

# Saint Barbara's Nocturnal Visits: Jerusalem Memoirs

George Jawharieh

When I was seven years old, I often used to visit my dear aunt Shafiqa in her ancient house in the Old City. Returning home, her son Na'im would escort me on what was probably a fifteen-minute walk – from Herod's Gate to our house. Just past Herod's Gate, there was a *sous*-vendor in the street. The *sous* was a famous light and refreshing drink, made from liquorice and very popular across the region until the advent of Coca-Cola. It was kept in a big copper urn, hung by the seller's neck and resting on his stomach, along with a string of glasses. In his left hand he held *sajat*, or finger cymbals, such as those used by belly dancers. These produced a merry jingle to attract customers, much like the pipe organ of ice cream trucks in other cultures. His right hand remained free to pour water with which to rinse each glass again and again, to be used between one customer and the next. Not a particularly hygienic practice, but in fact we never got sick.

One time I was thirsty so when I encountered a very large *sous*-vendor I asked for a drink. He had already filled a glass for me when I remembered I was not carrying any money. I looked for Na'im, but he had walked away and was lost in the crowd, and I could not see him. I panicked and thought, since this is very likely to end up with a beating, why not finish the whole glass anyway? So I returned the empty glass to its place and bolted off. The poor man came running after me, cursing me and my father for having raised such a son, but he was fat and weighed down with urns and glasses, while I was young and nimble, so I managed to escape. When I told the story to my father he was very mad. He said that probably every other shop owner near Herod's Gate knows me: "You could have gone to any shop and told them you are my son and surely they would have given you half a piaster to pay the poor man, instead of causing all this mess."

In my childhood, it was standard practice that when old friends visited my father I would be called in to greet them, kiss their hand, and would usually receive five piastres as a gift. They would chat with me a few minutes before I would be excused. One particular time a friend from the al-Jabsheh family, an old family from Jerusalem, visited us (unfortunately I forget his name). After the ritual of hand kissing and friendly exchanges, my father asked him to tell me the story of his first visit to Cairo. After a bit of coaxing, he finally agreed.

Jerusalem in the old days was a quiet, sleepy city at night, while Cairo was very lively and active. One street in Cairo had all the cabarets, theatres, and bars, with enough light to illuminate the whole of Jerusalem. He and a friend went to Muhammad ‘Ali street and had a great time bar-hopping until by the end of the evening they were quite tipsy and having difficulty finding their way back to their hotel. Our friend had an urgent need to relieve himself and, thinking he was still in the old dark streets of Jerusalem, he found a wall and urinated against it. A policeman passing by got mad at him, scolded him, and since he answered very incoherently, the policeman took him in for the night to be taken before a magistrate the next morning.

In court, the policeman reported what had happened the night before and the judge was very upset, fiercely scolding the offender. His penalty was to pay 25 piasters. Our friend started counting the money: 15, 20, 25, 30. The judge could not understand why he was giving him 30 instead of 25 piasters, so our friend answered: “Your Excellency, I come from Jerusalem, and Jerusalemites never lie. When I was urinating, I also farted once, so I am paying the extra 5 piasters for the fart.” The judge and all the people roared with laughter, then the amused judge quipped back: “Since you come from Jerusalem, you will pay nothing. But be sure never to do this ever again.”

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My sister Yusra was very keen on classical music and once passionately wanted to attend an opera presented by Jewish singers and orchestra at the Edison Theatre in the Jewish part of Jerusalem. Jews, particularly those coming from Germany and Central Europe, were extremely talented and serious about classical music, while those who came from Yemen and Iraq were and still are more interested in Arabic music. Of course my father wouldn’t dream of letting her go alone to a performance late at night. She begged and begged and finally their compromise involved my poor uncle Fakhri, who was convinced by my father to escort Yusra to the spectacle.

Uncle Fakhri was an avid player of the qanun, a zither-like string instrument, and adored oriental music but had never in his life attended a concert of Western classical music. After they took their seats, he wanted to chat with Yusra, but she explained to him politely that in these types of concerts you do not talk or whisper until the very end. Grudgingly, Fakhri accepted that but could not in any way follow the music or relate to the opera’s plot. At the very end, probably after two hours, the heroine discovered that her lover was cheating on her so she took a gun out, shot him, and said, “Moot! Moot!” – for the word for “die” in both Hebrew and Arabic. That was too much for Fakhri who stood up, calling out to the murderous soprano, “You have killed us all!” The other members

of the audience yelled at him angrily as he dashed out of the theatre pulling the sobbing Yusra behind him. Yusra never again went with Uncle Fakhri to any concert.

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One of our greatest spots for outings and vacations in my childhood was Jericho. My parents, like many other Jerusalemite families, spent their winters in Jericho, a short distance from Jerusalem but with a drop in altitude of at least one thousand meters. This makes it very warm in winter, with temperatures eight or ten degrees Celsius higher than Jerusalem. Actually, the Dead Sea, which is close to Jericho, is the lowest point on Earth. An Arab tour guide once proudly and solemnly announced to a group of visiting Americans, with a high degree of geographical precision: “Ladies and gentlemen, you are now the lowest people on Earth.”

In the years before the war, Jericho had a small population of around only five thousand people, excluding the local tourists that visit from Jerusalem. We used to love going there in the winter. It would be very green due to a number of springs, which irrigate the arid land, and, of course, the Jordan River. The big wadi would fill with water in winter when it rained a lot in Jerusalem. There were a number of sites around it, including the Dead Sea, the site of Jesus’s baptism, and the Jordan River, as well as several springs, which were bursting with water in the arid winters, irrigating the orange groves and many tropical fruit orchards. Jericho oranges had the reputation of being the sweetest in the world, ripening a full month or so before the famous Jaffa oranges.

As a boy, I had many friends in Jericho, among them my dear friend Fakhri Hazineh and his brothers. Frequently, I would spend days at their beautiful house in Jericho when my parents were not down there. Other friends – all Muslims and Jerusalemites, come to think of it – were Sami Oweida, Sari Nashashibi, the children of the Rassas family, and Sa’id and Musa Halaby. We used to spend hours playing ball, shooting birds, and visiting the different sites, and never noticed the days passing by. During the full moon, my father and other friends would rent a bus and all the families would go to the Dead Sea. These picnics were so dear to our heart and the Dead Sea looked marvelous under the moonlight. Sometimes they would get a boat for all of us to take a ride. Frequently we would swim in the extremely salty waters and on the shore, our families would eat and drink, while my father played his famous *oud*, accompanied by my sister Leila’s voice.

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My dear mother was extremely religious and she would fast literally every year for Christmas, Easter, and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary in August. Fasting in winter is difficult while in summer it is much easier, with the abundance of different fruits and vegetables including grapes, watermelons, prickly pears, and pomegranates. As children, we usually only fasted the last week before the feast. I remember my sister Ayah and I used to bore my mother with all our questions about what is allowed or not during the fast. For example, we would ask, “Is water allowed, mum? What about bread?”

Is lying allowed?” Sometimes she got so tired that she thought it would have been better if we quit the fast.

The climax was the Feast of the Assumption and the breaking of the fast on 15 August. My mother and all the children would leave the house very early in the morning, probably as early as four, and walk to Herod’s Gate, crossing the Old City, leaving it through Bab al-‘Asbat (Lion’s Gate), and walking a short distance to the beautiful old church of the Holy Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ. It is believed that she is buried somewhere in that church. The church has very small doors opening onto passages leading to a number of stairs rising up to the altar. These stairs were lit on both sides by candles and the sight of the lit stairs will never leave my memory. Many Muslim women would come to light their candles, too, in honor of the Virgin, revered in the Qur’an as the mother of the prophet Jesus.

We would light our candles, kneel to pray alongside my mother, then rise up and leave the church. A small grove with lovely trees surrounded the church, with a clearing that had swings and other playground attractions for the children. There was a peddler selling whistles, toy drums, cymbals, and tambourines, as well as small clay drinking pots, sweets, and what have you. We would buy whatever we could afford and then rush home starving. Our household help would have prepared a fabulous breakfast feast and we would ravenously consume the food we had missed during our two weeks of fasting, including eggs, cheese, bacon, sausages, and milk.

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Like the feast of the Holy Virgin Mary celebrations in August, all religious festivities in Jerusalem had special traditions attached to them. The Orthodox Arabs follow the Julian calendar, which is fourteen days behind the Gregorian calendar. So our Christmas fell on 7 January, New Year’s on 14 January. This state of affairs suited the Jerusalem and Bethlehem churches quite well as it avoided having all the denominations crowding the same church at the same time.

At home we always had a large, freshly cut, green Christmas tree set up two days before Christmas. On Christmas Eve the whole family took part in decorating the tree. The main meal was on Christmas day. Christmas was much more religious and much less commercial in those days. The main religious celebration took place in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, as it still does today.

It is interesting to note that Yasser Arafat and later Abu Mazen attended these celebrations as heads of the Palestinian Authority, keeping alive an old tradition in Palestine going back at least to the Ottoman period, when local rulers were expected to preside over these ceremonies. They even have to do this twice, once for the Catholic Christmas and again for the Orthodox Christmas. It is worth noting that the Church of the Nativity, as is the case with the Holy Sepulchre, is meticulously divided among the different Christian sects, including the Orthodox, Catholic, Coptic, Ethiopian, Armenian, and Assyrian. Clerics from each denomination would fiercely and fanatically guard their sectors inside the church. Frequently, vicious fights would break out between monks of

the different sects on the slightest pretext, for example if one dared to polish a tile in a chamber belonging to another.

Another feast that took place before Christmas, sometime in early December, was the celebration of Saint Barbara. For a long time we as children genuinely believed that late at night Saint Barbara would visit each house and leave some coins on every plate that had been decorated the night before in her name by the children in each family. Each plate was filled with “koliva” (boiled wheat) topped with white sugar, and each child would decorate his own plate with different treats, like little peppermint balls, blanched pine nuts, and sugared almonds. When I was about ten years old, I skeptically questioned the truth of these beliefs, asking how Saint Barbara could possibly visit every single house in one night. The next morning I regretted my big, precocious mouth, since each of my sisters found a few piastres on her plate while mine had none. My mother sternly explained, “This is what happens to those who doubt.”

New Year’s was a very special occasion indeed since it was also my father’s birthday. On New Year’s Eve, literally the whole family, young and old, would be invited to a dinner that lasted for hours. My poor mother and her helpers spent days preparing for the banquet. Turkey was not very common but a nice stuffed lamb always took pride of place on the table. Around midnight, my uncle Khalil and his wife would leave for home. This was because Uncle Khalil had to start preparing the *k’nafeh*, a delicious sweet made with semolina, Nabulsi cheese, and a sugary syrup flavored with orange blossom or rose water, traditionally eaten for New Year’s breakfast. This took hours to prepare and bake. The next morning, around ten, we would all go to my uncle’s house to eat the fresh *k’nafeh* and all of us, including myself despite my young age, drank a glass of cognac to celebrate the New Year. This took place every year. No fancy parties with champagne, cotillion, and dancing to the music of live bands in hotel ballrooms, no fireworks, none of the wild celebrations you see today. Yet they were great happy times for us all.

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Easter in Jerusalem is the climax of all religious celebrations and cannot be compared with Easter anywhere else in the world. After all, Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. Thousands of pilgrims and tourists come for the occasion, mainly Greeks and Russians for the Orthodox celebration. Hotels, monasteries, and rooms-to-let would be rented at good prices in the two weeks around Easter. There was fasting of course, but we fasted only on Good Friday and Easter Saturday. Good Friday, when Jesus Christ was crucified, was always a somber day, where we could hear the mourning bells tolling all day long. Somehow, every Good Friday it would rain, as if the skies were crying at the crucifixion of Jesus.

Saturday’s noontime ceremony at the Holy Sepulchre was surely moving. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch would arrive with his retinue to perform a solemn ceremony and pray by the grave, the church crowded with people inside and out. It is believed that the Patriarch undresses completely and is thoroughly searched, to be sure he had no way of lighting the candle. Then, at exactly midnight, the Holy Light, according to the local

legend, appears to light his candle. The Holy Light then spreads like lightning from one candle to another, in the whole church and eventually to other churches in Jerusalem. People were very proud to carry the Holy Light for their lamps at home. I attended this particular ceremony on Saturday more than once, and when I was very young and too short to really see anything, my cousin Na'im put me on his shoulders so I could have a perfect view of the whole scene.

Easter Sunday was also a special day, when fasting finally came to an end and eggs, dyed a red color by boiling them with a piece of old red fez, were typically eaten. As kids, we chose what we thought were the strongest eggs and took great pleasure in cracking the eggs of other friends. The winner would win all the cracked eggs. It is interesting to note that in Greece they have almost the same traditions, and the Holy Light on Saturday is flown in on a special plane, from Jerusalem to Athens, accompanied by a priest. Then an efficient network of transport, including boats, trains, and planes, helps to spread the light so that it reaches all churches in Greece before midnight. The real mass in Athens is at midnight and the light spreads after the announcement: "Christos Anesti" (Christ is risen!). Again, in Jerusalem, Sunday lunch would consist of a large stuffed lamb and typical sweets would be the pinched circular *ka'k*, which symbolizes the crown of thorns Jesus wore, and the conical *ma'mul*, which is a symbol for either the nails or the spearhead that pierced Jesus's body at crucifixion or, according to some, the sponge soaked in vinegar. The red eggs symbolize his blood.

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There are a number of other Christian, Muslim, and Jewish religious feasts that were traditionally celebrated at different sites in Jerusalem and all around Palestine. These mainly honored saints and prophets, including St. George, St. Elijah, Nabi Rubin, Nabi Musa, and others. Birthdays were less important than name days and on one's name day, people would visit unannounced for two to three days to pay their respects. We often heard our old relatives talk about this incident happening around this name day or that name day. Often I heard specific dates referring to the "small snowfall" and the "huge snowfall," which became fixed reference dates for births and deaths. Another event often referred to was the great earthquake of 1927, which shook both Jerusalem and al-Salt in Jordan.

Muslims had their own religious holidays including the long month of Ramadan culminating in Eid al-Fitr and the al-Adha feast. Ramadan in particular was very intriguing for me. Muslims must fast completely from daybreak to sunset, without any food, water, or sex – I always wondered who would want sex if they could have no food or water. It is extremely hard to abstain from drinking water during the hot summer months, but since it is tied to the lunar calendar, thankfully the time of the Ramadan changes every year. I always admired Muslim endurance and patience and their great obedience to their religious laws. We Christians were naturally allowed to eat and drink, but my father always taught me never to smoke, eat, or drink in front of a Muslim who is fasting, out of courtesy.

When I was a child, our dear friends the al-Hazineh family would invite me to join their huge family for the Ramadan fast breaking every evening. We all sat around the

big table, and it was not a meal but a banquet, but we could not eat until the sun had set completely and we heard the gun being fired from the walls of Jerusalem. At the same time, the Qur'an recital over the radio would begin chanting *Allahu akbar*, denoting the breaking of the fast. Everybody would start eating, particularly myself, and my dear aunt would comment on how I always seemed more starved than those who were actually fasting. The meal started with soup and dates. Next, four or five different dishes would be served, to be followed by a great variety of Arabic sweets. *Qatayif* were particularly typical during Ramadan: little pancakes stuffed with cream or walnuts and doused in sweet syrup. My mother, and later my wife Katy, would insist on having this frequently during Ramadan. The Muslims are also allowed a light meal before the break of dawn, which is meant to help those observing the fast to endure it. I never joined in those meals, preferring sweet slumber to being awakened by the drum of the *musahhir*, who roused the pious to the last meal they could have until the sun set once more.

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