching them the language and Jewish and Israeli history, I included visits to the British Library to meet Ilana and her collection. As declared by all

of them in their evaluation comments, these meetings were a highlight. I also introduced new Israeli ambassadors to the UK to the same experience. They used to remind me of this, years after completing their term of office here with a note of gratitude for an unforgettable experience.

From this professional bond, it moved to a personal connection to include our families, especially with husband Menashe who became a contributor to our work. Who could ever forget his brilliantly illustrated and well-researched lectures on the Jewish elements in Michelangelo's ceiling paintings of the Sistine Chapel?!

If I were to tell you more, it would last till midnight and beyond. So to sum up the deep connection between myself and Ilana – it was perhaps enhanced by the fact that we were two female migrants with Eastern European roots, finding ourselves in the Western world with all the emotional and cultural connotations that this experience entails. Not easy, but we were tough enough not to be broken or be defined by the status of being strangers. Despite not losing our foreign accents and slightly different mentality we both have managed to reach publicly recognised high positions in our different cultural worlds, sharing love for Israel and the Jewish people, being married to husbands who shared our passion and inspired us, who by odd chance were both amateur but very talented portrait painters, our passionate love and care for our families whose members are each a living testimony of our aspirations. When it came to expressions of adoration of our grandchildren even those who live at a distance, we were as silly as each other- what a glue for deep closeness.

People leaving us are recorded only on official documents signed by doctors, coroners or by the existence of heavy marble tombstones - but for all who knew Ilana, her impact is engraved in us so deeply - it is continuing living like the ever-lasting tree: ILANA.

יהי זיכרה ברוך-May her memory be blessed or  
perhaps better to read it as *Let us be blessed by her memory living within us.*

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