

The Resurrection of Miriam Marmolejo

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



Picture of Old Jewish Cemetery, Mount of Olives, Jerusalem

“Shma Yisrael Adonei Alokeynu Adonai Echad.” “Here Oh Israel the Lord Our God the Lord is One.” That is how we sang it on Friday evening in the Nahon Synagogue in Tangier. Soon the less than one hour Friday evening service was over. Discreetly tailed by Hamid’s security man we walked over to Ozziel’s house, into the Moorish courtyard and up the stairs where we reclined on couches. Before we sat down to eat, I apologized to Ozziel for I had arrived at the Synagogue 15 minutes late

and they had waited for me to begin prayers.

Ozziel blessed the wine and as the only representative of the Israeli government in our minyan of ten (the minimum number of men needed for a Jewish prayer service) I recited the blessing over a fresh chala (Sabbath loaf), from the oven round Berber bread from the last Kosher bakery in Tangier. Soon after we dug into a feast of couscous, prunes and lamb, eating with our right hands and sipping wine and green tea intermittently.

After a lull in the conversation, Ozziel told me he wanted to raise an issue. I asked him if it was work for this was the Sabbath and we had an unwritten rule not to discuss clearly work-related issues, like the stock market, finance or diplomacy. He said, "It is, and it isn't" "Don't keep us in suspense," I joked with him.

He then pulled out a one-page vellum document. When I looked over at it, it was written in that no space cursive writing typical of 16th and 17th century Spain, the kind of writing that has been discouraging younger historians from dedicating their teaching and research careers to Spain at its height, because it takes years to master the script and the jobs in this field are drying up like the sand after a Saharan rainfall.

It was also discouraging young Israeli scholars from learning to read these antique documents for all the positions in the Israeli Universities dealing with what for our nation was the period of the "Inquisition," were filled with baby boomers and older, world-renowned scholars. The field had been pioneered by Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu's father, an academic pioneer and historian of the Inquisition and its Jewish victims.

Ozziel told us that he would read it and then translate it into modern Spanish for those of us who did not have his multilingual and near astonishing academic chops.

This is how it went, more or less.

May 1560

Shma Yisrael Adonai Elokenu

This is the last will and testament of Maria Marmolejo. First, I would declare in this document that my name is Miriam Marmolejo, daughter of Conversos who served King Ferdinand of Aragon. I was baptized and raised a Catholic in my father's household until the age of my menstruation when I went into our wine cellar where I saw my mother lighting Shabbat candles on a Friday evening. I asked her about this and she brushed me off while at the same time warning me not to say a word, as it could lead us into the arms of the Inquisition.

From that moment on I was possessed with an unstoppable desire to understand the true faith, Judaism. I knew nothing about it except that Jews and Judaism were enemies of Spain and regularly accused by the priesthood of having killed Christ. After many adventures I found a Rabbi, who was also a Converso but had kept up his knowledge of Torah and Talmud. His wife was a gifted seamstress and so I arranged for him to tutor me while I learnt how to make dresses for women of my class and my "betters."

A few short years later I was married off to a Spanish aristocrat "a pure blooded" Andalucian, old Catholic who did not seem to mind from his point of view the shameful origins of my upwardly mobile father. He was a nice enough man and I loved him in my own way. And I pretended to be a good and observant Catholic wife except for the fact that for every prayer and festival in the annual ritual calendar, in my mind I had a Jewish prayer or observance which I recited in the innermost recess of my soul.

His name was Cabeza de Vaca. He spent many years in the New World. He nearly died in Florida and suffered terrible

iniquities among the Indians there, but as he wrote up his memoirs when he returned to me, he became known to the King who then sent him to the Rio de Plata to establish Spanish authority. Unfortunately for him and us, having witnessed the humanity of the Indians of Florida as slave, trader and then “curandero” (a kind of curing Shaman Ozziel explained) he fell afoul of the authorities, spent time in prison but lived long enough to see his good name restored.

I had read about Cabeza de Vaca while on a canoe trip in Florida’s Everglades. Although it was a bit of a luxury safari I still had to watch out for venomous snakes, panthers, alligators and crocodiles. I made sure I never fell out of the canoe. Every evening after dinner I would put my reading headlamp, lie on my hammock and fall asleep after having read a chapter of his biography by the notable American historian Andre Resendez. The title of the book reminded me of the kinds of titles that Cervantes used. The full title is *A Land So Strange-The Epic Journey of Cabeza De Vaca-The Extraordinary Tale of a Shipwrecked Spaniard Who Walked Across America in the Sixteenth Century*.

De Vaca was well known to Americans in the 19th and early 20th century but since WWII somehow his star has waned. Conquistador biographies are no longer fashionable in this hyper woke age when half of the USA opts to cancel Christopher Columbus Day. Wikipedia is a good [reference](#) for some more background.

Ozziel kept reading:

As any admission of my Jewish identity and faith in the one God of Israel would and will prejudice and endanger the future of my children and their children, I have entrusted one of my Muslim servants to take this letter and deliver

it to the Rabbinical authorities in the Royal City of Meknes to be held there until there comes a time, when the Jewish nation shall be redeemed. At that time, I empower the necessary Jewish authorities, if they have the power to do so, to apply to the King of Spain to have my remains transferred from the Catholic cemetery in Seville to a cemetery of their choice in David's sacred city in Jerusalem.

This may take ten years, a hundred years or many more than that, but as I will die a Jew I await the resurrection upon the return of the Messiah, a descendant of King David and who will take me up to heaven with him for I have lived and died true to my faith.

We were stunned. The room was silent. The only thing you could hear was the slow ticking of the 19th century grandfather clock that sat against the wall in the corner of the room.

I looked at Ozziel and said, "If this document is confirmed as real and true, then my office must request the office of the King of Spain to release Miriam's body from a Catholic Cemetery, put it on a commercial flight to Israel and renegotiate its burial in consecrated ground somewhere in Israel?"

Ozziel could not suppress his smile and said, "Yea, something like that."

We continued to eat and drink in silence, said our goodbyes and accompanied by my security man, I walked up the heights of Tangier to my house overlooking the port.

The next day I woke up determined to fulfill Miriam's request. After all, it was her last will and testament, the State of Israel has been reconstituted and her desire is and was reasonable, given the persecution that Jews of her time

experienced. It did not help when I dug up the following article from the Jerusalem Post, but I was not deterred:

The Torah asserts that humans were created in the image of God (Deuteronomy 21:23), and therefore places tremendous value on treating corpses and their final resting spots with dignity (kavod hamet). As such, Jewish law prohibits benefiting from a corpse (YD 349:1) and all forms of its disgrace or mutilation (nivul hamet). The Talmud forbids exhuming a corpse for purely financial motivations such as identifying legal heirs for inheritance (Bava Batra 154b). We would never allow the relocation of a known cemetery simply because it was prime real estate.

Jewish law prohibits exhuming a corpse even if the intent is to immediately move the remains into a grander location (Tur YD 263). One explanation of the prohibition of reinterment invokes a mystical notion that the dead experience pain from the exposure of their remains. Some commentators readily dismiss this concern (Shu't Rashba 1:369), with others allegorically explain that the soul feels pain from the body's decomposition (Sefer Hassidim 1163). Many alternatively explain that the soul fears that divine judgment is repeated when its corpse is removed from a grave (Beit Yosef YD 363:1). Some decisors, however, believe that this notion only applies while the body decomposes, but not when mere bones remain (Noda Biyehuda Kama YD 89).

I discussed the matter with the Chief Rabbi of Casablanca and he found somewhere in Jewish law a precedent for what I was about to do.

My biggest headache was to be with the office of the King of Spain who at first categorically rejected our request.

Luckily, we hired a very good Spanish speaking Sephardic lawyer from Panama who won the day in court when he explained that today's Spanish government regularly claims ownership over Spanish colonial treasure dug up within the territorial waters of the State of Florida.

Therefore, a self-declared citizen of a once again independent state of the Jews (and recognized by Spain) had the right to petition the King to be reburied in her ancestral homeland. The Judge who heard the case was a reasonable man and also understood that if he voted against the case, it could be argued that the Spanish State was upholding the legal precedents of the Inquisition, which it most certainly did not want.

At the end of the day I flew to Israel with the body and we buried the woman on the Mount of Olives. To my shock and delight our surprise guest was none other than the Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu.

This was just some of what he said at the ceremony:

Miriam Marmolejo was a true daughter of Israel. She never gave up her faith. She may have feared the Inquisition and the torture they would have inflicted on her body before they burned her to death for apostasy had she been caught but she kept her faith to her dying day.

My father was a scholar and historian of the Inquisition. We grew up on these kinds of stories and so that of Miriam's is close to my heart. I mourn for her many descendants who never had the choice to follow the faith of their fathers although some in Mexico and Latin American who through DNA or historical studies have discovered their Jewish descendant have returned to the land of Israel and become contributing citizens in this wonderful but struggling democracy.

I salute Miriam and can only recite one prayer that she would recognize today:

"Shma Yisrael Adonei Alokeynu Adonai Echad."

His security detail quickly ushered him back to his car and whisked him away. I nearly broke down crying.

Weeks later I was in my office in Tangier and I received a registered letter. It was from a Colombian Citizen by the name of Maria Marmolejo. Here is the relevant excerpt.

...having read the article in the Spanish version of the Jerusalem Post I must then insist that I have the legal right to request the return of Miriam Marmolejo's last will and testament for I believe I am directly descended from the lady in question...

I was intrigued. Why would a Colombian citizen want to sue the Israeli government obtain this most fascinating living historical document. I went on the Internet and discovered this about the claimant:

Born in 1958 in Pradera, Colombia, María Evelia Marmolejo studied art at the Universidad de Santiago de Cali (1978–80). After Marmolejo left school, she focused on performance, producing many of her seminal works between 1981 and 1985. She has centered her art on pressing key concerns: political oppression, specifically, in 1980s Colombia; social and economic conditions in Latin America; and environmental and gender issues. Her work is characterized by its ritualistic nature and feminist and political intent, as seen in her first performance, Anónimo 1 (Anonymous 1, 1981), held at the Plazoleta del Centro Administrativo Municipal in Cali, in homage to the tortured

and disappeared during the regime of Julio César Turbay Ayala (president, 1978–82). For this performance Marmolejo's self-inflicted wounds and their subsequent healing were intended to bring to the public's attention the political violence prevalent at the time. A key example of her gender-focused work is 11 de marzo—ritual a la menstruación (March 11—ritual in honor of menstruation, 1981). The artist considers this performance to be a menstruation ritual and a celebration of the female body and the centrality of women in the origin of life.

In 1985, when the artist was two months pregnant, she self-exiled to Madrid due to the political turmoil in Colombia. There she studied video and television at the Centro de Enseñanza de la Imagen. On October 12, 1985, the artist realized the performance América at the Plaza de Colón in Madrid to protest the coming celebration of the five hundredth anniversary of the “discovery” of the Americas, which led to the deaths of sixty-seven million indigenous people as a result of colonialism. One of her most radical performances is Sesquilé, held on December 5, 1985, in the Hospital Anglo-Americano, Madrid, where she proposed that the birth of her child was to be considered as a work of art, only to be experienced at the hospital by a small group of people. In 1996 Marmolejo moved to New York, where she studied at the City University of New York (BA 2003, MA 2010). After 1985 Marmolejo produced only two performances, in 1992 and 2004; in 2013 the artist reactivated her artistic career and has presented new performances in Miami, New York, Milan, and San Pedro La Laguna, Guatemala.

I took this information to Ozziel who then wrote this letter signed by him and who asked me to send it via diplomatic post.

This is what he wrote:

As the official head of the Tangier Jewish Community under the laws of the Kingdom of Morocco I read your letter with interest. I understand that in some way you believe that as a descendant of Miriam Marmolejo you have a right to reclaim this letter as part of your family heritage. However under Jewish law and Moroccan law it is the official property of our Jewish community bequeathed to us by the lady in question, so many years ago. Another reason we cannot part with it is because it is and was the custom of the people of our faith to keep documents in a special room in the Synagogue (a geniza), and sometimes we later bury these documents in a consecrated cemetery, for any document with the name of God on it is considered sacred by our community.

Although we cannot stop you from using a copy of the document in your unusual and unconventional performance art, in the spirit of multiculturalism we hope that you would respect the rights of this indigenous Moroccan Jewish woman to respectful treatment in public, according to the values that she held dear and sacred and not those that you personally profess.

Most sincerely,

Simon Ozziel

Head of the Jewish Community of Tangier

Simon got up to leave my office and just before he closed the door he turned to me and said, "I will see you at Friday services. This time, don't be late."

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](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)