

I was an Israeli film star (for 45 minutes too long)

By Geoffrey Clarfield

I had done everything one could have done in Israel during the late 1970s to get away from the hustle and bustle of Israel's big cities, where most of its citizens live.



Eastern Sinai Desert, 1980 Photo-Geoffrey Clarfield

And so my wife Mira and I and our newly born son moved to the Negev desert, where Abraham sojourned some 3,000 years before we did, and as luck would have it much of the

environment that he had lived in had not changed.

The Negev in those days was empty. Its biggest city, Beer Sheva was to the north of this small desert town that we chose to live in. Mitspe Ramon was and still is perched on a cliff that overlooks the large Ramon Crater and from where you can see the mountains of Moab across the Rift Valley in Jordan.

When people say that the desert lacks vegetation that is true, but it makes up for it in color, for every half hour during the day the rocks of this ancient landscape change color-they can go from black, to brown, to red, to pink, to mauve and even gold in the bright sun and combinations of these in ever changing rhythms. And then there is the space. In those days

you saw nothing but hills, mesas and plains with the occasional acacia tree sprouting up from a hidden local water source.

Mitspe Ramon was and is a place where you can walk in what is still a quiet and small city. Now it is a center of the arts with music, dance, and circus schools and justly so as here you have the desert, the quiet, the wind and the wet and hot seasons to inspire you, away from the noise of the big cities.

I went to Mitspe Ramon as a defiant and budding anthropologist and musicologist. I had been unable to negotiate a fair and supportive Israeli MA program to do the kind of research I wanted, and so with just a few thousand dollars in the bank, no institutional support, and no car we moved to the desert.

My goal was to spend a good 10 days a month for one year among a Bedouin tribe in the nearby Israeli administered Sinai desert that had yet to be returned to Egypt in a peace deal, that now after 40 years may be seriously fraying as it was discovered that the Egyptians had been allowing Hamas to smuggle in weapons from their side in preparation for October 7th. But then all was peace and optimism for a future where the Arab World would accept Israel. This has not happened.

And so I learnt how to be self-sufficient, hitch rides with army trucks and walk into the Eastern Sinai where the Sheikh of the Azazma Sarakhin allowed me to be a guest in his tent. My goal was to become conversational in Bedouin Arabic (I just managed), learn how to live in rough desert conditions (I managed that and changed my clothes only once during my 10-day stints) live on local food (not a problem) take pictures (not a problem) make recordings (not a problem) and interview people with my trusty Bedouin translator Suleiman Awd, who spoke both Hebrew and Arabic.

I simply lived with the Bedouin, watched them, photographed them, recorded them, lived among them in the hope that like

the great American cultural anthropologist before me (Ruth Benedict) I would discover a "pattern of culture" that no one had yet seen, and I did. Simply put, as the Bedouin were becoming less nomadic and more settled, they added the music of sedentary Red Sea town dwellers to their repertoire sung to the accompaniment of a surviving version of King David's harp called the Simsimiyya in Arabic.

But what did I do with the rest of my time? I shared the care of our son with my wife, read about the Bedouin and the near east, went over my recordings and field notes, and socialized with other young couples in our village. This meant long walks, picnics in the crater, play dates for kids and once our son was asleep the hope of a good film or TV show on the one station available to us at that time. Oh yes and lots of radio, both Hebrew and Arabic. I also found an Arabic tutor to help me on my way with my research.

Given that Mira was born and raised in Israel and I in Canada, we were considered an odd couple. But the fact that we are sociable and that I play and sing American folk music means that there was always an invitation to visit from someone in the village, as socializing in that pre-Internet period was the main thing to do with leisure time. I regret the passing of this period where you make your own fun.

Somehow our oddness came to the attention of the authorities. And the authorities have always emphasized that Jews must live in all the land of Israel and not just its cities, so we were considered "late pioneers" who had resisted the religiosity of Jerusalem or the international lifestyle of coastal Tel Aviv with all its earthly delights.

And so one day a youngish Israeli film maker knocked on our door. He had a contract from the government to do a short documentary on Mitspe Ramon and after he talked with us a bit, he wrapped the story around us, about this forward-looking desert outpost filled with energetic young couples in order to

attract more people like us to fill the town. And while filming, suddenly the Sheikh of the tribe that I stayed with in the Sinai showed up at our house (a second-floor apartment that looked onto a splendid desert landscape).

Sheikh Salama had ridden his camel all the way from his camp to our house. He said that it had taken a few days. He tied it to a tree near our balcony. He smiled at Mira and me as we invited him in and up to our apartment for the traditional three cups of coffee that a Bedouin host must give his visitor as well as an open invitation to stay over for three days which we offered him. He gladly accepted our hospitality.

The film makers heard that the "Sheikh" was visiting us and showed up to film us having coffee and eating together. They were quite excited as this gave even more local color to their documentary.

Well, the day came when they showed the documentary in our community center and left us with a VHS copy which has gone missing over the years. I thought the film was quite upbeat and I thought that I was a good booster for Mitspe Ramon. I praised its beauty, the quiet, the closeness to nature, the fact that as there was little to do people were very social. I praised it because I could read quietly and write up my field notes in between my sojourns to the Sinai.

I mentioned we were an hour by bus to the city of Beer Sheva where you could get all the benefits of a big city - universities, libraries, restaurants, cinemas, concert halls etc. I praised it, no doubt like the residents of Sedona Arizona do, as a new age mecca in the desert but a close drive to Phoenix.

Soon after I got an earful from a number of my formerly pleasant neighbors. They said things like, "You made us look like a bunch of rejects and failures, you said there was nothing to do here. We have a community center you know. We

invite guest lecturers. We have concerts and screen films. We do not live in a cultural wasteland! You embarrassed us by saying that the nicest thing about the place was that you could entertain yourself and enjoy your privacy away from the packed cities of the north and coast!"

Well, not everyone felt like this but enough did to make me feel a bit surprised. At the end of the day I woke up to the fact that many of my neighbors had come here to build "a city in the desert" and I instead had come to commune with the "Voice in the Wilderness" that had brought our forefather Abraham to the Negev, and whom I often dreamed up in my mind's eye when I went walking alone in the wilderness. Sometimes I got into such a reverie that I felt that at any moment his mixed train of camels and donkeys and the riches of Ur of the Chaldees would soon be unloaded into his luxurious camp around a small hill.

In my imagination Abraham would set up his tent and like my Bedouin hosts, invite me to stay as a guest for three days and nights of feasting and music. I even imagined that in a science fictional way I might have been able to record a song or two. But that could never happen.

What did happen was that I became famous in our village. I suspect that our documentary tape was erased to make room for another documentary, perhaps about another couple that had moved to the Negev and who did not go off script like I had.

When I look back at the experience I conclude that I had been an Israeli film star for 45-minutes too long.

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