Fantastic Key Encounters during the Six-Day War

Yiftah Levin

1 Introduction

This article examines stories centered around the event of transferring keys. These narrated images arose in the course of our interviews with Jewish-Israelis when referring to the most elated moments of the 1967 Six-Day War. Upon rereading stories dealing with keys in the various interviews, I drew a broad range of connections related to the worldviews and experiences of the interviewees within the context of the war and its consequences. The key, as a substantive and metaphoric object, became a multifaceted symbol in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the city of Jerusalem and its environs. Naturally, the key has practical importance; however, and more importantly, it holds meanings of control, ownership, transfer of property, and serves as a symbol of the memory of home and property left behind by Palestinian refugees. The centrality of the key within the Palestinian context is beyond the scope of the present article (Sa’di & Abu-Lughod 2007; Webster 2016). This article concentrates on stories relating scenes occurring during the war, in which Arab1 civilians transferred keys to some of the most important religio-historical sites to Jewish soldiers, in particular the keys to Rachel’s Tomb and the Mughrabi Gate, which

1 The tags Arab and Palestinians used by Israelis are controversial in the internal Israeli discourse and are politically charged, as each holds territorial, cultural and national meanings (Rabinowitz 1993). The use of both terms in this chapter, therefore, will change according to the context of the argument.
links between the Western Wall and the Temple Mount. The various stories will be analyzed against the specific worldviews and experiences of the interviewees.

The Western Wall, a remnant of the Temple in Jerusalem, and Rachel’s Tomb near Bethlehem, the tomb of a sacred female figure who served as a metaphor for the concept of God returning the people of Israel from exile, both symbolize the sense of yearning for a return to Jerusalem and the Holy Land. However, a discussion of these events is not only important due to these sites’ roles symbolizing the desire to return to the land of the Bible which could not be accessed after the 1948 war. Those stories focus on Jewish-Israeli meetings with Palestinian-Arabs who lived from 1948–1967 under Jordanian rule. Those encounters share similar structure and narrative roles. They are narrated by the key recipients and echoed by others, including the media, and relate events that occurred on the third day of the war while arriving at the sacred sites. I ask how the stories of key transfer encounters shaped formative events of encountering both holy places and the Palestinian Arab Other?

I argue that a discussion about key transfer events within the wider context of the war, and in light of its results, contribute to the understanding of the relationship that emerged between Jews and Palestinians as respective rulers and subjects who emerged during the war. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to shed light on those stories from a Jewish-Israeli narrative perspective. In this view, the key transfer is narrated as both cultural and intergenerational, as a mode of justifying the rule over the holy sites. The events narrated occurred within the context of combat. Most of the interviewees are soldiers, who define themselves as national religious Jews.

As the various chapters in this book show, the results of the war were of immense significance to all population sectors of Israel and Palestine. However, the national religious public attributed meanings to the events not necessarily shared by other sectors. For them, the implications of the war relate to a grand divine plan whose fulfillment was manifested partially with the reunion with biblical sites, among them the Western Wall and Rachel’s Tomb.

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2 There are also stories relating to the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron and Torat Haim synagogue in the Muslim quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, that will be discussed in future publications.
3 Please refer to the list of interviews at the end of the chapter for the names or abbreviations used for each interviewee.
4 See the contribution on the Western Wall by Hagar Salamon and the contribution on Hebron and the Cave of the Patriarchs by Ronit Hemyan in this volume.
5 The Jerusalem Brigade: Yohanan Fried * (Battalion 62), Rafi Miara (Deputy Company Commander, Battalion 62), I.K. (Patrol Brigade), R.B. (Company Commander, Battalion 161), N.M. (Battalion 161), I.E. (Company Commander, Battalion 161); Paratrooper Brigade: Yoram Zamush (Company Commander, Battalion 71), M.M. (Yoram’s Signal Operator), Avraham (Yoram’s Runner); Civilians: S., S.S., L.D., and T.G. * The names of Yoram, Rafi and Yohanan are fully disclosed because their stories have been documented in this context through various media which I quote in this article. The other interviewees are mentioned only by their initials.
6 An example of this can be seen through the “Combatants’ Discussion” project (Alberton et al. 2018), which dealt with the feelings of soldiers returning from the war. It included a conversation with some of those interviewed for the present project. These conversations were archived until the publication of the jubilee version of the book.
Over 50 years after the war, the interviewees who play central roles in the key transfer encounters, now in their 70s and 80s, present their stories following predictable narrative structures, even though they ended in often unexpected ways, and contradict other narrated versions.

2 Analytical Tools

In this article, I use analytical tools based on two branches of research in folk literature. The construction of the war story as an epic tale (Propp 1968) and Todorov’s (1981) approach to fantastic literature as a genre for understanding the key transfer encounters.

I propose, therefore, reading the stories presented and the events they treat as fantastic (Todorov, 1981). Todorov’s characterization of the fantastic has similarities to the events described by the interviewees. Using the concept of the fantastic in no way diminishes the dire consequences of the war, particularly the pain felt by the Palestinians. Instead, the use of fantastic characteristics is a metaphorical approach to understand events from the narrators’ perspective. As the stories contain war events narrated by different participants in disparate ways, they require interpretations that remove them from realistic descriptions of the war and imbue these narratives with fantastic elements. Hence, we are faced with the task of understanding the narratives not as historical events, but as cultural, and perhaps even cosmological events, whose interpretations are influenced by Jewish traditions from various periods within the context of the folklore of the Six-Day War.

Removing the narration of key encounters from the flow of a personal interview, I also employ components of a formalist approach to the study of folk literature which focuses on the connection between the various characters and their actions. It allows one to clearly recognize the formal structure and organization of the plot (Propp & Liberman 1984: 67–81). Propp (1968) analyzed “wondertales,” illustrating that the characters are exchangeable or malleable elements of the story, while their actions may be abstracted as stable functions, necessary to advance the narrative in a predictable manner. The key transfer encounter stories illustrate that the narrators, some fifty years after the events, construct their personal narratives by referring, surprisingly, to most of the narrative roles that Propp identified in his “wondertale” analysis. The roles noted by Propp are: the hero, the villain (the rival of the hero), the donor who provides the hero with a magical agent, the helper who helps the hero during his/her mission, the false hero who claims to have completed the hero’s mission, the dispatcher who sends the hero on his/her mission, and the princess and her father7 (Propp 1968: 79–80).

7 It is worthwhile noting that there are some variations regarding the hero’s identity. While certain narrators refer to all seven of Propp’s roles, others neglect some of them. In addition, some roles are fully physically manifested, while others are referred to implicitly or metaphorically.
3 The Tale

According to Todorov (1981), the fantastic story portrays events that cannot be explained through the laws of nature. The fantastic depicts the misgivings and uncertainties of a person facing two possibilities: the first is the determination that an event is a sensory illusion, the product of the imagination, and the laws of nature continue; the second is the determination that the occurrence did, in fact, take place and must, therefore, be explained by other, previously unknown laws. The chain of events related in the personal stories focused on in this article are characterized by uncertainty, beginning with the “waiting period”8 leading up to the war, a period defined by an atmosphere of a growing and real existential threat. The quick and sweeping victory with its dramatic changes in the region was generally characterized by a feeling of euphoria. How can the contrast between these two extremes be explained? According to Todorov, the movement towards the fantastic gradually begins from uncertainty, becoming clearer and more direct as all the elements contribute to the effect that appears at the end (Todorov 1981: 63). According to the interviewees, explanations were given through signs, which place a fantastic chain of events within a structure, which, unlike Todorov’s approach, is not part of a duality but is, instead, based on faith in Divine Providence, reinforced by the events. The interviewees characterize events that occurred before and during the war as signs hinting to the future. Nikiforov, who preceded Propp, cites the hero’s miraculous birth as the first function of the tale (Jason 1971: 62). Yoram, the hero of the key transfer encounter of the Mughrabi gate, cites his own birth as a sign of the future 25 years later:

I was born on June 7, 1942. One of Kibbutz Yavne’s first babies […] and I am the son of a father who was the only member of his family who survived Berlin […] My grandfather had a business with two brothers in Berlin[…] and on Kristallnacht, the Nazis blew it all up, burned it […] grabbed him, the Nazis beat him almost to death […] and he survived but was blinded […] they were expelled from the Lodz ghetto […] and 19 family members were killed on the same day I was born. June 7, 1942. Now, exactly 25 years later, coincidentally, on June 7, 1967, I waved the flag on the Western Wall. This is somehow hidden in the story of the Jewish people. (Yoram)

The greatest tragedy and the war’s victory are mediated by Yoram’s life story, they are entwined in his birth and function in the war. The miraculous birth designates the hero’s function in the tale, the ‘coincidence’ interweaving the events, are all revealed to be crucial components in our heroes’ manner of constructing their tales’ plots.

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8 The name that was given in Israel to the period between Independence Day, May 15, 1967, and the beginning of the war, June 5, 1967.
The sermon delivered by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda HaCohen Kook (RZYHC) on the eve of Independence Day, May 14, 1967, shortly before the Six-Day War, at the Rabbi’s Center Yeshiva in Jerusalem serves as the first sign. Some of the soldiers involved in combat in the war, who were studying at the time at that Yeshiva, attended the sermon, or heard about it afterwards.

On Independence Day at the Rabbi’s Center, we had a custom, in which all the students would gather for a feast of giving thanks to God for the liberation of the Land of Israel, the establishment of the State of Israel [...] That same year, on Independence Day, call it a coincidence, but we think it’s more than a coincidence. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda [...] told us that on the 29 of November [1947] [...] great joy erupted in the streets of Jerusalem [...] “and we met [RZYHC and Rabbi Charlap], the two of us together in a small room, we expressed great joy, but also great sorrow. Great sorrow due to the impending partition of half of the country, my country would be divided” [...] He had such a way of speaking, that he would sometimes jump very loudly, almost shouting. “And what do you think, that we have forgotten Jericho?” All this, according to the partition, would be given to the Jordanians and the Arabs. “What do you think, we have forgotten Jericho? We have forgotten Shechem? We have not forgotten! And beyond the Jordan River?” That’s how he shouted that roar, it impressed everyone [...] and two weeks or three weeks after Independence Day, actually a month later, all these places were conquered by us. So, it made a big impression on us. (I.K.) (see Appendix 1)

The second sign, described in greater detail, relates to the song Jerusalem of Gold written by Naomi Shemer and sung by Shuli Natan at the Hebrew Song festival in Jerusalem the next day, at the end of Independence Day (Appendix 2). The interviewees note that the song was sung by them or in their presence during the war.

Here, I.K. describes Yohanan, who is the hero of the Rachel’s Tomb encounter, singing the song:

The next day we came to study at the yeshiva [...] The nature of the study is that during the course of learning, we break into song [...] to stimulate thought [...] But Hebrew songs we would not dare to sing, they were considered profane [...] Then Yohanan entered one of the doors and suddenly, he sang Jerusalem of Gold. So, he sings a secular song and I think, “What’s with him?” He said, “You heard that song yesterday?” I said, “Of course.” He said, “It captured the heart.” And that was true, it captured the heart. I sang it too, and the truth is we all sang it. So, this too expresses the will of God [...] this detail too has its place. (I.K.)

9 The Rabbi’s Center Yeshiva was established by his father, Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook, and served as a connection between Jewish messianism and political Zionism (Aran 2013).
The interviewees, each in their own words, provide a singular interpretation of these two events. Despite their proclaimed caution at invoking prophecy, they note in retrospect that these significant occurrences hinted at events that happened soon afterwards. According to Propp’s (1968) narrative roles, the two symbol providers, RZYHC and Naomi Shemer, personified the dispatchers who send the heroes to their mission.

It is a coincidence, a coincidence, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda was no prophet, there are no prophets today [...] I believe that there is guidance from the heavens. I believe the Almighty is directing what is happening in the land [...] and I firmly believe this coincidence is no coincidence. It is a coincidence that, The Almighty, forgive me for the crude expression from a thinking perspective, but it is the truth, in my opinion, that a coincidence that is directed by the Almighty [...] we heard about these things and this approach every year. But this was surely exceptional. Because we noticed that it was unusual. But we didn’t attribute it to anything in this world, it was inappropriate to attribute it to anything. (I.K.)

Listen, to write such a prophecy, to write something like that, one or two weeks before the war [...] how do people get the muse? [...] She (Shemer) wrote it “and there isn’t descending to the Dead Sea,” but there is immediately, “descending to the Dead Sea via Jericho,” and everything became true. “We returned to the water holes,” we returned to everything. It’s a prophecy. (A.S.)

It was totally out of the blue. This is here [the sermon at the Rabbi’s Center] and Jerusalem of Gold are like two prophecies [...] I heard Yohanan tell how they arrived in Bethlehem and an Arab came out to greet them, running to greet them, and said, “Here is the key of your mother, Rachel’s Tomb.” (S.E.)

The day after Independence Day, the “waiting period” began with the mobilization of army reserves, when the villain (Propp 1968: 30–35), embodied by Egyptian President Abdel Nasser, leader of the Arab states, closed the Straits of Tiran. The threat to the regional stability provoked the uncertainty that characterizes the fantastic movement (Todorov 1981). This was felt among the civilians and especially among the soldiers. At this point, the heroes are called into action and must leave their homes (Propp 1968: 38–39) as the Jerusalem brigade is deployed in and around Jerusalem.

We were on Mt. Herzl [at the western edge of Jerusalem] for two weeks [...] as a “waiting period” involves waiting [...] nothing happened. The country
was in great confusion, also politically, Eshkol [the Prime Minister] then known for his stuttering.\(^1\) (Yohanan)

At one point, the guys said [...] Let’s get all the cars, let’s go to Eshkol [...] We’ll park the cars across from him and tell him that he must start the war, it is impossible to wait like this. Of course, it was a joke, but a joke that was said. (I.K.)

At the same time, the Paratroopers Brigade were training near Lod Airport, as the uncertainty increased due to the real threat to their lives if the war plans were to be realized.

The war was intended primarily for the Egyptian army [...] And we prepared for a very dangerous parachute descent, very, very dangerous. It was nearly a suicide operation [...] 50% casualties were expected. (Yoram)

There is the song “*Que sera sera.* Whatever will be will be. A black car will wait.” We talked, all those difficult jokes. [...] There were two backgrounds [for the parachute brigade’s pin]: some will have a red background, and some will have a black background, the mourning edition. We joked [...] it was clear that not everyone would survive. It was obvious, of course. (A.S.)

In dealing with the real threat to their lives, the heroes are called by Moshe Dayan for the first test of their ability to perform the mission (Propp 1968: 39–42), only four days after his appointment to defense minister. The war began on June 5 in the morning, as the uncertainty that has prevailed in recent weeks continued.

\(^1\) Many interviewees refer to Eshkol’s speech broadcast on the radio a week before the outbreak of the war (May 28, 1967), which reflected the fear and apprehension of the approaching war. Two days after, Eshkol appointed Dayan, former Chief of Staff, to the position of defense minister. The following is a recording of the speech on Voice of Israel radio: https://soundcloud.com/nationallibrary-of-israel/28-1967a (accessed November 9, 2021). “The response in the world to Dayan’s appointment: Israel’s position will be more rigid” Maariv, June 2, 1967. http://jpress.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI_heb/?action=tab&tab=browse&pub=MAR&_ga=2.192757034.1654236019.1567318688-1217283777.1567318684#panel=document (accessed November 9, 2021).
The officers arrived first, and the fantastic events began to transpire as they looked toward the Jordanian city. Yoram, the “hero of the story,” was anticipating his mission, while the battalion commander embodied the “helper (that will facilitate) the spatial transference of the hero” (Propp 1968: 79) to where he will complete his mission.\footnote{The interviews illustrate that the following conversation is not unique, and that the nature of the war dictated that there were discussions and negotiations at varying levels of command regarding who would do what and how.}

Over there we saw the Jordanians preparing and beginning to organize at Ammunition Hill, the Police Academy, Wadi Joz, etc., Augusta Victoria Hospital, Mt. Scopus. And we set a plan, more or less […] I asked for my mission from my battalion commander, to be the commander on the front. I was
meant to be the leading front commander, to be the first to break through to the Old City and to the Temple Mount. I requested, I bothered, and he promised me. (Yoram)

The rest of the soldiers then departed towards Jerusalem, singing Jerusalem of Gold, the song which quickly became part of the war’s folklore, blurring the distinction between secular and sanctity.

On the way, we were singing, what else, but Jerusalem of Gold [...] We are ascending to Jerusalem, on the one hand, frustrated by the thought that we are meant to be a defensive force rather than an attack force, as they taught us. And, you know, we are singing songs of Jerusalem [...] “Judah will be inhabited forever” and “From the summit of Mount Scopus” [...] and somebody is reading chapters of Psalms, one of the traditional, religious guys. (M.M.)

At night, the Paratroopers Brigade organized at the rear-side neighborhood of Beit Hakerem, where the sounds of explosions and the anxiety of citizens combined with fantastic events, whose signs, in retrospect, were beginning to become apparent.

Both Yoram and L.D., each in a separate interview, illustrate this duality as they narrate the night’s events.

There was absolute darkness. Like the plague in Egypt. Shelling, fires, sirens, not a soul around. Where is everyone? In the bomb shelters. (Yoram)

And I remember I told them again “whatever will be, will be. In the shelter I'm not sitting, I'm in my house, and whatever will be, will be” [...] I was just sitting here with scissors in hand, and I said, “That’s it, they are coming to murder me” and I’m with the scissors. But in the middle of the night, I went down anyway [...] here were a lot of our soldiers [...] and basically, they sat up all night and talked [...] and I think she [the neighbor] also gave them the flag, that they drew during the War of Independence. It was kept that way in the family [...] and I believe that flag was hung in the Old City when it was conquered. (L.D.)

In her description, L.D. emphasizes the gap between the existential fear that took hold of her in those moments, and the symbol of victory, the conquest of the Old City and the raising of the flag that was given to soldiers by her neighbor. Yoram and the other paratroopers were the soldiers in the bomb shelter that night. L.D., the civilian, like Avraham, the soldier, who was staying at this time outside her home, uses the same phrase, “Whatever will be, will be,” to express fear. Several interviewees recall their fear of “a second Holocaust,” as mass graves were dug in public parks in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv during the “waiting period”. Contrary to L.D., this same meeting is described by Yoram as the beginning of the mission and his role as the hero.
We were in their living room, down in the shelter […] This family was very excited to hear about the mission, to hear the commands, and see it on the map […] And then the grandmother came out, excited, with her cane, and returned with this flag from her apartment. She gave it to me, in tears, in tears, truthfully. “You should know that the entire Jewish people is pushing you with its fingers towards the Western Wall.” No kidding, with tears, truthfully. Exceptional excitement. She felt history taking place in her hands, in her fingers […] she gave us feelings of yearning of generations […] “It is not the entire Jewish people, it is all the generations of the Jewish people.” That’s how she corrected herself. All the generations of the Jewish people. From that moment, we were glued. (Yoram)

The description of this encounter completes the story of the hero’s birth and gives it an additional meaning as an essential element in the history of the Jewish people. This story weaves together personal and family history with national memories of the Holocaust and the symbol of the people’s longing for a mythical past – the Western Wall. As such, a third sign was revealed. While the earlier signs – the sermon at the Rabbi’s Center and the song Jerusalem of Gold – were presented before larger audiences, this time, the sign – the flag – was personally given to Yoram. The grandmother, forced to leave the Old City in 1948, transferred the flag to Yoram, the officer who will take his soldiers to the Old City and hang the flag over the Western Wall. Thus, the grandmother plays the role of the donor who provides the magical agent, the flag, that possesses a magical property (Propp 1968) that hints at future events. The hero is chosen to receive the magical object and, therefore, to take on a mission.

Another version of that scene is narrated by Landau, one of the soldiers that fought together with Yoram, who wrote about the events upon the war’s conclusion. His version varies from Yoram’s, although the basic elements of the fantastic, the hero, and the donor are still present.

The old woman’s request electrified the group […] Afterward, the company commander asked one of his commander’s permission to take and conceal the flag under his combat belt. “When we arrive at the Western Wall, I will raise it with my own hands above the holy rocks,” he promised the grandmother. Indeed, Zamush, the only religious company commander in the paratroopers’ division was specifically the one upon whom the plot of the flag being flown befell […] when he heard the story, the young officer trembled. When he was a small child, he had gone to pray at the Western Wall, and he now felt the deep meaning of the historical task that had been granted to him and his soldiers. From here onwards, it was not a normal combat task, but a

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12 “Old woman” and “grandmother” are both used to indicate the same character.
mission that had been given to them by the Jewish people. (Landau 1967b: 58–59).

The heroes of our tales were identified following the events by a few journalists that covered the war (Haber 1967; Landau 1967a), although it is said that they were recognized by those in their immediate surroundings beforehand. For both M.M. and Landau, Yoram was identified as a charismatic hero.

The old woman, she identified him […] He has an uplifting, impressive presence. If I were to walk into the room, and try to get into the grandmother’s shoes, I would turn to him. He is dominant and has a charismatic character. He has a presence. (M.M.)

Yoram’s physical appearance allowed him to be identified as such, while the role of the hero was given to him due to his religiosity and was predestined by his previous connection to the mythical site. Therefore, as a charismatic hero he embodies the culture (Csordas 1990), a Jew that returns victorious to the site that symbolizes the yearning for Jerusalem. Furthermore, Yohanan will be identified as a hero by the very same cultural process.

In the story about the flag, a link is drawn between the ’48 and the ’67 wars, as the basis for the actualization of the mythological yearning for the Western Wall, through the experience of both civil women and men soldiers. A local journalist (Shot 2001) mentioned that the flag was bought in Tel Mond, a town in the coastal area, and did not originate from the Old City of Jerusalem. However, years later (Gil-Har 2008; Stein 2018), the tale’s heroes still appear on news items celebrating the ’67 anniversary commemorating the flag’s myth.

That night, the paratroopers’ battalion 71 passed through the City Line into the Jordanian city, and engaged in combat in the American Colony, Wadi Joz, up to the Rockefeller Museum adjacent to the Old City walls. Along this path, the fantastic chain of events became clearer as they approached the Old City and the Western Wall.

4 The Climax of the Fantasy

The pinnacle of the fantastic events is the encounter in which an Arab man hands over the key to the holy site to Israeli soldiers. The fantastic appears in various sources when meeting with the Other. However, beforehand, the fantastic is revealed through signs that create a certain order from previously sporadic events. Smith (1985, 27–32) and Todorov (1998, 28–32) describe the fantasy of Columbus “discovering” the Americas as an attempt to fit these discoveries into his worldview. This approach is applicable to the holy site “discovery” narratives. The signs envisaging the fantastic encounter with the holy sites are delivered on several levels: the song Jerusalem of Gold is given on the national level; RZYHC’s sermon is given to his disciples and published afterwards; the flag is given to Yoram and marks him as the
hero of the event. However, the fantastic is also the encounter with the Other. In essence, the encounter with the holy site is mediated through the encounter with the Other. Schreffler notes that “European chroniclers in the ‘age of discovery’ similarly evoked the world of dreams, uncertainty, and hesitation in their descriptions of the Americas” (2005, 302–303). The use of this discourse was a tool for preserving the distance of the subject from the world being described. Taussig (1993) presents a complex picture of the encounter with the Other, when, in the process of mimesis, the subject is drawn to the representation and the represented, as the subject attempts to unify with the object. In the stories discussed here, this representation is the Old City of Jerusalem and the Western Wall for which the soldiers yearned before the war. At the beginning of the 20th century, Rachel’s Tomb and the Western Wall were recognized as “the two special monuments of the national tragedy” (Ben-witch 1919, as cited in Sered 1995: 122). The Western Wall and Rachel’s Tomb were represented for years through paintings hung in the sukkah (tabernacle), through engravings and flags intended for Simchat Torah in the synagogue, and through childhood memories of those who lived there before the War of 1948. Yoram describes the tours that he conducted along the City Line with his study group from the Rabbi’s Center Yeshiva, in which Yohanan participated. During the tours, he pointed out sites beyond the line, such as Mt. Scopus, the Western Wall and the Temple Mount. Between 1948 and 1967, Mt. Scopus was held by soldiers disguised as police in an Israeli enclave within Jordan. M.M., who served there, described how he looked down on the Old City: “And I stand there […] feeling like Moses on Mt. Nebo. Across from you, you will see the land, and there you will not enter.”

M.M., in the account of his longing for the Western Wall, alludes to the biblical figure of Moses, who led the Israelites through the desert, but was forbidden by God from entering Israel, only able to gaze upon the land from the adjacent Mt. Nebo (Deuteronomy 32: 52). The representation of Jerusalem as a near but distant dream, a childhood memory, a fantasy, materialized through the encounter with the place and its people. The encounter with the place is a return, the fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and, thus, serves as an actualization of the fantasy, which is expressed by the stories of subjects, although it broader meanings.

5 The Mughrabi Gate Encounter

The two ‘key transfer’ encounters took place on the third day of the war, June 7. After two days of fighting in Jerusalem, the third day became decisive.13 The various details in the ‘fantastic story’ create a gradualness (Todorov 1981: 63), as moments before the key transfer encounter, the fighting intensified. Thus, the key encounter is structured as the culmination of the fantastic events, standing in contrast to the

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13 The Jerusalem Brigade advanced to the territories south of Jerusalem toward Bethlehem and Hebron. The Old City was occupied by forces of the Jerusalem Brigade and the Paratroopers Brigade (Avital-Epstein 2017).
other semantic components, but simultaneously constitutes an element in the broader course of events. The story is understood as a coherent unit when each element is understood through its relationship to the other elements (Todorov 1981). The hesitation of encountering the Other is illustrated through the escalation of the fighting:

We are on a street that ascends towards the corner of the Wall [...] Jordanians are sniping and firing at us [...] the tanks were meant to lead and then the patrol [...] We receive a command to stop. There was a complication which continued with firing and a tank that had caught fire at the Gethsemane Church, and the rescue of the wounded under fire. There were heroic acts [...] There were Carmel films [documentary films] about the defenders of the quarter [the Jewish Quarter in 1948] being taken captive. From where? They were taken through the Lions’ Gate to captivity in Jordan in Um Jimal [a camp in Jordan]. The same gate that we entered from the opposite direction. (M.M.)

Yoram’s company entered the Old City through the Lions’ Gate, which quickly transforms from a symbol of defeat in the 1948 war to a symbol of victory in the 1967 war. At the gate, the soldiers turned left towards the Temple Mount. Their detailed description of the combat during climactic moments reinforces the fantastic image of events, while giving them the validity of a true story.

On the right was a tent, we opened fire, we didn’t look if we killed or not, it was just a lot of firing to warn, to chase out, to smoke them out, and we continued to move towards the mosque. To our left, a half-track vehicle with the division command passed us, fired to the left and ascended the steps [...] And this issue of the Temple Mount plaza and the Old City, as long as they did not fire, and it’s not as if there was not an order, it was some kind of self-discipline, in my opinion, there was something in the atmosphere, in a spirit of holiness [...] And then they came up from the left, we went to the right, and from the right side there were the steps opposite the arches in the front courtyard [...] there were Jordanian vehicles and we saw people under one of the arches. Sh. [abbreviation] […] kneeled with a rifle grenade, aimed it downwards and eliminated the two soldiers who were underneath. (A.S.)

And there is smoke, and from out of nowhere an Arab emerges in a white jellabiyा [robe]. A red ribbon is on his hand, on his arm, and he says in broken Hebrew, “I am good.” I’m good, like I’m one of the good guys. And Yoram turns to him […] and says to him, “Where is the wall of the Jews?” And Yoram, I think, speaks to him in English, actually. He thought he did not know Hebrew; why would he speak Hebrew to an Arab? Apparently, this was probably one of the Western Wall’s ushers, of this place, one of their guards who guarded the Western Wall area. And he is in complete panic, this Arab, but Y. [abbreviation] turns to him and tells him, “Calm down.” He calms him
down. “We won’t hurt you.” And he tells us, “I know what you are looking for,” in Hebrew. In Hebrew, but disjointed. Half Hebrew. Half English. He leads us to the Mughrabi gate, to the gate, and on the way, we are looking at him, and a key is hanging from his neck, but \textit{wab\textbar} [a real beast of a] key. Huge. He leads us to the wooden door, green wood, to this day it is still the same original door. And he hands us the key, and along the way he says to us this sentence, which is not written in any other place, “For 19 years I waited, I knew you were coming.” (M.M.)

At the height of fighting on the Temple Mount, again the role of the donor that provides the magical agent (Propp 1968) appears, when the Arab in the white robe appears, leading them towards the Western Wall. The hero and his soldiers are granted the ultimate magical agent, the key, which allows them to reach the desired Western Wall. The encounter is strengthened by the contrasting elements that emphasize arrival at the fantasy’s climax – the exit from versus entry through the Lions’ Gate, the loss of Jerusalem in 1948 versus the victory in 1967, combat versus revelation, and the giving Arab versus the receiving Jew. Hence, the key encounter holds the mediation of dualities that symbolizes the arrival of the story’s heroes to the Western Wall at the most elated moment of the war.

![Figure 2: The Mughrabi Gate Key that was taken by paratroopers on their way to the Western Wall. It is now kept at the Ammunition Hill memorial site, Jerusalem. (Photograph by Yiftah Levin)](image-url)
6 The Rachel’s Tomb Encounter

Only a few hours after the first key encounter, a story emerged connecting the events into a fantastic tale among the soldiers situated in Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, as the combat and fear of intense conflict intensified:

There was constant bombardment from Mar Elias Monastery towards us […] Until we were informed on Wednesday […] at noon, that we are ascending to Mar Elias […] we were very scared, because Mar Elias was a formidable thing […] and you see the people in the woods, looking at pictures of their family […] there was great fear. Especially since we had the feeling that Mar Elias Monastery was filled with [Jordanian] soldiers because they were constantly shelling us and shooting at us. (Yohanan)

Yohanan, similar to Yoram, is identified by another person as a charismatic hero, hence, he is provided with the magical agent. Here, it is the right to conduct prayer, which hints to the future role of the hero.

One man approached me, grabs my back and says, “Yohanan, maybe pray minchab [the afternoon prayer]? Now is the time for minchab” […] Then the prayer begins with silent prayer, and then the cantor repeats the Shmonei eisrei [the prayer of 18 blessings] […] After the second and third time, someone approaches me and says, “No, no! Stop!” I thought we were done and going out to battle. “Stop,” he says, “I want to take some flags and every time we are to say ‘amen,’ a command will be given to the tanks to shell.” I stand and say the blessing out loud, around me, the crowd answers ‘amen,’ he gives a sign to the tank, and the tank hits it. One, two […] not a real bombardment, they knew they had to shell, so instead of shelling, it was a prayer along with shelling […] We finished praying. Because G. [abbreviation], the kibbutznik […] is not religious, he says, “I think we’re going on our way, after this prayer, we will surely succeed.” I said, “Okay, we will succeed” […] We descend with our heart jumping, the heart is simply jumping, who knows what is waiting for us at Mar Elias? We descend to the valley […] we wait. We don’t know what, soon they’ll start shooting at us. They don’t shoot, nobody shoots. You descend downhill and ascending a relatively easy climb […] we are breathing hard […] ascending, ascending. The first who ascends to Mar Elias starts shooting in all directions, and there is no response. Mar Elias was empty. That is the amazing story in this whole business. For two days we were bombarded. For two days we were scared. Once we descended, we were sure they would cut us down […]. Everyone is touring around. The feeling is that you are not in combat at all […] Quiet, there is nobody in this entire mighty fortress […] Nothing, nothing, where is everyone? (Yohanan)

Yohanan connects the prayer service directly to the success of the attack on Mar Elias, thereby expediting the fantastic movement, and preparing the ground for the
encounter in which an Arab transfers the key. Similar to the description of the battle on the Temple Mount, the detailed description of the fear experienced reinforces the fantastic occurrence in sensual reality, giving it validity. The geography of Ramat Rachel, Mar Elias and Rachel’s Tomb, and the concrete nature of the key as an object validates the entire story.

Onward to Bethlehem. We get on the road, without war, without anything. A march. We are marching [...] walking and walking and walking, we arrive at a group of houses, the houses have white flags. The surrender of Bethlehem. It surrendered. Even before we reached Bethlehem, they surrendered. They hung clothes, white undershirts, white underwear, everything was hung on every house [...] You could see that there was a great effort to show that they surrendered [...] We arrived at some city square, and in the square, suddenly some old Arab was running around, not old but somewhat old in his sixties or seventies with a robe and some kind of abaya [traditional Arab dress], holding something, “Hadha El Maftuh”[^14] [Here is the key]. It is the key to Rachel’s Tomb. He gave it to me, to G. the key to Rachel’s Tomb [...] G. gives me the key, G. tells me, “I don’t know what to do with this, Yohanan, you take it.” I kiss it like it’s the first time in my life, I know what it is. Jerusalemites have myths about the key to Rachel’s Tomb, all kinds, that it can solve infertility problems and the like [...] Jerusalemites knew there is a big key, a key like this, a big one [...] I put the key into the pouch, and the events continue – three half-tracks come passing by. One of them is a friend of mine [...] with a big red beard, I.K.. He stands on the half-track and yells, “We are making history,” like he is in summer camp or whatever, “We are making history, not war, history.” He continues, “See you later, see you later, see you later.” (Yo- hanan)

We were driving, I passed by some place, a regular street, and then I see Yohanan [...] I’m with a hardhat and I sit next to the driver [...] I’m trying to get my head out with the hardhat towards Yohanan, but I don’t succeed. I didn’t dare try to open the door, either way, we are in a war [...], I said, “Yohanan!” He answers, “Here is Rachel’s Tomb.” I said to him, “Where’s Rachel’s Tomb?” It was no longer possible to detect it because Rachel’s tomb always stood alone, and now it was among a row of houses.” (I.K.)

Yohanan and I.K. emphasize that they did not recognize the tomb due to the change in the area that was familiar to them from the pre-1948 period, and as it has been etched into their memory from various classic representations.[^15] Although both tell of the same occurrence, they perceived them differently, even in contradictory ways.

[^14]: Key in Arabic is Mafta’ah and not Maftuh. Yohanan quotes the Arab, but says what he thinks the word in Arabic is, but is not really Arabic.

[^15]: In those representations where “the tomb is alone on the hill at the side of the road,” originates from the biblical description of her death (Genesis 35: 16–20) and its commemoration by Jeremiah (31: 14–16).
Furthermore, upon entering Bethlehem and particularly after receiving the key, especially vividly in Yohanan’s story, the fantastic movement has turned the war into a journey or pilgrimage, as “fear” turned into “march” and then “summer camp.”

A soldier who was slightly behind narrated a different version of the entrance to Bethlehem and the ‘key encounter.’ In his description, there was no miraculous revelation, the initiative was Yohanan’s and his conduct was almost like that of a visit to a tourist site rather than of a site of combat:

He went looking for the key. Went around among the houses, knocked on the houses. Searched for a key. They referred him to the one who holds the key and he opened Rachel’s Tomb […] Everyone asked, why are we stopping, why not enter? They said Rachel’s Tomb is closed, someone went to look for the key. (N.M.)

Rafi tells his own version of the key encounter at Rachel’s Tomb. In his story, Rafi is the protagonist, not Yohanan. Here, too, the narrator emphasizes the geography of the crossing from Ramat Rachel to Bethlehem:

Then we descend [from Ramat Rachel] down the slope toward Bethlehem […] we walked in two columns, the force I led in the company, Tz. [the Company Commander] was 50–60 meters behind with the rest of the company […] we continued on foot […] There were no [Jordanian] soldiers, either they fled or escaped by vehicles […] This is the story of Rachel’s grave, and it’s as if it is happening to me now, why I kept telling it, and no one can come to tell a different story. Everyone can vouch for the fact that I was there with my soldiers, one of them spoke Arabic, right? A Jerusalemite […] And then I arrive, I remember it was a stone wall and some kind of blue wooden gate like that, and an Arab woman calls for me, I kind of hear, understand some Arabic, I enter, she shows me the tomb and tells me, “This is the key, we waited for you to come.” Of course, I was excited, I remembered […] also in my childhood, we studied Torah at the Heder [religious elementary school] in Morocco […] The Bible, in general, and the story of Ruth the Moabite and Bethlehem fields, right? And Rachel’s Tomb. (Rafi)

In describing the events, Rafi illustrates his awareness that there is a competing version of his story. Yohanan and Rafi’s stories compete with one another, each claiming that he carried out the hero’s mission, which aligns with Propp’s (1968) differing portrayal of the hero versus the false hero. According to Nikiforov (Jason 1971: 62–63), in folktales, in addition to the central hero role, there are also the secondary roles, such as the hero’s assistant, and the object he is attempting to obtain, a bride or a magical object. If so, I suggest that the key given to soldiers is the magical object that the heroes are sent to obtain. Since the renovation of the tomb by Montefiore in 1841 until the separation from it in 1948 war, Jewish caretakers held the keys to Rachel’s Tomb (Shragai 2005: 66–94). T.G. tells of Gad Freiman, the son of Shlomo Freiman, the Ashkenazi caretaker of the tomb until 1948, as a charismatic figure,
similar to how Yohanan and Yoram are described. Here, too, there are the basic narrative roles that appear in all versions of the bestowing of the key – the hero, the donor and a magical object.

When I went there to see Rachel’s Tomb […] I had a picture in my head from my time as a girl, in which I remember a big key which was used to open it. I know that afterwards they [the Freiman family] came and went, this I know from the stories that the guard told “knew you would come.” They even knew him, the guard who was there. (T.G.)

7 The Key as a Miraculous Object

Yohanan describes the encounter with the Arab and the receiving of the key as a fantastic moment, which completes a course of transformation during the war. This movement began before the war and intensified with the prayer and events that followed it. Obtaining the key to the holy site from an Arab donor is accompanied by an intimate sense of wonder at the object’s legendary magical powers. The magical nature of the key is related, among other aspects, to its extraordinary size. Similarly, the key for the Mughrabi Gate is described as one of exceptional dimensions. These descriptions intensify the events that preceded or followed the key transfer. In the case of the Mughrabi Gate, the miraculous moment is the juxtaposition of the encounter with the combat that has just concluded. Yohanan describes the excitement he experienced upon receiving the key and the magical powers attributed to it regarding fertility problems. According to Sered, since the 1930s, Jewish women who suffered from complications during labor would lay the key to Rachel’s Tomb under their heads to ease childbirth; in addition to these traditions which developed during the 19th century, the key symbolized two dimensions of the myth of Rachel – female fertility and the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel (Sered 1995: 135–136).

Receiving the key serves as a recognition and glorification of the hero character, and the importance of the story is mirrored by the immediate interest of the main Israeli newspapers. The war began on June 5. Two days later, the events described here occurred, while as early as June 9, an article in the daily newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* appeared, describing the transfer of the key to Rachel’s Tomb to Yohanan, in a meeting that was attended by Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan and senior generals:

The Commander of the military unit in the area said that when his men entered Bethlehem, they met a man running toward them. They stopped at his side, and he handed over to the radio man from company B, Yohanan Freed, the Jerusalemite, a huge key. This was the key to Rachel’s Tomb. (Haber 1967: 3).

In *Life Magazine’s Special Edition, Israel’s Swift Victory* (June 30, 1967), this encounter, as well as the image of Yoram and his soldiers on the Temple Mount, are
photographed. Many of the interviewees note that Dayan’s appointment shortly before the war is remembered as one of the events that contributed to raising the morale of the citizens. Indeed, Dayan is widely documented during this period in newspapers and the victory is largely attributed to him. Thus, he can be placed in the role of father of the princess foreseen by Propp (1968). Yohanan recalls that during the meeting with Dayan, he had a conversation with him about the name of the war, which is also documented in the same newspaper article. The Mughrabi Gate encounter, documented in the book *The War on Jerusalem* (Nathan 1968), is described there also through the lens of fantasy. Although it is not stated that the Arab man handed over the key while showing soldiers the way to the Western Wall, the event is linked by the author to the tradition of the keys of the Temple (Jerusalem Talmud. *Shkalim* 26: 1–2), where it is written that the keys were transferred as a deposit at the time of the destruction of the First Temple:

> Legend has it that when the Priests saw that the Temple was burned and destroyed, they took its keys and ascended to the roof of sanctuary. As they stood there in groups, they turned to the Almighty, and threw towards the sky the keys to His house. Then they jumped and fell into the fire that consumed the Temple. Simultaneously, a part of a hand came out of the sky and picked up the thrown keys. (Nathan 1968: 311)

Sered (1995, 122–129) argues that although the “tears of Rachel for her children” was a symbol of mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem since the prophecy of Jeremiah, only towards the end of the 19th century were the words of Jeremiah reinterpreted within the context of the return of the Jews to the Land of Israel during the early days of the Zionist movement.

The heroes of the keys’ stories revalidate their current status through the role they played in the war. Thirty years after the war, when Rafi served as Deputy Mayor of Yavne, a local newspaper said that Rafi was the first combat officer from the city and describes the key encounter (Vaserman 1997).

Yoram, as the receiver of the Mughrabi Gate’s key, also comprehends himself years later as part of the Western Wall’s tradition and as a carrier of the history. During the war, a dramatic change occurred near the Western Wall, when the Mughrabi Quarter was demolished in preparation for the plaza that exists to this day. However, since then, any intention of archaeological excavation or construction in this area has caused resistance, which has often overflowed into violence between the two sides. An article about the expansive building plans that Yoram promotes at the Temple Mount and its environs illustrates how his story serves as a confirmation for the plans:

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16 Moshe Nathan was a journalist, and later a radio broadcaster, who covered the war for the military magazine *Bamahane* (lit. In the Base Camp). For the purposes of his book, which was a best seller at that time, he interviewed 400 soldiers and collected a variety of archive material. [https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/1.1737270](https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/cinema/1.1737270), [https://www.the7eye.org.il/42308](https://www.the7eye.org.il/42308) (accessed December 30, 2021; the link does not work outside Israel).
Zamush is convinced that because we received on that day the key and opened the gate, it will remain under our sovereignty. And now the commander of police in Jerusalem, Ilan Franco, determines what happens there. Why should we suddenly act according to the decision of a policeman? (Pepper 2007).

According to Yoram, receiving the keys grants the state sovereignty over the place; he states, “I have an account to settle with my grandparents and my great grandparents, and with my brigade deputy, Moshe Stempel, who was with me when we liberated the Western Wall and was killed several months afterwards” (Pepper 2007). Thus, the historical right is deemed more powerful than the authority of the law. Twelve years later, in 2019, Yoram and other soldiers were photographed on the Temple Mount, for a report aired on Independence Day on the occasion of the retirement of the Jerusalem police District Commander (Vered 2019). It seems that ‘receiving the key’ serves the heroes to accumulate symbolic capital and recognition, through their personal war experience linked to a mythical past.

8 The Arab that Provides the Key

We knew that in Bethlehem, we’d encounter some historical sites […] but when we saw this Gentile-Jew with the key, he says, “Hadha El Maftuh” [Here is the key, in Arabic], and it was Rachel’s Tomb, we saw his face. (Yohanan)

In the mimetic process, the replica receives power from the original, while the perceiver, the soldier, is drawn into the representation (Taussig 1993 59–62). The representation of the sacred place is transmitted through the representative, the Arab who provides the key, while the soldier sees him as himself, a gentile Jew. Nevertheless, the process is bidirectional (Taussig 1993), as Yohanan mimics the Arab’s words in order to validate them. Thus, the Arabs who provide the keys are the representatives that embody the representation – the encounter with the place is an encounter with people, and a Self, the Jewish soldier, that is expressed through the Other, the Arab. The Arab is the figure of the biblical Jew who provides them the key that was left for his safekeeping. Similar to M.M., Rafi also describes the Arab donor as someone who guarded the site.

They have some kind of fear of the holiness of the God of the Jews, you see? […] I remember she was very sad, the Arab woman, she was very old, maybe it was her job to safeguard it, maybe she lived there. This is a custom, in Morocco […] I saw it in Jewish cemeteries, where there are no longer Jews […] the Arabs live in the cemetery and keep guard. (Rafi)

S.S. holds a similar opinion regarding the encounter at Rachel’s tomb: “He kept the key all those years […] ‘the Jews will come, and I will hand it to them’” (S.S.).
When describing the encounter with the Arab, while he ignores the key’s existence, Landau emphasizes the Arab image as holding an historical function – to guide the Jewish soldiers towards the sacred place.

While the group of commanders is dealing with the combat over the Old City from the Temple Mount plaza, next to the entrance of the Omar mosque, the paratroopers unit opened a path towards the Western Wall. An Arab civilian dressed in white – it could be that history appointed him to be the celebratory guide to the soldiers – ran ahead of them on their way to the Western Wall. At first, he did not understand what the group of emotional soldiers who had taken hold of him wanted from him. Afterwards, as he (the Arab) understood what they were after, he smiled and began walking slowly, with great importance, to the alley that leads to the Western Wall […] they discovered a small gate on the right side of the alley. A paratrooper broke through the gate and suddenly broke out in a wild scream, “The Western Wall! I see the Western Wall!” (Landau 1967: 169)

What is the source of the argument that the Arabs were waiting for the arrival of Jewish soldiers? Cohen (2003) points out that there is a tradition among the students of the Rabbi’s Center Yeshiva, where several of the interviewees were educated. It concerns the Arabs’ expectation of the return of Jews to the Land of Israel by virtue of ancient right. Muslim traditions speak of the returning of the Jews to the land, but within the context of the preparation for doomsday, when they would face a choice between conversion to Islam and destruction. The members of HaShomer (lit. the Guard), a Zionist movement from the 1920s, not like other Zionist movements, were close to the Arabs, learned Arabic, and exchanged stories with them. Therefore, it is possible that they molded these traditions to their needs, in order to obtain recognition of their right to the land and justification of their actions from the perspective of the Arabs that lived on the land (Cohen 2003). The author Shay Agnon, who apparently mediated these ideas between the secular Zionists and Rabbi Kook, wrote, “I and all of Israel did not stop believing that the Land of Israel is ours and all the nations that sit here are none other than guards that the Almighty placed here until He returns Israel to the Land of Israel” (as cited by Cohen 2013: 338). Cohen (2003) added that after the 1967 war, in order to allow the establishment of Jewish settlements in the territories conquered, RZYHC revived the argument that the return of Jews is an enshrined value in Islam.

According to Rafi’s version of the story, the key was presented to him by a woman. Even though Rafi does not link this woman to Rachel, the narrative is not accidental. In the last two hundred years, there have been occasions in which Rachel was revealed to believers (Sered 1995: 139–140). During the military clashes in recent years in Gaza, soldiers have attested that Rachel was revealed to them and warned them of dangers (Appendix 3). The incidents received widespread attention from rabbis, while the various versions all emphasized Rachel’s mythical traits, as a mother who ensures her son’s wellbeing. Another testimony from years later, was that of
Hanan Porat, a member of Yohanan and Yoram’s yeshiva. Porat related such a narrative that occurred when driving to Rachel’s Tomb, in 1995:

I am near the Mar Elias monastery, I innocently turned on the car radio, and am instantly shaken to hear the anguished cries coming from the square. I stopped the car in amazement and listened to the message from agonized Eitan Haber, announcing the death of Yitzhak Rabin […] then suddenly, I hear a distant voice crying in my ears: “Rachel is weeping for her sons.” I bit my lips until they bled, and I said to myself: now at this very moment, Rachel is mourning the death of Yitzhak Rabin, who is no longer with us. (Cohen 2012).

The revelation that Porat describes, as opposed to that of the soldiers, is vocal rather than visual, and by this indicates Jeremiah – “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation, and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children.”17 The event took place following the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Chief of Staff during the Six-Day War, in November 1995, 28 years after the war.18 Similar to Rafi and Yohanan, Porat also indicates Mar Elias’ physical proximity to Rachel’s tomb, but in contrast to them, he relates his revelation to this physical proximity, even if he hears a distant voice. For Crapanzano (2006), the “scene” is a shadowy world, the subjective effects on the paramount reality, whose side effects manifest in the world. The scene is the encounter of the ideal version, as it is comprehended through myth, and the real version of the occurrence, as it is manifested through ritual. One casts a shadow on the other and vice versa. The ideal cannot be disconnected from the real, but the relationship between them is divergent (Crapanzano 2006). This is how Rachel’s myth is embodied by the gloomy Arab woman donor, who sits and waits for her sons to return to the tomb, through a kind of pilgrimage that revives the myth of return to the holy site and to a mythical era.

9 The Fantastic – the War as Pilgrimage

The fantastic events occur as a confluence of revelation juxtaposed with battle descriptions that preceded it, in which the central contrasts are combat versus revelation, sacred versus profane and purity versus impurity. Eliade (1961) describes the construction of the world as a duality of cosmos and chaos; the cosmos is the known world, while the chaos is the foreign, dangerous and chaotic space. In wars, it can be said that soldiers move from the cosmos towards chaos. The moment of the outbreak of combat serves as the transition from the familiar world, Jewish Jerusalem, towards the crossing of the City Line into the chaos of war in the Jordanian

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18 The Hebrew date on which Rabin was assassinated is 11 of Heshvan, the memorial date of Rachel according to tradition.
city. Getting to the Temple Mount is akin to arriving at an *Axis Mundi*, the world’s axis, the holiest site that constitutes the meeting point between the upper and lower planes of the cosmos, with the subterranean water [tehomi], which connects them (Eliade 1959: 12–16). That which is sacred is forbidden. Eliade claimed that “the sacred is at once ‘sacred’ and ‘defiled’” (Eliade 1959: 14–15 as cited by Douglas 2001: 8). This duality is reflected in the transition from the Western Wall and the return to the Temple Mount towards the *Makkabame*¹⁹.

We return to the plaza and reach a metal gate fastened with a lock, we break it, try to open it, we shoot it, also with a rifle grenade. There was an old man there who was hit by our rifle grenade […] it was a terrifying sight […] And we saw some people who looked like guys from Harlem […] And in front of us stands a tall man […] hugging two women. One black and the second white […] it was an American Jew who converted to Islam named Abdullah Schleifer[…] a beatnik Jew from New York who converted to Islam and came to the Old City […] To this day, this man has been lost to the Jewish people […] one of my friends tried to hit him, move him out of the way, Moshe Stempel [the deputy brigade commander […] prevented him, otherwise he would have broken his […], he would have killed him on the spot. (M.M.)

Desecration of the holy is embodied by “the guys from Harlem” and especially in the image of the Jew who had converted to Islam, embracing two women, one black, one white, as a kind of representation of the unresolved conflicts between the sacred versus secular, the Jew versus the Muslim, and war versus pilgrimage. The image of a man embracing a black woman and a white woman, is well-known in folktales.²⁰ In these stories, there is a meeting with a man, and next to him are two women, one black and one white. The man presents a riddle to his guest, essentially a choice between the two women. The solution to the riddle does not depend on the woman’s color but upon a deeper insight, based on the nature of the ties formed between a woman and her partner. I propose viewing the encounter with the converted Jew as a choice that occurs on the threshold, as part of the story of Jewish Israelis reconnecting with a holy site which they had not been able to access. When reaching *Makkabame*, a rite to sanctify the place is performed – raising the flag that Yoram received only two days before while singing *Hatikvah* [the national anthem] facing the destroyed Jewish Quarter, as the cosmos is consecrated as a mythical archetype (Eliade 1961). Immediately upon his arrival at the Western Wall, Yoram sent soldiers to bring the dispatcher, RZYHC, to visit the Western Wall.

¹⁹ *Makkabame* - A Mameluke period madrasa and courthouse on the Temple Mount.
²⁰ IFA 1665: 17081, 12856.
²¹ Another flag was hung over the Mosque of Omar (Landau 1967a) and removed the same day, apparently due to an order by Dayan (1976: 388). Landau’s description in his book (1967b: 169–171) is almost identical to his report from the same day, excluding the flag hung on the Mosque of Omar.
10 The Meeting with the Dispatcher

I thought they should be here at this time. And I sent two soldiers […] “In the Geula neighborhood you will find Rabbi Zvi Yehuda and Rabbi Hanazir and bring them here.” […] Just when they arrived, our Battalion commander also came with Rabbi Goren with an entourage of military rabbis. (Yoram)

The role of Rabbi Shlomo Goren, the Chief Military Rabbi, during and after the war was fundamental to the biblical and messianic fantasy during that period. Thus, he served as another dispatcher. Yohanan and Rafi emphasize that they handed the keys over to Rabbi Goren a short time later. Another encounter took place with the dispatchers from the Rabbi’s Center Yeshiva. Yoram wrote that a few weeks after the war he was invited along with Yohanan to RZYHC’s home:

[…] he permits Yohanan to pour a glass of wine – “le’chaim” [to life – the traditional Hebrew toast] […] quoting from his sermon (and highlighting that due to the war) “Hebron and Jericho and Shechem are ours” and then visited Rabbi Hanazir who said to them, “Welcome, pay homage to the heroes of Israel.” (Zamush 2016: 37)

The second sign that preceded the war, the song Jerusalem of Gold, was sung by the Jerusalem Brigade in Bethlehem as soon as they heard that Western Wall had been conquered.

We walked and walked and walked and walked and crossed all of Bethlehem […] today, the Deheishe refugee camp is there. So just before Deheishe, there is a quarry […] We go up the hill and the commander, G. [abbreviation], instructs all the guys to deploy on the hill […] And we hear on the transistors […] we hear the Western Wall was liberated. We start dancing on the hill, everyone there. (Yohanan)

We drove onward and arrived at Deheishe, to this jabla’ab [I.K means a mountain in Arabic, which is Ja-bal]. And on this jabla’ab, we only hear one thing: tak, tak of the hoes. Because they got a command, you see, in this stupid rock terrain, that everyone would dig his own personal trench […] In another minute, the Jordanians will be shelling here, so all you hear is tak, tak, tak, tak […] Then a radio broadcast began at eight […] reporting on the conquest of the Western Wall, and then the whole mountain began to sing in a choir, a men’s choir. I’m a little bit emotional. A men’s choir, Jerusalem of Gold. All the mountain, you hear, the clatter of hoeing and you hear Jerusalem of Gold, the whole mountain, a men’s choir like that of the Red Army, you know what I

22 Rabbi Hanazir (Nazirite) was an alias of Rabbi David Cohen. He was a student of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaCohen Kook, the father of RZYHC and founder of the Rabbi’s Center Yeshiva. He was mentioned by Yoram and Yohanan as a central and important figure alongside RZYHC, the head of the Yeshiva. His daughter was married to Rabbi Shlomo Goren.
mean. Two or three hundred soldiers, infantry soldiers, 28 or 29 years old, singing. It was an unforgettable sight, as you can see; when I tell you, I get emotional. (I.K.)

The song was written and sung by a single woman singer before and after the war. During the war, it was sung several times over a few days by a group of men. As such, the song that expressed the longing for Jerusalem, went through another stage in becoming the symbol of the war, but also a symbol of the return to Jerusalem. On the following day, the second dispatcher, Naomi Shemer, came to sing to the soldiers and to the mayors and heads of the churches who had surrendered just the day before. As such, the villain had to accept the results of the combat in the face of the dispatcher and its representatives, the new rulers of the occupied territory.

That Thursday evening, we were told: you are receiving a prize; Naomi Shemer is coming along with Shuli Natan. They are coming to perform an evening of songs for us at the Bethlehem movie theater. Three days after the start of the war, they came. We invited the mayor and all the church leaders, we invited everyone. And they sang [...] *Jerusalem of Gold* of course, but also other songs. (I.E.)

Stein (1999, 25–26) points out that the experiential empowerment depicted in the quest stories of the Jewish Sages is “first and foremost the seal of mythic actualization.” Here, too, the history of yearning for the holy sites and the encounter with them is characterized by various combinations of “the magical, the mythological, the rebellious and the empowered […] in the face of the limits of the institutional culture” (Stein 1999: 26). With the awakening of the figure of Rachel in the context of the return to Israel during the early period of Zionism, various writers had begun to link her to the Land of Israel and its nature (Sered 1995: 131–132). If we return to the sermon of RZYHC, it appears that, among other images, he describes the biblical land as desired by God. “Every grain of sand, every forearm [described through biblical measurements], every tract of land, and every piece of soil belongs to the land of the Lord.” Thus, the female images in these stories, such as the encounter with the Arab woman at the entrance to the tomb, the imagery of the land as desired and the arrival at Rachel’s tomb resonate with the mythical figure of Rachel as the mother waiting for her sons’ return from exile. Thus, it can be said that Rachel portrays the figure of the princess (Propp 1968), who waits for the hero after completion of the mission. Thus, the key encounter, in fact, does not just stand by itself as an episode of the war, but serves as the fulfillment of an ancient Jewish fantasy, particularly among the national religious sectors. At the same time, it is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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23 During the conquest of the Bethlehem area, there were at least three acts of surrender by the mayors of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour to the commanding officers of two battalion. According to R.B., Rafi, Yohanan, I.K. and I.E., during one, the officials of Bethlehem approached the soldiers; in the others, the Israeli officers approached and got them to sign a surrender document.
11 Discussion

The key encounters of the Six-Day War emphasize the centrality of holy sites and the meetings with local Palestinians. In this framework, what is the significance of encounters with Others as described within the context of arrival at a holy site or through the search for a holy object? As Girard (1965) argues, mimetic desire of the subject toward the object is essentially a triad, dependent upon a mediating factor of that desire. If so, the soldiers’ desire for the coveted holy sites is mediated through a third party, the male or female Arab donor of the key.

Indeed, the encounter with the Other holds a crucial role in Jewish and Christian folklore of holy sites. Stein (1999), for example, argues that the Talmudic journey of Rabbah bar bar Hannah in search of the dead of the desert and Korach’s tribe represents a rejection of authority as

an expression of a need to experience a fundamental, pre-cultural, non-institutionalized foundation, a need involves breaking the boundaries of the present. It is not surprising that the search for this foundation is mediated by the figure of the Arab, the Other: he does not belong to the cultural framework that conceals from the eyes of society the location of foreign elements. (Stein 1999: 20–21)

Here too, the journey to Axis Mundi is a journey that breaks the boundaries of the present – towards the mythical Jewish past, and here, too, the arrival at these places is mediated by an encounter with the Arab, the Other. Furthermore, Hasan-Rokem notes that motifs of deciphering signs in Jewish culture associated with Arab culture (1989: 121) are related, for example, to a Jew’s holiness, as an Arab interprets the bellow of the Jew’s bull as heralding the onset of the destruction of the Temple and signaling the coming of the Messiah (1989: 117). Moreover, Christian traditions that refer to the Holy Land, treat the image of the Jewish figure as Other (Limor 1996). In these traditions, knowledge or an object, are transmitted from the Jews to Christians through the use of force or judicial decision. In addition, Limor (1996) points out Jewish, Muslim and Christian narratives that describe the Jews as showing Caliph Omar the Foundation Stone of the Temple Mount, where the Caliph then built the Dome of the Rock. Limor (1996) claims that the Jews hold the metaphorical ‘keys’ of both holy sites and Christian texts. In our case, there are actual keys in addition to the metaphorical keys that allow entry or express the transfer of ownership and control over the holy sites, conquered during the Six-Day War.

Limor (1996) notes that although Christians regarded the Jews as having the knowledge and authority to identify and legitimize holy sites and sacred objects, the Jews did not attribute holiness to them. Similarly, in the events discussed in this study, interviewees claimed that during the encounters, the Arabs said they were waiting for them and knew that they would return. Thus, according to the interviewees, the Arabs acknowledge the Jewish ‘truth’ and justify the Jewish presence and their future status as subjects under occupation. However, similar to Jews in
Christian tradition, the Jewish soldiers recognized the presence of Arabs, so that the encounter itself, characterized by the key transfer or leading Jews to the holy site, served as an act of recognition of the Arab Other and their right to the holy site. Thus, the arrival of the soldiers and encounter with the Arab key guardians constituted a confirmation of historical Jewish presence at the site and transfer of ownership, marked by the transfer of the key and the establishment of new relationships between the previous temporary owner and the new owners of the holy sites, as well as with the surrounding colonial sphere. The previous owners are represented by the old Arab, while the new owners are represented by young Jewish soldiers. The transfer is both cultural and intergenerational. In this context, we note the event of the woman who had fled the Old City in 1948 transferring the flag to the soldier who conquered it in 1967. Yoram’s description of the key encounter includes additional meanings that contribute to future colonialist relations:

We found an old Arab with a key around his neck […] “And I knew the Jewish Wall, [that] you would come for 19 years,” in Arabic, in Arabic. My deputy speaks excellent Arabic, was a Shin Bet [Israel Security Agency] man […] He did not give it to us, we ripped it off him. But he certainly flattered us and cooperated […] so he grabbed him, and he spoke to him in Arabic, interrogated him and so on. He asked what needed to be asked. We started arresting all the men there. We gathered 250 people there […] on the Temple Mount, there was a huge encampment […] soldiers hiding, soldiers wearing pajamas, as if they were uniforms […] So, during the continuing combat, we were searching, there were shots, and we hit at least 12 of them, dead […] So, he grabbed one of these Waqf officials, who started singing, talking. So, he, it turned out, also had a key. We caught everything that moved, everyone that moved […] “the key to the gate of the Jewish Wall, I knew for 19 years you would come here,” he started to sweet-talk us like that. (Yoram)

Compared to the previous description of voluntary giving, here Yoram notes that the key is taken aggressively. In addition, the encounter is described as occurring on a battlefield, as the images presented reflect asymmetrical relationships of domination and power, presenting the enemy in diminutive and insulting terminology, describing them as “soldiers wearing pajamas, as if they were uniforms […] we hit at least 12 of them, dead […] one of these Waqf officials […] started singing.” What drives the recoiling from the Other? The verbal and physical violence towards the other? Bhabha argues:

The myth of historical origination […] produced in relation to the colonial stereotype functions to “normalize” the […] colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal […] The desire for an originality which is again threatened by the differences of race, color and culture. (1994: 74–75)

The arrival at Axis Mundi, the desire for the center of the Jewish world, the forbidden place, encounters a fantasy of imagination and difference – a man in a white robe
who speaks Hebrew, a Jew who converted to Islam, who is embracing a black woman and a white woman. The mimetic desire grows and culminates in a passion for originality – raising the flag and singing the anthem over the Western Wall. “Not itself the object of desire but its setting […] the production of ‘colonial desire’ marks the discourse as a ‘favored spot for the most primitive defensive reactions such as turning against oneself, into an opposite, projection, negation’” (Lapalanche and Pontalis 1980: 318, as cited in Bhabha 1994: 81). The encounter with the Arab is the encounter with the negation of the Jew in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict – but the key transfer is also a transfer of control. “What is being dramatized is a separation […] that repeats obsessively the mythical moment of disjunction” (Bhabha 1994: 82). Transfer of control involves an act of violence. The fantasy occurs on the backdrop of war, which alongside the encounter with holy sites, marks one of the key moments in the relationships between Jews and Arabs in the Middle Eastern sphere.

12 Closing Remarks – The Fantastic Fulfillment

This article analyzes ‘key encounters’ that appear in personal stories of soldiers during the Six-Day War. In their stories, these encounters are presented as climactic moments that echo characteristics of the epic tale, while the narrative framework of the war and its aftermath utilize characteristics of fantastic literature. The events serve as a mirror of a broader change that occurred following the war among specific sections of the Jewish public in Israel. Among the soldiers whose stories are narrated in this chapter, those who identify as national-religious are also its protagonists - Yoram, Yohanan, I.K., N.M., A.S. and S.E., who identifies as a national-religious Jew, describes the fantastic:

It’s as if all the aspirations, all of this, and even after the Holocaust, suddenly accumulate into some kind of sense of redemption, the fulfillment of prophecy, of all the things we hardly even dared to dream of, and we see them come true in front of our eyes. All the places came out of the Bible, and I really say not only to us, it was to almost the entire public in Israel […] And it was as if God Himself was speaking to us through history, and things are really happening right before our eyes. (S.E.)

The key encounters were fantastic events that occurred right before the soldiers’ eyes as they arrived at the Western Wall and Rachel’s Tomb. They fulfilled the ancient desire that was embodied within the representative sites. The Arab provided them with the key, and by this, for them, the control of the site, opening a new era, for both sides involved in the key’s encounter.
Appendices

1 Sermon by Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Cook on Independence Day

And where is our Hebron – Have we forgotten it? And where is our Shechem – Have we forgotten it? And where is our Jericho – Have we forgotten it? And where is our Ever - haYarden [Trans-Jordan]? Where is each clod of dirt, each piece of […] the Lord’s land? Can we sacrifice a single millimeter of it? God forbid! (Psalms 17 of the State of Israel, 1967. English translation from Hoch 1994: 96–97).

2 Jerusalem of Gold, written by Naomi Shemer; performed by Shuli Natan

The broadcast tape dated May 15, 1967:

The mountain air is clear as wine; And the scent of pines; Is carried on the breeze of twilight with the sound of bells. And in the slumber of tree and stone; Captured in her dream; The city that sits solitary; And in its midst is a wall.

Chorus: Jerusalem of gold; And of copper, and of light; Behold I am a Violin for all your songs.

How the cisterns have dried; The market-place is empty; And no one frequents the Temple Mount; In the Old City. And in the caves in the mountain; Winds are howling; And no one descends to the Dead Sea By way of Jericho.

Chorus

But if I come to sing to you today; And to adorn crowns to you; I am the smallest of the youngest of your children; And of the last poet. For your name, the lips score ; Like the kiss of a seraph; If I forget you, Jerusalem, Which is all gold […]

Chorus

We have returned to the cisterns; To the market and to the market-place; A ram’s horn calls out on the Temple Mount; In the Old City. And in the caves in the mountain; Thousands of suns shine; We will once again descend to the Dead Sea; By way of Jericho!

Chorus


Naomi Shemer’s performance can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjmMllp8hJg (accessed December 27, 2021).
3 On the revelation of Rachel to Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip

The revelation of Rachel to soldiers in Operation Cast Lead

An interview with a soldier on the topic
https://www.inn.co.il/News/News.aspx/189655 (accessed November 9, 2021, link only available in Israel).

Rabbi Eliyahu relates to the revelation
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrHAx9vn6Xo (accessed December 30, 20201)

Rabbi Obadiah Joseph relates to the revelation
https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3661185,00.html (accessed December 27, 2021, available only in Israel).

The mother of everyone – an explication on the revelation of Rachel – Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu https://www.kipa.co.il/%D7%99%D7%94%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/%D7%90%D7%9E%D7%90-%D7%A9-%D7%9C-%D7%9B% D7%95% D7%9C% D7% 9D / (checked June 15, 2019; the link is no longer available).

What is it about Rachel Our Mother in Operation Cast Lead - incredible!
https://www.fxp.co.il/showthread.php?t=15736720 (checked December 28, 2021, the link is only available in Israel).

Primary Sources (interviews, in alphabetic order according to first name)

A.S. – Male, aged 72 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Shluhot on April 16, 2019.

I.E. – Male, aged 86 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Ramat Gan on June 16, 2019.

II.K. – Male, aged 80 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Jerusalem on April 4, 2019.

L.D. – Female, aged 80 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin on March 15, 2019, in Jerusalem.

M.M. – Male, aged 75 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Hod Hasharon on March 28, 2019.

N.M. – Male, aged 76 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Jerusalem on April 3, 2019.
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Rafi Miara – Male, aged 75 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Rehovot on July 18, 2019.

S.E. and S.S. – Females, aged 68 & 65, respectively, when interviewed by Hagar Salamon and Yiftah Levin in Jerusalem on November 1, 2018.

T.G. – Female, aged 71 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Jerusalem on June 27, 2019.

Yohanan Fried – Male, aged 78 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Jerusalem on November 30, 2018.

Yoram Zamush – Male, aged 77 when interviewed by Yiftah Levin in Jerusalem on February 6, 2019.

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IFA 1665: The Israel Folktale Archives in honor of Dov Noy (IFA), in University of Haifa; Jason, Heda; Shibli, Miriam; Iraq; 1665 (in Hebrew).

— 17081: The Israel Folktale Archives in honor of Dov Noy (IFA), in University of Haifa.

— 12856: The Israel Folktale Archives in honor of Dov Noy (IFA), in University of Haifa; Sagiv-Meir, Mira; Agasi, Eliyahu; Iraq; 12856 (in Hebrew).


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