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Of Winter's Cost

Written by Geoff Akers

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Of Winter's Cost

by

Geoff Akers



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author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons,
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This book is dedicated to the memory of Israel Shahak, a tireless campaigner for justice and human rights in his adopted country.

My heart aches. I ask why are our memories so short? Have our Jewish sisters and brothers forgotten their humiliation? Have they forgotten the collective punishment, the home demolitions in their own history so soon?. Have they turned their backs on their profound and noble religious traditions? Have they forgotten that God cares deeply about the downtrodden?
Bishop Desmond Tutu

When do we Jews notice that Israel is insane?
Gideon Levy (Israeli peace activist)

...Like waifs their spirits grope
For the pools of Hebron again—
For Lebanon's summer slope...
Isaac Rosenberg

Prelude

Grandfather died two days after my fourteenth birthday. I remember being surprised that he was still asleep when I arrived with his breakfast that morning. Normally, he was propped up on his pillows waiting for me.

Preparing and transporting grandfather's breakfast was a solemn ritual performed at the same time each day. Watching him sip his orange juice and chew reflectively on a slice of toast, I looked forward to the moment when he would push the tray aside and begin one of his tales from the distant past. I would sit spellbound as images emerged from a time and a place so different from my own.

Occasionally, he spoke of his early life in Krasnow, the small Polish town of his birth and upbringing, but the main focus was always on the horror of the Nazi occupation. I found it hard to connect the frail old man with the hero of combat against a remorseless enemy. Only his eyes, alight with the memory of a particularly daring deed, or saddened by the recollection of a futile death, provided a palpable link with the past.

On the morning of his death, I called out to him but the blankets remained ominously still. Finally, gathering my courage, I pulled back the top cover and brushed his mottled neck with my fingertips. The skin was hard and cold

to the touch. The realisation that death had stolen him away in the night, leaving this crusty shell behind, overwhelmed me. I rushed out of the room kicking over the tray and mashing the toast into the faded fibres of the carpet.

Over the next few days a host of strange and familiar faces floated in and out of my consciousness as old friends and comrades stopped by to pay their respects. I greeted them all courteously, but felt brittle and shrunken inside. Even now, it's hard to express my love for an old man who had been virtually bedridden for as long as I could remember. I suppose he was a refuge from my parents' endless squabbling.

Grandfather's death led to our relocation from Jerusalem to the West Bank settlement of Kiryat Arba, making it possible for my father to fulfil his long-standing religious ambitions. The rapid distillation of everything but fear and hatred, was the main outcome of my move to Israel's troubled frontier.

When I consider what I have done, my blood runs cold. How could I have been so blind, so impervious? I realise now that grandfather wished to preserve me from this fate – his stories an attempt to purge evil, not invest it. He desired above all else that I might live at peace with myself and others in a land liberated from violence. The state of Israel was to be a new beginning, free from enmity.

I shut my eyes and find myself seated once more at the foot of grandfather's bed, hearkening to his every word. His face tightens as painful memories are summoned up and appraised. His voice, rising and swooping like a bird in flight, carries me along in its slipstream.

Chapter One

The West Bank: Summer 1993.

Mr Dayane's pick-up roars out of Kiryat Arba. My father is up front with Mr Katz while Gad and me are sitting in the back trying to forget that the driver is our religious instruction teacher. In class he praises the courageous pioneers of Hebron, paying tribute to those brave souls who squatted in the town centre defying pressure from all quarters to move on. Almost fifteen years later, despite tough resistance from Arab terrorists and self-hating Jews, they're still here – stronger and more determined than ever.

We pile out of the truck and walk the short distance to the Cave of Machpelah. The truth is that no right-thinking Jew, living in Hebron, or Kiryat Arba, can stand the idea of sharing our shrine with Arabs, so we harass them at every opportunity. As usual, there's plenty of action at the foot of the steps leading up to the Cave. A gaggle of American tourists is being softened up by a *towel-head* guide. These twisters hang around offering their services for a few shekels. Mr Dayane speaks through clenched teeth.

"Why do we allow these creatures to ply their trade here of all places?"

"A good question, Yoel!" Mr Katz waggles his finger in our direction. "By the time these boys are running things, they'll all be gone. In the meantime, we can only show them how we feel."

Father smirks. He believes that expelling Arabs from Judea and Samaria will solve all our problems. Mother argues that we must share what we have with our "neighbours", as she calls them, and be more tolerant if things are ever to improve. She never lets him off with anything. She's so different from the other wives in Kiryat Arba who wouldn't dream of showing such disrespect to their husbands.

We move inside. The shrine is crowded with gawking tourists. Locals coming here to pray have a hard time of it, their anger often spilling over into violence. The Americans, we noticed earlier, are crowded round the Cenotaph of Abraham as their guide tries to hurry them along. Having been paid up front, he'll be anxious to get the tour over and done with. Mr Katz deliberately barges into him. He grimaces through a mouthful of yellow teeth and shakes his fist at us. He looks like an angry old goat. Gad laughs in his face as we follow our elders into the Tomb of Joseph. Here, we mingle with a dozen Hebron men holding Bibles and mumbling prayers. There's hardly room to breathe and the barrel of someone's semi-automatic pokes painfully into my back.

A group of Arabs, standing just beyond the tomb, are offering up prayers to Allah. They chant in loud voices.

The alcove empties as we move out to confront them. An anxious security guard hovers in the background. Nearby, the tourists are listening attentively as their guide drones on about the centrality of the patriarch, Abraham, to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. That sort of blasphemy might in itself set things off but today our attention is fixed elsewhere.

One of our Hebron brothers raises his weapon and noisily releases the safety catch. The Arabs watch us, seemingly unperturbed by the threat. He gestures at the nearest of them.

"Get out of here, Mohammed! You and your *towel-head* pals, now!"

"Mohammed" replies with no hint of irony in his voice.

"I trust that Jews and Moslems can share this holy place without ill will."

The Hebron pioneer is unimpressed.

"I won't tell you again."

The young Arab raises his eyebrows in mock bewilderment.

"There is no need for such hostility." He glances round at his comrades for the first time before continuing in the same affable tone. Although he is smiling, his dark eyes are cold. "Next thing you know we'll be rounded up and dumped in a concentration camp."

The words send a sudden, cold shiver up my spine. As if previously rehearsed, one of the Arabs feeds him an opportune line.

"You mean a refugee camp?"

"Is there a difference, my friend?"

The pioneer's finger tightens on the trigger – the slightest pressure and the thing will go off. Fear beats around us like startled birds. I notice the Yankee tourists are pressed against the rail surrounding the Cenotaph, suddenly aware that something is terribly wrong. My father, trying to look tough, is anything but. I recall mother telling him during one of their frequent, stormy rows that he was "all talk, and no action". I was furious on his behalf at the time, but maybe she was right. His face is a pale mask beneath its dark tan, and his legs are trembling. I feel ashamed and pray that no one else will notice. Fortunately, everyone is staring at the Arabs. Mr Katz's face is beetroot-red and slicked with sweat. My shame is swept aside by a sudden impulse to laugh. His swollen neck and bulging eyes remind me of the frogs we used to watch spawning in the early spring. At that moment the security guard intervenes.

"Break it up! What are you thinking? This is no place for confrontation!" He turns to the Arabs. "You'll have to leave now!"

They make no move to obey. Instead, "Mohammed" feigns surprise.

"Why are you picking on us, sir? We have done nothing wrong. These men and their brats are causing the trouble. They are the ones sticking their guns down our throats."

He stares straight at me with a mocking smile. I frown and stare back. Who the hell does he think he's calling a brat?

"Look, surely no one wants any trouble here of all places?"

The guard is trying to reduce tension by appealing to everyone's veneration for the ancient and holy site.

Again, the Arab smiles.

"Of course, sir. Your wish is our command. I forgot for a moment that our necks are under the Zionist heel. How foolish of me!"

He walks off, motioning his comrades to follow. The Yanks squirm out of his way as though he might suddenly explode in their faces. There is no doubt that "Mohammed" and his mates have won this round.

Shaking his head the pioneer flicks his weapon back to safety and frowns.

"That is what we have to put up with, day in, day out." Flecks of spittle fly into Mr Katz's face but he doesn't react in the slightest. He is fiercely intent on what the man is saying. "The *Canaanites* always cause trouble when they know it's hard for us to do anything about it. They're cowards, the lot of them!"

I have some trouble accepting such a branding but Mr Katz intervenes.

"You see how it is, boys! We are mocked and persecuted in our own temple by the agents of Satan. That is why there can never be any compromise with the Arabs while even one of their number pollutes our sacred land." Gad nods eagerly and my own unease dissolves as the words strike home. He's right! Why should we tolerate such blasphemy? "You boys are the future. Never forget that, and never forget your duty as righteous Jews. Then you will ride high when our Lord redeems his people."

I notice the concourse is now almost deserted. The tourists have fled. No one wants to be caught in the crossfire.

Outside things are also quiet. There is no sign of the Arabs who upset our prayers. Father and Mr Dayane seem to have lost their appetite for trouble and are anxious to depart. On the way home Mr Katz tells us that our persecutors will be punished for their latest act of sacrilege.

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Gad phones me a few days later to confirm that things are heating up. He tells me that his father, as chairman of the locally affiliated Committee for Safety on the Roads, has come up with the perfect plan to punish the Arabs. The problem of children throwing stones at cars on the outskirts of Hebron has escalated recently so the Committee has voted to patrol the hotspots in force. This will provide the perfect smokescreen for our revenge outing.

"Father says that we can come along and observe."

"That's good!"

The idea of us "observing" is ridiculous, of course. Although we won't be armed, we'll definitely be in the thick of it. If mother finds out there will be hell to pay. She's only trying to protect me, I suppose, but we are fighting an enemy whose stated aim is to wipe our country off the face of the map, so there's no room for compromise.

I remember father once demanding to know why she condemned our just battle for survival when her own father had fought so heroically in defence of persecuted Jews. She gazed at him for a moment with what looked like pity in her eyes, but her words jabbed like daggers.

"How dare you bring my father into this? You and your friends are not worth the dirt under his fingernails! He laid his life on the line so many times fighting real evil. What you call a war of survival is a miserable excuse to occupy land and oppress innocent people."

Father tried to bluster his way out of it but he knew he wasn't getting anywhere. Mother just stood there glowering until he left the room. After that she slumped down on the couch, covered her face with her hands and began to cry. I couldn't decide whether to run after father or stay and comfort her. In the end, I just stood there like an idiot, staring at my feet.

"See you tomorrow morning, bright and early. We're picking you and your dad up at seven thirty."

"Great."

For a moment I have trouble shaking loose. Problems at home have been nagging away like a sore tooth recently. And, try as I might, I can't get these Arabs in the Cave of Machpelah out of my mind either. I sometimes think we're all reluctant actors in a film playing parts that none of us really understands. I can't explain it but that's how I feel.

"You okay, Sam?"

"I'm fine! See you tomorrow."

The phone clicks off and I slowly replace the handset. I really don't know what's going on inside my head. The last thing I want is for Gad to think I'm going soft on Arabs.



The gathering is large. I recognise many of the faces from meetings at the Kiryat Arba Community Centre;

but there are lots of people here I don't know, including kids of my own age and younger, presumably from Hebron. One of their rabbis, a ball of a man with no neck and stocky shoulders, is mounted on the back of a pickup addressing the crowd. His voice, high-pitched and indignant, carries well.

"I am gratified to see such a large turnout today. Thanks are due to David Katz and our Kiryat Arba brothers for their help in organising an appropriate response to *Canaanite* profanity." I exchange glances with Gad and we both smile. A low growl of anger from the crowd shows how high feelings are running. "Remember to fill up your pockets with stones which we will need to provoke the reaction we seek. Under no circumstances fire your weapons until the *Canaanites* retaliate. It is important that we are seen as having been forced to use firearms in self-defence. If any among you have difficulty with such a deception, please remember that we are not dealing here with fellow-human beings. We, and we alone, are the true children of God, and the inheritors of the Land. Any method we choose to rid ourselves of vermin is acceptable."

The rabbi receives a rousing cheer as he steps down, and we set off. It's mid-afternoon and the sun beats uncomfortably hot on my neck and shoulders. We pass through a small olive grove where Arab labourers are resting in the shade of an ancient tree. They stare at us but we ignore them. Although these peasants are not our target today, they could be soon enough. Many such groves have been bulldozed recently because terrorists conceal their guns and bomb-making equipment among the roots of the trees.

We reach the first few houses at the edge of the district selected for the attack. The crumbling breeze-block walls and rusty corrugated iron roofs show how poor the residents are. Few of these hovels have electricity or running water. Our teacher, Mr Dayane, believes Arabs are animals who understand nothing better and that it would be a waste of money to attempt any improvements.

Father's hero, Rabbi Previnger, wrote in a recent article that:

"Although we live in close proximity to the Arab, we, the vanguard of the chosen, inhabit a separate universe of thought and feeling, and that is only right and proper."

Father cut it out of the local newspaper and told me to memorise the lines. Maybe he's worried that mother is having a bad influence on me.

I stoop to pick up some loose stones at the side of the road. Others are doing the same. Father tells me to stay close. This is really embarrassing. I can't believe he's treating me like a stupid kid. If the other men are happy to let their sons stick together, why can't he just let me be with my friends?

Things quickly hot up. Mr Katz grins as Arab women and children rush around us, trying to escape indoors. He hurls a stone which strikes an old women on the back of the head; she tumbles forward onto the road. The sound of breaking glass mingles with yells and screams as I throw my stones at a second-floor window. I hear Gad whooping in delight as he trips a terrified boy and boots him hard in the ribs. He doesn't look more than twelve years old. Father has vanished and I fight my way through the throng, eager to rejoin my friends.

At that moment, a crowd of yelling Arabs arrives. Just as I reach Gad, a bottle bounces off his shoulder and shatters on the ground. He grimaces in pain. Mr Katz rushes up firing his gun in the air. He suddenly levels it at an old man struggling to pull down a metal grid over his shop window. It barks once, twice and the Arab slumps forward onto the dirty iron slats.

Father is back, his face twisted in fear or fury, I'm not sure which. Bullets whine and ricochet among the buildings. Within seconds the street is almost deserted. I hear the wail of an approaching siren. A few metres away the old woman, felled by Mr Katz, is crawling sideways like an injured crab. The excitement has evaporated and more than anything I feel ashamed of what we've done here. I can't help thinking about the elderly shopkeeper sprawled in a puddle of his own blood, and the other casualties lying around me. I wonder if anyone will die before help arrives. Gad smiles through the pain in his shoulder.

"It'll be a while before they make trouble for us again. They had it coming."

Trouble is I'm finding it hard to visualise those who were injured as anything other than innocent victims.

Luckily, when we arrive home mother is out. Although I'm not hurt, my legs won't stop shaking. I strip off and take a shower. The water, swirling around my feet, is filthy. I hear the whir of the washing machine next door as father rinses away evidence of the street battle. It reminds me how strained things have become of late. I can't help wondering what life must be like in the Katz household where Gad's mother agrees with everything her husband says and does.

As I switch off the taps and step out of the shower, I think about Gad's latest 'war wound'. It was bad enough when he was bruised in a street fight last year, but this injury will make him stronger than ever. He has the knack of avoiding real damage while plugging his role as martyr for all it's worth. The funny thing is I wouldn't trade places with him. He struggles so hard to stay on top – to be the leader – that he's never able to let his guard down for a second. Maybe in that way he's like "Mohammed". I try to imagine his reaction if I was ever to make such a comparison to his face.

When I come out of the bathroom, cleaned up and feeling a little more normal, father calls me through to the lounge. He is sitting in his favourite armchair looking extremely serious.

"Samuel, we need to talk."

His behaviour is unusual enough to make me feel nervous. Maybe he's embarrassed about his behaviour earlier on today and needs to justify himself in my eyes. It won't be the first time.

"I asked you to stay beside me today, and what did you do? You ran off with your friends as soon as my back was turned. That is not what I expect when I give you an order."

I'm not sure what he's up to but I feel a slow throb of anger start to build.

"You disappeared. I couldn't see you anywhere, so I thought it would be safer to be with my friends."

The explanation doesn't help. Maybe he thinks I'm criticising him. He stares at me for a moment as if waiting for an apology. I don't see why I should back down – it's not my fault he vanished at the crucial moment.

"Nevertheless, Samuel, you disobeyed me."

Perhaps it's his high-handed tone or the pent-up emotions of the day. Before I can stop myself, words tumble out.

"Mr Katz doesn't treat Gad like a kid and he doesn't run off when things get tough either."

Quick as a flash he grabs me by the front of my tee shirt and slaps me hard over the face. Using physical punishment as a means of discipline shatters my illusion of adulthood and slices through my self-control. I wrench away and lash out with my right fist, catching him square on the nose. The gush of blood satisfies something deep inside while shocking me to the core.

Looking round I see mother framed in the doorway. She looks utterly horrified. Father sinks onto the floor moaning and clasping his face between both hands. The enormity of what I've done breaks over me like a huge wave. I lean down, wanting to help him, but he pushes me away, rises unsteadily to his feet and stumbles out of the room. Stepping aside, mother lets him pass and stares at me in disbelief. Then she follows him out, leaving me alone.

I feel physically sick. Our rabbi teaches that violence committed against a fellow-Jew is the most heinous of sins, unless the victim has consciously betrayed his people. I shudder to think how he would react to the sin of a son striking his own father. I feel tears trickling down my face. Once this gets out I'll be treated as an outcast – nobody will understand. I feel confused and frightened. How could I have lost control so easily, and lashed out so hard? What would grandfather think of me? Family

meant so much to him. He would be appalled by such an outrage, despite his coldness towards father.

I hear mother's voice next door. Although I can't make out the words, her tone is harsh. She's probably trying to find out what happened while helping father clean himself up. He is saying nothing. Should I go and beg his forgiveness? I decide that would do more harm than good. Mother returns and stares at me again without speaking. My discomfort grows under her steady gaze. Finally, she breaks the silence.

"I never thought I'd ever witness a son of mine strike his own father. Your grandfather used to say that violence begets violence. It seems that the only way you can react these days is to lash out first and ask questions later. Is that how you were brought up to behave?"

"I'm sorry. I only wanted to… ."

"Only wanted to what? Teach your father a lesson he would never forget? Is that what things have come to in this family?"

"I didn't mean to… ."

"Don't insult me with your half-baked excuses, Sam. There can be no justification for what you did."

I bow my head. I know well enough that there is nothing I can say or do to make things better.

After a long pause, she continues, this time speaking a little less harshly.

"Try to understand why you would do such a thing. Has hitting your father made you feel any better?"

The answer is clear. I feel ready to listen to what she has to say, but, at that moment, father reappears. I want the ground to open and swallow me up. He is pressing a bag of ice against his face, and, to my amazement,

smiling through his pain. He pats me on the shoulder with his free hand.

"I'm sorry I slapped you, Sam. I can offer you no excuse for that. And, I'm sorry I embarrassed you in front of your friends this morning. I've been treating you like a child and I have paid the price for my stupidity." I gaze at him in disbelief. I thought that he would never speak to me again, but instead he's actually apologising. I rise and hug him tightly. He laughs and thumps me playfully on the back. "Where did you get such a right hook?"

It sounds as though he's proud of me. Instead of despair, I now feel as if I have stumbled through some kind of initiation test. The door bangs loudly as mother leaves. She must be disgusted by what is happening, but I only feel an overwhelming sense of relief. Father glances round for a moment.

"Don't worry about her! Women can never really understand the bond between father and son. But how am I going to explain this?" Father suddenly looks woeful and points to his swollen face. My guilt returns in a rush.

"I'm, I'm not sure."

He laughs again. "Don't worry – that's easy. I'll say I got in the way of an Arab fist and Mr Katz will be mad it wasn't him. You know what he's like, always trying to be the biggest martyr for the cause."

I nod.

"Gad's the same – always trying to keep one step ahead of the rest of us."

I can hardly believe we're having this conversation. Father has never ever criticised any of his friends in front of me – especially Mr Katz – and I would never normally

dream of putting down Gad in front of him. This is something entirely new between us.

"I'm really sorry that I… ."

"I don't want to hear another word about it. What's done is done!" How could I ever have thought badly of him? Not only has he spared me terrible humiliation, he's actually showing new respect by speaking to me adult-to-adult. "Now, let's get out of here and show off my war wound. Do you think we can convince people that I was beaten up by an Arab mob?"

"You don't look that bad." I laugh guiltily. "Let's stick to something they're likely to believe."

"You're right. We'll work out the details on the way."

I pull on my jumper, briefly wondering what mother was going to say before father's dramatic entrance, and before relief blotted everything else out of my mind. His arm is around my shoulder and the icepack has been discarded. He proudly displays his new proof of Arab hostility to the world.

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Two days later, Mr Katz calls round at the house. I hear father talking to him in the lounge. Their raised voices and whoops of laughter spark off my curiosity. The outside door slams shut and father comes into the room.

"Look at this, Sam!" He throws a cutting from a newspaper onto the bed. Unable to contain himself, he picks it up and thrusts it into my hands. "Read it! This is what we were hoping for –it's why we'll get rid of all these Arab scum in the end."

I smooth out the crumpled sheet.

"Seven hurt in Hebron shooting incident

Three Kiryat Arba residents were injured in a clash with a mob of Hebron Arabs yesterday afternoon.

A group of Jewish families, members of the Committee for Safety on the Roads, were passing through the dangerous Harat a-Sheikh district of Hebron when they were set upon by several hundred Arabs, and pelted with rocks and bottles from rooftops and alleys.

A woman and two children were injured.

To escape the unprovoked attack, the settlers fired in the air, and when that had no effect, they fired at the legs of the rock-throwers.

Last night, four wounded Arabs were brought to Mokassad Hospital in East Jerusalem. One, the hospital reported, was in a critical condition with bullet wounds in the back. Another was seriously wounded in the head and chest, and a third lightly wounded in the leg.

The IDF relayed a report on the incident to the Hebron police, who have opened an investigation.

The Committee for Safety on the Roads said it would continue to patrol Arab neighbourhoods, which Jews have previously preferred not to enter, until attacks on innocent people ceased."

I look up. Father's eyes are burning into me.

"People will see us as heroes fighting to protect our community. That bit about the two children and the woman being injured is excellent, although Gad won't like being called a child, I imagine."

I really want to share his enthusiasm but find it hard to feel joyful about a pack of lies being passed off by

The Jerusalem Post as fact. I know it's what we wanted but I can't help thinking about the man shot in the back – no doubt the victim of Mr Katz's shooting frenzy. And, as for the injured Jewish woman, there were none there – the only injured women in the skirmish were Arab women; and the only real children in the firing line were Arab children. I know the danger of thinking this way, but I just can't help myself. I force a smile for father's benefit.

"It's a good story."

"I can't wait to see people's faces when they read it. I'm off to see Mr Dayane. Do you want to come?"

"No. I've got some homework to finish off."

"Quite right. I'll see you later on then. Keep up the good work!"

He snatches the cutting and dashes out of the room. I feel sorry about lying to him but I really don't feel like celebrating.

Mother comes in from the garden, trowel in hand.

"What's going on?" She stares at my glum face for a moment. "No, don't tell me, I don't want to know."

I can't explain what's happening to me right now. Some days I'm up for the fight, other days I feel guilty about what we are doing. When we were walking around showing off father's black eye, I felt proud. For once we were the centre of attention – heroes of the hour. Gad and his father seemed particularly impressed. A part of father, shrunken by past failures, blossomed in the warm glow of their approval. At last he was the person he most wanted to be. Later, though, after all the excitement had died down, the significance of the lie grew in my mind.

I felt like the world's biggest fraud. The fact that father was exhibiting his bruised face, the result of my shameful blow, while our victims were lying in hospital, felt awful. What would grandfather have made of it all? His sympathies, I'm sure, would have been with those we attacked – his contempt for our lies and brutality absolute.

But, of course, we are a people set apart and our enemies are in league with evil powers. I hear this said over and over again. Grandfather always rejected such ideas. Maybe the fact that he shunned the synagogue accounted for his lack of faith. I know that's what father thinks, even if he never actually says so. Few dare to criticise Shoah survivors, especially those who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto. Here in Israel, such people are regarded as heroes and righteous Jews.

I really want to believe but maybe it's what grandfather went through – things father, Mr Katz and the rest of them could never begin to imagine – that makes me hold back. Or maybe it's because he wanted nothing to do with our cause, and never stopped condemning what he regarded as racist outrages in Judea and Samaria. I should probably find out more about his past. I've forgotten so much of what he told me. I remember bits from his 'ghetto' stories, but that's about it really. Mother is the only person who can help me put all of the pieces together.