

You Have Much to Learn About Living Here

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



Untitled, Farid Belkahlia, 20th C

Fortunately, I and my staff of two, Hassan and Zenobia, had

moved up the hill from the old city into one of those Mauresque houses built by expatriates during the early 1950s, when Tangier was still an entity ruled by a consortium of Western powers just after my grandmother had left the city to study in France.

I looked out at the sea and saw racks of low-lying dark clouds coming in to the beach reminding me of films of the waves of light craft that carried soldiers to the beaches of Normandy in 1944. They just did not stop. Then the lightning struck, the thunder roared and the rain fell in sheets. The elements were aggressive as if the spirit of ancient Hercules had been summoned up by the Gods of Olympus and thrown on to this town that had forgotten its pagan roots as its citizens now only worship Allah.

I felt threatened, vulnerable, at the mercy of the elements. It reminded me of a night I once spent in a remote Nepali village in the Himalayas. I had insisted on setting up my tent outside the village as I did not want to sleep indoors. In the middle of the night the rain, the thunder and lightning bombarded the village. The noise was amplified by the amphitheater like setting of the village on a rise in between two steep forested mountains. Indra the God of Thunder was showing me who was boss. I was frightened.

I had that same feeling now as the storm just did not stop. I watched with anxiety as the rain pelted the hill side. Cars pulled over and stopped driving. People turned off the windshield wipers. A truck pulled over just below my balcony. The driver was a Rifi with his tight turban and brown djellaba. I could see him pulling out his sebsi, his long marijuana (kif) pipe and he filled the cabin with smoke. Soon after all I could see was the rain on his windshield and his blurred silhouette disappeared from sight as the smoke from his pipe filled his driver's cabin.

Hassan and Zenobia came up to the second floor from the main

floor. Hassan said, "Better we stay with you here sir until the rain passes. We could possibly get washed away if the storm does not stop and the water climbs up the hill." I was really worried. Surprisingly, Zenobia was cool as a cucumber. She even took some time to clean house and do some cooking, singing out of tune all the way through as is her custom. She took a break from work and spoke.

"Yes," Zenobia continued. "When I was five, we had a worse storm. Our house was near the port and the first floor was filled with water. We stayed upstairs for two days. Then a fisherman came and took us to higher ground. Eventually we went home. Luckily, we lost nothing as it was my mother's custom to take all our belongings upstairs as she cleaned the house thoroughly once a year before the start of Ramadan. I believe God spared us as my parents were upstanding and right-thinking Muslims. They worship the one God, like the Jews but not like the Catholic French. " She went on, "Your people believe that there was a flood long ago and that the Prophet Noah and his children survived, is that not so?" "Yes," I told her.

Whenever Zenobia wanted to discuss something about Jews and Judaism she often used the neutral expression that she had made up, "Your people-Nnass dyalek ... " rather than "The Jews" or "Al Yehudin," which in Moroccan Arabic at times is used as a curse word. Well, I knew I was not going to turn around 1300 years of prejudice in one day so I considered this a small step forward. I asked her, "It sounds like you know the story of Prophet Noah, Peace Be Upon him. Can you tell me about it?"

She said, "I do, and I will tell you about it. For ever since the time we moved up the hill, a stork has been building its nest in the garden behind the house. This is a sign of blessing, baraka. It means you are meant to be here."

It was my turn to play host and I made Zenobia tea. She watched me and giggled but was impressed when at the end I

raised the tea pot two feet above the round copper tray and poured two direct hits into our glasses, one after the other." As the rain, lightning and thunder hammered the neighborhood she drank and told me, "Your grandmother may have told you this story as she was born here but, in your land (she meant Israel), I hear that all you do is work hard and study science and make magical inventions like computers. Life is so much better here and now you are discovering that, is it not true?"

I agreed and did not tell her that the level of employment, health and well being in Israel for the average citizen, Jewish, Christian or Muslim is somewhat more advanced than that of Morocco but I agreed silently that they have much more leisure time than we do as we are always in a rush.

Zainab made herself comfortable and began the story.

The Sultan, that is the King, now rules Morocco and so it should be. He is an Alawi and a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him. Before he ruled, we were under the authority of the French and, before the Arabs came, a Berber Queen called the Kahenna ruled here. Before that it was the Roumi (Byzantines). Before them we were ruled by Romans, before them the Greeks, and before that, the people of Carthage. Before that, we were ruled by wizards, kings and priests—some of them small, like Pygmies, and some of them seven feet tall from way beyond the Nile River! I heard all of this from my grandmother.

Well sometime long before the Arabs ruled Spain, thousands of years ago there was a land close by between two rivers. The people worked hard and built beautiful cities. They were connected by canals and you could take a boat from one city to the other. The land was irrigated and people were rich. There were traders and princes and they worshiped

pagan gods, so many that they would lose count.

One day they would worship one idol and the next day a different one until sometimes there were so many that they destroyed, the ones they had made earlier for each idol had to be fed and each idol had its birthday each year and was paraded through the city. There were so many priests that the people had to work harder and harder to supply their needs. They reached a breaking point and brother took up sword against brother, sister turned on sister and men began to act like bandits, attacking their neighbor's houses, raping their daughters, and then getting drunk off the fruit of the vine. Living in fear, they put their faith in sorcerers who demanded expensive sacrifices and who ate the meat thereof. The evil eye was everywhere and there was no defense against misfortune.

God looked down on mankind. He had created three kinds of beings, angels and spirits—good and bad—and men and women. He despaired of the behavior of men and women and vowed to drown them all.

Noah, his wife and his sons and daughters were carpenters and boat builders. They worshiped the one God in secret and lived righteous lives.

One night Noah dreamed a dream. He heard a voice, "Noah, I am the Lord your God and I am the commander of your family. I made the world and uphold the heavens without pillars. I created both Jnun (Genies), Angels, and men—and mankind deserves not to live. But your family have secretly prayed to me and so I will spare you. Build yourself a boat, take all your family and two of every living thing and begin your work tomorrow. In six months I will flood your world'"

Prophet Noah confided in his family. But his children said, "We are not wealthy or powerful and who will give us the wood and tools to build the ark?" Noah said, "Some of you

are magicians and have learnt to tame snakes and turn them into wood. Go out into the city square and entertain the people. Tell them you have magical powers and that they must give you money if they are to see you turn snakes into rods." His children did so and brought home much gold and silver which they used to pay the workmen and their families to make the Ark. Six months later it was ready.

But the local king became envious and thought to himself, "I am the most powerful man in the city and the ark should belong to me. He summoned Noah and demanded that he hand over the ark. Noah told him that he would do so at the next full moon and the king agreed.

The day before the full moon Noah gathered all his family and retainers and two of every animal and plant and took them into the ark. They began to wait. They prayed to the one God and the rains began. The king assembled his army and said, "Noah is a sorcerer. Let us give chase and imprison his people and claim the ark for ourselves." He assembled his horsemen and he raced to the ark which was perched on the river's edge. As the ark rose upon the waters Noah watched the King and his horseman drown in the deluge.

Noah cried as he had walked through the streets of the city proclaiming, "If you worship the one God all will be well but the children threw stones at him, the artisans threatened him with violence, and the judges of the king laughed at him saying, "He is mad, possessed by a demon. He is a fool." No one had listened.

The Ark was thrown out into the dark seas of the Atlantic off the coast of Tangier. Whales passed by and sharks filled the waters. Noah and his children had food and water for forty days and forty nights and then the rain stopped. They drifted. A stork had followed them from land and perched itself on the front of the Ark. Noah approached the

Stork who was a messenger from God. The stork alighted on Noah's arm and then flew into the air. Seven days later she returned with an olive branch in her mouth and seven days later they landed on the beach of Tangier.

When Noah stood once again on dry land he exclaimed, "El ma mech ou ettin dja" (The water has gone and the clay has remained). And that is why they have called this city Tangier (Tinja). All the storks of the city are descended from the one that brought Noah the olive branch. And all the olive trees nearby have survived from that time.

A few of the sun worshipers had fled to the Atlas mountains and survived the flood. When they came down to Tangier they declared Noah to be their King and vowed that from then on they would only worship the one God. Soon after, the followers of the Prophet Mohamed came here and taught us the Koran and how to pray correctly.

I am not a superstitious person but after the storm died down, then and there I sat down with my servants Hassan and Zenobia and included a daily ration for the stork in our budget.

The next day I read the news. Here is an excerpt:

More than 24 people have died after heavy rain flooded an illegal underground textile factory ...

A further 10 people were rescued from the workshop, located in the basement of a house in Tangier.

It's not known how many people were in the building at the time of the flood. Rescue workers are still at the scene and an investigation has been launched. Morocco has been experiencing heavy rains in recent weeks. Blocked or poorly maintained drains often worsen flooding in Morocco's

cities.

Videos from Tangier over the past few days show cars completely submerged in water. Local media reports say water poured into the basement of the building where people were working.

Many of those trapped inside were rescued by a local man who used a rope to bring them to safety, AFP news reports. One government official said those killed were all aged between 20 and 40.

Morocco's textile and leather industry is heavily reliant on informal operations including unregulated factories leading to unsafe conditions for workers.

Zenobia said, "Yes I heard the same news on the radio early this morning. During the storm I saw you fear that the flood may come up the hill and drive us out of this house, perhaps even drowning us. But I was calm. I trusted in God because I knew the stork would not allow that to happen. It is a direct descendant of Noah's stork. I am sure of it. You have much to learn about living here."

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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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