

It Better Be Fun

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (August 2025)



Jaffa Gate (Shmuel Katz, 20th C)

I decided to walk to the interview. I was about to be offered a job, but I did not know what it was. I live in a beautiful apartment in Rechavia, in Jerusalem's new city, but walking distance from the Jaffa Gate of the Old City. And so, one bright and beautiful morning I left my house to find out what fate was about to hand me.

Rechavia is a suburb that was built before WWII where the apartments and the few houses that were constructed are made

of Jerusalem stone. The stone is whitish brown or brownish white, but I would not call it light brown or dark white, as it seems to glow in the afternoon sun and for a half an hour each day everything shines like gold.

Apartments in Rechavia are not cheap, and they are usually handed down across the generations like ours was from my grandfather who came from Vienna during the British Mandate. He was an expert in the Central Asian Silk Road and a scholar of early Buddhism. He was a correspondent of the assimilated Hungarian Jewish explorer Sir Aurel Stein.

Gershom Shalom, the scholar of Jewish Mysticism, lived in Rechavia as did Martin Buber and they had visitors by the likes of a Swiss physicist named Albert Einstein. My favorite neighbor was Edith Gerson-Kiwi, a German Jewish ethnomusicologist who recorded all the traditional music of Jerusalem and its Jewish and non-Jewish ethnic groups. She was very, very proud of the most exotic musical instrument in her private collection, an American Appalachian dulcimer! She had a lively correspondence with Alan Lomax the American ethnomusicologist who discovered the song, "House of the Rising Sun."

Jerusalem stone is just one more reason why songwriter Naomi Shemer wrote the song *Jerusalem of Gold*, the Israeli anthem of sadness and triumph for our survival of the 1967 war when Egypt, Jordan and Syria tried once again to wipe out the Jewish State of Israel.

How do I know this? She told me about it at my parents' apartment for, although one is a doctor and the other is an engineer, they have a soft spot for the arts and during the sixties and seventies their/our home was one of the few but fascinating remaining "Salons" that have made Jewish Jerusalem such an interesting place to live and work.

I met most of the great Israeli scholars, writers, musicians,

and artists of the time there. I took them all for granted but much of their erudition wore off on me, often unconsciously. For example, Israeli foreign minister, Abba Eban, was a frequent dinner guest, and he was my personal advisor on historical writings. He made me read a condensed version of Gibbon (from the Gateway to the Great Books, a complete collection which Ben Gurion kept in his library at Kibbutz Sde Boker) and which I found horribly boring at the time. I preferred Ian Fleming and James Bond and oh my God, when the films arrived, I had never seen female actors like the Bond Girls.

We always spoke English with Eban and his Egyptian born wife, as it was their native language. He was a brilliant linguist and spoke fluent Arabic and Persian which he had studied in England. He used to joke that Prime Minister Golda Meir spoke wonderful Hebrew— “all five hundred words of it.” There was no love lost among the elites in those days.

Contrary to popular belief, Shemer did not write her song about the Golden Dome of the Mosque of Omar. It was all about the stone. But Jews are used to “cultural appropriation” by our self-proclaimed opponents. It has been going on for a long time.

I doubt that today’s poorly educated leaders of Black Lives Matter would ever acknowledge the gift of the anti-slavery message in the Old Testament that, embedded in Christianity, was preached to America’s slaves, and gave them the Jewish idea of an Exodus to freedom. Not surprisingly when I have leisure and I walk through the streets of the New City or the Old City of Jerusalem, I carry with me the ‘weight of the Bible.’ What do I mean by this?

Well, as someone who has made a living writing research and administrative reports and yes, based on real sectoral expertise in the arts, I realize that my ancestors created a series of books that is second to none. As the late great

Canadian literary theorist, Northrop Frye once claimed, the Bible is the code that makes sense of all English Literature.

Nice to know, but it was my ancestors and not the English who wrote those books. I am supposed to still have some of their DNA in me, like the “Kurdish gene” common to Jews and the Kurds of Iraq, and not surprisingly the birthplace of Abraham. This heritage weighs on me and says, “You are a mere modern, you cannot match what we finalized in the 5th century BC and then, with the Apocrypha in the Hellenistic age—so dream on, buddy.”

Those scribes were talented guys, and they often wrote under pseudonyms like King David or Solomon. Talk about self-esteem. They had it in bundles. I continue to dream and hope that one day I may write something that at least echoes their greatness.

Yes, I hear their challenge every time I enter or leave the Jaffa gate where I have my imaginary conversations with Ned, for that is what his family called him. He has asked me to use that name exclusively when we “talk.” It is easier for him and he does not have to speak or act like a world-famous figure when we are together. I am speaking of the spirit of T.E. Lawrence who in 1917 stood just inside Jaffa Gate in his Arab headdress and British uniform when General Allenby entered the city on foot after the defeat of the Turks.

Ned once told me in one of these what I think may be waking dreams, “Yes, I know it was the Jewish Nili spies who gave us the intel that allowed us to defeat the Turks in Gaza after two colossal military failures. Yes, I know they did not get the credit for it at the time but that is how things go when you are playing the Great Game. And yes, I know about my Protestant Irish doppelganger John Henry Patterson whose Jewish soldiers in the Jewish Legion fought a lot better than my rent a Bedouin. It was not cricket you know.”

"Yes, Ned, yes" I would answer in my reverie (making fun of his ever so overpolite Oxford style of initially agreeing with me with a "Yes" that mostly but not always meant "Yes, but...") "but despite your giving the Biblical land of Jordan to your Bedouin buddies (to whom you paid mountains of gold) and which you then severed from the Mandate, we still fought them to a standstill in 1948. And remember, we were outgunned and outnumbered by your fellow British officers and their Arab Legion."

Inevitably he would answer, "Well I didn't plan on that happening. I too wanted a Jewish State, but I thought the Arabs would be happy with half of the Mandate for Palestine, and anyways Churchill wasn't around to make sure the British played fair. He paused, smiled and looked at me with his head tilted to one side, and with a warm smile said, "You do understand that I was already dead at the time? Got to go now!" Yes, Ned can be so damn exasperating at times.

And in my mind's eye I would see him disappearing like a ship over the horizon as he walked down the steps of the markets of the Old City, on King David Street on his way to visit the shop of one of his many spies and informants. Our encounters are surreal.

I took a bus to the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, and walked by the replica of the Menorah that Titus had taken from the Temple down the road to Rome after he conquered Judea in 70 AD, and from there walked to a series of high-rise buildings, very low key, but all covered in Jerusalem stone where the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is located. I presented my ID to the armed guard and then took the elevator to the top floor.

The head of the ministry was in his spacious office from where you can see the Judean wilderness and the Mount Scopus campus of the Hebrew University. Unlike his Sabra colleagues who dressed like Kibbutzniks, he was wearing a suit. He was

originally from Northern Ireland. Quite the gentleman. He reminded me of the actor, Claude Rains. I was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, long pants with a belt and leather shoes.

The Minister asked me to sit down and took out a file, "Knowledge of European art, three years in tanks, fluent in English, passable in French, Moroccan Arabic and Spanish. Speaking ability in Swahili. Knowledge of Jewish history, knowledge of Middle Eastern and African history, good understanding of criminal networks in the art world, no arrests or legal action pending, comes from a good family, loyal to the state, knowledge of world history, time spent travelling the world, Sephardic grandmother from Tangier, interested in near eastern music, amateur oud player, diplomatic and sensitive to cross cultural differences ... Well then." He left out the fact that he knew my parents well. Yes, that is how things work in Israel. Everyone knows everyone or at least someone knows someone else.

"Well then what?" I blurted out. He answered me, "Yours is the only profile of former IDF officers that fits the job description I have in front of me, and we are looking for someone just like you. Computers are rarely wrong about these things. You know, we are the high-tech nation!" Throwing caution to the winds I said, "Could you please be straight with me (dugri in Israeli slang) and tell me what is on offer here?"

The Minister got up from his seat and stared out the window. He said, "Well it is a new posting. We are looking for someone to join our diplomatic mission to the Kingdom of Morocco. We are offering you the position of Israeli Cultural Attache to the Kingdom of Morocco. Your job description will be of your own making, but it will be the creative implementation of explaining Jewish and Israeli culture to Moroccan Arabs, Berbers, and Blacks with an eye to engaging the rather large expatriate community of Europeans and North Americans who live in that ancient but modernizing state."

The Minister asked me to think about it. And, he added that there was not a lot of time. I said goodbye and went to the Ministry cafeteria. They were serving Moroccan food that day and so I had a wonderful couscous with prunes and chicken for lunch. I ordered tea and sat myself down in a corner. I lost track of time, and everything went quiet. I started to review the adventures I had had during the last few years.

First of all, a short while back I had become a newly minted PhD in European Art History with an emphasis on the depiction of Old Testament themes. Before I could even start teaching (or sell falafel in front of the National Museum as my parents feared I might have to do to make ends meet), I had been approached by the Mossad to work with them on art theft and smuggling in Israel (I began to doubt myself. Did my parents ask the Minister for a favor? I thought I had been approached solely on merit).

In the process I had helped secure the crown of the medieval Kingdom of Armenia from an excavation site in Galilee and return it to Yerevan. I had broken up a ring of nuns who were smuggling art. I had saved the country from an American terrorist who thought he was Jesus Christ, and while doing all this I had also published a number of well received academic articles in my field as my cover was an art historian for the Israel Museum. (One was a Freudian interpretation of Islamic Art.)

I had continued my clandestine relationship with a group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim musicians who were tasked with maintaining a musical tradition begun by King Solomon himself and which I helped maintain to this day. It has something to do with the Templars and their adoption of Kabbalistic philosophy. My bosses at the Mossad knew about it and thought it harmless.

And then there was that very strange experience I had on a visit to Toronto where I just might have met up with the

spirit of a dead American writer (We had spent four years there as my Dad had a contract with Solel Boneh, the Israeli engineering firm. I learnt to speak fluent, idiomatic North American English during that time as I passed puberty there and when I speak English I sound like an Anglo Canadian version of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Every once in a while, I betray myself and say, "Eh?" a typical way of saying "Understand" in Standard Canadian English. Ned once said it is an endearing way of talking.)

I sat in the cafeteria and watched the people come and go. Smartly dressed young Israeli women and men whom, having just finished the army were working for the ministry as they pursued their degrees in political science or foreign languages at the Hebrew University next door (where Sholem and Buber, my parents' buddies, used to teach).

I marveled at the young Ethiopian women who had come here on Operation Solomon now speaking fluent, idiomatic Hebrew and having adopted Israeli body language serving in the cafeteria, flirting with the ex-soldiers, and envying their Ethiopian brethren in the cafeteria who having finished their service were studying and working there like everyone else. Truly, I thought to myself, Israel is a color-blind society.

I could see everyone and everything around me as in slow motion but could not really hear them. I realized he was back. Yes, Ned was sitting beside me and said, "Well what is the offer?" I pinched myself but he did not go away. I explained the offer in some detail and just for fun I asked him, "Did you ever get an offer that you just could not refuse?"

He laughed and said, "Didn't you see the film?" I said, "What film? He answered, "Lawrence of Arabia, you dolt!" "Oh, that film," I answered with some embarrassment. He said, "Don't you remember the scene where I am offered my job?" He then quickly acted out the two parts.

Here is the dialogue: Lawrence: "Thanks. This is going to be fun."

Lawrence's boss: "Lawrence, only two kinds of creature get fun in the desert: Bedouins and gods, and you're neither. Take it from me."

"Well," Ned said, "That was MY dream job. Is this one yours?"

Ned stopped talking and put his elbows on the table. He rarely did that. It meant he was serious. I was just about to say to him, "Well, Morocco is not the desert, there are only Bedouin in the south of the country, and I hear that Tangier is one hell of a city. And I am certainly not a God!"

Ned then answered me, "Maybe it will give you something to write about. My job worked out that way." I was just about to try and answer him, but I was at a loss for words. Ned had already disappeared, as he often does, just when we get to the meat of any issue, quite exasperating. I was left alone with my thoughts.

I then remembered a short passage from his book that another one of my parent's friends had made me read when I was a teenager. Ned had once written,

All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible.

I did not have to give it further thought. This was to be my dream job. My eyes had been opened and I was dreaming about Morocco. I decided to take the job then and there. As I rode the elevator up to the top floor, I repeated to myself like

some Yogi with his mantra:

“It’s going to be fun. It’s going to be fun. It better be fun.”

[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.

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