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DARA HORN

HAUNTED BY THE DEAD

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THEN



NOW

Transformed: Michael Isaacson recently and years ago (left)

Suspected MP killer's father defended attacks on Israel

BY NIC NORTH

► THE FATHER of the man arrested for the murder of Tory MP Sir David Amess posted a series of inflammatory tweets about Israel including one in which he defended Palestinian rocket attacks.

Harbi Ali Kullane, the father of 25-year-old terror suspect Ali Harbi Ali, also responded to the clashes on Temple Mount in 2009 with a warning that Israel did "not know what it is meddling with".

The posts, which were uncovered by the influential think tank Policy Exchange, have prompted extremism experts to question whether his son may have been motivated to murder the pro-Israel MP by a "grievance culture" against Israel and the West.

In other controversial messages, Mr Kullane, a former diplomat for the Somali government, in 2015 compared the Islamist terror attacks in Paris to the West's aerial bombing campaign in Syria and posted a tweet in 2017 criticising "the misery inflicted by British colonialism".

Mr Kullane was a one-time adviser to the former Prime Minister of Somalia, Hassan Ali Khairre, and a director of the then-government's media and communication department.

According to Mr Kullane's friends in North London, where he has a home in Bounds Green, he is a

► CONTINUED ON P6



Harbi Ali Kullane, father of the suspect

PHOTO: TWITTER

Exposed: 'Sleeper cell' of evangelical Christians posing as Orthodox rabbis

● Father and son performing sacred rituals in series of Jewish communities deny being secret missionaries

JC INVESTIGATION

BY JONATHAN SACERDOTI AND DANIEL BATES MARYLAND

► A FATHER and son practising as Orthodox rabbis in America have been accused by anti-missionary investigators of being secret evangelical Christians.

The claims over Michael and Calev Isaacson — who have changed their family name from Dawson — would cause disastrous halachic problems for the Jewish community if true.

Sacred rituals performed by the

two men include writing holy scrolls, washing the dead, and conducting weddings, divorces and even conversions.

Investigators allege neither man is Jewish, making any rituals in which they took part invalid.

They are suspected of being a "sleeper cell" of evangelical Christians who may ultimately attempt to make aliyah and embed themselves within Israeli society.

The Isaacsons have been accepted and welcomed in a number of Orthodox Jewish communities in locations across the US.

Extensive research has uncovered no evidence of traceable Jewish heritage or

any official conversion by members of the Isaacson family.

An investigation by the *JC* has revealed that Michael Dawson grew up in a Lutheran home and he and his wife were married in a Lutheran wedding.

An aunt of Michael Isaacson was shocked to hear about his professed Jewish identity, telling the *JC* she found his claims over his background "bizarre".

There is no evidence that the Isaacsons are attempting to convert Jews to Christianity, but when confronted over their true faith they have refused to renounce their belief in Jesus.

The Isaacsons currently reside in

Phoenix, Arizona. The family was based in Texas between 2014 and 2016, when Michael Isaacson worked as a supervisor in the Houston Kashrut Association.

They have also lived as Orthodox Jews in Memphis, Tennessee and Milwaukee.

Blending into each community in which they have lived, the Isaacsons have led prayers, blown the shofar, given religious lessons and hosted Orthodox Jewish guests.

Investigators at anti-missionary organisation Beynenyu claim the family always move on when confronted by

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Life



Painting in colour

The new star of Israeli art, Nirit Takele on the inspiration for her work

Dara Horn

Why her new book is called
People Like Dead Jews **p47**

Jews in space

The star-gazing sages of the
ancient world **p48**

Leonard Cohen

A spiritual singer's
soul examined **p52**

Fake pork

Should it be kosher?
This rabbi says yes **p53**

Nirit Takele's colourful art draws on her background as an Ethiopian immigrant to Israel, she tells Karen Glaser

NIRIT TAKELE remembers her first breakfast in Israel vividly. "I was shocked how white everything was.

Bowls of what I now know is labneh, quark, sour cream, cottage cheese and other soft and hard white cheeses. I couldn't understand why the food had no colour."

It was 1991 and Takele was six years old. Twenty four hours earlier she'd eaten a colourful breakfast in Addis Ababa. She, her parents and three siblings, the youngest just two months old, had left their home and farm in Kunzla, a village in northern Ethiopia, travelled by boat across Lake Tan and then walked for four days to the country's capital where Jews were gathering for Operation Solomon, the covert Israeli military operation which airlifted 14,200 people out of Ethiopia to their promised land in 36 hours.

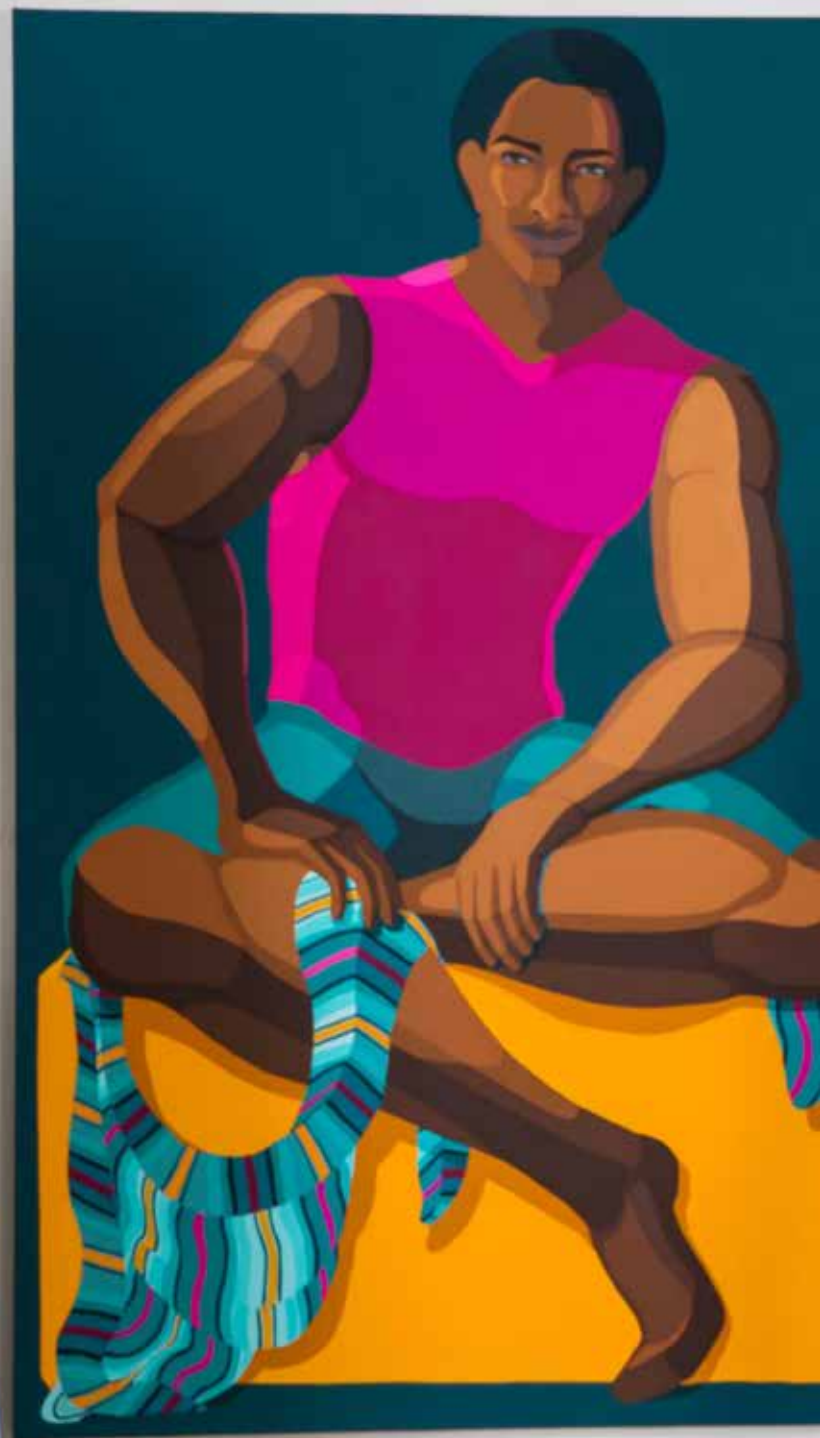
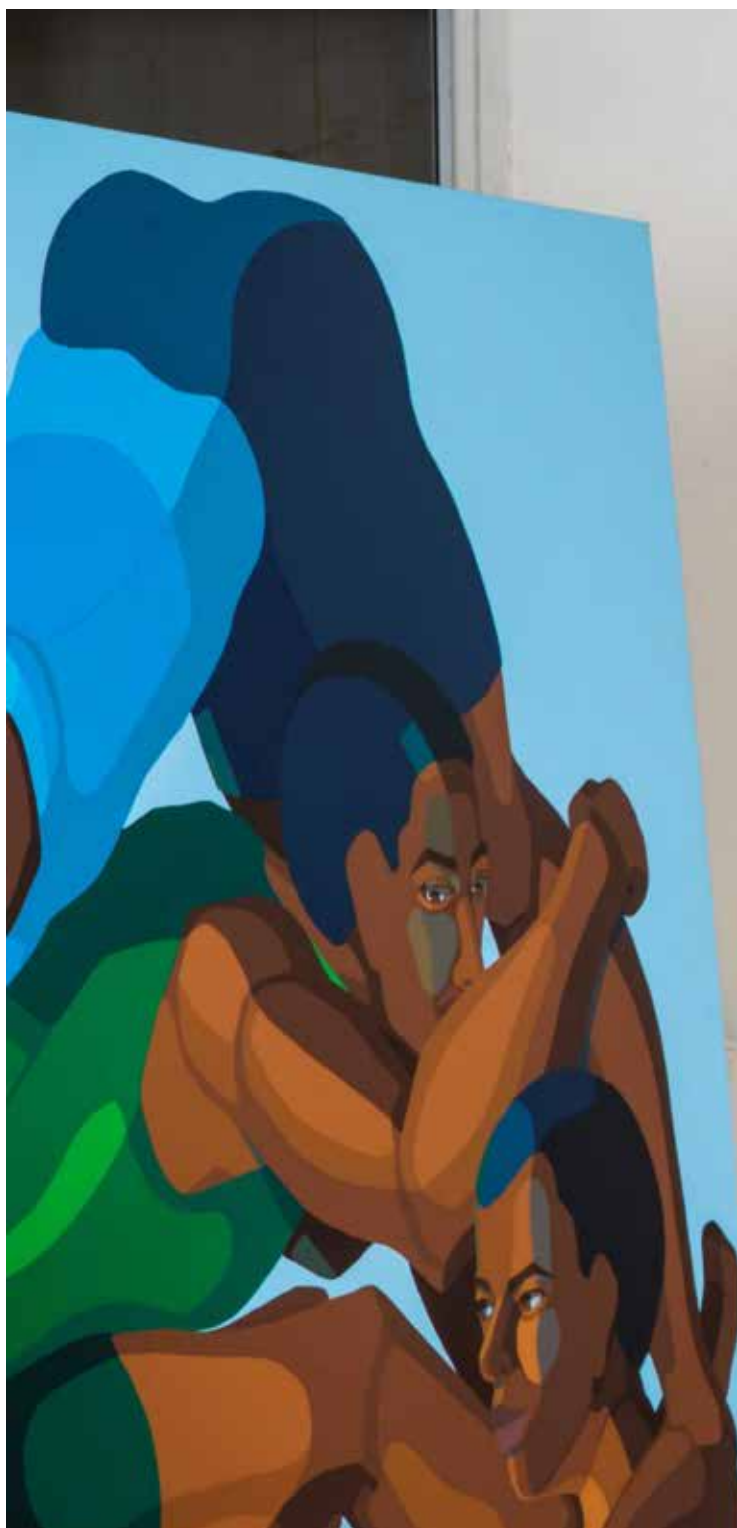
So her first Israeli breakfast was eaten in a hotel, one of the many in Jerusalem where the Ethiopian Jews stayed before being moved to absorption centres across Israel. The Takele family was sent to one in Rehovot and from there to a new home and life in Ofakim, a then economically depressed town in southern Israel. New factories and the hi-tech industry have since moved to Ofakim, but as recently as 2008 *Haaretz* newspaper reported that nearly one third of its inhabitants were "supported by the welfare department and hundreds of families receive aid, including food."

Thirty years after little Nirit Takele arrived in Ofakim, the now feted Israeli artist is on a visit to London, a city where she can start the day with breakfast foods in every hue and from every corner of the globe. She is here for her solo show *The Space Between Us*, the inaugural exhibition of a gallery in the heart of Fitzrovia. And it would be fair to say that the colour white continues to preoccupy her.

"The people in my paintings are as dark as me," she tells me in the white cube gallery set up by Rakeb Sile and Mesai Haileleul of Addis Fine Art, who, five years ago, also established Ethiopia's first gallery for contemporary art. "When I studied history of art at college I was struck by the gap between my expectations and the curriculum, the canon. I scanned the paintings of the old masters for people who looked like me and when I found some, which wasn't often, they were invariably on the edge of the picture, and usually a servant or a slave. I didn't feel represented at all."

Takele's cylindrical figurative paintings — reminiscent of the rounded forms of Fernand Leger, a forerunner of pop art, but influenced by Michelangelo's sculptures and Hockney's colourfulness too, she says — are also a celebration of the Beta Israel, as her community is called in Israel.

This community of 150,000 or so can feel maligned and marginalised, she explains. "I haven't personally experienced any racism in Israel and



The people in my paintings are dark as me... I want to show Beta Israel's inner heroic strength



the community elders mostly still feel grateful to the state for bringing them here. But the younger generation often feels on the edge of things. The big, muscular Black men and women in my paintings are a response to this hurt. I want to show Beta Israel's inner, heroic strength."

That hurt came to a head in 2015 after a video emerged of an Ethiopi-

an-born soldier being beaten up by a policeman. Damas Pakada was on day-release from the army when he was stopped by an officer cordoning off an area after a suspicious object had been found. Within hours of the footage airing on national television Pakada was out of jail and the policeman dismissed from the force. But the incident set off a string of

"I only saw people like me on the edge of paintings... I didn't feel represented at all"

protests from Ethiopian Israelis for whom the assault symbolised years of unfair targeting and heavy-handed treatment by the police.

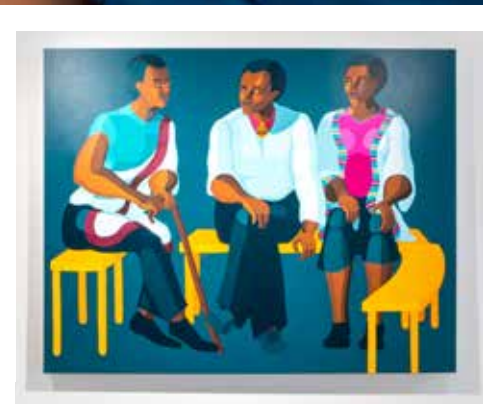
The shocking incident — "we are not talking a civilian here, Damas was in army uniform, serving the country, when he got that beating" — also gave Takele her artistic calling. She made a huge painting of the assault for her final degree show at Shenkar College of Engineering, Design and Art, in Ramat Gan. Her teachers gave her almost a whole wall on which to display the work which sold immediately. It was 2015, she was 30 years old and her career as an artist had begun.

But she had got to Shenkar College almost by accident. After her army service, which she chose to do at a

West Bank military checkpoint and where her good friend died when a Palestinian slit his throat — "I wanted to meet the Palestinians about whom I'd heard so much first hand, I left the army thinking we should respect but also suspect them" — she slid into a series of dead-end jobs.

"I've always loved drawing and painting, but it was a private thing. I used to hang my pencil drawings and charcoal sketches, my paintings done in cheap acrylics, on my bedroom walls. I had no idea that art could be a career, that other people might want to see my work."

Even at the age of 25 when she hired an art teacher for an hour a week as respite from her "soul-killing" job in a factory, she still had no real idea where it might lead her.



I feel very lucky to get to represent my community on canvas and proud to be an Israeli artist

Nirit Takele with some of the paintings from her latest exhibition

“After ten art lessons, something shifted in me. I knew that I had to choose a new path, I just didn’t know what it should be. I made an appointment with a careers advisor to try and find out. I said I loved art but that I also wanted to be financially independent. Should I do a course in business studies, maybe?”

The careers advisor wasn’t much help. “She said it didn’t really matter what I studied because there was no guarantee I’d end up working in my chosen subject. The important thing was to get study something, to get a qualification.”

Feeling a bit nonplussed, Takele left and made her way to the bus stop. As she waited for an Egged bus out of Ramat Gan she looked up and saw the words Shenkar Art Department writ large on a nearby building. “And I thought, well, if there are no guarantees, I might as well try

and study something I actually love.”

And now the art world loves her. Since she sold her graduate show painting of Damas Pakada (now a decorated officer in the IDF’s cyber unit) her work has been shown at the Israel Museum, Haifa Museum, the Negev Museum of Art and the Fresh Paint Art Fair. She was the winner of Sotheby’s 2017 Under the Hammer Prize and this is her second European solo exhibition with Addis Fine Art.

The giant, muscled Black bodies depicted in the 14 paintings, which all sold within a week, continue to portray the Beta Israel — “a beauty and strength that isn’t always recognised,” she says carefully — but also explore the social unrest triggered by the pandemic and the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement around the world in the past 18 months.

Of particular inspiration were the BLM protester dubbed naked Athena who last July confronted Portland police wearing only a face



mask and beanie and, two weeks later, the Israeli who climbed a menorah statue near the Knesset and removed her shirt. In *Human Pyramid*, a limp female figure, her breasts exposed, lies on top of a pyramid of intertwined men, the Hebrew words for ‘art or die’, a popular slogan in the Israeli art scene, inscribed on her chest.

Takele is now at the centre of this scene. When she was a student she prepared her graduate show in the bomb shelter of her block of flats, and worked throughout her degree — in a supermarket, as a face painter and latterly as a waitress in the café of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. “It was just nice just to work in a building dedicated to art,” she says. Now she has a studio in her home in Tel Aviv, where she works full-time.

Many students with whom she studied at Shenkar, where she was the only Black student on the course, are not working artists. “I feel very lucky,” she tells me. “Lucky that I get to represent my community on canvas and proud to be an Israeli artist. There are problems in our society, but I’d never want to give the impression that I am anything other than a proud Jew and a proud Israeli.”



A window on the world of showbiz with **Jonathan Shalit**

STARDUST MEMORIES

Fun with Thomas, Tom and many more

THE WHIRLWIND of premieres and award ceremonies has returned with vengeance. The renewed social whirl brings new parties, fun events and simultaneously evokes happy memories of past ones.

A few weeks ago I attended perhaps my best premiere ever, a special screening of the latest *Thomas & Friends* film with the most special guest — my three-year-old grandson.

During the showing, my mind slipped back to a London premiere of *Mission Impossible* at which Tom Cruise and I talked about his hobby of fencing. I used to fence when I was younger, inspired by my father who had qualified for the British Olympics team but was prevented by injury from taking part. My family though still enjoy Olympic pride as my wife Katrina’s father, Peter Clayton, competed as a swimmer for the British Olympic Team in 1948.

I also recalled the 82nd Academy Awards in Hollywood. I flew to LA with Myleene Klass, who was then hosting CNN’s movie show *The Screening Room* and brilliantly anchoring their Oscar coverage from the red carpet.

The Oscars ceremony itself lasts around three and half hours so sitting through it can be tedious — unlike attending the exclusive VIP viewing parties where the real fun happens.

In 2010 I was a guest at The Elton John Aids Foundation Academy Award viewing party, where the invitees included Victoria Beckham, Heidi Klum, Jamie Foxx, Sharon Osbourne and Simon Cowell. What makes Elton and David Furnish’s parties so special is that they are such incredibly welcoming hosts. Stories of their kindness are legendary. Elton’s Aids Foundation is in the top 10 philanthropic funders of HIV grants in the world.

I attended with Heart DJ Kelly Brook whose film *Piranha 3D*, an award winning comedy horror film, was released a few months later. Kelly’s career has been remarkable since she achieved national stardom 20 years ago when co-hosting *The Big Breakfast*. Kelly has starred in movies, a US network TV show, on the West End stage and been the face of brands all over the world.

As Thomas cavorted on screen — to the utter delight of my grandson — other memories of my Hollywood trip that year came to mind

As I was driving down Hollywood Boulevard on the way to an important meeting, my life changed irrevocably. Myleene

was on the phone to my brilliant co-director Severine Berman. Suddenly I had an epiphany. I hit the dash board so loudly that Severine could hear me back in London, shouting: “I am going to marry Katrina!”

Such was my schedule that, one evening following the Oscars, I hosted three dinners concurrently at BOA Steakhouse on Sunset, a magnet for film and TV stars.

On one table was Myleene and the late Hollywood super-agent John Ferriter who was my LA business partner.

On another was Kelly Brook with important TV producers for pilot season, which is when Hollywood studios create samples of new shows. This led to Kelly starring in NBC’s sitcom series *One Big Happy* produced by Ellen DeGeneres.

Dinner number three was British multi-platinum-selling hip music group N-Dubz being filmed dining for their MTV *Being N-Dubz* series.

Leaving my reverie, there was plenty going on in the present.

I was so excited to be invited to the stage premiere of a favourite film of all time — *Back To the Future*. And wow! I was not disappointed. The DeLorean car defied the laws

of theatre as it seemed to speed at 88mph, with spectacular special effects sparking a shower of light and colour.

People screamed in terror as we watched 2:22 *A Ghost Story* starring Lily Allen and Jake Wood. As Jake took the curtain call to a standing ovation, Katrina leaned over to me and said “Jake was fantastic and should be a Hollywood superstar. His acting is brilliant.”

A more sobering occasion was a dinner to discuss the curse of modern day slavery. It seems beyond belief that we are talking about slavery in 2021. The intimate dinner was hosted by Princess Eugenie with Caroline Haughey QC, a leading expert in human trafficking, setting out the dreadful scale of today’s problem, leaving us in no doubt that for many people modern day slavery may be as close as a home of in their own street. That is the reality.

In 2016 the remarkable Nicola Mendelsohn CBE was diagnosed with follicular lymphoma, an incurable cancer of the blood. My charity shout out this month is to her Follicular Lymphoma Foundation to fund research to find a cure for this terrible disease. Please go to www.theffl.org and donate.

One evening after the Oscars I hosted three dinners at the same steakhouse at the same time



Nicola Mendelsohn: campaigning