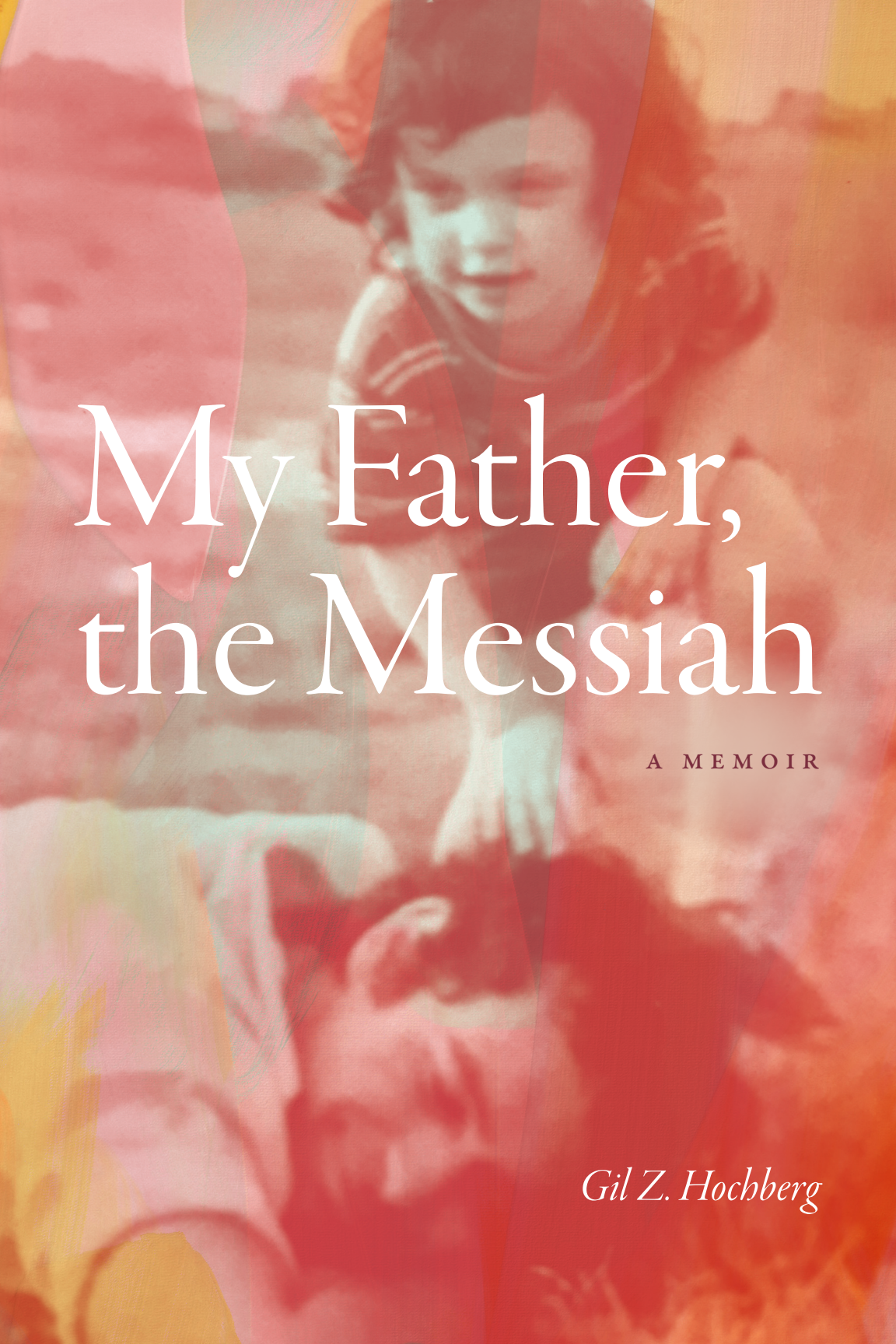




My Father, the Messiah

A MEMOIR

Gil Z. Hochberg

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A M E M O I R

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My father's face. Dark complexion, long sideburns, meaty lips. When my father smiles, his whole face lights up. His deep brown eyes shine and his mouth opens wide. Over the years, as he got older and sicker, his face became puffy and his skin flaky and pale. He lost his smile and his eyes turned vacant.

My father had two faces. The lively gleeful face of his youth and the drained face of the second part of his life. The former shined and glittered; the latter I'd rather forget but cannot.

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Prologue

I have become my father's archivist. He has become the object of my writing. At times. But writing about him is also writing with him. This book is written between our bodies. Between identities, temporalities, memories, spaces, genders, and sexualities. Between the living and the dead. It is made of his writings and mine: his writings to me, his writings about writing, his writing about my writings, and my writings about his writing. Not mine. Nor his. He/I. His/Mine. We. Us. He. I. My memory, his. His body, mine?

Writing from this blurred space is an attempt to shake off the fixity of common narratives of loss, grief, mourning, and recovery. This book follows no arc of healing. It is an attempt to render the space of writing, as well as that of memory, mourning, and archiving, as a queer space. Which, as such, is just as messy at the end as in the beginning.

This is also a very Jewish text in the sense that it resists a linear perception of time and the idea of progress. "Judaism doesn't know the difference of time; what was then is now," I learned from my father. And, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, with the prohibition against "investigating the future," Jews are obliged to remember rather than think forward. And yet, as both Benjamin and my father knew well, this doesn't mean that the future is devoid of magic, because at any given moment the "Messiah might enter."¹

Playing with Dad. Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1972.

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2013

East Jerusalem

Bus Station

I was at the central bus station in East Jerusalem around noon, queuing for a minibus heading to Ramallah, when my father's wife called. Miriam never called me. We weren't close; we barely tolerated each other. So when I saw her name on the phone, I knew something must have happened. Still, I was just about to get on the minibus, and my sabbatical from UCLA was about to end, and I was running out of time, and I still had a lot of research to do, and I had a meeting to attend. I needed to get on that bus.

It was extremely hot for late April. It felt like mid-August. I was burning in my white, long-sleeved, button-down shirt that I wore so I'd look professional when I met the professor I'd been trying to get ahold of for months. Jerusalem's dry air felt like an open oven. It hurt to inhale.

I have to get on this bus, I told myself. But the phone kept ringing. I knew I had to pick up. My mind was racing. *I can't miss this ride. I can't give up my place in the line. I've been standing here under this beating sun for almost an hour already. Why is she calling me?!*

Damn it. The ringing stopped and started right back. I had no choice. I picked up. "Gilly," Miriam's metallic voice was shaky, "Abba be-beit cholim, be-tipul nimrats" (Dad is in the hospital, in the ICU).

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"Gilly, are you there? Do you hear me?" Miriam's voice was so alarmed. I froze.

"You need to come now!"

I can't stand her voice, I thought, a second before I snapped back into reality.

"Ken, okay, ken," I responded nervously, at once aware of the fact that I was speaking Hebrew in the middle of a long line of Palestinian passengers in East Jerusalem. Self-aware and uncomfortable, I told Miriam, "I can't hear you well. I'll call right back."

I left the line and moved through the crowd, looking for a quiet place and some shade. My heart was racing, a combination of the heat and the news I'd just received. I found a naked tree that gave an illusion of shade behind the central area, where all the minibuses were parked, and called Miriam. "I'm in Jerusalem. What happened?"

"Leave!" she shouted. "Come to Ichilov, now!" Her authoritative tone shocked me. I've never heard it before. *Ichilov* . . .

"Dad is in the hospital" were words I was used to hearing from her. But I would mostly hear them from afar. I'd been living in California for over twenty years, so visiting Ichilov, Tel Aviv's central hospital, was not an option. This time I was around. Close enough. Still, I was in East Jerusalem where I was spending my sabbatical, doing research for a book about the visual politics of the Israeli occupation. While only an hour drive away from Tel Aviv, these two cities are worlds apart. The transition required serious mental preparation. So, when Miriam said, "Come now!" I initially got confused. It didn't seem possible. It took me a couple more minutes to realize that I had no choice. I had to move into action.

I put the phone in my backpack and then looked around at the busy streets and the minibuses. I knew I had to make my way from East Jerusalem to the west side of the city, but I suddenly lost my sense of direction. Partly it was the heat, but mostly it was the dread that filled me each time I had to navigate between the two divisions of this torn-apart and artificially glued-together city infested with police and armed border control. The schism between the transition from Arabic to Hebrew and from a reality marked by visible military occupation to a reality thriving in its concealment was the topic of my book in progress. Still, it was much easier to write about it than to move through it.²

Robotically I got into a taxi, making my way out of the crowded bus station in the East to the central bus station in the West. Within fifteen minutes, my physical reality changed radically. Once at the new station, I got into a large,

new, air-conditioned bus with velvety blue seats. Quite different from the small, old, overheated, and overcrowded minibuses that took Palestinian passengers from East Jerusalem into the West Bank. I was tired. I felt something akin to nothing. A nothingness that filled my chest with a very unpleasant feeling. The seat next to me was empty, so I placed my backpack on it and closed my eyes. An hour later I woke up in Tel Aviv.

2013

Tel Aviv

Modern Death

My father wasn't a healthy man. By sixty, he'd already had two heart attacks and several strokes. He suffered from internal bleeding caused by years of overdosing on steroids, chronic back pain, colitis, high blood pressure, and an irregular heart-beat. This in addition to his bipolar disorder and the psychotic episodes that led to living through three suicide attempts. Hospitals were not foreign to him, or to me. I hated visiting him in my early twenties. When he wasn't in urgent care, he was in psychiatric wards. Now, fatigued, I made my way to the fourth floor of Ichilov—Internal Med, Urgent Care. I had visited him here before. I knew the routine: wash hands; put on facial mask, gown, latex gloves; sign in; and enter the quarantine room. I also knew what to expect. I knew I'd find him puffy, unconscious, and immobile, connected to machines that kept him alive. I knew I would find Miriam sitting by his side, holding his hand, her eyes distraught.

The ICU is a place of waiting. There is not much to do there but wait. Waiting to see on what side the patient who is between life and death would end. For the next two weeks, this was what Miriam and I did. We waited. We took turns. Sometimes sitting in his room, sometimes in the visitors' waiting area. Waiting has its own pace, its own temporality. Two weeks of waiting in the hospital can feel like a year, even two. But sometimes it can also feel like a single day. Waiting stretches and shrinks linear time, making it irrelevant. Along the way, it devours everything else. Time stops. Thinking stops. Feelings stop. Waiting.

Sitting by my dad's bed meant following the perfectly rhythmized movement of his chest, up and down, as if dancing to the sounds of the ventilator. I spent

Notes

1. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 259.
2. Following the 1948 war, Jerusalem was divided: The western part came under Israel’s rule and East Jerusalem under Jordan’s control. After the 1967 war, Israel conquered East Jerusalem and the West Bank and declared the whole of the city—both western and eastern parts—as its capital. The international community has generally never recognized Israeli sovereignty over East Jerusalem. In 2017, President Donald Trump announced US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and moved the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Only a handful of nations in the United Nations voted along with the United States and similarly moved their embassies to Jerusalem—among them: Guatemala, Honduras, and Kosovo. In July 2024, the United Nations’ top court (the International Court of Justice) declared that Israel’s presence in East Jerusalem is illegal. Also see Hochberg, “This City That Isn’t One.”
3. *Sepsis* derives from the Greek word *σῆψις* meaning “decay” or “decomposition.” See Vincent, “Evolution of the Concept of Sepsis”; Funk, Parrillo, and Kumar, “Sepsis and Septic Shock.”
4. Erlichman, *Odes to Lithium*, 41. The source passage reads: “Yellow, slutty tree, oh cerebellum, oh lithium, do your job.”
5. Lowe, “Lithium, Love and Losing.”
6. Jamison, *An Unquiet Mind*, 258.
7. Moses ben Maimon (1135–1204—commonly known as Maimonides and also referred to by the Hebrew *Rambam* (רמב"ם), the acronym for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, was a rabbi and philosopher who remains the best-known Jewish writer and thinker of the Middle Ages, if not of all time.
8. Grand Rabbi Gershon Chanoch Henech Leiner of Radzyn (1839–December 15, 1890) was known for his research on the restoration of the original blue color of the