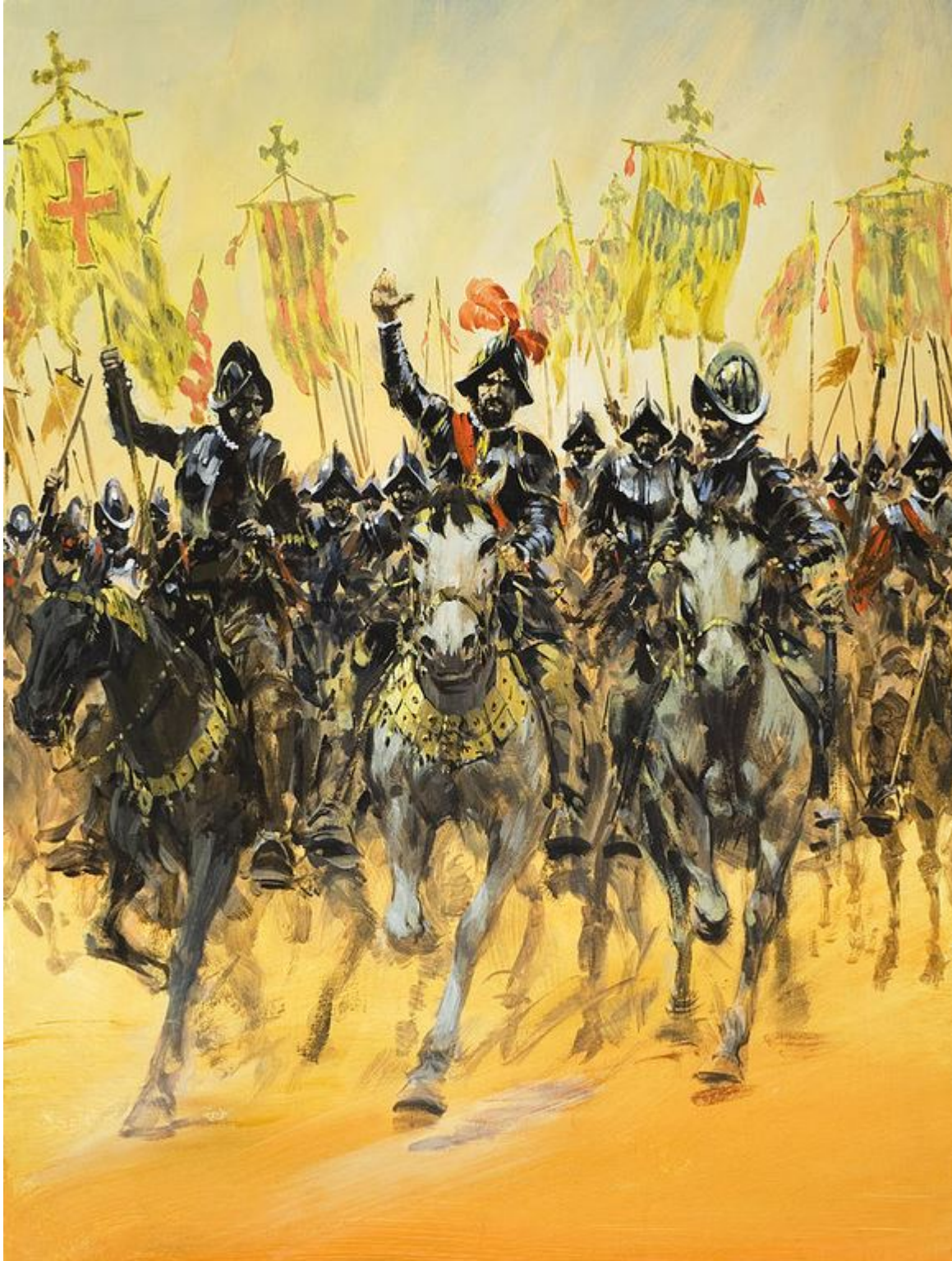


# Aleph Hé

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (May 2023)



*Conquistadors*, Graham Coton

Although I spend most of my working time trying to explain Jewish and Israeli culture and history to Moslem Arabs and Berbers and to the Euro-American expats who live and work here in Morocco, there are things that I do simply for their own sake. As Aristotle once wrote, happiness is a goal in and of itself (And yes, he was translated into Hebrew and Arabic during the Spanish middle ages).

So it was with some enthusiasm that I heard that the now-world famous Moroccan Israeli singer Emile Zahran was coming from Ashkelon Israel to Morocco to worship at the tomb of one of our Jewish saints. Zahran was coming to the hilula of Rabbi Pinto. The local press reported:

*Rabbi David Hanania Pinto, head of the 'Orot Chaim & Moshe' Institutions in Ashdod, a fifth-generation descendant of Rabbi Haim Pinto of Morocco Israelis of Moroccan descent stepped down last week from an El Al Airlines aircraft for a visit to Morocco, with many arriving to mark the anniversary (hilula) of the death of the famed Rabbi Haim Pinto.*

*A record 2,000-plus Moroccan Jews from around the world arrived in the city of Essaouira to mark the rabbi's hilula, according to Morocco World News. "I am sure they will enjoy discovering this wonderful historical city (Essaouira) that I personally adore," enthused Eyal David, Israel's deputy head of mission in Morocco. This was the first such visit since the start of the coronavirus pandemic to the tomb of the rabbi, who passed away on the 26th day of the Hebrew month of Elul. The rabbi, who served as the Jewish leader of Essaouira, was an extremely popular scholar and teacher. Jews flock to the rabbi's tomb on pilgrimage each year to mark the anniversary of his passing with prayers at the gravesite in the city's old Jewish cemetery.*

*Hundreds of Moroccan Jews sang and danced this year at the tomb while holding pictures of King Mohammed VI and waving the Moroccan flag. Israel and Morocco re-established diplomatic ties in December 2020, with Morocco becoming the fourth Arab signatory to the historic Abraham Accords.*

*Since that time, Morocco and Israel have taken a series of measures to strengthen those ties. This past April, more than 15,000 Israeli tourists visited Morocco to celebrate Passover.*

Emile was set to play at a number of the celebrations during this time. He also wanted to pray in the Nahon synagogue with us here in Tangier and he wanted to give an intimate concert the evening that the Sabbath ended. We limited the participants to fifty as that is about the maximum we can squeeze into this small house of worship.

And so the question is, "What was he going to play?" The answer is something that should make any Jew a believer.

Ozziel, the head of the surviving Jewish community, explained to a group of visiting American Jewish visitors one evening over dinner after the synagogue service.

"When you come to Tangier you see a marvelous white-washed Arabian nights city on the Mediterranean with a small Jewish community. Yes, we are now less than a few hundred. But we represent something much much bigger. We represent—and we are descended from—the Jews of Spain. We are their living survivors. We are their representatives and their cultural stewards so to speak. We are the survivors of the expulsion of 1492 and we speak in their name.

“Some of our ancestors came to Spain after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans. We flourished there. The Muslims and Christians turned out to be equal opportunity patrons and persecutors. On both sides of the religious divide, they would tolerate us for a while and then the pogroms and expulsions would begin.

“When Ferdinand and Isabella conquered the Sultanate of Granada, they threw us out. We were not allowed to take gold or silver or anything valuable with us. Those that survived the journey to Tangier arrived here penniless.

“We did bring with us the secular and religious poems of the great medieval Spanish Jewish poets, Yehuda Ha Levi, Shlomo Ibn Gavirol and so many others who had written Hebrew poetry, both secular and profane, in the style of their secular Arab neighbors, who during the Spanish middle ages were engaged in their own poetic and cultural renaissance.

“Those poems which were of a sacred nature entered into the liturgy of our community. Many of the others disappeared from oral tradition, were lost for centuries and then turned up in medieval manuscripts in the hands of Jewish antiquities dealers in Baghdad, just before and after the British established their mandate there. They were then bought up by Jewish book collectors and scholars in London England. Over the last century these works have been edited and published by American Jewish and Israeli scholars.

“These poems are now taught as literature in Israeli schools and Jewish studies programs in the diaspora. But for us, they are still living musical phenomenon. Our versions have been sung and made famous by Rabbi musicians like Haim Louk, the late Sami el Maghribi and singers like Zahran who although raised in Morocco and was musically imprinted here, has a growing following in Israel.”

He pulled out his cell phone, got onto YouTube, and played us a fragment of this [music](#).

Ozziel continued, "Let me tell you what kind of man Ibn Gavirol was." He pulled out a piece of paper and read,

"Solomon ibn Gabirolor Solomon ben Judah—in [Hebrew](#), שְׁלֹמֹה בֶּן יְהוּדָה אִבְּנֵי גַבִּירוֹל, [romanized](#), Shlomo Ben Yehuda ibn Gabirol— was an 11th-century [Andalusian poet](#) and [Jewish philosopher](#) in the [Neo-Platonic](#) tradition. He published over a hundred poems, as well as works of biblical exegesis, philosophy, ethics and satire. One source credits ibn Gabirol with creating a [golem](#), possibly female, for household chores.

"Every time I cross the strait and arrive at the Spanish port of Malaga, I remember Ibn Gavirol, as he was born there. My favorite poem that he wrote is called Shachar or the Dawn in English. Let me sing it to you in the mode called Hijaz al Msharki."

He began singing.

*"Shahar, I will ask you to be kind and exalted  
I will prepare before you my morning and also my evening*

*Before your greatness, I will stand and be afraid  
for your eye will see all the thoughts of my heart.*

*What is it that the heart and the tongue can do  
to you and what spiritual strength is in my heart?*

*Behold, it will be good for you, a human singer,  
therefore  
by you while you will be the breath of God in me*

*The dark light creates my soul  
My listening rang and heard my prayer.'*

“And so, ladies and gentlemen, for those of you who will be coming next week to hear Zahran, this is the kind of thing that he will sing for you.”

Chazzan and singing star Emile Zahran arrived on an El Al flight from Tel Aviv to Rabat. An embassy car picked him up and he was taken to one of the Jewish houses in old Tangier as he and his family are kosher. Our local kosher chef was on call to serve their needs.

When I met him, he was very emotional, “You know,” he said, “I left here when I was nine. I am very Israeli, very happy in Ashkelon, but there is nothing like visiting the place of your birth. I hear the melodies jump off the trees and flowers when I walk down the street, go to the port, see the birds fly and smell the Atlantic Ocean.”

Within four years of his arrival in Israel while still a teenager, Zahran was singing at weddings, circumcisions and family festivals across the length and breadth of the land. He was a local success story. His three-octave range gave him the nickname of “the nightingale,” a word and metaphor often used by the medieval Spanish poets, and his repertoire includes their para liturgical piyyutim (hymns), Moroccan love songs, Jewish, Arab and other North African and near eastern songs. He loves music, loves his audience and they love him back.

In 1999 he did an American tour with a small ensemble. He was

well-received and has gained a growing appreciation by non Jews interested in what is now called "World Music."

When we met I regaled him with tales told to me by my late grandmother who was born in Tangier. He was impressed by my knowledge of Sephardic culture, for my father comes from the Ashkenazic side of the Jewish people. As so many of our family have worked for the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs over the decades, we thought of ourselves as Sabras first (born in the land) and a mixture of ethnic backgrounds second, although for me the magical tales of my Tangieri grandmother always held me in thrall.

After dinner Zahran, who is the first to admit that he is not a historian or scholar told us the following tale. As he took his third glass of tea, he began his tale.

"Well you know that I am not the first Jew to have ever come to America and somehow as I played this or that North American or Mexican city, I had this peculiar desire to find out who was the first American Jew. I was in for a surprise.

"After playing a free concert in Central Park for the World Music Society I walked over to the library on 42<sup>nd</sup> street. It is an unbelievably beautiful building and I lucked into a walking tour before I visited the library. The whole thing is done in marble in the style of Napoleon the Third of France and it feels like it was somehow transplanted from the streets of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris.

"The tour was wonderful but the young tour guide seemed to be more inclined to keep reminding us that the library staff "are on the left" and that they have the people's interest at heart in all and everything they do. Oh yes, and that the mayor himself has a library card here.



"After the tour I went to the main reading room, a well lit, long room with marvelous paintings on the ceiling, filled with old fashioned wooden reading desks with small over head lights, something like the study or library that you see in the Indiana Jones films.

"I made an appointment with the librarian, explained who I was and what I was doing in New York City and that I wanted to know who the first Jew in America was. She was quite helpful. Her name was Esther Cohen.

"Miss Cohen collected a number of books and printed out a number of articles and then piled them on the table. In her charming but short-tempered Manhattan style and with a bit of a Brooklyn accent, she said to me, 'I think you will find your man in these documents. His name was Hernando Alonzo. I am sure the new mayor will be delighted to know that the first American Jew was a Latino.' She walked away before I could answer her.

"I began reading and discovered that the man in question had fought beside Hernan Cortes when he conquered the capital city of the Aztecs, Tenochtitlan. As I read some of the first-hand accounts of this remarkable, brutal, military and political triumph, I came upon this description of the city written by Cortes himself and concluded that he must have believed that this city was greater and more wonderful than even the Jerusalem that King Solomon built.

"He wrote this in a letter to the King of Spain:

*'This great city of Tenochtitlan [Mexico] is situated in this salt lake, and from the main land to the denser parts of it, by whichever route one chooses to enter, the distance is two leagues. There are four avenues or entrances to the city, all of which are formed by*



*artificial causeways, two spears' length in width. The city is as large as Seville or Cordoba; its streets, I speak of the principal ones, are very wide and straight; some of these, and all the inferior ones, are half land and half water, and are navigated by canoes. All the streets at intervals have openings, through which the water flows, crossing from one street to another; and at these openings, some of which are very wide, there are also very wide bridges, composed of large pieces of timber, of great strength and well put together; on many of these bridges ten horses can go abreast. Foreseeing that if the inhabitants of this city should prove treacherous, they would possess great advantages from the manner in which the city is constructed, since by removing the bridges at the entrances, and abandoning the place, they could leave us to perish by famine without our being able to reach the main land—as soon as I had entered it, I made great haste to build four brigantines, which were soon finished, and were large enough to take ashore three hundred men and the horses, whenever it should become necessary.'*

“The man who built the brigantines was Hernando Alonzo. He was a gifted carpenter and blacksmith. He was born in Spain probably in the year 1460. So he was still probably in his thirties when he went to Cuba and helped the governor conquer the island. He supplied the Spaniards there with beef and pork and thrived economically. When Cortes went to Mexico the governor of Cuba was furious and sent an expedition to Mexico to arrest Cortes. Alonzo was part of that war party but went over to Cortes' side and was instrumental in the helping him build the boats for the conquest of Tenochtitlan.

“When the Aztecs were finally defeated, he was given an

estate near Mexico City with much land, Indian laborers and potential access to the silver mines of Mexico. He was part and parcel of the get rich quick mentality of the Conquistadors. As Cortes himself once wrote, "*I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart which can be cured only with gold.*" Alonzo prospered. He married three times and one of his wives gave him a daughter. Then something terrible happened.

"The rulers of Spain and the "Old Christians" of the reconquest became obsessed with the fact that the remaining Jews of Spain who had opted for conversion rather than expulsion, may just be secret Jews. These Conversos as they were called, were thought to be hiding their Jewish practices and so the church and the authorities encouraged anyone who may have seen evidence of these practices to come forward and secretly inform on their neighbors or even close family members. This was part of the Spanish Inquisition, a creation of Church and State that set up an enormous network of spies, informers, interrogators, torturers and executioners all united by the desire to root out heresy and punish the heretics among them.

"Conveniently for the church and the authorities when someone was arbitrarily arrested, interrogated and questioned under torture the inevitable occurred, a forced or invented confession, for most of the time the accused had no idea what they were being accused of. And so their enemies often inherited their land, their money and their ability to create wealth in a pre industrial society.

"The trial of Hernando Alonzo is well documented by the Inquisition. They took notes of all and everything that happened to a person that they arrested, interrogated, tortured, tried and often burnt to death. I found the Latin documents, photocopied them and took them home. A friend of my daughter who is studying medieval European history at Bar Ilan University helped me with the translations. It was

horrifying to read them.

“In his trial, Alonzo was accused of ‘Jewish Practices’ –specifically a ritual witnessed by a secret informer whereby after his child was baptised in the church he took him to a place where a mockery of the baptism was carried out in order to reclaim the child’s Jewish identity. One scholar describes it, *‘In the presence of invited friends, so the report stated, he was put into a washbowl, wine was poured over his head and allowed to run down over his genitals;it was then drunk by the parents and guests.’*

“There is no such Jewish ritual of this kind, but Alonzo was convicted regardless. Of course, he confessed as the Inquisition threatened to torture him. He confessed to his crime and begged for mercy.

“So with the Inquisition (who remind me of the Mafia), once you confessed, you had a trial, were convicted, asked to repent and demonstrate your belief in Catholicism in the hope that you could get away with flogging, solitary confinement or banishment, just short of being burnt at the stake. In Alonzo’s case, you can imagine his dread and astonishment when they sentenced him to burning at the stake. We do not know if they gave him the privilege of being strangled to death before they burnt his body or whether he was denied that last privilege.

“I also discovered that when Cortes was still trying to conquer Tenochtitlan he invited a group of Aztec nobles to a meeting and then had them burnt to death. It seemed to be a popular pastime of Spaniards at the time, whether secular or religious. I think the Mafia are a tad more morally advanced.

“What I did find out was that the Church believed it should rule Mexico and they resented the power of the Conquistadors. They wanted to show them who is boss. As

Cortes was back in Spain fighting for his legacy, by accusing Alonzo of being a Jew the Inquisition made sure that none of his comrades in arms would step forward to defend him, as they too could be accused of "Jewish practices.

"I made a list of the the names and dates of some of the first Jewish martyrs who were burned at the stake by the Inquisition in the early days of Colonial Mexico:

*Hernando Alfonso 1528*

*Gonzalo DE Morales 1528*

*Garcia Gonzales Robber 1579*

*Dona Leonor Carnival Y Deandre 1596*

*Don Isabel Rodriguez DE Granddad 1596*

*Luis DE Carnival Junior 1596*

*Dona Catalina DE la Cueva 1596*

*Manuel Diaz 1596*

*Manuel de Lucena 1596*

*Dona Beatrix Enriquez de la Playa 1596*

"I think we should say prayers for the dead for these fine and good people whose only crime was that they either still believed in the Jewish faith or, before they became Catholics, had been born into Jewish families."

We were silent and then as one we sang Kaddish, the prayer for the dead.

As Emile was about to leave the house he said, "I am not a scholar but I am still not sure that Alonzo was really Jewish because a few years later the Inquisition reopened the case and said that the evidence had been insufficient for him to be

executed. What the ...? Maybe he really was a devout Catholic converso with no interest in the Jewish religion?"

Ozziel asked him to wait a minute just before he got into the car. He then turned to me and Emile and said, somewhat conspiratorially, almost as if he was trying to evade a potential Inquisition informer.

"Listen to me. It is well known that there were Spaniards who tried to enter Mexico before Cortes arrived. Some of them were captured by the Mayan Indians and enslaved by their kings. They became bilingual in Spanish and Mayan. They met Cortes on the coast when he invaded and with the participation of an Aztec female slave they joined his expedition and provided him with the translations needs that were essential to his conquest.

"These Spaniards before they were caught by the Mayans buried their swords and Spanish clothes in a chest which was later sent to Montezuma the King of the Aztecs. It included a Jewish silver Menorah, a candelabra used during the holiday of Hanukkah, called a Channukia as it has eight candles.

"We know that the chest was taken from Montezuma's palace after the conquest and that Alonzo took ownership of the lamp. His daughter, after his execution, kept it hidden in the family treasure and passed it on to her children's children. During the Mexican revolution, it came into the possession of one of our congregants, a man called Solomon Alkalai (I will tell you his tale one day) who married a Mayan woman who converted to Judaism. I can show it to you."

While we paused at the door, Ozziel came back carrying a

beautiful embroidered bag. He took out a shiny Channukia and said, "Look at it carefully." We did. I could quite clearly make out two Hebrew Letters that had been engraved on the lamp, the Hebrew letters *Hé* and *Aleph*. The initials of Hernando Alonzo. Zahran was stunned.

He went back to his lodgings and called me the next day. He said, "I now believe that Alonzo was the first American Jew—may his memory be blessed."

However, when the news gets out, I sincerely doubt that the Mayor of New York will celebrate the first Latino Jew to have arrived in America, regardless of the opinions of a librarian named Esther Cohen.

## [Table of Contents](#)

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)