

A novel idea: Leaving Hollywood for Jerusalem

(Miriam Wasserman)

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Chana Studley never thought she would write a novel, and definitely not from an apartment in Jerusalem. But then that's the thing about thoughts, they can't always be trusted. In the 1980s, after surviving three separate violent incidents, Studley, who was in England at the time, suffered from PTSD and subsequent years of debilitating anxiety. She decided to help others who had suffered similarly; training to be a counselor who helps people recover from trauma and mental illness. Alongside her counseling career, Studley worked in Hollywood for 20 years, creating special effects for movies such as *Babe*, for which she received an Academy Award.

"After I left the film business I taught for five years in a Jewish day school in Los Angeles," Studley recalls. "The kids were often my teachers and I started to realize that they knew a lot more than I did. I decided to take a year off to come to Israel and learn. After just a couple of months at Neve Yerushalayim, I knew this was home. I discussed it with my rabbi and he cautioned me to wait a few more months and consider how I was going to support myself. So I started thinking about what I could do. I had always sewn and had been teaching dressmaking classes after school. I found a great apartment in the center of Jerusalem and set up a dressmaking school, where I still teach up to 30 ladies a week how to sew and do alterations. Soon someone asked me to make a wedding dress and then suddenly I was making wedding gowns, too. It was so much fun!"

In 2015, five years after making aliyah, Studley was having lunch with a friend who told her about a workshop called *The Three Principles*, which had made a big impact on her. "This new understanding of the mind and how all human experience works grabbed me instantly," Studley explains. "It was the vocabulary I had been looking for to explain what I had seen to be true for a long time – we are not our thoughts, but it is through thought that we experience life." Studley is now a certified *Three Principles* practitioner and co-founder of the *Three Principles Jerusalem*. In recent years, she has become a certified Life Coach and a World Health Organization psychological first responder. In the midst of all of these endeavors, Studley somehow found time to turn her experiences into a novel, called *The Myth of Low Self-Esteem*.

"I first had the thought of writing a book back in California when I was working in the film industry," Studley says. "The idea started out as a self-help book. It seemed like everyone in California was talking about their low self-esteem. It cracked me up because I had never met a more self-possessed group of people. I started seeing that talking about low self-esteem was really a resentment because the world wasn't treating them right."

After Studley finished the first draft of the book, she realized it was too preachy. About a year ago, she decided to discard that version and turn it into a novel, where the characters develop the ideas; giving her more freedom to disseminate the key themes. "For a long time, friends have been encouraging me to write a book to share my Hollywood stories," Studley recalls. "So I put these two ideas together. The novel has similarities to my life, but it's definitely not an autobiography."

The novel centers around a girl named Deborah who has experienced trauma and violence, from which she recovers. In that process, she goes on to have a Hollywood career. She visits Israel in the story as well. When Studley first came across the *Three Principles* [of Mind, Consciousness and Thought] and began learning about it, her teachers were explaining how people go through life. They repeatedly used special effects as a metaphor. "Special effects in movies is really all about fooling you into thinking that something is real," Studley explains. "My teachers would tell us to imagine that a tiger walked into the room and then you found out it was just a puppet. Well, I made a tiger for Dr. Dolittle and people thought it was real when it was on screen. When you



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think something is real, you have a very different reaction. In the *Three Principles*, I learned that consciousness is the special effects department of the mind. If something strikes you as being difficult, your mind brings up other memories of difficult times and then your heart starts pounding, your breathing becomes quicker, and you experience panic or anxiety. There are all kinds of reactions that become physiological and then you think, it must be real because my heart is pounding."

For Studley, what makes the *Three Principles* different and more appealing than the myriad of other mindfulness modalities available, is that it's not a technique, it's an understanding.

"Once you understand that you're only ever experiencing your thinking, there is actually nothing to do because the tiger is just a puppet; it's not real. I've found that all those methods were not as impactful as this. Usually, they are really good for the person who invented them, but when you're in a place where you're low and need help, you're not going to be journaling or meditating. You can just recognize that those are thoughts going by and they will settle on their own."

Studley's novel is three-pronged, or even three principled, in its own right. There is the trauma aspect, the Hollywood stories, and the ideas of the *Three Principles*. These three facets were mixed together into a story that Studley hopes is compelling and accessible. The main character goes on what can best be described as a spiritual journey. Studley, in turn, went on a journey of her own since moving to Israel and more recently, in the year it took her to write the novel.

"People come up to me and say that I'm so brave and ask where I got the courage," Studley adds. "Whether it's with surviving the trauma, or moving countries, or changing careers. But showing somebody what I'd written was one of the scariest things I've ever done. I hadn't really written anything since high school. The first time I sent it to a friend to read, I was really scared. The funny thing is that the next day, I came up with ideas for three more books. We're always telling ourselves stories. Mine was that I can't write. The story I told myself my whole life was that I'm not academic. I was always credited for creative stuff, but never for having a brain. We limit ourselves by the stories we tell," Studley adds. "Life is what you think." ■