

State & Local

The price of a stolen diamond: a mother's guilt

Replacing a wedding ring meant answering a son's tough queries

JOHANNA GINSBERG
NJN Staff Writer

I am now unexpectedly in the market for a diamond engagement ring. Married 17 years, at the age of 44, with a house, two children, and five pets, it's not exactly the moment. Who needs to buy a diamond ring now, when college tuition, home repairs, and b'nei mitzva celebrations loom? Unfortunately, mine was stolen when my house was broken into last August. It was a beautiful 2.1 carat diamond in a platinum setting with seven serpentine diamond chips on either side, and it originally belonged to my husband's grandmother.

My initial impulse was to find a pretty band complementing the one I already have, and walk away with the sparkly stacked look.

"You should have a ring," was my husband's quiet response.

Meanwhile, my 12-year-old son has dipped his big toe into the process of becoming a bar mitzva. Just a few weeks ago he met with our rabbi to put together a list of issues he cares about. Perhaps one will become the focus of his mitzva project. Topping the list, along with animal conservation and puppy mills, was, of all things, conflict or "blood" diamonds.

Conflict diamonds, according to a United Nations resolution implemented in 2003, are gems that originate from places controlled by forces that are opposed to legitimate, internationally recognized governments and that fund military action against the government.

My son, who doesn't miss much, eventually weighed in. "Mommy, you're not going to buy a blood diamond, are you?"

Anyone with children knows that there is only one answer to such a question.

I had heard about blood diamonds, but never really considered what it would take to avoid them.

But a simple trip to a local jewelry store, or even to 47th Street — the center of the diamond district in New York — now seemed suddenly fraught.

My personal matter took on a more public turn, as blood diamonds screeched back into the headlines. On Dec. 28, Israel's Diamond Exchange announced that it had expelled a longtime member for smuggling illegal blood diamonds from Zimbabwe into the country. A spokesman for the exchange said his organization "will not tolerate dealing in blood diamonds."

But wait, if the UN has a definition for blood diamonds, adopted in the course of passing a resolution to halt the trading of blood diamonds, can I, in fact, go to a local jeweler to purchase a ring without worrying about contributing to terror? It was time to get my hands dirty. A few mouse clicks, e-mails, and telephone calls later, I have finally reached a conclusion — sort of.

A higher standard

The main result of that UN resolution is known as the Kimberley Process, named for the town in South Africa where it was conceived in 2000. It is basically a certification process that ensures all rough diamonds entering the international market come from legitimate mining operations through legal sales channels. Participating countries basically pledge both to ensure the legality of their diamonds, and not to do business with non-participants.

As of December 2009, 75 countries had signed on as members. Kimberley Process diamonds account for 99.8 percent of the global production of rough diamonds, according to its website. (In the 1990s, by comparison, up to 15 percent of diamonds were considered blood diamonds.)

Israel, by the way, currently holds the rotating chair of the Kimberley Process.

So what does all this mean for my possible upcoming purchase? According to one local jeweler, it means I am virtually assured of buying a conflict-free ring.



The Kimberley Process is a joint government and industry initiative to stem the flow of conflict diamonds, profits from which finance wars against legitimate governments. San Francisco retailer Brilliant Earth says its rings, right, adhere to an even higher standard.



Photo courtesy Brilliant Earth

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Henry Feldman owns Henry's Fine Jewelry, located in Summit and Basking Ridge. He's been in business since 1989, when he opened his first shop, then in Union. Once upon a time, he said, no one asked any questions about diamonds. "People didn't question it, and suppliers didn't question it."

But today, asked if one could purchase a conflict-free diamond in his shop, he said, "Not only can you get it, it's the only diamond you can get." He added, "Suppliers like to make sure diamonds come from the right sources, and they say so on their invoices."

He estimates that only 5 to 10 percent of his customers ask if his diamonds are conflict-free.

"But it's important for me to know, and when I sell, I can point it out to people," said Feldman.

But critics say the Kimberley Process falls short, particularly in addressing issues in Zimbabwe, a Kimberley Process participant. Ian Smilie, a creator of the Kimberley Process, cites human rights abuses, with alleged government involvement, in diamond mines in a region of Zimbabwe known as the Marange. He and others say diamonds from this region continue to be smuggled into international markets and mixed with other diamonds.

Other critics say the UN definition itself is too narrow — that

it focuses only on rebel groups and excludes child labor, state-sanctioned violence, and worker exploitation, not to mention the environmental damage inherent in mining.

Among this latter group are Beth Gerstein and Eric Grossberg, who founded Brilliant Earth in 2005. A San Francisco shop with an on-line store, Brilliant Earth sells what the proprietors call "ethical origin" diamonds that meet their specific criteria for conflict-free diamonds. They promise "Canadian diamonds, ethically sourced sapphires, and recycled gold and platinum," as well as Namibian diamonds "mined, cut, and polished with fair labor practices." It's the fair trade coffee of the jewelry trade.

"Well-documented instances of torture, rape, and vast problems are getting past the Kimberley Process, which doesn't address violence perpetrated by the government," said Gerstein. "Millions of carats are exported legally even though these abuses are well documented."

And yet, even as recently as last month, the UN General Assembly backed a resolution calling for countries to be more consistent and thorough in reporting the origins of diamonds. The resolution was proposed by the Israeli chair of the Kimberley Process, Boaz Hirsch, who also urged action on

Zimbabwe and the Marange.

I'm still not sure what to do about replacing my ring, or what to tell my son. I'm glad local jewelers meet the Kimberley Process standards, but I wish they were higher. If I want to be really *machmir* (strict), I could buy from the folks at Brilliant Earth or a similar shop.

But, as it turns out, the best solution may be sticking with an antique ring similar to my original. According to Gerstein, not only is purchasing an antique diamond okay, it's also environmentally friendly — it counts as recycled; there would be no way my purchase would contribute to the exploitation of workers or the propping up of corrupt regimes.

In any case, no matter what I do or which mitzva project my son ultimately chooses, he is already making an impact.

jginsberg@njewishnews.com

The Luggage Center

Is New Jersey's #1
LUGGAGE REPAIR CENTER

Authorized Factory Repair
Center for Every Major Brand
of Luggage

Authorized Repair Center for
Every Airline, Domestic
and Foreign

Most Repairs Done in 48 Hours
Reasonable • Efficient

OPEN 7 DAYS

333 Springfield Avenue • Summit
908.273.6674



"OBAMA'S RABBI"
AT AHAVAS SHALOM
SUNDAY JAN. 16TH AT 2PM

A community-wide celebration honoring the life and vision of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Keynote address by Rabbi Capers C. Funnye, Jr., cousin of First Lady Michelle Obama.

FREE ADMISSION
145 BROADWAY-NEWARK
INFO@AHAVASSHALOM.ORG

NEW JERSEY COUNCIL
FOR THE HUMANITIES

Pain Management and Anesthesiology of NJ



Treatment of chronic and acute painful conditions
Interventional Pain Management Specialist

Mikhail Solomonov M.D.

DIPLOMATE OF THE AMERICAN BOARD OF ANESTHESIOLOGY/PAIN MANAGEMENT

8 SADDLE RD. SUITE # 204 • CEDAR KNOLLS, NEW JERSEY

973-998-7868