

## **Fruma Gallant's inspirational story embodies the Zionist vision, the Holocaust, and rebirth.**

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**Fruma Gallant** ( 1936-2023), her name sadly returned when Israeli news reported that she had passed away, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. Her passing at the age of 88, in and of itself, would have not been remarkable, were it not for her story.

Holocaust survivor Fruma Gallant traveled to British-controlled Palestine on the ship *Exodus* in 1947 and was the mother of Defense Secretary Yoav Gallant. Born in Poland, Fruma Gallant was a girl of 11 when she and her parents crisscrossed Europe after the war until reaching Germany, where they had boarded the ship. Her younger sister was born on the *Exodus* itself. They arrived in pre-state Israel on the *Aliya Bet* ship *Exodus* in 1947, but the passengers were deported back to Germany by British troops before they could disembark. **(3)**

Fruma Gallant later returned to Israel shortly after the founding of the state and often gave speeches about her life to visiting groups and dignitaries.

Last month, the defense minister mentioned his mother in a Holocaust Remembrance Day speech, noting that she was a five-year-old girl when the Nazis invaded Poland. “Like many of my generation, I grew up with the stories and memories of the World War years,” he said.

In his speech in March, the defense minister cited his mother’s experiences and called for a pause in the controversial judicial reform.

“Major national change is achieved through dialogue. Tonight, I am thinking of the generation that founded Israel. Gallant said in the speech that led to his sacking by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (he was later reinstated after mass protests). Gallant then released a video in which he was heard talking to his mother after his release.

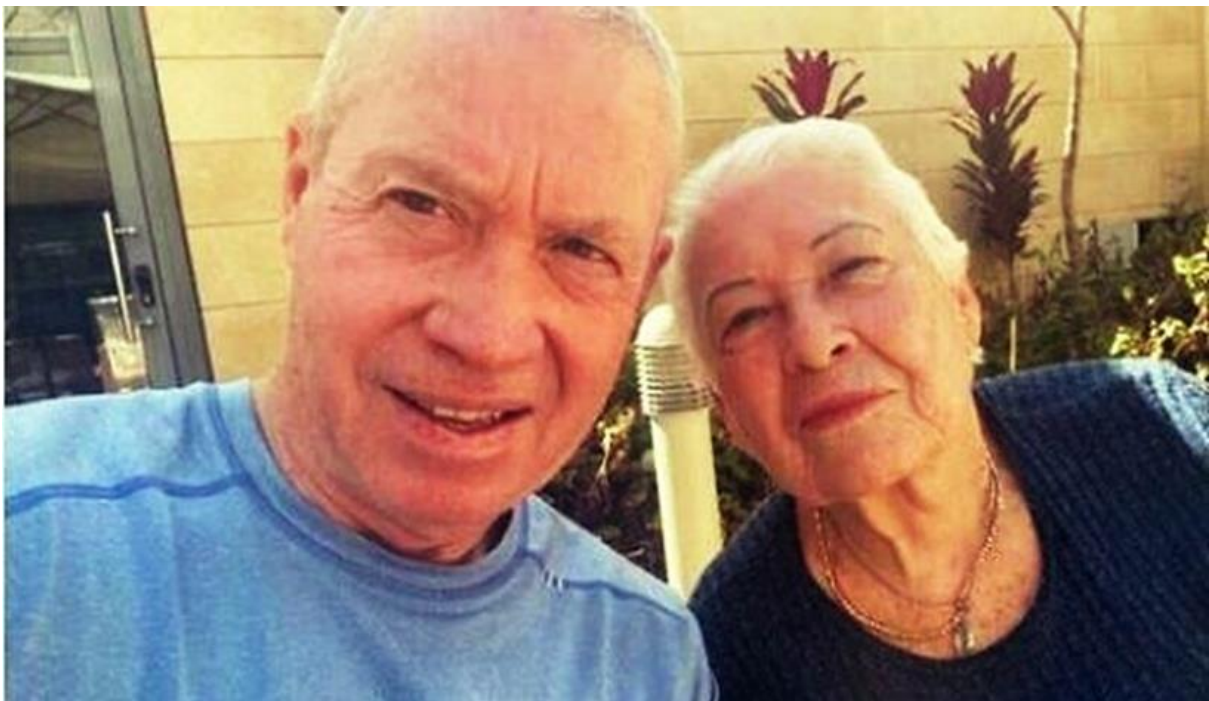
“You have intelligence and courage and I love you very much,” said Fruma Gallant. “I hope everything will be fine.” In classic Jewish fashion, she then said to him, “When there is something good to report, call me.” It was so sweet, so classically Israeli, that it almost sounded like a Jewish mother joke. ‘Call me but only if you have something good to tell me’.

“The story of Fruma is a story of inspiration and embodiment of the Zionist vision. She survived the horrors of the Holocaust, undertook the arduous journey to Israel aboard the Exodus, and raised an honorable family with a son who is Defense Minister of the State of Israel,” Netanyahu said. “May her memory be a blessing.”

Fruma Gallant was also praised by President Isaac Herzog and praised for instilling a sense of duty.

“Her life story is the story of the Holocaust and rebirth. “A Holocaust survivor who came to Israel with the Exodus and built an exemplary life and family here,” he wrote. “Had the privilege of hosting her at the President’s residence and was touched by her life story and the fact that she passed on to the next generation the duty to serve and protect our people,” Herzog wrote.

The Defense Ministry announced her death Thursday while her son led Operation Shield and Arrow against the Palestinian terrorist group Islamic Jihad in Gaza. (4)



*Fruma Gallant, with her son, Yoav Gallant.*

## **The *Exodus* 1947 an "illegal" immigration ship.**

An "illegal" immigration ship that attempted to bring Jewish survivors to Palestine in 1947, only to be turned back to Europe by the British Mandatory authorities. The *Exodus* 1947 became an international symbol of the need for free Jewish immigration to Palestine. In July 1947 the Mosad le-Aliya Bet, the main illegal immigration agency, loaded 4,500 Jewish refugees onto a re-outfitted American ship, which sailed from Marseilles, France. When it reached the open sea, the ship renamed itself *Exodus* 1947. British warships picked up on the ship before it even reached Palestine's waters and forced it to advance into Haifa. As soon as the boat reached the port, British soldiers forcibly removed the refugees, killing three and wounding many others. On July 20 the refugees were dragged onto three British ships and sailed back to France. The ships sat off the coast of France for a month, while the French authorities refused to remove the Jews, but also refused them refuge. The Jews organized a hunger strike that attracted world attention to their terrible situation. Nonetheless, to the world's astonishment, the British decided to send the Jews back to displaced person camps in Germany.

The famous ship was part of an attempt to evacuate thousands of Holocaust survivors from Europe, and the deportation is widely believed to have helped shift public opinion in favor of establishing a Jewish state.

On May 15, 1947 (almost a year to the date before Israel would be created), the UN created the **United Nations Special Committee on Palestine**, better known by its acronym, **UNSCOP**. Composed of representatives from eleven countries, UNSCOP was charged with doing what the British had been unable to do-finding a solution to Palestine. The Arabs immediately announced that they would boycott all UNSCOP meetings and discussions. On June 2, UNSCOP committee members traveled to Palestine and remained there for three months of intensive study and investigation. As there were still hundreds of thousands of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust desperate for a place to go, illegal immigration continued apace.

While UNSCOP deliberated, a ship carrying homeless Jews to Palestine captured headlines. This ship was the *Exodus*; it was, like many other ships, part of the *Yishuv's* efforts at defying the British White Paper's near zero-tolerance for Jewish immigration to Palestine. When the *Exodus* arrived, the British were once again unwilling to allow their passengers to disembark in Palestine.

Formerly named SS *President Warfield*, the *Exodus* had sailed from Port-de-Bouc to Sète, where some 4,500 Jewish survivors of the war from Germany and Poland embarked. With the ship filled far beyond capacity, its passengers slept on shelves with

barely enough space to lie down, a painful reminder of the concentration camps where many of them had narrowly survived. It reached Palestine in July 1947. (3)



*Images: Top, the Exodus. Below, is a handwritten letter from the Exodus to a British soldier, from an Exodus organization website*

The ship sailed from a small port near Marseilles, France, on July 11, 1947. The British authorities, determined to stop the illegal immigration of Jews that had increased after the war, had adopted a new policy to return ships to their European point of embarkation and had warships accompany the Exodus once it left French territorial waters.

On the morning of July 17, a refugee named Dvora was on the deck of what was still the SS President Warfield, watching the British warships approach. "That morning, our ship's name was not yet the Exodus... Late in the afternoon, I saw a friend of mine, a Belgian boy, struggling with a long piece of cloth and some paint. He explained he was going to paint the name of our ship on the sheet: Hagana Ship, Exodus 1947... After a while, the job was done. 'That is how our ship became Exodus,' she wrote in her memoirs.

That night, the British rammed the ship and brought it to a stop outside the territorial waters of Palestine. Soldiers forcefully boarded the ship; passengers armed themselves with anything that could serve as a weapon. Dvora held a hammer. After a

harrowing two months at sea and ports, and clashes, hunger strikes, and defiance, the immigrants once again found themselves back in Europe ‘that for us meant only misery and horrible memories,’ Dvora wrote. They were forcefully removed from the ship in Germany. **(1)**

The Exodus (Government Press Office); this small ship carried some 4,500 passengers fleeing Europe, only to be sent back by the British.

The British had no intention of letting the thousands of displaced persons, survivors of hell, set foot in Palestine. They boarded the ship by force, and during a brief skirmish, the British Royal Navy killed three Holocaust survivors; they had escaped the Nazis only to be beaten to death by the British with the shore of Palestine visible. The passengers were taken off the Exodus and transferred by the British to the Empire Rival, which would take them not to Cyprus, where many other Jewish refugees had been taken before, but back to Europe.

Aubrey Eban (who later, as Abba Eban, became Israel’s ambassador to both the United Nations and the United States) convinced members of the UNSCOP committee to come to witness the transfer. When they arrived, Eban later wrote, they saw “British soldiers using rifle butts, hose pipes, and tear gas against the survivors of death camps. Men, women, and children were forcibly taken off to prison ships, locked in cages below decks, and sent out of Palestine waters.” When the UNSCOP members returned to Jerusalem, he recalled, “they were pale with shock” at the British cruelty they had witnessed.

Golda Meir similarly wrote in her autobiography:

Before the shocked eyes of members of UNSCOP they forcibly caged and returned to Germany the 4,500 refugees who had come to Palestine aboard the Haganah ship Exodus 1947, and I think that by so doing they contributed considerably to UNSCOP’s final recommendations. If I live to be a hundred, I shall never erase from my mind the gruesome picture of hundreds of British soldiers in full combat dress, bearing and using clubs, pistols, and grenades against the wretched refugees on the Exodus.**(4)**



Jewish displaced persons protest Britain's decision to send back to Germany the Jewish refugees from the ship *Exodus 1947*. **(2)**

The ships sat for three weeks in the sweltering summer heat, but the passengers refused to voluntarily disembark and the French authorities were unwilling to force them to leave. The British government then transported the passengers to Hamburg, where they were interned in camps in the British zone of occupation in Germany. Displaced persons in camps all over Europe protested vociferously and staged hunger strikes when they heard the news. Large protests erupted on both sides of the Atlantic. The ensuing public embarrassment for Britain played a significant role in the diplomatic swing of sympathy toward the Jews and the eventual recognition of a Jewish state in 1948.

Despite being surrounded by the British Navy, rammed by British ships, and threatened physically, the 4500 Holocaust survivors on the Exodus refused to listen to the British orders or let them board the ship.

Even though they would see Palestine for just a short time, when the Jews in Haifa began singing Hatikva and then were joined by the passengers on the ship, it was a tearful, emotional, and uplifting entrance into Palestine.

The British tried to send the passengers back to France, but they refused to get off the boats for three weeks. When the British threatened to send these Jews back to the “Death Land”, Germany, it became a PR disaster for the British. Thus, these defenseless survivors were able to defeat the will of the British navy and sway world opinion in favor of the Jews for the first time.

**Yossi Harel (1918-2008), commanded ship *Exodus* 1947.**

Harel commanded four refugee ships and sailed to Israel with 25,000 immigrants altogether during the time of the British Mandate.



Yossi Harel with Ben Gurion

The Exodus was bought by the Aliyah Bet movement in 1947 to circumvent British-imposed immigration limits on Jews. It set sail on July 11 of that year from a small harbor near Marseilles, with 4,554 German Holocaust survivors unable to get immigration permits to Israel on board.

The British Fleet followed the ship and eventually forced its passengers to return to the German camps from which they fled. In September the passengers disembarked and were returned to the German camps, while the world and the press watched.

Yossi Harel, 30 years old, commanded the legendary ship Exodus, carrying some 4,500 Jewish refugees and Holocaust survivors from Europe to British Palestine in 1947.

In one interview, Yossi Harel described combing through the displaced person's camps in Europe. Touched by the hundreds of parentless children, he said he was convinced 'the British navy would not stop us. We knew whom we were carrying this is what was left of 6 million people.'

Many Israelis recognized Harel's role in the Haapalah, the clandestine maritime immigration of Jews to Mandatory Palestine run by the Haganah, the pre-state underground Jewish defense forces. But Harel died before the state paid proper tribute, what Ynet critic Ariana Melamed writes today (in Hebrew) is ingratitude typical of Israelis: living in the present and quick to forget moral debts. Few detected Harel's gentlemanly irony in his remarks, she writes, when he received the Exodus Award from the Italian government at La Spezia, the port town where the Exodus had been prepared in secret urgency for its historic journey at sea nearly 60 years later. 'I thank you for teaching your children our history,' he had said.

Fruma Gallant, whose son Yoav Gallant serves as the major general in charge of the Israel Defense Forces' Southern Command, had met Harel a number of times later in life. 'A most impressive man, I don't know what award he should have received, but there certainly should have been recognition for this man who undertook such a difficult mission at so young an age.'

### **Yoav Gallant is the most trusted member of the cabinet.**

Nothing was surprising about the latest round of warfare between Israel and Gaza, this time with Islamic Jihad and not Hamas (whose leadership has likely noticed that the senior ranks of Islamic Jihad are now somewhat depleted after a series of Israeli-targeted assassinations). It is not surprising, but it is still unrelentingly sad for the Israelis who live in terror near the border as well as for the non-combatants in Gaza who are no less terrified and who live under a regime that could not care less about them.

It's not going to end anytime soon, though, and the suffering on both sides will continue. It is grinding, brutal, and depressing.

And it is, though we seldom think about it this way, the continuation of Israel's very first war. It is, as I've noted in earlier columns, the "latest battle in the War of Independence." Israel is still fighting against these Palestinians for their right to be. When they chant "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," they say exactly



what they mean. That chant is not about territorial compromise, a two-state solution, or even some intermediate arrangement. It is about wiping Israel out. Israelis understand what they mean, which is why even when the war is at its ugliest, the Israeli left does not protest the actions of the army. Those on the left, too, would be dead without the army's actions-and they know it.

At the same time as Israel left is *not* protesting, numerous American Jewish leaders-and I've spoken to many of them this week declare that this "outdoor prison in Gaza" simply has to end. That it cannot be sustained. That there must be an alternative. Yet here's what I never understand when bright and thoughtful people say that to me. If there's an obvious alternative, why are no Israelis pushing for it? If there's a way to solve this, why does no one in Israel discuss it? Because none of us care? Because we're all hopelessly calloused? Because no one here realizes how miserable life is on the other side of the border?

When people say to me, as they did this week, "there has to be a solution," I now ask them about guns in America. Surely there's a solution, no? What I want them to explain is why doesn't America just fix the gun problem. Surely all problems have solutions, no? And while you're at it, why doesn't America fix the race issue, once and for all?

Sure, that, too, could be solved if people just cared enough, no?

America's gun problem isn't going anywhere. Americans are going to slaughter each other at schools, malls, places of worship, the streets, the subway, and more for as long as any of us are going to be alive. Why my American Jewish interlocutors acknowledge that *that* problem has no solution, but insist that the Palestinian conflict must, is simply beyond me.

But here is what I *do* know. The sad passing of Fruma Gallant is a reminder of how much has changed because Israel exists. Before Israel, the British could turn her away. Before Israel, thousands and thousands of Jews had nowhere to go. The British at times called them surplus Jews, Jews they simply did not want and would not take. No more. There are no more "surplus Jews." No longer are there Jews with nowhere to go. Fruma Gallant would not be turned away now, nor would any other Jew. And when we are attacked, by Hamas or Islamic Jihad or Hezbollah or anyone else, simply because we exist, we are reminded that this conflict is a century old and that we are all sick of it, but we are also reminded that the following photograph is a picture of what is no longer.

That was essentially the world that Fruma Gallant fled. Yet when she died, her son was Defense Minister, conducting a war against those people who seem to imagine that lobbing rockets at Jewish civilians will go unpunished. Gallant and IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi plus thousands of other soldiers involved in the recent round of fighting were doing what they could to make clear that no, we still can't always stop our

enemies from killing Jews, but as Moshe Dayan once said, “we can make the price very, very high.”

From being a passenger on the Exodus who was sent back to the hell of Europe to her son being the Minister of Defense at the helm of one of the most powerful military forces on earth that’s the difference this place has made. It’s a horrible conflict, a debilitating conflict, a moral mess, and a source of endless suffering.

But still, compare the Exodus and the IDF “war room,” and you are reminded how much has changed. It is not perfect, far from it.

But it is much, much better, and at times like the week that just ended, that is more than good enough.

Fruma Gallant, the mother of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, made Israeli news back on March 26, the day Bibi Netanyahu fired her son. The massive range over Gallant’s firing, you may recall, spontaneously brought hundreds of thousands of young Israelis to the streets in a spasm of anger directed at Netanyahu and his coalition. As a result of his willingness to speak out against his government and then being fired, according to some polls, Gallant is now the most trusted member of the cabinet.

Not quite what Bibi had in mind when he axed him.

But as fast and furious as the news cycle during the judicial reform crisis was on March 26 and 27, Israeli reporting paused for a few moments to focus not on Bibi or the government or the proposed legislation, but on the fact that Gallant’s mother called him after he was fired, to tell him “You have good judgment, courage, and I love you very much.” (4)

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Jewish displaced persons protest Britain's decision to send back to Germany the Jewish refugees from the ship *Exodus 1947*. The photograph was taken by Henry Ries. Hohne-Belsen displaced person camp, Germany, September 1947.

*Henry Ries / The New York Times Copyright © The New York Times.*

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[Israel from the Inside with Daniel Gordis](#)

From the "Exodus" to the cabinet war room, one family's story reminds us why we're here May 15, 2023

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