

NONFICTION

# Naming

*Amy Champeau*

“We continue to speak, if only in whispers, to something inside us that wants to be named.”

- Dorianne Laux, “Dark Chants,” *Only as the Day is Long*.

My name is Chaika Runya bat Yitzchak v’ Channa Gittl. This is my ‘Hebrew’ name, my sacred name, my Yiddish name, my hidden name, my underground name, the name that binds me to family lineage and tradition and to my people, going all the way back to the beginning of time. This is the name I am called in Jewish ritual, when I have an *aliyah* to give a blessing over the *Torah* or when I am invited to the pulpit to read the *Torah*, or when I am a witness to someone immersing herself in the sacred baths in order to convert to Judaism.

I am named for two great aunts who were murdered in the Holocaust.

Most mornings of my life, since I was younger than six years old, I’ve woken in terror, heart beating fast, body sweating. In an effort to calm myself I’d listen to music or focus on my breathing before opening my eyes to start the day. Each morning the fear would dissolve as I moved into the day’s activities, only to return the next.

One morning, not long ago I decided to turn toward the fear and terror rather than away, to be curious about it, to explore it, to get to know it. I curled up in the fetal position in bed, tuning in to the sensations I experienced physically. I became aware of a feeling like electric jolts pounding and jumping in my chest and arms. I asked the sensations, “What is the message held in my body?”

What I heard them say was this: “Life is not safe.”

My mother tells me my aunts, Chaika and Runya, the younger sisters of my mother’s father, were shot, killed and buried in a mass grave in then Austria-Hungary during the Holocaust. In my mind’s eye, here is how I imagine them: They are two young women, maybe in their 20s; their light brown hair hangs in braids down their backs, each wears a dark wool dress, a cream-colored pinafore, woolen

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knee-high socks and sturdy shoes. They stand with their family and friends and fellow-townspeople, all of whom have been herded out of their homes, their beds, and lined up at the town's edge, in rows, ahead of them the deep pit into which their lifeless bodies will be tossed, one on top of another, like sacks of potatoes, to be covered with dirt, and erased.

I imagine dogs barking wildly and the loud yelling of male voices in a language my aunts and their friends and family don't understand. They do understand what will happen to them. I imagine the rifle shots as faceless men mechanically shoot them from behind, one by one, and I imagine the unbearable, unimaginable terror of waiting as your turn comes, hearing the screams, hearing the heavy *plop* as each body falls into the pit, witnessing your loved ones' deaths, knowing your inescapable fate, waiting to feel pain, feeling the bullet entering your chest from the back, breathing your last breath, collapsing and tumbling, finally, into the pit. In their names, their stories, their lives, their deaths take residence within the confines of my body, mind and soul, carried within me like a blessing, or like a parasite.

My mother tells me that everyone in the village was killed. Except for two girls, not related to my family, who hid and ran away, the only two people to survive from that small town in eastern Europe. My grandfather, having left his town, having emigrated to the United States, alone at the age of 13, located those two girls somehow and brought them to America.

"The village was called Pullen or Pullyon," Mom tells me. It's still on a map. There are no Jews there now."

Tradition: the naming of a Jewish child is a profound spiritual event. The Sages say that naming a baby assigns her character and her path in life. The *Talmud* says that an angel comes to the baby's pregnant parents and whispers the Jewish name the new baby will carry. The *Talmud* tells us that in life people are called by three names: the name the person is called by her father and mother; the name other people call her; and the name she acquires for herself. A name can confer our standing in a lineage, our membership in a tribe, along with that tribe's history. It tells people who we are and where we belong. It points to our identity. Jewish tradition teaches that through our own choices and actions, each of us can name and rename ourselves and that in the end the best name is the one we give ourselves. At the end of our lives, a "good name" is all we take with us.

Ashkenazi Jews, Jews who came from Eastern Europe like my family, name their baby after a relative who has died. With this name, the child is endowed with the

parents' hope of who she will become and the memory of where she has come from. She is a memorial candle in this life, through which the deceased's memory is kept alive. An intangible bond is formed between the soul of the baby and the dead loved one. The soul of the deceased can be elevated through the good deeds of the namesake; the child can be inspired throughout her life by the good qualities of the deceased. My name identifies me as the daughter, 'bat', of Yitzchak and 'Channa Gittl,' my parents, whose English names are Irwin and Connie.

A Hebrew name is not just a convenient assortment of letters. In Hebrew or Yiddish (the colloquial language spoken in Eastern Europe which is a mix of German and Hebrew, but written in the Hebrew alphabet), each name has a meaning and the letters of the name reveal its underlying characteristics. The first of my Yiddish names, Chaika, is yiddish for 'life' and 'living.' The second name, 'Runya,' means 'joy of God.' My name situates me, connects me with the past, tells me where I belong in this life.

Jewish tradition instructs that it is important for parents to choose a name that will have a positive effect on the bearer, since every time the name is used the person is reminded of its meaning. It also suggests not to use the name of a person who died at a young age or suffered an unnatural death - like my two aunts - so as not to bring misfortune to the new bearer of the name. I'm quite certain my parents didn't know this when they bestowed my names on me.

Rachel Yehuda, professor of psychiatry and neuroscience and the director of the Traumatic Stress Division at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, is a pioneer in understanding how the effects of stress and trauma can be transmitted biologically, beyond the cataclysmic events themselves, to the next generation and beyond. As a researcher in graduate school, Ms. Yehuda, the daughter of a rabbi, studied Holocaust survivors. She was surprised to discover similar chemical and hormonal profiles in them as had been found in American combat Vietnam veterans with PTSD.

The Holocaust survivors interviewed by Yehuda reported all the symptoms of PTSD: nightmares, flashbacks, terror, panic. They'd been suffering with those symptoms for decades but never sought help. "Who could understand what we have gone through?" one woman told Yehuda. Eager to help them with their PTSD symptoms, Yehuda established a clinic for them. But rather than the Holocaust survivors themselves contacting the clinic, it was their children who called, describing the ways in which they had been traumatized by witnessing the symptoms of their parents and the expectations placed on them by their parents - expectations that they live so that the lives of the people who had died would have meaning.

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These offspring had difficulties with relationships. Experiences that involved separation from a loved one - divorce, for example - were particularly difficult. These offspring felt vulnerable in life and were more than three times more likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder than Jewish persons whose parents had not been affected by the Holocaust.

In 2016, Rachel Yehuda and her colleagues found that Holocaust survivors and their children both had evidence of *methylation* - a process in which small molecules are added to genes, thereby modifying their DNA - on a region of a gene associated with stress, suggesting that the survivors' trauma was passed on to their offspring. Epigenetics, according to Yehuda, is the theory that not only do experiences lodge in our bodies, but that these physiological changes can actually be passed on to the next generation. Sometimes psychic legacies are transmitted through unconscious cues that flow between adult and child. Sometimes anxiety falls from one generation to the next through stories told. Learning this confirmed and validated my suspicions that at least some of my anxiety could be due to intergenerational trauma. Knowing this, I felt less alone.

My Grandpa David, my mother's father and older brother of Chaika and Runya, was a stern, harsh and scary man. He had a booming voice and a strong accent. I was afraid of him. As a girl, my mother had been afraid of him. He'd traveled to the United States alone, on a boat at the age of 13, before the killings, knowing the killings would come, following an older brother and sister who had arrived in this country before him, each sibling vowing to rescue the next in line from certain death. I never heard Grandpa talk about the Holocaust or the deaths of Chaika or Runya. He just yelled in his booming voice and scared us. That he didn't talk about it didn't mean he was not affected, or that others around him didn't feel and absorb the grief, anger, fear of the unspeakable wound. His brain, altered by the absence of a safe place to which to retreat, his unpredictable rages, his fierce protection of his children, his fear of others, spoke for him.

I don't know how his anger and sadness and losses affected my mother; she never spoke about that, either. I do know that she was terribly paranoid and prone to extremes of angry outbursts and depression and that my siblings and I lived in daily terror of her moods and her meanness and the occasional physical abuse she doled out. Our father told us she was the way she was because she had suffered so much abuse as a child.

In my own childhood, I felt safe in our synagogue, Temple Menorah. Unlike at our public school which had only three Jewish students in it, at synagogue all

the kids celebrated the same holidays and sang the same songs. My parents tried to help us feel safe by moving from our house near the Pacific Ocean in Torrance, California, to Beverly Hills, California, a small city in which the majority of students were Jewish. The schools were closed on Jewish holidays. Non-Jews were in the minority. Most of us went to religious school on the weekend and Hebrew school after public school three days a week. Many of us were studying for our bar or bat mitzvah. We socialized through B'nai Brith youth dances and summer camps for Jewish teens. Most of us were second generation immigrants and we worked hard and were expected to study and go to college and accomplish a lot. We had books in our homes and knew how to debate ("two Jews = three opinions") and we didn't feel out of place or ashamed if we interrupted someone because we felt passionately about our point of view. We were all liberal; our parents voted Democrat. We dated Jewish boys and girls. We were expected to marry within our faith. We were competitive with each other for good grades. It was 'cool' to be smart. I felt a sense of safety in our modern ghetto, insulated from the prejudice of the larger world.

But outside our Jewish enclave, I quickly learned I could not hide from the ignorance, prejudice, hatred and fear of anti-Semitic belief. It was always lurking, like a shadow, like a thief hiding behind a building who would jump out at me from around a corner. I was never prepared for its appearance. Like when I was eight years old and the mother of a little boy my age wouldn't let him play with me because I "killed Christ." Or when people would tell me that someone had "Jewed him down" in a deal, not realizing those words were offensive. It appeared when my son visited Sunday school with a friend and saw a film depicting Jews as disgustingly ugly Christ-killers. It appeared when people asked me where my horns were, referring to an old belief that Jews had them.

Decades later, as a psychotherapist living and working in southeastern Wisconsin, I was vigilant about how 'out' to be as a Jew and tried to keep my religious background out of any publicity about me or my work. But at one point in my career, a local newspaper wrote an article about me and about my work of integrating psychotherapy and spirituality. The *Kenosha News* ran the story on the Religion page of the Sunday paper with a nearly full-page color photo of me. The article mentioned that I was Jewish and worked as a therapist in a pastoral counseling center with a number of Christian clergy. The week after the article appeared, a long-time client, a woman in her 40s dealing with depression and marital problems, came in for her regular appointment. We greeted each other in the waiting room and she took her usual place on the brocade couch adjacent to my chair. Before I was able to say anything to her she began, "I saw the article about

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you in the Kenosha paper on Sunday.” I acknowledged the article. Suddenly, she jumped out of her chair, opened her mouth wide, and yelled loudly at me, “You killed Christ. You are a Christ-killer.”

I sat in my chair, my heart beating fast. I was stunned, paralyzed. I didn't know what to say. The client sat down. She looked at me. I fumbled with my words. “Yes, I'm Jewish,” I acknowledged. “Can we talk about what it's like for you to know that?” We struggled to make some conversation. She never came back.

From my earliest years I felt the burden of carrying the names of my great-aunts. I “felt” the weight but I never mentioned it to anyone. I didn't know whether I could put it down or whether I was doomed to carry it, like a sack of rocks or a bag of flour, for the rest of my life. It felt like an obligation but I wasn't sure what that obligation was. Should I become a devout Jew, taking advantage of the freedom in the United States to worship as I pleased, since they had not had that right? Or should I run away from Judaism out of fear of being terrorized or killed?

This dilemma haunted me when I went to the nearest reform synagogue where I begged the female rabbi to teach me how to chant from the *Torah* and conduct services, honors previously bestowed only on men. Week after week, I sat with her as she taught me to read the markings of the ancient trope that accompanied the Hebrew script, transforming it into melodies that have been passed down for thousands of years. I became a lay leader in our small congregation, presiding over services when the rabbi was away. Every time I stood on the *bimah* with the *Torah* scroll opened in front of me, as I opened my mouth and chanted the ancient texts, I felt my aunts behind me nodding in approval.

Decades later, when I was in my 50s, I trained to become a Jungian psychoanalyst. As part of my training I'd chosen to study with Dr. Carl Greer, a psychologist who was both Peruvian shaman and Jungian analyst. Every couple of weeks I'd meet with Carl at his office in downtown Chicago to learn about shamanic journeying and practices, energy work and the power of the earth and her symbols.

During our work together, Carl invited healing professionals and shamanic practitioners to meet twice a year to learn tools and practices borrowed from the Jungian and shamanic traditions so that we could offer them to our clients and communities. Our gatherings took place at a retreat center operated by the Episcopal Church, set in the hills outside of St. Louis, near the confluence of the Mississippi, Missouri and Illinois Rivers. Not far from the retreat center is Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, a pre-Columbian Native American city which existed from 600-1350 CE.

Cahokia contained several burial mounds. At one of them, Mound 72, more than 250 skeletons were found. These included four young males, missing their hands and skulls, their arms pointing to the four directions; a grave containing skeletons of more than 50 women around the age of 21, most likely a ritual execution, with the bodies arranged in two layers separated by matting; and a mass burial containing 40 men and women who were violently killed, like my aunts in Austria-Hungary. Some of the Cahokians were buried alive. According to one researcher, the vertical position of some of the fingers of these skeletons appeared to have been digging in the sand. Some had been trying to pull themselves out of the pit, out of the mass of bodies. The skeletons at Mound 72 date to between 950 and 1000 CE, almost 1000 years before the Holocaust and the deaths of my aunts and millions of other Jews.

At our final group meeting, Carl announced that we would be honoring our ancestors and the ancestors of those who had lived on the land throughout history. At our first meal, I carried my tray through the cafeteria and sat at one of the round tables. Carl sat down next to me. I looked at Carl, took a breath, and said to him, “I have something that I’ve been carrying from my ancestors that feels like a burden. I’ve never told anyone about it.” He looked at me, encouraging me to tell him more.

“I was named for two aunts who were killed in the Holocaust,” I told him. “I’ve always felt like I was carrying them as a heavy pack on my back.”

I looked down at my hands, then turned to look at the low shrubbery outside the window to my left. The afternoon sun was already weakening. Carl turned his head to look at me. His wavy gray hair and searching eyes were visible from the corner of my right eye.

“Would you like to work with that in front of the group?” Carl asked me.

I didn’t know. I felt my chest closing up. I was an introvert, shy. I hesitated.

“You’ll be helping everyone,” Carl encouraged. “You’ll be helping everyone in the room.”

I wanted to help, so I said yes.

It was the third day of the retreat when Carl finally decided the time was right for the work to take place. The day was cloudy, threatening rain, the room dark. In the dim light, thirty professionals, mostly women and some men, in their 40s and 50s, some older, most wearing blue jeans, sweaters and running shoes, some wearing ponchos woven in South America, sat on gray folding chairs in the large meeting hall. Carl placed his ceremonial *mesa* on the floor in front of his chair, along with his drum, rattles, and eagle feathers. I glanced around the circle, felt the familiar rumbling of my stomach, informing me of my fear. This was the way my nerves always showed up when I was going to speak in public.

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Carl announced to the group that I was going to do some energetic work. He called my name, motioned me to sit in the folding chair to his left. I stood automatically and began the walk to the chair next to Carl. It was only ten feet from me but it seemed miles away. What I most remember now was the feeling of a big smoky gray cloud surrounding me, extending two feet from my body in every direction. In that cloud, I walked as if pulled by a magnet. I took my seat.

“Amy told me about an ancestor story she’s been carrying. She’s willing to work with it here in our circle. Please give her your respect,” Carl began. I felt the attentive eyes of everyone on me. Suddenly I felt important.

“Can you tell the group what you told me?” Carl asked.

“I’m named for two great aunts who were killed in the Holocaust,” I began. I heard my own voice speaking the familiar story from a place far away. “They were my grandpa’s sisters. Their names were Chaika and Runya and those are my Hebrew names. Everyone in their town was killed.” The room became more silent.

I said those words the way I’d always said them before - like a report of historic fact. But on this day, as I imagined Chaika and Runya in my mind, there in our circle their stories came alive. It felt as if the light shifted, like a spotlight was shining down onto the center of the circle. I could not see anyone else in the room. The light in the middle of the circle grew brighter, like a campfire. The only ones who existed then were me, Carl and my two deceased aunts.

Carl’s voice called me back. “Tell the group what you told me,” he coached.

“They were killed by the Nazis. Ever since I can remember I’ve felt like they are a burden I’m carrying on my back. They’re heavy, like a backpack full of heavy books.” As I spoke these words, I relived in imagined memory the horror of my aunts’ last moments, their terror resonating as a painful tension in my back. My breath stopped momentarily in anticipation, as if contracting could keep the unthinkable from happening. On top of that tightness rested the twenty-or-so pounds of weight that had been hanging from my shoulders for over 60 years.

Carl asked if he could remove the pack from my back. In a daze I nodded agreement. Carl gestured for me to stand. Following his direction, I rose from my chair and stood behind it, my legs wobbly, facing the middle of the circle. Carl stood behind me, facing my back, his thin six-foot frame towering over my five-foot tall soft round grandmother body. I heard him reach into a pocket. From the pocket he removed a small leather sheath that cradled a sharp small knife. He stood at my right side, showed me the knife and indicated that he would be removing the pack from my back. I stood firm, felt my feet on the floor, solid in my tennis shoes, my belly relaxed, no longer afraid. I heard the knife whooshing back and forth in the air as if



cutting the cords and straps from my shoulders, my mid-back and my low back. I felt the straps loosen.

When his job was complete, Carl said to me, "Now I'm going to remove the pack from your back." I nodded. I felt the pack loosen and a lightness like a cool breeze as Carl pulled the pack away from my body. I felt immediate relief, air filling the back of my body, as if my back were taking a deep breath in, my lungs expanding. Carl handed the pack to me. It felt solid and heavy in my hands. Pointing to the floor in front of my chair, he gestured for me to set it down. Holding both sides of the pack, I carefully laid it on the floor.

With his right hand, Carl wordlessly suggested I open the pack and look inside it. I felt the familiar anxiety churn in my stomach. I didn't know what I would find.

Bending forward from the waist, I leaned my head toward the pack. My fingers fumbled with a drawstring that had held the pack closed all these years, clumsily grasped the smooth woven strings and coaxed them apart. My eyes searched inside the pack. It was pitch black in there at first, but as my eyes adjusted to the dark I saw something white at the bottom of the pack. They were bones, glistening white, gleaming toward me and beckoning me.

"Their bones are in there," I whispered to Carl, a sensation like butterflies fluttering in my chest.

"Can you remove the bones?" Carl asked. A slight gasp escaped my lips, then a deep breath to steady myself.

I reached my hands into the dark cavern of the pack and gingerly, reverently pulled out each gleaming white bone. I set each one on the floor in front of me, then sat still, looking at them. Seeing and touching those bones took my breath away. I felt it catch in my chest. Dare I say I felt love? Wonder? Awe?

The room was almost completely dark now. Nothing existed for me except the white bones of my aunts and Carl sitting next to me.

"What do the bones want you to do?" he asked.

I looked at the white bones sitting on the floor in front of me. I listened for their guidance. I listened in the silence for the guidance of my two aunts. The silence filled the room. The edges of my body seemed to expand beyond the boundaries of my limbs, my body's atoms joining the energy of the silence.

And suddenly I knew.

"They want a burial," I whispered to Carl. My stomach settled in calm certainty.

In the Jewish tradition it is customary for a burial to take place within 24 hours after a death. These bones had been wandering for sixty years.

"They want to be put to rest," I added.

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Carl was still for a moment. He wanted to honor the bones' request. But we didn't have any dirt or earth there in the meeting room.

"Can we bury them with fire?" he asked. "Fire is a way to return them properly to the Earth."

I didn't answer right away. Jews were supposed to be buried in the earth, not by fire. I wondered for a moment if this would be acceptable, to my people, to my aunts. But my life had brought me to this moment and I knew I needed to honor it. After a moment, I nodded my head yes.

Carl lit a candle. I picked up each white bone and passed it through the flames until the bones dissolved into the air, into the Earth. I opened my mouth and chanted the *kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, over the bones.

Then I heard a voice. A lone body-less voice from the darkness chanting the *shema*, the central prayer from Judaism, from the book of *Deuteronomy*, proclaiming the oneness of all creation. It is traditionally prayed as the last words before a person dies. Another voice joined in, then my voice was added to them. Thirty voices then, Jewish and non-Jewish, in spontaneous unison, chanted the *shema* together. Those who knew the words took the lead, followed by the others. I had forgotten that those other people were in the room with me.

"Look around," Carl told me. I looked up. For the first time, since I had begun this work with Carl, the cloud lifted completely. I recognized the bodies of the people sitting in the room with me, witnessing and participating. My eyes rounded the circle, surveying and touching the faces of each person in the room. Every single one of them was crying, the soft prayer wafting from their mouths. I cried, too, moved with an indescribable joy. It felt as if my arms grew to encircle them all while I felt held gently and firmly in the arms of those present. After a few minutes, Carl called us back to our lives with his drum and flute. Someone turned the lights on in the room. Carl and I embraced.

I didn't immediately know whether the effects of the ritual would last, or even what those effects were or would be. Now, eight years later, I can say the burden has never returned. In its place is a freedom, a spacious emptiness. Even today I can feel the lightness of breath in my back which was released when the pack was removed.

"Everyone has ancestors," Carl said. "We all have stories that need to be buried. We all have trauma that has been passed down to us through the generations. We are all carrying these burdens. We all want to put them to rest." When we do our own work, we do more than heal our own stories. Energetically, in some mysterious way, we heal the stories of others, some of whom we know, many whom we do not.

The act of naming is a powerful thing. In the *Old Testament*, God gives human beings the ability and power to name the animals and plants around them. Through the process of naming, we seek to bring order to our chaotic and dynamic world. Naming something - be it anxiety, terror, anti-Semitism, prejudice - gives meaning to it, and without meaning we wither. As Eve Ensler wrote, “naming things, breaking through taboos and denial, speaking the unspeakable and struggling with the unknown is dangerous, terrifying, and crucial work.” It is the act of naming that gives birth to something new.

These days I don't struggle with my Yiddish names. My name is Chaika Runya bat Yitzchak v' Channa Gittl, daughter of Irwin and Connie, granddaughter of Ethel and David and Sidney and Bessie. I don't worry about whether I am living up to those names. I don't wonder if I am honoring them in the best way.

Freedom begins with naming things.