**Mishy Harman:** So, I am connecting. Let’s see. Join a meeting. Let’s hope this works. Join audio. Hey Robby, can you hear me now?

**Robby Berman:** Uh, yeah. How are you?

**Mishy Harman:** Good, how you doing?

**Robby Berman:** OK. I have regards for you from Ira Glass. *[Mishy laughs]*. That’s a good regards.

**Mishy Harman:** Toda. Where did you meet Ira?

**Robby Berman:** I was buying a raincoat and so was he, in downtown Manhattan. He was going to Hong Kong, and we just started talking and uhh… yeah.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Hey guys, it’s Mishy. We’re working around the clock to get you the episodes of the second half of the season, which we’ll start releasing in a few weeks. But meanwhile - just in time for Yom Kippur - we wanted to drop a little bonus into your feed.

A few months ago we asked listeners to send in their notes for the Kotel. We got prayers for health and prosperity, hopes for a better future and world peace, and we also got a good share of confessions. That’s right - apparently there’s something about the stately Second Temple stones which makes people want to come clean.

And that’s good, especially this time of year. Because in *U’Netanneh Tokef* - a medieval piyyut, or liturgical poem - that Jews around the world recite during the High Holidays, we sing a Talmudic refrain - “*u’tshuva, u’tfilah u’tzdaka, ma’avirin et ro’a ha’gzeirah*.” Basically that repentance, prayer and charity, are saving graces when we stand in front of God’s judgment. So confession is, of course, a big part of that holy trifecta. But is there a statute of limitations? Do we still get those coveted brownie points for confessing if it’s been thirty years?

Robby Berman - the guy who met Ira Glass while buying a raincoat - is a long time Israel Story listener from Jerusalem. In fact, he takes podcast listening to a whole new level.

**Robby Berman:** I literally try to drive during traffic hour, you know, in order to get stuck into a jam. And I’ll take the long way just to listen to podcasts. Uh, yeah.

**Mishy Harman:** But Robby, you know that you don’t have to be stuck in traffic to listen to podcasts, right?

**Robby Berman:** Ummm… I can’t see myself, I’m too much of an active guy, I can’t see myself just sitting down… Like, I like music, but I would never just sit down and listen to music. I got to be doing something else.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** Robby does a ton of things.

**Robby Berman:** What do you want me to say about myself?

**Mishy Harman:** Who are you?

**Robby Berman:** Who am I? I’m originally from New York, I moved to Israel thirty years ago. I currently run a non-profit organization called the Halachic Organ Donor Society which tries to raise awareness about Halachic support for organ donation. I’ve been studying Arabic for ten years. I’ve been studying guitar for three years. I sell exercise cards that I manufacture in China and sell them in Israel and in America. You buy a deck of cards, you open it up, and you see what exercises to do. Ummm… And I guess that about sums me up. Is that… is that good or is that pathetic?

**Mishy Harman:** No, that’s… That’s excellent. And very eclectic.

**Robby Berman:** Yes.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** But Robby didn’t reach out to us to talk halachic organ donations or Chinese exercise cards. Instead - just in time for *Kol Nidre* - he wanted to get something off his chest. You see, thirty years ago, in 1989, someone threw a grenade in Jerusalem’s Old City. No one was hurt, thank God, but the police swarmed the streets trying to find the culprit. They didn’t.

The true story of who threw that grenade, and why, remained a mystery. Until today. Here’s Robby.

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**Robby Berman (narration):** *[In Hebrew]* “Were you the one who threw the grenade?”

“Were you the one who threw the grenade?” the stocky policeman asked me again this time extremely softly but with such an intensity that it felt like he was shouting. It was four in the morning in Jerusalem’s Old City. The interrogation cell was very small, very empty and very cold.

I didn’t reply. “Did you throw the grenade?” he repeated, the frustration in his voice even more evident. “Of course not,” I finally said, looking down at the floor.

The year was 1989. I was twenty-three years old, a wide-eyed Israeli soldier on a weekend leave. Just a few hours earlier, someone had thrown a grenade in the Muslim Quarter. And now this intimidating detective was asking, over and over again, whether it was me.

‘How did I end up in that cell,’ you might be asking? Well, at the time, I'd been in Israel for less than a year. I had made Aliyah from Long Island just as soon as I graduated from Yeshiva University. I was devout, zealous, and determined to join the IDF. But in the few months before I was drafted, with some time to kill, I decided to teach at a Yeshiva geared towards secular Jews.

One of my students, who was just about the same age as me, quickly became one of my best friends.

His name was Tom. Tom Cole. And we clicked the second we met. But to tell the truth, that didn’t make me special. See, Tom was the kind of guy who clicked with everyone.

Tom grew up in Cleveland. He didn’t know a bracha from a baloney sandwich. He had a long ponytail, wore ripped blue jeans and a grey fuzzy sweater and always had this big silly grin on his face.

He was also the funniest guy I had ever met. When I wasn’t teaching him Jewish philosophy in the classroom, we’d explore the alleyways of the Old City...

talking about the Holocaust, the Babylonian exile and Steve Martin. Whenever we would get into a debate about anything, Tom would conclude by saying: “I don’t think the historical records will bear you out on this one, Bert.”

In July 1989, I was finally drafted. Tom stayed on at the Yeshiva, and on my very first leave from the Army, right after basic training, I went to visit him. He was still living in the Yeshiva dorms, housed in a five-hundred-year-old Crusader building on Misgav Ladach Street in the Old City. During the War of Independence, the building had served as a military outpost for the *Palmach*, the pre-state military.

I got there around midnight just as it began to drizzle outside. Still wearing my uniform and proudly shouldering my Glilon assault rifle, I made my way up the three flights of stairs to the roof where Tom’s room was located. I opened the door without knocking and I saw Tom sitting on his bed blowing bubbles in a weird-looking plastic bottle.

I stared for a moment trying to figure out what the hell he was doing. “Is this the way you spend your time?” I shouted at him. “I’m out there risking my life trying to defend the country and you’re getting your kicks by blowing bubbles into a water bottle like a baby?” Tom looked up at me and smiled his usual silly grin. “Bert, are you an idiot or what? This is a bong. I’m smoking pot.”

In my defense, I should say that I came from a very sheltered yeshiva background. I had never taken drugs, obviously, and had never seen any kind of drug paraphernalia. But before I could even ask what a bong was, my eye caught sight of something else in the room. Something that made me freeze. In the middle of Tom’s bedroom, dangling from a chain attached to the ceiling, was an old, rusty hand grenade.

As it happens, I had just spent an entire week in the army practicing throwing grenades. And if I learned one thing that week it was what kind of damage they can do. I slowly asked Tom in a hushed voice: “What *the fuck* is a grenade doing in your bedroom?”

As if it was nothing, Tom looked at me and said, “hanging, Robby… Just hanging.”

“Seriously?” I said, terrified. “Chill out!” Tom came back at me. “I found it in one of the crevices in the wall here. Don’t worry, it’s not live.”

“And how exactly do *you* know it’s not live?” I asked.

“Because I’ve been throwing it against the wall and playing catch with it. It’s all goooood,” he replied with a little slur. “Don’t worry.” And then he went back to blowing some more bubbles into his bong and inhaling more thick smoke.

Scared shitless, I carefully approached the hanging grenade and began examining it from all angles. This was not one of the modern M67 grenades with a smooth exterior I knew from my training. It was a classic WWII grenade, with skin like a Hershey bar. When it explodes, all those thick squares on the outer shell break up into large and deadly metal chunks. I imagined someone had hidden it in the wall and forgotten about it back in 1948. It still had its pin and handle intact, meaning that in theory, at least, it could still be in working order.

The bottom of the grenade had a hole in it because someone, God knows who, had unscrewed and removed its delay fuse. So yeah, the situation was even worse than I had thought. I slowly and gently inserted my pinky inside the grenade, exactly as I was taught to do in basic training.

I felt around its inner walls and there - to my horror - it was: A thick layer of what felt like chalk. *That* was the explosives.

“Tom,” I shrieked. “There are *definitely* explosives inside this grenade.” Tom just smiled at me, and said, “I don’t think the historical records will bear you out on this one, Bert.”

I told Tom we had to call the police immediately and hand it over to them. He quickly stood up: “No!” he insisted. “I’m going back to America in two weeks and I want to bring the grenade home as a souvenir.”

“Are you *fucking* insane?” I yelled. “You’re going to try to bring a live grenade onto an airplane at Ben Gurion airport?”

“Yup,” he said, sitting back down on his bed and letting out his famous rolling laughter.

We argued back and forth. It was serious. Our first and only fight. I told him it wasn’t safe and that he could both get killed and kill other people. At the bare minimum, I predicted, he’d end up in prison. He said he didn’t care. I told him I would call the police whether he liked it or not. He told me it was *his* property and *his* decision and that I should just butt out.

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Over the last few days we’ve been overwhelmed by the love pouring in from so many of you who heard our listener drive and decided to support Israel Story.

As anyone who’s listened to even a single episode of the show knows, the Israel we try to explore is all about its people. About its diversity and complexity. About a place that’s both genuinely wondrous and utterly messed up. That cracks you up one moment, and brings you to tears the next. That’s heartfelt, and bizarre, and interesting.

So help us with this mission. Help us tell a nuanced story of Israel. One which isn’t simple or uni-dimensional. One which doesn’t just replicate the usual coverage we see on the news or read about in the papers, or hear about from advocacy groups and political lobbies. One that’s different and diverse and… real.

All you have to do is go to our site, israelstory.org, and press that big red “donate” button. Thanks to each and every one of you for opening up your heart, and supporting the show. All donations are tax-deductible, and since our show is independent, when you support Israel Story, you’re supporting us, directly.

OK, back in Jerusalem, poor Robby was desperately looking for a solution that would keep both his friend and his friendship alive. But given Tom’s fierce objection to calling the cops and handing over the old grenade, that seemed increasingly unlikely. It was a lose-lose situation, and Robby was running out of ideas.

That’s when a half-baked compromise suddenly popped into his head. It wasn’t a good one, even *he* knew that, but it was the best he could muster. Tom’s room, you’ll recall, was on the roof of the yeshiva dorm. The next building over, the one right next door, was already in the Muslim Quarter. And on *its* roof, surrounded by thick cement walls, was an ancient grave of an Arab sheikh. A grave which - Robby thought - might be the way out of this impending catastrophe. Alright, back to Robby.

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**Robby Berman (narration):** I suggested to Tom that I pull the pin and drop the grenade on top of the tomb. It was as safe a bet as I could see: If it went off, the walls would contain the blast and no one would get hurt. And if it didn’t go off, I conceded with a heavy heart, Tom could go collect the grenade and do whatever the hell he wanted with it. If he wanted to get arrested at the airport, that was his problem. After a somewhat Talmudic debate about each possible eventuality, he finally agreed.

We stepped out to the roof. It was dark, drizzling and a bit eerie. Two cats somewhere off to the side were going at it. I stood at the edge of the wall. Tom stood behind me.

I grabbed the pin of the grenade, twisted it counterclockwise just as I was taught, pulled it out, held it over the wall, and dropped it. We both heard the handle pop off, as it was supposed to, and Tom and I ran a few steps back and jumped onto the wet rooftop floor. And then…

Nothing. Deafening silence. Seconds turned into minutes and before long Tom was grinning from ear to ear. “Told you so, Robby.”

He got up and headed toward the wall to retrieve the grenade. But I reached out and grabbed him by the collar. “Tom,” I started. “I know I made a deal with you. But now we have to call the police.” Tom cried foul play. “What? You promised!”  
  
“Look Tom, this was one of the dumbest ideas I’ve ever had. I *know* there are explosives inside because I felt them. Maybe the grenade didn’t explode because it was rusty or old. And maybe all it needs is one more sharp movement, one more knock, and it will detonate. You’ll pick it up and BOOM!”

Tom was pouting but I was determined. Somehow, finally, what I said began to make sense to him. Maybe the pot was wearing off. Anyway, I was going to get the bomb squad.

But that was easier said than done. I knew that if I were to call the police, we’d be asked what happened. I couldn’t tell the police, that I - an IDF soldier in full uniform - had pulled the pin on a grenade and thrown it into the Muslim Quarter. Let’s just say that that wouldn’t play well on the morning news. And it would definitely not sit well with my commander.

I told Tom we needed to coordinate our stories. “Here’s what happened,” I said. “I came to visit you, you were playing solitaire. I went out to the roof for a breath of fresh air while you finished up the game. I found the grenade next to the tomb, and I told you I was going to get the police. That’s it. You got it?” Tom said he understood. But since Tom had also spent the evening smoking pot, I asked him to repeat and rehearse the story.

Growing up, I had watched enough episodes of Columbo that I could imagine exactly what would come next: A cigar-smoking detective rubbing his chin with his thumb trying to catch us in a minor inconsistency. I could literally hear him ask:

# **Columbo:** One more thing, sir, I almost forgot.

**Robby Berman (narration):** ‘Just one last question, young man - did you first go to the police and then tell Tom you found the grenade or did you first tell Tom you found the grenade and then you went to the police?’

# **Columbo:** Huh, gee. I almost forgot what I came here to ask you!

**Robby Berman (narration):** I knew we needed to get the timeline right so I repeated the chronology over and over again.

“Remember Tom, I told you I found the grenade first and only then did I go to the police.” “I got it. I got it,” he said, still annoyed at me for depriving him of his prized souvenir. “I’m not an idiot.”

I didn’t have to go far to find a soldier to whom I could report the incident. The entrance to the Kotel was right around the corner from the dorm, and there was always a soldier standing guard there. I caught my breath and went up to him. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, I told the soldier that I had found an old WWII grenade nearby. I asked him if he could call a bomb disposal expert to get rid of it and I specifically pleaded that he *not* to make a big deal out of it. He looked at me like I was insane, and he called it in - the highlight of his shift, I’m sure. Maybe of his entire army service.

Within minutes what seemed like hundreds of policemen and soldiers descended upon the Old City. A military helicopter began circling overhead, sweeping the courtyards and alleyways with a cone of white light.

I led the bomb squad to the grenade, they placed it in bomb-proof box and took it down to the Kotel. The whole Plaza was immediately cleared. The police took me, Tom and the few dozen other late-night daveners into a nearby tunnel. A couple of cops stayed close to us to make sure we didn’t bolt before they could question us.

“Robby, you are such a *schmuck*!” Tom whispered to me. “The grenade wouldn’t have blown up. You made such a big deal about no...

Tom turned white. The severity of what just went down began to sink in. I could almost see the thoughts running through his brain. ‘This was the grenade he had been throwing against the wall, playing catch with and hanging above his bed while he slept.’

The police marched us up the stairs towards the Arab shuk. Our destination? The *Kishle*, an old Ottoman police station, right next to Jaffa Gate. Tom was unusually quiet as we began walking, and his eyes were darting all around. He mumbled to me that he needed some pot to calm down.   
  
“Tom,” I replied, “you realize we’re being escorted by the police on the way to a police station, right?”

That didn’t seem to deter him. He told the cop he was cold and seeing as we were going to pass by his dorm building anyway, he asked if he could go upstairs and grab a jacket. To my surprise, the cop agreed. When Tom came down, he had a big grin on his face and a joint and a lighter in his pocket.

When we entered the *Kishle* we were placed in a cold, empty cell with two cots. They swung the cell door shut and locked us in.

We were told that we would have to wait until the detectives came and that it could take a few hours. Just as soon as the cops walked away, Tom took off his sweater and jacket and stuffed it at the foot of the cell door. He then took out the joint and lit up.

“Tom, are you fucking nuts!?” I said in a frantic whisper. “We’re in a jail cell and you’re smoking pot? And besides, why the hell did you put your sweater down on the ground by the cell door?”

“Oh, I always stuff it under the door,” he said, “so people outside can’t smell the pot.”

I looked at Tom’s smoke as it wafted through the iron bars. “Does this look like a normal door to you?” I said. “It’s bars. Just bars. They can smell your pot in Amman.”

A few hours later, the detectives showed up. We were taken out of the cell and placed in two different rooms to be interrogated separately. I quietly prayed that Tom would stick to the script.

A short stocky cop sat me down at a table in a small empty room and said to me in Hebrew: “Berman, what were you doing on the roof tonight?”

“Well,” I began, fully prepared, “I went to visit my friend Tom, but he was busy playing cards so I was just walking around on the rooftop until his game was over, and then I found the grenade.” I honestly thought he would say “OK, you’re free to go.” But that didn’t happen.

“Did you have a flashlight with you tonight?” he asked looking right at me.

“No," I said, wondering where he was going with this.

“Well, there was no moon tonight, so how did you see where you were going on the roof?”

“I have good eye-sight,” I answered, as I pushed my thick eyeglasses a little higher up on my nose.

“Did you have an umbrella with you tonight?” he continued.

“No.”

“Do you always walk around in the rain without an umbrella?”

All these questions were beginning to add up and started weighing heavily on my chest. “It was only drizzling,” I said, “and I actually found the rain quite refreshing.”

He clearly wasn’t buying it. “You wear glasses and it was raining,” he went on. “Wasn’t it hard to see with the raindrops on your lenses?”

“I got by,” was the best answer I could come up with.

Now he went in for the kill.

“So you mean to tell me that on a rooftop with no streetlights, on a night with no moon, with no flashlight and with raindrops on your glasses you looked down into a gravesite surrounded by walls and saw a small black grenade?”

“Now that’s a good question,“ I admitted, trying to buy some time so I could think. Somehow we hadn’t covered that one in our cover story! I scrambled to come up with a plausible explanation.

“Well I was afraid to tell you this before,” I began. “But I had jumped down into the grave area to see the tombstone up close, and that’s when I found it.”

“Were you the one who threw the grenade?”

“Of course not,” I said.

“OK… but just one more thing: When you found the grenade did you go right away to the police or did you first tell Tom what you had found?”

I smiled. He *was* my Columbo after all. And Tom and I had this down.

I opened my mouth and I said: “First I told Tom that I had found a grenade and then I went to the police.” At that very moment the door swung open and the other detective popped his head in. “Yossi,” he said to my interrogator. “The American doesn’t speak Hebrew. And my English is shit. Do you speak any?”

“Nope,” Yossi said.

“What should we do?” the other one asked. “Wake up Avrumi?”

“It’s 4:00AM!” Yossi shouted. “You want to wake Avrumi up at four in the morning? He’ll kill us.”

This, I realized, was my get-out-of-jail-free moment. I cleared my throat and I said in the most authoritative Hebrew I could summon: “*Ani medaber anglit, ani yachol letargem lachem.* I speak English. I can translate for you.”

There was a pregnant pause in the room. They looked at each other. Then, impatiently, at their watches. Then they shifted their gaze to me and shrugged. “OK,” the guy said, “I’ll bring him in.”

Before I knew it, Tom was sitting next to me. They asked me to ask him all kinds of questions. Our versions were aligned and the story was adding up. Till they got to the last question. “Ask Tom,” Columbo ordered me, “if after you found the grenade you told him about it and then went to the police or you went to the police first and then you told him.”

I turned to Tom and said in English: “The detective wants to know if I told you about the grenade first and then went to the police or the other way around.” Tom recognized that I had prepared him for this exact question, and he broke out into his big stupid grin.   
  
Loudly and assertively he said, “Robby, first you went to the police to report the grenade and *then* you came back to tell me about it.”

It was the exact *opposite* of what we had rehearsed.

Tom looked at me, all satisfied with himself. I, on the other hand, was speechless. Too afraid to look at the detectives, I imagined the worst. We were toast. I’d be kicked out of the army, and we’d both be called Jewish terrorists and thrown in jail.

But nothing happened. Utter silence. I slowly turned towards the detectives trying to evaluate whether they had understood Tom’s reply. Nada. Zilch. Efes. They just stared at me, waiting for me to translate.

“Uhhh,” I muttered. “Tom said that I told him first and then went to the police.”

Columbo and his partner looked at each other with a tired glance they said “OK, you’re free to go.”

Seventeen years after we got away with it, scot-free, my dear friend Tom Cole died, presumably from a deep vein thrombosis he got after getting off a plane. I’ve always suspected that his death might have had something to do with his drug use, but I’m sure that if Tom were here today he would look at me with his big silly grin and say, “I don’t think the historical records will bear you out on this one, Bert.”

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**Mishy Harman (narration):** Robby Berman. Joel Shupack edited and produced this piece, with help from Yochai Maital, James Feder and Zev Levi. He also arranged the scoring with music from Blue Dot Sessions. As always, Sela Waisblum mixed it all up.

**Mishy Harman:** What compelled you now, thirty years later, to confess?

**Robby Berman:** Umm, well… You know, the statute of limitations I think is seven years, even in Israel and the world should know who threw the grenade in 1989.

**Mishy Harman:** Yeah, seems like you really made some great choices there when you were twenty-three.

**Robby Berman:** Right, right, well, this is right before Rosh HaShana, so I’m glad to have this confession, get it off my chest and move on to the next exciting adventure.

**Mishy Harman (narration):** So, with that confession, we wish you all a meaningful Day of Atonement and a *gmar hatima tova*. Please consider going to israelstory.org and starting off the new year with a gift to Israel Story.

Remember - listener support is what makes this program possible. People like you, who care about Israel and care about storytelling, are the reason that Israel Story exists. So thank you.

We’ll be back very soon with all new and wonderful Israel Story episodes. So till then, from myself and the entire Israel Story team - *shana tova u’metuka,* a happy and sweet new year, thank you very much, *shalom shalom* and *yalla bye.*

*[End Song]*

\*\*\* END \*\*\*