In King Solomon’s House

by Geoffrey Clarfield (May 2022)

The Oud Player, Saad Yagan, 2020

Psalm 127:1

A Song of Ascents, of Solomon.
Unless the Lord builds the house,
They labor in vain who build it;
Unless the Lord guards the city,
The watchman keeps awake in vain.

There are twelve songs that I cannot sing in public. I cannot record them. And I cannot share them with friends or family. They have taken over much of my inner voice. I listen to them throughout the day. They are my internal soundtrack and each song seems timed to go off at a certain time of day, for they are connected to the rising and setting of the sun and change ever so slightly in their timing with the changing seasons, as they have strong astrological associations. One day I must choose someone to give them to.

That does not mean that I have no time for Monteverdi, Rossi, Bach, Mozart, Bob Dylan, Bob Marley, Bob Seeger or our own Arik Einshtein whose voice and music expressed the inner life of so many Israelis for a good few decades before his untimely death. In between the emergence of these melodies in my inner ear there is always ample time for other music. And, when I am listening to other music or playing music, these songs do not appear.

I listen to them in addition to my extensive collection of what is now called “World” music, a collection of tapes, vinyl and CD of the music of the world’s people that I have accumulated over fifty years. Here is an Egyptian folk song that I have listened to since I first discovered it when I was 15 years old. It is timeless, almost eternal, but not quite.

No, these songs are different. They are ancient, haunting. I am pledged, on my life and the lives of my children not to

reveal them to a single soul, at least not yet. I cannot let you hear them. It all started in 1971, in Jerusalem of course, during my first visit to the city.

I was fifteen years old in 1968 when the six day war broke out. I followed it on television and read about it in the newspapers. The press was not terribly sympathetic to Israel's plight and I knew little about Israeli or Jewish history for that matter.

I was content where I was, the third child of middle class Jewish parents, in a lovely suburb, a kind of Jewish version of "Leave it to Beaver" and I was famous! That is to say I appeared regularly on TV, radio and stage. I was being trained classically as a singer at the conservatory and had successfully auditioned for a British broadway musical that would have taken me to New York had my parents not nixed it, for good reasons.

And so, out of curiosity I decided to give myself a lesson in Jewish history and culture. I found out that there was a Jewish library near my house, within walking distance. I joined and befriended the librarian, a bookish man my father's age with a mild Eastern European accent. I started with the Kabbala, or what I could find written about it in English in 1968.

The German Jewish Israeli scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem had translated part of the Zohar into English. I read it just after the summer of love. I had fully absorbed Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club band and had bought my first recordings of the haunting classical sitar of Ravi Shankar. I read these excerpts from the Zohar with delight, and then a dry history of Jewish mysticism by the master himself. I also discovered something I had not been taught in school, that during the Renaissance, Christian mystics had learnt to read Aramaic and Hebrew and immersed themselves in the Jewish Cabbala. It was thought that some Muslim mystics in

medieval Spain had an Arabic version of the Zohar. This surprised me.

I then set out to read general Jewish history, the history of the rise of the State of Israel, Biblical archaeology, the Jewish communities of the Islamic world and a tedious five hundred page volume about my own Eastern European ancestors, The Course of Modern Jewish History by Howard Morley Sachar.

At the same time, I made a weekly pilgrimage to the fine arts library in my city. There they had an extensive collection of world music. For two dollars a year I could borrow any one or two or three of these albums for two weeks. I spent hundreds of hours "sound chair travelling" in the mountains of Northern Morocco, among the gypsies of Southern Spain, in highland Crete, in the Lamaseries of Tibetan India, in the Zen gardens of Japan and in the deep south of the USA with song collector Alan Lomax as my guide.

A few days after my 18th birthday, I boarded a plane and arrived in Tel Aviv. I arrived early in the morning and saw Ben Gurion look alikes standing on their heads on the beach. I walked through Jaffa and found the bus in the old station that would take me on a scenic trip through rural Israel to the Jezreel valley where I volunteered on a Kibbutz as an agricultural labourer.

There I befriended an Israeli writer, Nava and an Arab electrician. Every evening we would sit in front of her house. Hatim the electrician would make Turkish coffee and we would listen to the music coming from Radio Cairo-Um Kulsoum, Farid al Atrash, Ismahan, Mohamed Taha and many, many others. I was entranced. I vowed to buy an *oud*, an Arabic lute and learn how to play.

The kibbutz gave us time off after we had worked a number of weeks. I took the bus to Jerusalem and stayed at a youth hostel with an English and French volunteer. He came from

London and she from Paris. We felt like the three musketeers. We visited every holy site and every museum and trawled through the markets looking for gifts for family and friends.

I inquired if there were lute makers in the old city and an elderly merchant sent me with his son through a series of alleys that alone I would have never found and never exited on my own although I did notice that the workshop I was about to enter was about one hundred yards away from King Solomon Street. I was ushered into a workshop where a man in his thirties was making lutes, ouds. We agreed on a price and a month later I came to pick it up. Before I left they took me to what must have been an old Ottoman mansion in the backstreets of the Christian quarter, again, walking distance from the street named after this famous and wise King.

The floor there was covered with oriental rugs. The merchant asked me to sit down and offered me tea and biscuits. There was a Jewish oud player from Algeria, a Muslim Arab singer whose family had come to Jerusalem from Damascus during the British mandate, a Turkish born player of the bowed lute, the Kemenche, a Shia Persian santur player who had left Iran in the 1950s to make Jerusalem his home. Then there was a stunningly beautiful Armenian woman, a few years older than me who could sing in Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Armenian and Persian who had the proverbial voice that was as beautiful as a nightingale. I listened to them play for an hour and a half.

The woman said to me, “You are now one of us. We are your teachers. You may come here whenever you want, learn what you can and share it widely.” I eventually made my home in Israel, married there and had two children. Music became my avocation and anthropology my vocation. Although based in Israel I lived and worked in various parts of the third world as a researcher for hire. And two or three times each year, I would go to Jerusalem alone, and sit at the feet of my masters, oud in hand.

On my fortieth birthday, I was sitting in the Old Ottoman mansion listening to these musicians. They were now much, much older than I was. They asked me if I would become an "initiate" if I trusted them. Their leader now was a Christian Arab violin player named Safi. He said that they also played the "music of the spheres," twelve melodies that King Solomon himself had composed and that had been passed down from generation to generation and that over the centuries their ancestors had been chosen to keep the tradition alive. They said they would teach them to me.

They made me swear I would reveal them to no one, but that on my 80th birthday I would bring one of my music students to their disciples and I and their students in turn would share these twelve melodies with him or her. I gladly accepted. I was honoured.

They explained that they were all students of the Kabbala and had been given the melodies by their late teacher, the singing Rabbi, Shalom Shabazzi ben Nun ben Israel ben Azariah ben Gavriel whose family had preserved them in the Yemen since the sixth century and had brought them back to Jerusalem in 1900. They explained Shalom had been a great Kabbalist and his wisdom was distilled in these twelve melodies. As I left the building Safi said to me," Whomsoever guards these melodies, it is as if they live in King Solomon's house and carry his wisdom with them ."

I never quite understood why I had been chosen for this task. But later in life I found a clue. A friend of mine from Toronto, an Orthodox Jewish scientist who had come to work and live in Israel wanted to know if the division among Jews between Cohens, Levites and Israelites had a genetic basis. A we know, the Cohens and Levites descend from the priestly castes who ran the Temple rituals and sang in the Temple choir before its destruction by the Romans.

He found that there was a genetic marker among sixty per cent

of people descended from Cohens and Levites. I called him at his office at the medical school and he sent me to a lab to do the test. It was positive. The gene must have come through my mother as her father had been a Levite and a Klezmer.

My mentors in Jerusalem clearly had felt something that I did not even know about myself. They also knew that I was born on June 21st, the first day of summer, and had told me this was astrologically important. I wondered if possibly, one of my ancestors had been a musician in Solomon's Temple. Could he have possibly, long time ago known or known about the 12 melodies? Was this just a way of reminding me about something that my family had forgotten during their long persecution in Eastern Europe and their migration to the New World? Did I have to return to Jerusalem in order to hear these melodies once again? Was it my fate or destiny to once again take on the burden of this most ancient family legacy or obligation?

A number of years ago I visited the Israel Museum. I do so frequently for there is always something new to see there, as archaeologists dig up the Jewish past that has lied buried for so many centuries only to be rediscovered by the genetic descendants of the people who once, lived, loved, died and who are buried in this land. But this time I was looking for a piece of jewelry. It was a recently excavated artifact from the first Temple, Solomon's Temple. It was a beautiful earring like piece. *The Guardian*, that left leaning British newspaper had gleefully reported:

> *It all started with the pomegranate. On Christmas Eve, the Israel museum in West Jerusalem made an announcement about a tiny ivory pomegranate that had been on display at the museum since 1988, believed to have come from the First Temple of Israel. The pomegranate, the museum sheepishly revealed, was actually a fake. It was still a very old and beautiful carving, but the inscription denoting its First Temple origins had been forged.*

I was disappointed and whenever I am disappointed in Jerusalem, I go for a walk in the Old City. I found myself in the Christian quarter visiting my friend Yayha Gubran, a Christian Arab merchant and a great lover of oriental music whom I have known for twenty years. We would often sit in his shop listening to Radio Cairo. It made me feel 18 years old all over again

Geoffrey, he said in his Arabic accented English "I have sold more fake artifacts than there are exhibits in the Israel Museum. My world is filled with them. It is almost impossible to tell the fake from the real unless you excavate with a team and can prove where what was and how it came to light. The Israel Museum got the fake pomegranate but the *real one* is being held by a merchant in the Old City. I know, as God is my witness. He wants far too much money for it and so he sold them the fake as revenge. It is like that here. Trust is in short supply. This is a vendetta culture. It is very sad."

He then turned to me and in a low, almost conspiratorial voice he said, "There is another rumour going around the Old City. It is so outlandish that in my gut I feel there might just be something to it. It is said that there exists a secret brotherhood of Kabbalists; Jewish, Christian and Muslim who have been guarding twelve songs of King Solomon across the generations. They are sworn to secrecy. It is also rumoured that they must find new disciples to inherit these tunes every forty years and that that time is soon coming."

He then offered me some more coffee and biscuits. He said, "You are a musician, you play with people from around here. Could there by any truth to this bizarre rumour?"

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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.

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