

## Making Light of Noir

The First Two Pages - Good Morning, Jerusalem 1948

Michael J. Cooper

*“I never sleep well under mortar fire. Last night was no exception. The flares hadn’t helped either, night shining like day.”*

So opens my contribution to the *Jewish Noir* anthology, *Good Morning, Jerusalem 1948*. Presented in the first-person voice of 26-year-old Yitzhak Rabin, I sought to establish within the first couple of pages a number of features that, for me, are central to Noir fiction. These include the tension between darkness and light, the first-person narrative voice, and the protagonist’s tragic character arc. Additionally, since the anthology is dedicated to the sub-genre of Jewish Noir, the story is set in a historical and thematic context, which reflect aspects of the Jewish experience.

The tension between darkness and light is highlighted at the outset as shown in the above-referenced opening lines. Indeed, the expression “night shining like day” is taken directly from Psalms 139:12;

*Night shines like the day and darkness is as light.*

The story is set during one of the darkest moments of Israel’s War of Independence, May of 1948. The Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem is under siege, and the young Yitzhak Rabin is coming to grips with the fact that the Quarter will soon fall, and with it, an almost unbroken

three thousand year history of Jewish life in Jerusalem will end. Stationed beyond the city wall, Rabin is a commander of the *Palmach*, an elite strike force of the Jewish Militia, the *Haganah*. And just as bright flares change night to day, Rabin awakens to see black smoke darkening the morning sky, an ominous harbinger of the fate looming over the Jewish Quarter.

*“I peek through a narrow gap between the sandbags, scanning the crenelated battlements along the top of the wall. I don’t see any snipers. But what I do see makes me feel sick—a column of thick black smoke rising in the sky over the Jewish Quarter just beyond the wall.”*

The darkness and light motif is further reinforced by the *Palmach*’s simple (and fictional) code of replacing good morning with good night during the day, and replacing good night with good morning at night;

*“There are plenty of infiltrators who cross from East to West Jerusalem, and by hearing “good night” instead of “good morning,” I know it’s one of our guys on the other side of the door. The opposite, of course is used at night. It’s simple and saves the effort of trying to remember changing code words that people tend to forget.”*

Using the first-person narrative voice was my way of establishing a “noir” feel to the story insofar as two of my favorite authors of the genre, Jim Thompson and Raymond Chandler, were masters of this voice with the added power of interior monologue and stream of consciousness. And beyond that, the first-person perspective involving a historical figure like Rabin, creates a confined perspective yielding a poignant limitation

juxtaposed against the reader's knowledge of the full sweep of history—the reader knows what's going to happen—to Jerusalem and to Rabin.

Indeed, the remarkable and ultimately tragic arc of Yitzhak Rabin's personal history moves from his birth in Jerusalem in 1922, to soldier from age 19 in 1941 to age 46 in 1968, to statesman as ambassador, politician, minister of defense and first native-born Prime Minister of Israel. And when the arc of Rabin's life turned emphatically to peacemaking, the end came from a place he did not expect, from one of his own. The “minority vote” came in the form of the assassin's bullets, tearing into Rabin's back in 1995, tearing apart the fragile framework of a peace Rabin was hoping to forge after a half-century of war.

In underscoring the motif of light vs. darkness, I also found a way to insinuate the Kabbalistic framing of golden sparks of the divine emanation shrouded by the darkness of husks—*kliptot*. And herein lies the redeeming silver-lining of a Jewish history, (and for that matter a human history) filled with the darkness of dislocation, diaspora and death. All of us, Jews and non-Jews alike, have the opportunity and responsibility of *rectification*, of *tikun*, of partnering with the divine and with each other—dispelling darkness by gathering the bright sparks of divine emanation through acts of compassion, justice and loving-kindness.

This is, indeed, the unstated message of the story—despite the seemingly unrelenting despair, there can yet be hope for peace, for the delayed but eventual completion of the arc of Yitzhak Rabin’s life.

And it all starts with setting the stage in the first two pages.



Michael J. Cooper emigrated to Israel from Northern California in 1966 and lived in Jerusalem during the last year the city was divided between Israel and Jordan. He studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and graduated from Tel Aviv University Medical School. Now a pediatric cardiologist in the San Francisco Bay Area, he volunteers for medical missions twice a year, serving Palestinian children who lack access to care. He is the author of two novels of historical fiction; *The Rabbi's Knight* set in the Holy Lands

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