Ehud Banai's Guide to the Soul of the Land



This piece first ran on our Substack, Reading Jewish History in the Parsha. We're pleased to share it here on our website.

This essay was first published in June 2025 amid Israel's 12-day war with Iran. References to current events reflect that moment.

Parshat Shelach is where we engage our love and anxiety about the promised land. Who were the spies? Do we see ourselves reflected in their fear? Would we be like Caleb and Yehoshua, or would our doubts overtake us like the rest of the princes? And then there is the mystery of what got to the spies: What spooked them about the Land of Israel?

Living with the parsha this week of all weeks forces an even deeper reckoning with the story of the spies. With Israel's extraordinary success in striking the Iranian regime and the waves of powerful, destructive rockets raining down on Bat Yam, Rehovot, and Tamra, my connection to Israel, to the land, and most importantly its people is on over-drive. I think about my family and friends throughout the country with an urgency which has become well practiced but feels different, because it always feels different and evolving.

At this moment, for many diaspora Zionists like me, there is little space for doubt, curiosity, or exploration about our relationship to Israel. This is a moment of solidarity, prayer, hope for victory, and worry about the short- and medium-term twists and turns of the war. I've been constantly checking in with family and friends, junking-out on podcasts, and tuning in to Israeli news in search of clarity and connection.

Like many, my personal form of crisis-mode comes from a rich and deeply personal connection to the Holy Land and to the Zionist project. Every Jew has their own story; the land and its people influence, inspire, and shape our life abroad in as many ways as there are Jews.

Over the last few years, Ehud Banai has become one of my most important guides on this twisting, ever-unfolding path of love, discovery and sometimes anguished wrestling with Israel. More than his music, it was his quirky Friday afternoon radio show that turned me into a "Banaist." I discovered the Galatz app during the summer of 2014 when I spent a summer in Jerusalem with my family. That summer we witnessed a different Gaza war, and the radio was a comfort and guide for responding to the rockets, sirens and unfolding horror of war. Upon my return to the US, I would use the app to play Israeli radio in our kitchen on Friday mornings as our kids were getting ready to go to school; I wanted to bring in a drop of Israeli Erev Shabbat energy into our home in suburban New Jersey. I loved the mix of songs—Madonna followed by Yehudit Ravitz followed by the latest "religious" hit. I would also put on the news channel—Galatz—to fill the house with the sound of Hebrew and try to hear what Israelis were talking about.

That is when I stumbled on Banai's Erev Shabbat radio show. I quickly began arranging my Friday mornings so that I could hear it because it had not yet come out as a recorded podcast. I wanted to hear Banai's sweet and gravelly voice, his musings about art and life and the weekly parsha. He avoids being partisan or divisive even while expressing strong opinions. He blends songs with *divrei Torah*, sonic essays dedicated to a poet who recently passed away, or a Persian *tar* player he particularly loves. By juxtaposing a Dylan song with a piece by Rebbe Nachman he enriches both, expanding the meaning of the Chassidic lesson and changing the meaning of the song forever.

Banai is a singer-songwriter, author, and prolific performer of what he might call “Blues Cana’ani” Israeli music that is deeply rooted in the power and depth of Hebrew language and literature in all its manifestations and in constant conversation with global musical cultures—blues, rock, folk, classical Persian, Gaelic folk, Ladino ballads, and much more. He comes from a storied family of artists and performers. The family has roots in Shiraz and settled around the Mahane Yehuda shuk over 100 years ago.

Ehud Banai took a while until he found his groove as a musician, releasing his first album with his band the “Plitim,” the “Refugees,” in 1986 at the very un-rock-and-roll age of 32. His songs tell stories and paint pictures drawing on his journeys and explorations of Torah and poetry and the vagaries of the human soul. Banai was always a searcher, someone who notices, feels, and records his impressions with care and simplicity. He is a careful reader of others and a student of the masters of song. His books offer a window into that process, sharing his musings while crafting a complex and luminous portrait of everyday life.

I have been reading his most recent book *Sefer Habetzalim Hayerukim* (“*The Green Onion Book”*) over the last few weeks. I often read it on Shabbat afternoon, ideally sitting in my garden with a glass of tea and with the time and quiet the book deserves. The book, as its subtitle tells us, is a collection of “journeys, encounters and dreams.”



He introduces you to Max, a drunk with a touch of prophecy, a man who lived in one of the wadis outside Eilat, “a combination of a philosopher and a criminal.” A young Ehud meets him one night. Banai spent a few months in the port city working on a construction job to make money for his big post-army trip abroad. Max sees Ehud at a café, insists on calling him Muhammad, and bums a cigarette off him and eventually some beers. They speak about God and man and law, world peace too. They meet again and again until he never sees him again. Just one more moment of encounter, revelation, and insight that forms the mosaic of life in the Holy Land.

When I read the book, I have his voice in my head because of those Friday mornings listening to his radio show. I also had a chance to see him play in a small kibbutz theatre last year—intimate, charming, telling stories he has told many times before. The crowd was a mix of Israel: teenagers, old folks, middle aged, religious, secular. Everyone knew every word, and the kids got up to dance. Banai puts in the time and does the work. He plays throughout the country, often in small crowds, allowing him the chance to connect with the people and stories that inspire so much of his music and thinking.

He includes a chapter on Nir Oz—a place he visited both before and after October 7. A few weeks after the attacks he dedicated the show to Amiram Cooper, a founding member of the kibbutz, an agronomist, and a fine poet and composer. He read Cooper’s poetry, making sure we knew he was not just a victim.



Cooper’s book of poetry displayed on the Shabbat table awaiting the hostages (Hostage Square January 2024, author’s photo).

In the book, he describes a concert he gave there a few years back, the people he met, how much he loved the simplicity and natural beauty of the kibbutz, the way that simplicity gave space to its members to lead creative lives—by day they worked the fields and on the side they could write poetry, study archeology, and create communal galleries. In the book he talks about an unforgettable concert he gave there in 2018, the people he met then, and what happened to them on the dark Shabbat of October 7. One friend died fighting off terrorists while his wife was taken captive and released in one of the first hostage releases. He talks about playing another concert for them in a hotel set up for the survivors. And it all leads him to ask the big questions:

Beyond knowing the basics of the land, the geography, I have a need to know the land unto its deepest heart. I want to know what ties me to this place, beyond history and identity, beyond the state and tribalism. The land is a body and inside it there is a soul. (שימו לב לנשמה)

Be careful with the soul, lest it be destroyed. The Torah tells us that the ground of the Land of Israel has consciousness. Uncovering a *tefach* of the soul of this vital earth, there is a necessity to do so now, to understand what she is trying to tell me, the soul of the land of the Bible, the Holy Land, a land that is now one great stretch of fire. What does she ask of me? What is she warning me of?

Confronting the people of flesh and blood, of souls and bodies who weave together the layers of life on this troubled soil, the life that was built at Nir Oz, the wreckage that was left, and the uncertainty the country faces between war and trauma, Banai is forced to ask questions and listen more closely to the soul that lies in the dirt and soil of the land that is on fire. He knows there is something that is more powerful than our identities and ideologies. This is a Zionism without slogans or easy answers.

Banai's music and his writing offer access to the many Israels that exist side by side and all at once; the Israel that contains multitudes: the soldier poets, the mechanics who spend their evenings studying the Zohar, the heartbroken couple he meets at a snack bar off the highway, who gain strength to carry on after an omelet made with love and a little conversation with the owner, and so many others.

He tells us about the guy who sells him a shawarma near Beit She'an, who gets the courage to tell him how one of his songs changed his life. He said to him:

Now you see me, I am religious, I have a family, I own this shawarma shop. But when I was young I used to steal cars, mostly just for fun. One Shabbat evening I stole a car and drove it real fast, I turned on the radio and it was set to a cassette tape. The song blew me away, it was about Ethiopians—and there was this one powerful line: “And who knows if Abraham wasn’t black?” I loved the music, I pumped up the volume and then I hit one song I knew a bit from the radio—”City of Refuge.” I realized that it was you singing with your band. From that moment I wanted to find you and now you are here.

A rock song about a place to run away—a place to transform your life after you almost wrecked it—spoke to that young hooligan in a way that no rabbi’s sermon ever could.

When I read Banai’s book, soaking in his poetic yet uncomplicated Hebrew, I get access to a world of Jewish possibilities that go beyond the easy binaries that structure our contemporary religious culture. It also gives me access to the dynamo that is Jewishness: to the collective creativity, the audacity, the grace and humor of our wise men and women. I can learn from brilliant, enigmatic rabbis like Rav Menachem Froman, the singer Etti Ankri whose renditions of Yehuda Halevi’s poetry bring me to heaven and back, but also Marianne Faithfull, Leonard Cohen, early and late Dylan, the much missed Meir Ariel, Nathan Zach, Corine Allal and the poet Rachel, but also the taxi drivers and gabbais of the dusty synagogues of Ramat Gan, south Tel Aviv, Nahalaot or the East Village.

While listening to Banai, I am invigorated to reconnect, to dedicate myself anew to building my own Jewish life. He helps me rethink what it means to have my heart in the East even as I live in the West. Banai shows how much Jewish culture in Israel is nourished by its connections with the cultures that came to the land from all four corners of the globe, but also the ongoing dialogue—point-counter-point—between Israeli culture and global trends: His own engagement with classical Persian music, American blues, his collaboration with the great guitarist Michael Chapman and the Israeli Arab musicians George Samaan and Salam Darwish. There is a translation of worlds that comes across in his music that allows the listener the chance to create their own lexicon and make their own connections between the Torah and their lives.

During these days of rage and fear but also hope for a brighter, more peaceful and thriving Jewish future, we must double down on the sources of Jewish joy. We must fill our wells with Torah wisdom in order to move forward and create the world we want to live in. There is a special place for the artists that shuttle us between the holy and the profane, who translate the world into a sacred language and give us new vocabularies and tools. Banai’s collected “journeys, encounters, and dreams” is just one very special storehouse of this wisdom.

For those who would like a deep dive into Banai's life and thought in English, check out this video of his visit to YU between Purim and Pesach this year. It was a magical night of music, conversation and connection in the heart of the great Babylon—Manhattan! And here on his radio show he talks about his time in the US with a special shout out to his visit to Washington Heights.