

What Do You Buy the Children of the Terrorist
Who Tried to Kill Your Wife?

A MEMOIR

David Harris-Gershon



ONE WORLD

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For my friends and foes – our hope is not yet lost.

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PART I

The Bombing

The force of the blast tore through the ceiling, blew out doors, tossed tables across the cafeteria. Salt shakers, plastic trays, and barbed nails were sent flying. And after the flying, there was wailing. And after the wailing, anarchy, as students in torn khakis and hijabs scrambled over the splintered tables. After that, they say people began stuffing pages from their Hebrew exercise books into the wounds.

Three weeks before the bombing, a Palestinian man from East Jerusalem named Mohammad Odeh had scouted the campus of Hebrew University perched high atop Mount Scopus. Odeh noted students' patterns of activity. He noted their eating behaviors, where they congregated, always checking the clock, calculating precise times and places. Then, as he approached the cafeteria entrance – the doors invitingly propped open – he watched those seated within and listened to a mix of Hebrew and the Western tongues of summer exchange students. He considered the oblivious mass of humanity, nodded internally and decided, yes, this is the place where it will occur.

Nobody noticed. Nobody noticed the day before Odeh struck, when he hid behind a bank of bushes, scaled one of the university's barrier fences, and buried a backpack stuffed with explosives, nails, and quarter-inch bolts under some brush. And the next morning,

nobody noticed as he flashed his Jerusalem identity card, passed through security wearing cologne to mask the scent of explosives, retrieved the backpack and slung it over his shoulder.¹

He intended to kill Jews and Americans. We were both, far from home, newly married, living in Jerusalem. Graduate students being stalked.

They say we were targets.

The moment the bomb's rippling rings expanded past the cafeteria's broken frame – the reverberations widening, traveling along electromagnetic waves reaching for T.V. antennas, hopping from house to house until reaching mine – the moment it was learned, this thing, this bombing, everything changed. Words shifted and language folded in upon itself. There was nothing anyone could have done. 'Pesto' became blood. 'Cafeteria' became detached limbs, a head face down. 'Capri pants' turned into third-degree burns, percentages of the body covered, skin grafts, recoveries.

This is what I mean:

Capri pants: On the morning of July 31, 2002, a Wednesday morning, a summer morning in Jerusalem, Jamie awoke and quietly put on her Capri pants, trying not to disturb my insomnia-induced stupor. Curiously, she did not choose shorts that morning, though outside it would reach 95 degrees Fahrenheit before 10 a.m., and she didn't choose jeans, despite being accustomed to dressing rather modestly. Instead, she chose this pair of cropped trousers, the material appearing to have been inadvertently shrunk in the dryer, a hybrid article of clothing I'd always found slightly absurd.

The evening before, Tuesday evening, Marla had come to our apartment carrying Hebrew workbooks and a concerned look. It was a look Jamie mirrored. The two were taking a Hebrew

language class at the university during its summer session, and were bracing for a pivotal exam the next day, an exam they would need to pass in order to graduate with an M.A. in Jewish Education.

Still, that evening felt strangely buoyant and light, the air unusually crisp for a Jerusalem summer. A breeze carried the cries of stray cats and kids cursing in Hebrew through our open window as we sat at a large oak table, Hebrew dictionaries strewn everywhere, studying. Watching them, I thought, *They are beautiful*. And they were. Jamie with her straight, sandy brown hair occasionally falling across her face, obscuring green eyes moving right to left, eyes that trapped me immediately the first time I saw them. And Marla, with her dark curls unfurling around a radiant smile. They were both glowing.

But the Capri pants. While I slept, Jamie dressed and caught a taxi, something she did every morning that summer. It was quicker than public transportation; it saved time. At least, this is what we told ourselves. In truth, we were nervous that a bus might suddenly explode. We'd seen it so many times on the news, the frame buckling, the steel skeleton exposed and scorched, the television crews swarming, the spotlights, the ambulances flashing red.

So she took a taxi.

Class convened at 8 a.m., a final session before the exam that afternoon. Jamie and Marla decided to cram over a hot meal during the break and headed toward the Frank Sinatra Cafeteria near the university's Rothberg International School. It was the first time they had eaten on campus that summer, being accustomed to returning home each day after class for lunch and an afternoon of conjugating verbs. *Hayah*. It was. *Y'hayah*. It will be.

Just after 1 p.m., with their test slowly encroaching, Jamie and Marla waited in a crowded line, grumpy and frazzled. They spotted Ben, a stout friend who learned Torah by day and spun records as a DJ by night in darkened, West Jerusalem clubs, his body bouncing

to jungle rhythms that pulsed until dawn, his *tzitzit* (tassels) swaying from his waist amidst the filtered light.

They grabbed three trays of kosher food and sat near the front to eat, not far from the cash register, centrally located.

Cafeteria: Mohammad Odeh lived in East Jerusalem's Silwan neighborhood, just south of the Old City's Western Wall and Al-Aqsa Mosque, where he shared a home with his wife, five-year-old son, and infant daughter.

That Wednesday at dawn, Odeh must have awoken to the muezzin's amplified adhan – the Muslim call to prayer – as it echoed through the Gihon Valley. He then likely washed his face and kissed his sleeping children before donning a pair of jeans and a polo button-down shirt, clothes that gave him the appearance of a university student. Suitably disguised, he then trekked to Shchem Gate just outside the Old City and waited for Wa'al Kassam, the leader of a Hamas cell composed solely of Jerusalemites who would take him to Hebrew University.

Weeks earlier, Kassam had arranged a private meeting between Odeh and the terror cell's general, Abu Moaz. The general, impressed, recruited Odeh into the fold and asked that he suggest a target for the cell's next attack: a test for the new recruit. It was a test Odeh passed. He mentioned he had previously worked as a contract painter at Hebrew University – that he knew the campus well. He even still had in his possession an official entry card. Immediately, Moaz approved plans for an attack, and Odeh was ordered to fix upon an exact time and place to strike.

After several days spent testing the entry card and scouting the university grounds, Odeh set his sights upon a cafeteria, adjacent to the Rothberg International School, frequented by Israelis and a significant population of foreign students, mostly American.

It was a place Palestinian students, of which there were many, would be less likely to dine. He then walked along the university's barrier fence, noticed a section facing the village of K'far Issiva that was unusually low, and lingered for a bit. After a time, with no security visible and very little traffic, Odeh decided it would be the ideal place to move a bomb onto campus.

On July 30, a bomb was prepared in Ramallah and placed in a black backpack. It was then transferred to East Jerusalem, where that evening Odeh picked it up, traveled to the university, jumped the barrier fence, and hid the bomb under some shrubs. He worked quickly in the dark. And just as quickly, he was gone.

The next morning around 8 a.m., when Kassam arrived at Shchem Gate in his car to pick up Odeh, the two stopped briefly at a kiosk to buy two items: a Hebrew-language newspaper and cologne. Odeh sprayed his hands and arms with the cologne as they skirted the eastern edge of the Old City in Kassam's car, the Dome of the Rock rising to their left, mirroring in miniature the Mount of Olives to their right. They passed through Wadi al-Joz and climbed Mount Scopus – the university at its summit – the car struggling, downshifting toward the campus's western entrance.

When they arrived, Odeh hopped out and walked toward university security – a booth surrounded by chain-link fence and barbed wire – where officials waited with metal detectors and wands. Having handled explosives the previous evening, he must have been nervous. I imagine Odeh fidgeted with his scented hands, moving them in and out of his pockets while standing there, waiting with a collection of students, some of whom he would soon tear open. His skin was steeped in the cologne to mask the scent of any explosive residue that might remain – residue the wands wanted, residue the wands failed to find.

It was early, perhaps around 8:30 a.m., when Odeh entered campus. He headed straight for the bushes, grabbed the bag, walked

quickly to a utility closet, and set it down among cans of paint and rollers. Shielding his activity by closing the door slightly, he opened the bag and wired a cell phone to the bomb. Finished, he sprayed the bag with cologne, closed the closet, and “passed time.”²

Around 1 p.m., Odeh returned to the closet, grabbed the backpack, and walked directly to the cafeteria’s main entrance, newspaper in hand. It was probably not his intention to drape the day’s edition over the bag, shielding it from view under a mound of newsprint; that would have drawn attention, been conspicuous. Instead, he must have thought, *Fold it*, knowing that a newspaper resting upon an abandoned backpack indicated an item to which one would soon return. He hoped nobody would notice the bag perched alone, unattended. Hoped nobody would think, *Hefetz hashud* – suspicious object.

After entering the cafeteria, he looked around – the bag slung over his shoulder – and spotted an empty table near the front. The place was full. Bustling. It was easy to blend in. Gliding past students he placed the bag on a table unnoticed, the folded newspaper balanced on top.

Then, he was gone, disappearing into Kassam’s car, where he fingered the cell phone and hit “send.” The phone ringing.³

Capri pants: After finishing their meals and failing to notice the abandoned backpack on the table next to them, Jamie and Marla decided to hang out and study. Only there was little motivation to do so, full as they were from the meal, and fatigued, with Ben still finishing up his lunch before heading to the gym. Finally, after procrastinating for as long as possible, Jamie decided to cram in one last study session, bent over, reached for her workbook on the floor, her head shielded below the table’s flat, Formica surface as she reached and reached and – when the bomb exploded, Jamie was

thrown against the floor. Her clothes and skin scorched by the explosion's flash. Her body punctured by shards of metal as people screamed and ran through the shattered glass, stepping over bodies and fettuccini and downed picture frames.

Jamie shook her head, sitting on the ground, dazed.

Cafeteria: Odeh pressed send, called the bag. And the world ended. Began again.

Pesto: When the phone rang at home, I was eating spaghetti with sun-dried tomato pesto. Red-tinged olive oil dripped down the strands of steaming pasta, my lips greasy. Smacking.

I paused and answered, "Hello?"

"David? This is Esther. Jamie's here with me. There was an explosion at the university, but I just want you to know she's fine. Okay? She's fine." [Click.]

I was still chewing, twirling the fork, and knew I didn't know an Esther, didn't know what she was talking about. After a few seconds, puzzled, I thought, *That was nice of her*; thought, *There must have been some kind of electrical explosion*; thought, *Keep eating*.

Although I'd lived in Israel for two years, had been anticipating this, fearing it, I was oblivious. *An electrical explosion*. As though people routinely called strangers to alert them of transformers on the fritz or wires sparking overhead. But as I continued to eat lunch, the beginning of unease, the sense that something was off, crouched silently.

I turned on the T.V.

Nothing. Channel 2 was showing its daily Spanish soap opera with Hebrew subtitles. I ate.

Then, ten minutes later, the news broke in. A man saying the word *piguah* – terrorist attack. Then a map. A star in the center. The words, Frank Sinatra Cafeteria, the words, Hebrew University. Ceasing to chew, I thought, *Not an electrical explosion*; thought, *She's fine. She's fine*; thought, *Why didn't Jamie call herself?*

Then the phone rang again.

“Hello?”

“David. This is Esther. Jamie's okay. But she's lightly hurt. They're taking her to the university hospital. She wants you to meet her there.” [Click.]

Lightly hurt. She was still fine, I thought, probably just some cuts and bruises. A scrape here or there. Skinned knee. Sprained ankle. I didn't rush. I called our program's dean to let him know what had happened, gathering some clothes, saying into the phone, “Lightly.”

The dean's voice was quiet on the other end. He knew, after living in Israel for decades, that the word “lightly” when conjoined with “injured” did not mean “she's fine.” Finally, he asked, “David, what does that mean, ‘lightly’? What did they say?”

“I don't know,” I answered as tears suddenly welled and stuck in the back of my throat, feeling the fight, the flight. I was lost. In over my head. Clueless. I hung up the phone, threw it against a wall, and began packing. Frantic, I sprinted down a flight of stairs, ran to the street, and flagged down a cab.

The driver rolled down a window, leaned over, and smiled through a cigarette.

“Where to?”

“The university.”

“Sorry. Impossible. Place is blocked off.”

I opened the door and got in anyway. Slammed it shut. “Look. My wife was injured in the attack. She's at the hospital. I don't care how you do it. But you get me there. Now. Drive on the sidewalk.

Down one-way streets. I don't fucking care. You just get me there. Understand?"

"No problem."

Capri pants: Jamie shook her head on the floor, blinded temporarily by the blast, then heard the movement of feet and realized what must have happened – *terrorist attack*. She followed the shuffling sounds around her, first stepping, then running over broken glass with bare feet, her shoes having been blown off by the force of her trajectory. When she escaped into the sun-drenched courtyard, she was screaming. Loudly. So loudly that a student, a guy wearing a UCLA shirt, grabbed her and held her tightly, just trying to get her to shut up as Jamie said, "I can't, I can't, I can't."

The UCLA shirt guy lifted Jamie and carried her across the cobblestone, her burned flesh illuminated by an unforgiving sun. Without a word, he placed her beneath an awning next to those already lined up, injured, waiting for attention. And then he was gone. She was alone. Emergency personnel swarmed around her. People lay on the ground bleeding around her as I ate spaghetti, enjoying the afternoon light streaming in through our apartment windows.

As Jamie lay there, alone, someone approached, stood over her, and peered down into her face. Jamie said, "Esther, it's me."

"Who are you? I don't know you."

"It's me. Jamie. From Hillel."

Esther worked for Hillel at Hebrew University. After hearing the blast, she had jumped from her desk and raced across the courtyard toward the sound. Jamie, who years earlier had worked for Hillel at Washington University in St. Louis, knew Esther, a former colleague, a colleague who, scanning bodies, had discovered Jamie lying on the ground just as the paramedics reached her. They began

cutting off sections of her charred pants, everything from the calf down badly burned. *Capri pants*. They cut, trying to remove smoldering cloth from her burns, trying to determine how far the burns extended. And as they worked, Jamie felt embarrassed, not wanting to be exposed – felt vulnerable as they roughly calculated that thirty percent of the body had been burned, roughly categorized her as “lightly injured.” Then they moved on to the next victim in line.

Esther crouched down and promised to stay with Jamie when she began complaining of a stomach ache, the first sign of internal injuries, a sign that she needed to be upgraded from “lightly” to “moderately.” Esther grabbed some rescue workers, said, “She needs help,” as Jamie continued to believe in the idea of “lightly.” She did not understand the burns. She did not understand the shrapnel. She thought, as I did upon receiving that first call, *Just some cuts, some scrapes*. When the paramedics saw pools of blood coalescing around her abdomen and realized something was wrong internally, Jamie argued with them as they moved her to where the moderately injured were lined up, saying, “No, no. Lightly. I’m lightly injured.”