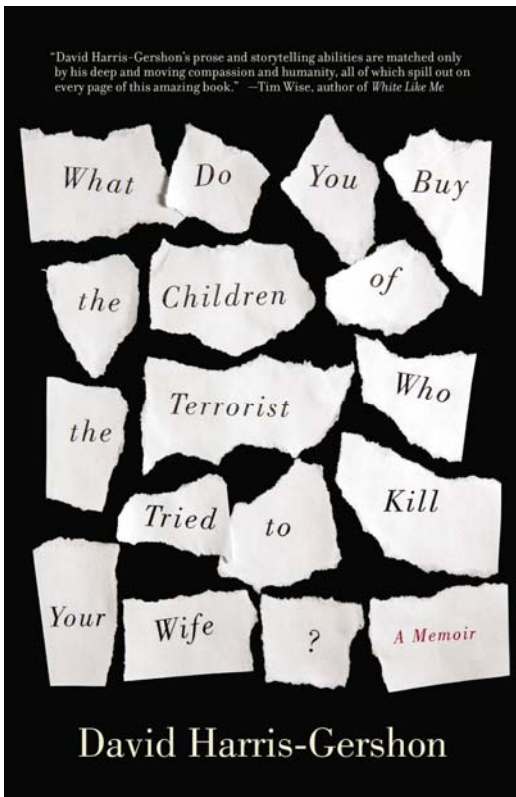


## How to Befriend a Terrorist

by Oren Kessler



**What Do You Buy the Children of the Terrorist Who Tried to Kill Your Wife? A Memoir. By David Harris-Gershon. Oneworld Publications, 2013. 288 pp. \$11.88, paper.**

Death's abrupt intrusion into life is the focus of Harris-Gershon's elaborately titled 2013 debut, *What Do You Buy the Children of the Terrorist Who Tried to Kill Your Wife?* In 2002, the author (who now lives in Pittsburgh) moved to Jerusalem with

Jamie, his wife of three years, for graduate studies. While Jamie lunched with friends in the Hebrew University cafeteria, a bomb went off, slicing open her torso and leaving her with metal lodged in her organs. Two friends with whom she had been sitting were killed.

The author's wife experienced a painful—but thankfully, complete—recovery, and the couple returned to the quiet of suburban America. The author then reads in the news that the perpetrator—an East Jerusalemite acting on behalf of Hamas—has expressed regret at the loss of life he caused. Still traumatized by the attack, Harris-Gershon decides to return to Israel to track down the bomber—not out of revenge, he writes, but out of desperation to understand what happened. That quest forms the basis of the book.

The book is a deeply personal memoir of the author himself. Regrettably, it is too personal. One cannot but sympathize with someone forced to watch a loved one suffer who has been literally ripped apart in an act of terror. And yet throughout this book, the victim—Harris-Gershon's wife—makes only brief appearances, a bit player in her husband's drama. The reader gets intermittent updates on her progress, interspersed between seemingly unending expositions on everything the author did, saw, thought and said, no matter how banal.

In the postscript, he offers an explanation for why he felt it was appropriate for him to write a book. Even then, the explanation is self-indulgent: “This book, at its core, wasn’t about the bombing. It was about the personal attempt to overcome the psychological horrors that haunted me after the attack,” he writes, magnanimously offering gratitude to “my wife, Jamie, who I want to thank for her uncommon support and strength throughout this entire process—a process which has not been easy for either of us.”

The excessive self-regard is even more irritating because accompanied by factual inaccuracies. The author cites the biblical story of Cain and Abel, for example, to illustrate how Jerusalem’s history has been bloodstained from the very beginning—never mind that the Bible says the siblings lived outside the Garden of Eden, in Babylonia (the accompanying endnote renders the relevant Hebrew text backwards, from left to right).

He refers to an Arab village near Hebrew University named “Issiva” (it is Issawiya) and to the Tayelet promenade as being in “north Jerusalem” although it is actually in the city’s southern outskirts. At a toy store, he recalls seeing “semi-automatic squirt guns sporting Hebrew stickers that read *B’chaniah*. On sale.” This is likely intended as a telling anecdote on the violence suffusing Israeli society, but as elsewhere in this account, the author has gotten it wrong. *B’chaniah* means “in parking.”

Regrettably, the author is not particularly adroit with the English language either. Having returned stateside, he rediscovers the joys of writing, a process he describes as “shoving the funnel down my throat and pouring in everything that would

**Harris-Gershon’s revisionist account of history misleads the reader.**

slide down, excited to find out what would come back up to find life on the page.”

It is stunning that no editor at Oneworld—a legitimate publisher with some serious Mideast offerings—thought to unmix that metaphor or to suggest a more appealing image of the writing process than one of force-feeding and regurgitation, followed by an inspection of the spewed-up cud.

Worse still, the author’s revisionist account of history misleads. In his telling of the second *intifada*, Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas’ Fatah faction strives—with considerable success—to convince the Islamists of Hamas to end terrorism “not solely out of a concern for Israeli civilians” but because it harms the Palestinian case for independence. But then, in 2002, Israel assassinates Hamas terror chief Salah Shehade, and in the author’s words, “revenge was reclaimed” and “pacifism was dead.”

That the words “pacifism” and “Hamas” should appear in remote proximity stretches credulity. But more than that, absent from this narrative is the lead role Fatah’s own al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades played attacking hundreds of innocent Israelis. Absent too is the incessant terrorist glorification in the PA’s own media and schools—whether the victims are soldiers or civilians like Harris-Gershon’s wife—which continues undiminished today.

In an apparent nod to skeptics, the writer concedes that there indeed may be a “murderous element woven into the outer fringes” of the Palestinians’ social fabric. The trope of “fringe” support for terrorism in the Arab and Muslim worlds is by now familiar, generally uttered in the same breath as assurances that poverty leads to

extremism—and similarly undermined by the available evidence.

A cursory familiarity with Palestinian society and its discourse reveals the argument to be false: Palestinian television, newspapers, public figures—whether Fatah or Hamas—and even music celebrate violence with remarkable consistency. In July 2014, a massive Pew survey of the world’s Muslims asked whether suicide bombings against civilians are permissible in defense of Islam. Even when narrowed to a religious question, 46 percent of Palestinians said it was—higher than any other Muslim people worldwide, save for Bangladesh.<sup>1</sup> “Outer fringes” these are not.

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the bomber, despite his supposed remorse, at no point agrees to meet with Harris-Gershon. Still, the author is determined not to let reality interfere with the narrative arc—he arranges a meeting with the bomber’s family.

After fretting about whether and what to bring the killer’s children—and astoundingly, about what to wear—he travels to their home in the East Jerusalem village of Silwan. Relatives reaffirm the bomber’s regret over the attack (but fail to explain his refusal to meet), and Harris-Gershon drops in some bromides about peace. He does not reveal how long the meeting lasts, but from the short, 5-page description it gets, the reader is left to presume its duration was roughly that of a few cups of tea.

For Harris-Gershon, the objective has been met. “These people were now my friends,”

he concludes, jaw-droppingly. “Reconciliation. It had happened,” he adds, blithely ignoring the bomber’s refusal to meet him. “And in happening, had impressed upon me the force of restorative dialogue.”

The “About the Author” section describes him as a “popular online blogger” for *Tikkun* and *Daily Kos*—the latter, it helpfully adds, is “the most widely read progressive politics website globally.” Indeed, this book is useful primarily as a warning against the infinitely adjustable moral compass of progressivism run amok and of the solipsistic illusion that one’s own experience holds in it an epic human drama in miniature. Finally, it epitomizes the lamentable modern habit of enlisting one’s tormentors in the search for “inner peace.”

What do you bring the children of the terrorist who tried to kill your wife? The answer is tantamount to the value of this book: Nothing.

**Oren Kessler** is a Middle East research fellow for the Henry Jackson Society, a London-based think tank. He was formerly Middle East affairs correspondent for *The Jerusalem Post* and a staff writer for *Haaretz*, English edition.



---

<sup>1</sup> [“Concerns about Islamic Extremism on the Rise in Middle East,”](#) Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C., July 1, 2014.