



SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE

In Conversation with George Prochnik

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LIVE from the New York Public Library

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Margaret Liebman Berger Forum

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Hello, hello. Good evening. My name is Paul Holdengräber, and I'm the Director of LIVE from the New York Public Library. As you know, it is a pleasure to welcome you each and every time to events at the New York Public Library, at LIVE from the New York Public Library, where my goal is quite simply to make the lions roar, to make a heavy institution dance, and when possible to make it levitate. It is a pleasure to welcome you this time to the annual Joy Gottesman Ungerleider Lecture, which is made possible with the support of the Dorot Foundation.

Coming up next week on Tuesday I will interview Tom Brokaw, on Wednesday Errol Morris, and then Umberto Eco, and in quick succession Gilberto Gil, Jessye Norman, Brian Eno, Anish Kapoor, Peter Sellars, Osvaldo Golijov, Diane Keaton, Joan Didion, all before Thanksgiving. Really, delightful madness. I encourage you all to join our e-mail list if you're not on it yet and come and enjoy these events.

Tonight I'm delighted to welcome Simon Sebag Montefiore, the author most recently of *Jerusalem: The Biography*—I am particularly struck by “The,” rather than “A”—which got an excellent review in this week's Sunday *New York Times Book Review*, out today. He is the author of many works, including two books about Stalin. His most recent, to my knowledge, essay he wrote as an op-ed on October 26 in the *New York Times* on the lynching of Gaddafi, entitled “Dictators get the death they deserve,” a rather shrewd piece.

Tonight he is in conversation with George Prochnik, who I am pleased to welcome back to a LIVE from the New York Public Library evening. Last time he was at the New York Public Library he was here for us to honor his book *In Pursuit of Silence: Listening for Meaning in a World of Noise*. LIVE from the New York Public Library held an event that evening called Tactile Sound. That night, a year or so more ago, we attempted to make the audience *feel* silence. Next I intend to invite George back when his own book on Jerusalem comes out. At the present time, he's writing an introduction to Stefan Zweig's novella *Confusion of Sentiments* for the New York Review of Books Classics series.

Tonight the subject of Simon and George's conversation is, not surprisingly, "Why Jerusalem? Jerusalem's hold over the imaginations and politics of the world." After the conversation Simon Sebag Montefiore will be happy to sign copies of *Jerusalem: The Biography*.

In lieu of long biographical data, for the past year or so, I've asked guests to provide me with a biography in seven words, a haiku of sorts, or a tweet if you prefer. Simon Sebag Montefiore submitted the following: "Prizewinning, bestselling historian published in forty languages." George Prochnik's seven words are "Wondrously unraveled now but expect inspiration soon." **(laughter)** It's absolutely right. I see some people counting seven words. I'm very dogmatic about that.

In closing I would like to acknowledge that we have the pleasure of having in the audience a person who is counting the words, Stephen Corrsin, the curator of the Dorot Jewish Division here at the New York Public Library. In lieu of an introduction, Stephen Corrsin has offered to have his wife open the evening for us. For which I am grateful in advance to him and to Mrs. Corrsin, who will now take the floor. Please.

("Yerushalayim Shel Zahav")

(applause)

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Well, thank you for that. And thank you, everyone, for coming

out on this night. Lo, the heavens have smiled upon Jerusalem yet again.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: They're heroic pioneers. You find a way through the snow and the wind and the rain. You're like the pioneers who want to build Jerusalem again.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I'm feeling that spirit in the room.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Welcome. Thanks for that lovely song. It's wonderful.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And, Simon, congratulations first of all. It's a masterful, maybe Samsonian wrestling of material that you've done here, which is to my knowledge exists only in fragmentary patches. You've really woven it together into an extremely compelling page-turner. You've shown us Jerusalem, the rollicking, raucous roller coaster of historical event, when I think for a lot of people they envision a quagmire of so much.

I wanted to start by referring to something that you speak of in your preface when you talk about how you really feel that you were preparing your whole life to write this book. I want to ask a kind of multipart question. I want to know exactly what you mean by that. And why now? What's the hole you see that you're trying to fill with this work? And I realize this is an expansive question, but what do you hope it achieves that maybe we

don't have in the histories of Jerusalem that exist until your book?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Well, I've been going to Jerusalem ever since I was a little—ever since I was a baby. And Jerusalem's always been in my life because of a family connection now sort of semi-forgotten with a Victorian great-great uncle of mine called Moses Montefiore, who was fascinated with Jerusalem, loved Jerusalem, and who started to build one of the first suburbs outside the city walls, Montefiore Windmill, whatever you want to call it. Because of him, we have always been connected with Jerusalem. And he was an amazing character, who kind of defies all the clichés of what you expect to read, to learn about Victorian England, that class-ridden, snobbery-filled society that we read about. When he was born—he was born in Italy, came in England as a penniless immigrant and became hugely wealthy, friends with Queen Victoria, in the end knew just about everyone but also the crowned heads of Europe. And yet he remained a practicing Jew, and he said when he received his knighthood from Queen Victoria, he said the proudest thing was his banner, which said “Jerusalem” on it. And so Jerusalem is our family motto, in fact, so I've always grown up with some of his things, which I've inherited.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Like what?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Like this signet ring, for example, which says “Yerushalayim” on it. And I've got half his cutlery, which is nice to have. But a funny thing about growing up—in our family, it was like having a sort of family saint, you

know, and the elder people, especially Jewish Seder nights, Passovers, that we had in our family, the older people were always boring on about Sir Moses Montefiore and how wonderful he was, and we children were very skeptical about hearing another thing about this perfect man.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: You know, I mean, but it is remarkable that in an era in which, as you indicate, England was not known for his philosemitism as a rule, he seems to have been so universally acclaimed. I mean—do you have any speculations? I mean, he was the most important or as important as any Anglo-Jewish philanthropist ever and yet he managed to simultaneously instigate this incredible development work and charity work within Israel, while retaining very complex relationships within the upper echelon of English society, and that seems to have been such a trick at the time, and I wonder—

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: It was unusual. Whenever Queen Victoria saw him—I mean, I guess the answer to the question is he was exactly what Victorians thought a Jew should be like. I mean, he was six foot four, blue-eyed, broad-chested, you know, **(laughter)** and so whenever Queen Victoria saw him, she used to go, “Look at that wonderful old, grand old Hebrew,” like that. So he was exactly sort of playing the part. So that was one part of it. Of course, I mean, the serious answer to your question is that of course there was a very strong strain of philosemitism or Hebraism in English Protestantism, which really started with the Puritans. Some of them took a ship across the Atlantic, as you know, and they founded a New Jerusalem, a New Israel. And others, you know, ruled England, Cromwell and stuff. And they actually sort of believed that

fundamentally the return of the Jews was necessary before the Second Coming could take place. And so that sort of—that sort of line of thinking, that belief, went through English society through Nonconformism and right into the nineteenth-century sort of muscular evangelical Christianity.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: But is it correct to say that that was primarily directed more at an abstracted vision of what the Jews were, I mean, that it rarely focused on individuals the way it did on—and here you say here's this idea that Queen Victoria saw in him almost an allegorical figure. This was unusual, still, yes?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: He was a special figure. He had something. Partly he was quite an orotund, quite a sort of pompous Victorian. But he lived the life exactly like an English magnate, like an English aristocrat. But, you know, he was very daring, he went to Jerusalem seven times, which was amazing to travel in those days. He was quite frightening, and when he built the Montefiore cottages—which those of you know Jerusalem will know are rather like a sort of sort of Neo-Gothic sort of sorry golf club in English suburbia, you know—and the interesting thing about this crenellated little battlements that they had of course in 1948, they actually were used by the Haganah as a real fortress, which is ironic, and of course the British in a battle just before they left blew the top off the Montefiore windmill. But that's another story, but I think the fact is that Montefiore's love of Israel, his kind of pre-Zionist Zionism, if you like, really played perfectly and dovetailed perfectly with British imperial interests and also this theme of Hebraism, Protestant Hebraism, which actually was very seriously meant and was a key

part of British foreign policy right through the nineteenth century. And of course when it came to the early twentieth century you had people like Churchill and Lloyd George, who—though they weren't religious at all themselves, were essentially secular—had had the education based on the bible, so they felt entirely at home with the idea of Zionism. So Montefiore is a key stage on the road to the Balfour Declaration.

I must tell you one thing about Moses Montefiore. As I said, when we were young we were sick of hearing about this saint, but recently there's been a—a family scandal has been unraveled, which has shaken the Montefiore family to its foundations. And there were always rumors about Moses Montefiore and his perfect marriage and his perfect life. And of course like every Victorian magnate, it turns out he had a secret life. And when he died, his nephew, who was my great-great-grandfather, Sir Joseph Sebag-Montefiore, burnt all his papers the next day, always a bad sign. **(laughter)** And now, over a hundred years later, we've discovered that at the age of eighty-one, he fathered a child with his sixteen-year-old housemaid, which gives you an idea of the great energy of the man **(laughter)** who could travel to the holy land seven times. But I must say that even though—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Do you know what happened to the child?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Well, actually, we've now been reunited with that family. Recently, they've been kind of welcomed into the family. But of course for years, they were completely kind of cut off, and no one would recognize them or discuss it. And

even though we were all sickened by hearing about the perfection of, the younger people at Seder night now are quite interested in talking about him. For the wrong reasons of course.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I want to actually spin backward to the beginning of your answer, though. Your childhood experiences of Jerusalem. What was that Jerusalem? Even apart from your family connection, what did you see? What were your responses? I mean, was the thicket of your family's engagement with the city so intense that it was hard to get bearings, or wasn't that the case?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: No, not at all. In fact, it was a very interesting period. I was born in '65, so I was going after '67. I was there at a time when—it was the Teddy Kollek era of Jerusalem and through Teddy Kollek we would spend our whole time going around, sort of, we would meet Jewish people, we would also meet a lot of Palestinian people. And we would go to—I remember going to lunches in the West Bank, all over the West Bank, everyone welcomed us and so on. And of course I thought that was normal life. It didn't occur to me that could be—anything could be anything different. I was proud that there was such—that there appeared to be such friendship. Of course, it was partly an illusion and partly just a very special early period of time when there was this kind of—I guess there was almost ten years, maybe less than ten years, when there was some mixing, some cooperation between the two sides.

I mean, one of the things that I sort of really stress in the book is that I even hate talking

about the two sides. That's sort of—even the concept of the only two is a rejection of the sort of the Jerusalem that I know, that I've studied, that I've read about and hope to bring to life here. Because, you know, as you know, there are Orthodox Palestinians, there are Catholic Palestinians, there are Islamic Palestinians, there are Jews of every single possible origin, Sephardic, Ashkenazi, blah blah blah. And then of course there are then Armenians and Maronites and Georgians and so on. And so all of these people have special Jerusalemite culture.

For example, the Armenians of Jerusalem have a special dialect of Armenian. And the very fact that the Armenians—one of the fascinating things about Jerusalem, for example—is the Armenians—those of you know the Holy Sepulchre well will know—have a third share of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which it now seems extraordinary because why would this tiny ex-Soviet republic, the people of that republic, have a share in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre? But of course they were under the Ottoman Empire in 1852 when the division was made of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, an arrangement that is exactly identical now as it was then. When this arrangement was made, they—the Armenians were the sort of sultan's own candidate. Each of the superpowers, or great powers, backed their own sect.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And you write about the intensity of the conflict that that produced both within Jerusalem and within Europe, and maybe you could say a little bit about that. Because that moment when the great powers really invest themselves in Jerusalem perhaps dictates some of the continual antagonisms that we contend with

today.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: That's right. That's right. Well, I mean, there are times in Jerusalem's history—when you watch CNN or read the papers, it says sort of “Jerusalem, the holy city, holy to three faiths.” It is easy to forget that there were times in Jerusalem's history when it was virtually a forgotten village. Yes, a monumental village with superb buildings and memories, but it was virtually forgotten. And one of those times was the late eighteenth century, early nineteenth century, when Jerusalem—the population of Jerusalem was as low as a thousand people at times. And half the old city itself, within the walls, was empty, was just thicket.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yes, there are remarkable descriptions of just these gardens and patches of woods.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: There is a photo in the book, which you'll know well, by the Armenian patriarch, who was one of the pioneers of photography in the world but in Jerusalem as well. Typical Jerusalemite story, that. But there's a photo where it shows around the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, there was nothing, just prickly-pear cacti. So at that time Jerusalem was actually forgotten, pretty much forgotten, by all the major religions. I mean, it was abandoned, it was forgotten, it was unsafe, it was dangerous, it was ravaged. And then Napoleon was really the person who was responsible for bringing it back. And Napoleon never made it into Jerusalem, though he claimed to have done so. He lied to everybody, by the way, on this. He embarked on a

really kind of nasty little Middle Eastern war, in which he murdered lots of his own soldiers. When they were ill, he just abandoned them and murdered them and so on. But one of the things he did was to popularize Jerusalem, and that was really the beginning of the sort of great power interest in Jerusalem.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And how did Jerusalem become forgotten? How did that take place given the nexus of religious energy around the sites that were still semi-intact, at least, at least in some cases? What enabled that?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: It was the end of the crusading spirit, partly, and it was the decay of the Ottoman Empire, particularly. I mean, the Ottoman Empire was the greatest Islamic empire. And when it was vibrant, when it was strong, the sultans, there were padishah, they were emperor, they were caliph. And they restored Jerusalem, in fact. In fact Suleiman the Magnificent was really the person who created the sort of old city that we know today, or one of those key people. And one of the interesting things about Jerusalem is that in one sense its holiness evolved over, very slowly, over a long time, with the sort of infectious spread of holiness, which is a peculiar idiosyncrasy of Jerusalem. But on the other hand, it was really created by the decisions of about six men, completely whimsical decisions. And one of them was Suleiman the Magnificent, who said, “I am the emperor of Islam. I am the world emperor. And I will restore—I will restore Jerusalem.” And more than that, he said, “Of course, my name is Suleiman. I am the second Solomon.” And he took his name seriously. And he is referred to in inscriptions in Jerusalem as “the second Solomon.” And he built the walls around

Jerusalem. So people often go, “These walls are very ancient. They were here when King David was here.” No, those walls were exactly contemporary to Henry VIII and Hampton Court. So they’re not at all old, most of them. But the answer to your question is the decay of the Ottoman Empire throws Jerusalem and gradually the Ottoman Empire lost control over its provinces. And this it was greatly controlled by warlords and gradually Jerusalem just decayed.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Picking up on what you just said about the holiness. I mean, that’s obviously a bottomless subject. And you also write about how your book has to be a history of holiness or a study of what holiness consists of. I mean, can you speculate a little or say a little about why this place that is, as you indicate, had next to no if any strategic value and so problematic in terms of natural resources should have gravitated initially so much exuberance toward the heavens?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Well of course Jerusalem was far from the trade routes along the coast. It was stuck in those blistered yellow gorges up in the Judean hills, boiling hot in summer, freezing—it snows in winter. So you may ask, you know, why Jerusalem? And really I mean this comes down to decision of King David, or certainly the decision of someone to build a Jewish temple on Mount Moriah. So that was the key decision. The second key decision was to write about it in the Bible. Now the bible—of course if you’re a fundamentalist believer, you simply believe the Bible is the word of god. But if you’re a historian, the Bible is more like a library than a book. And it’s written by many different people, rewritten by many, reedited in different times. But the

point is that the Bible—once the Bible was translated into Greek, into Latin and so on, and it became the book of Christianity—it became a global, it became the global story, and that rebounded on Jerusalem. So that's the wider answer.

The narrow answer, about the actual geography of the place, is that people tend to find—people who conquer a city or a country—they tend to find holy the places that are already regarded as holy. They tend to inherit the heritage of holiness that is already revered by others. It's probable—we simply don't know—but it is probable that the Dome of—the site of the Dome of the Rock, the rock itself, was some sort of Canaanite shrine before the Jews even got there. And the Jews adopted this place and they put it in the Bible.

They built their temple there. So when the second revelation of Christianity—of course they revered the story they knew from the Torah, from the Jewish scriptures, and when you read the Gospels it's quite clear that Jesus revered the prophets, the Jewish prophets, and so he knew them extremely well, and he was keen to fulfill them. He couldn't have gone anywhere but Jerusalem.

If he was going to die, if he was going to ascend to heaven, if the kingdom of heaven was going to happen at all, it would happen in Jerusalem. And of course that happened for the third revelation of Islam, the final, as Muhammad said, the final revelation. He too had read or he was definitely closely acquainted with the scriptures, both the Christian scriptures and the Jewish scriptures. And he knew too, from the history, that Jerusalem had been destroyed twice, 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar and 70 by Titus. And for Muhammad that was proof that God had withdrawn his blessing from the first revelation

of Judaism and was ready for the final revelation of Islam.

So holiness in Jerusalem has been inherited step by step and each new revelation has commandeered, borrowed, adapted, and adopted the holiness of those who have gone before. And of course in Jerusalem, as you know from your own work there, that works in kind of often crazy ways. A quick example is Mount Zion. Mount Zion was—an ancient synagogue was there. The Christians, the upper room of the Christians, supposedly the last supper was up there on Mount Zion. On Pentecost, when the apostles spoke in tongues, probably in this place, it was for a long time it remained a synagogue and a Christian shrine. It became a great Byzantine cathedral, a great church. It was destroyed.

When the Crusaders took it, workmen there found a room with some treasures in it. “Wow,” they said, “what could this be? It has to be King David and his tomb.” Because everything in Jerusalem old, everyone, the Crusaders believed that everything old had to be to do with King David, as did the Muslims when they arrived, by the way. Virtually everything they thought was built by King David was built by King Herod, in fact. So they said, “This must be the tomb of David.” So they built a sort of cenotaph there. The Jews heard this and they said, “Now, hang on, if this is the tomb of King David, it must be holy for us, too.” So they started to worship there. By the time the Mamluk sultans were in power, and then the Ottoman sultans, and Suleiman the Magnificent, the Jews and the Christians were fighting to have to pray in this place, which was known as King David’s tomb, or the Muslims called it the tomb of Nabi Da'ud, the tomb of prophet

David. So by then Suleiman the Magnificent said, “This is outrageous. If this is holy to the Jews and the Christians it’s obviously holy to us.” So basically they built, he built a mosque there, he turned it into a mosque.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That palimpsest usage of the different spaces and finding of holiness across generations is something that you feel all the time. I mean, I’m reminded—There was a travelogue I saw from the early nineteenth century of someone who went up to the Chapel of Ascension, which is on the Mount of Olives. And there’s supposed to be a footprint of Jesus there, in fact his final footprint before he goes up into the heavens. And this I believe was an American traveler. And he looked at this mark in the stone with disdain and said, “Well, you know, look at the size of this, I mean, he would have to be something like a thunder lizard to have a foot that would fit there.” And his guide said, “Ah, would that the faithful had had your skepticism over the centuries, because it is our kisses on the print that have expanded and eroded the stones.” So you see just how many

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SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: That reminds me of, you know, Saint Jerome, when he visited in Byzantine times, you know, he said, you know they found the true cross. And probably the most successful archaeologist of all time was the Empress Helena, because when she arrived in Jerusalem, given a huge treasury to pay the soldiers of the Byzantine empire of her son Constantine the Great as she traveled there, and then when she arrived, a vast fund to rebuild the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Probably, I mean, it’s all a bit misty at that time, but one of the things she’s said to have done is to say, “If

we dig here we've got to find the true cross." And so she asked around and some old man was found who probably received a large tip as a result, and he said, "It's there, if you dig there, you're going to find a piece of wood." So they dug and they found the true cross. A true cross, by the way, that was divided so often into the reliquaries of Europe that it must have been the size of a forest. **(laughter)** But then she found the true cross and the true cross was the cross, the life-giving tree, as, you know, the Christians call it, which became the holiest relic of all Christianity. And that was the beginning of the sort of cult of relics in Jerusalem.

And Saint Jerome remembered that when, you know, when people used to go there—especially English female tourists, he complained, English female pilgrims—they would kiss it and then try to bite off a bit to take with them back to England. So in the end they had to put a guard there to stop this kind of frantic holy biting. But one of the tragic things about, I mean, just talking about the holy spaces that you were talking about, which is I think very interesting, is that, you know, it's not just building, it's also destroying that's holy there. I mean, first of all, the thing that most intensified the holiness of Jerusalem was the two destructions of Jerusalem, which created the prototype for the idea of the apocalypse.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: How does that imbue the space with holiness?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: I think because the Jews wrote about it, they wrote poetry about it, they dedicated their bible to it, they began to adopt in their exile, the

Babylonian exile, they started to adopt some of the rituals that we regard now as Jewish. Having Jewish names they kept rather than taking Babylonian names, circumcision, sabbath, other things like that. And that was really the beginning of sort of what we recognize as modern Judaism. But more than that, the Christians also read about this, were deeply affected by this, and it got translated into an ultimate definition of the apocalypse, what the end of the world would be like. And so Jerusalem became the definition of that. And from that, I think, evolved the idea of Jerusalem returning with the kingdom of heaven.

But the Byzantines took a different view of it. They left—deliberately, for hundreds of years—they left the Temple Mount where the temple had stood until it was destroyed in 70 AD. They deliberately left it unbuilt and as a rubbish heap. And they left a lot of old stones there and a heap of refuse. And they left it there in order to make the point that Jesus' prophecies had come true, that not one stone shall stand upon another, that the temple would never be rebuilt. And this was the proof that the second revelation was the correct one, the second revelation of Jesus Christ. So they left it deliberately ruined.

And Saint Jerome, who we were just mentioning, recorded the tragic scene about how they only allowed—the Jews were banned on pain of death from Jerusalem, but the Jews were allowed onto the Temple Mount once a year to mourn and lament. And there's one wonderful account by a Jewish rabbi who writes about the tragedy of people coming in dusk, of falling to their knees, of weeping, the sheer tragedy of the Jewish experience. And on the other hand there's Saint Jerome writing about this sort of circus act, about

these hideous and desperate Jews who came and howled and wailed—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And those responses continue for hundreds of years to the sight of the Jews at the Wall also.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Yes, that's right. But it was proof—it was a celebration for Saint Jerome of the truth of Jesus.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: One more side to that holiness. What about the integral city itself, the physical space of it? I mean, do you think there is—you know, when I'm in Jerusalem, there *is* something about the light, there *is* something about the air. I've got a—the owner of a deli on my corner is a Palestinian from very close to Jerusalem, and he was talking about why it's so difficult for him to go back now, his movements are so circumscribed. And he was saying how it had become too painful for him, but he wants to go back. I said, “You want to go back with all the trouble?” And he said, “Ah, but the air is sweet. The air is sweet.” And you will hear the yeshiva students saying, “The air in Jerusalem makes you wise.” And what about that confabulation of special effects that is created by geological, and the birds, and all of this—

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: You're studying that, aren't you?

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I'm looking at that. I'm trying to think of it in terms of whether this is also a dimension in your own experience of Jerusalem and whether you

think this place—

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: I mean, I love it, too. I do find it—I think there’s something about the light there, something about that wonderful stone, and of course, of course, it’s been now helped by man, by the greatest architectural visionaries of all time building these amazing buildings. I mean, starting with—we don’t know what the temple was like, but we have an idea of what Herod’s temple was like. Now, Herod was a complete monster—he was the Jewish Stalin, he was the Jewish Henry VIII, too—but he must have had an extraordinary sense of vision. Because the temple he built, which Josephus said, when you saw it coming over the hill, it was like a mountain covered in snow. It shone. Even the walls that survive, the supporting wall, the Western Wall, that wonderful white stone that Herod used, and which everyone since has reused, incidentally, in different ways. That must have been one of the most successful buildings—you know, religious buildings. And then of course the Dome of the Rock. What an astonishingly successful—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Can you say a little bit about how that got built?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Fascinating. I mean, the Dome of the Rock is a mystery, I mean, it’s not a mosque. The Al-Aqsa is a mosque, a mosque for Friday prayers. The Dome of the Rock is a shrine built on the stone, which was almost certainly the foundation stone of the Jewish temples of Solomon and Herod, almost certainly. And it was probably a very ancient Canaanite shrine, and that is Mount Moriah of the Bible,

where supposedly Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac. And when the temple was destroyed and the Muslims took—I mentioned how it was deliberately left as a ruin by the Byzantines, by the Christians—but when the Muslims took Jerusalem, they arrived with a very, very keen sense of the Jewish scriptures and of the progression of revelations that I’ve already talked about. And the man who, Omar the Just is the caliph who took it, immediately asked, “Where’s the temple of David?” And they took him to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Christians. He said, “No, no I don’t want to see this. I want to see,” you know, he sort of said, “I want to see the real thing.” And they took him up there, and he said, “It’s a ruin, we’ve got to clean it.” And he knew—you know, Muhammad had talked a lot about, you know, the concept of the coming of the hour, he called it the hour, the apocalypse, the imminent apocalypse. And that had to take place in Jerusalem, and so the early Muslims revered Jerusalem and so they started to pray on the Temple Mount and Abd al-Malik, who was the caliph, the fascinating caliph who—he is a sort of mysterious figure, and he appears once on a coin, and it’s really the last time a Muslim ruler would appear on a coin for a long time, because he was the person who was like the Constantine the Great and the Saint Paul of Islam. He sort of created formal Islam, which before that had been more amorphous in its rules and rituals and its acceptance of other religions.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And roughly what year was that?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: 691. He built, he finished building his new, his astonishing new building, so simple, with its golden dome on a drum, its beautiful shape,

its simplicity. And of course he was doing many things by building the Dome of the Rock. I mean, partly he was saying, my Umayyad dynasty is the greatest dynasty of all time, of all history, and that's why we are building, you know, the greatest place of all time, the temple, the Temple Mount. And the Umayyad Dynasty was a fascinating and very kind of colorful dynasty because they were more like Roman emperors than Islamic fanatics. They were, some of their palaces have been excavated and they're full of sort of bare-breasted women, very un-Islamic imagery. And they, so that was part of it, partly it was to overawe the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which it does of course dominate. It became—it became the sort of symbol of Jerusalem, as it was meant to. And partly it was to take on Christianity, and its inscriptions are really the first inscriptions from the Quran, the eldest that exist. And one of the things Abd al-Malik was to sort of formalize, and begin to sort of formalize, begin to collate properly the Quran. And it succeeded in all those things, and yet we don't know exactly why he built it. But he was a tough character. When he captured a rebel he famously led him around Damascus on a leash and then got up and sat on his back and literally eviscerated him himself, cut off his head, and threw the head to the crowd. So he was a tough guy, he would have fitted in well in Damascus today, perhaps.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: If you give us such a sweeping vision and you say early on that although Jerusalem is portrayed conventionally as a city of such brutal violence and reversals through violence that you were intent on showing us lines of continuity, and part of the way that you try to achieve this is through telling it as a family history and the organic, a substrate beneath families that can run for so long, but a lot of these families

are surely very violent families with—we see in the course of your book, we do see a tremendous amount of bloody reversal. And how do reconcile those, that urge to—what is the continuity to you outside of this slaughter?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Well, you know what, I think—I've been criticized for the gruesomeness of this book. But of course, first of all, you know, the gruesomeness is very much part of Jerusalem's history. The violence, the tragedy. I mean, it's one of the sort of tragedies and blessings of Jerusalem that everybody, whether they're secular or whichever of the great Abrahamic religions they believe, they adhere to, everyone has a vision, even the most secular people, of what Jerusalem should be like and that's also—that's always been the pattern. So people have a vision of Jerusalem and what it should be like, living far away, in Europe or America or Russia, and when they reach Jerusalem it's a terrible disappointment, and so they decide to remake Jerusalem in the way that they expected it to be and they wanted it to be. As I said, that's both a blessing and a curse to Jerusalem, it's one of the causes of the sort of terrible violence and the lust for total possession.

Another cause of that sort of lust for total possession is the sheer fact that if you are a believer and you believe that Jerusalem must be the site of the arrival of the Messiah, the advent of the second coming, the advent of the chosen one, you cannot compromise on that vision. It's not like you can say that, "The messiah's going to come but I'll share it with everybody else." No, if you believe that this is the site of the second coming, you know, then it must be, it's a Christian scene, it's a Christian moment if you like. And so

monotheism has a lot to answer for which we regard as so civilized. But of course the syncretism of the Greeks who kind of co-opted everybody else's religion was in many ways, at least there wasn't—there was very little religious strife. So that's part of it. But yes, I wanted to write—I think most books on Jerusalem are often quite dreary books about dark, holy, fanatical, murderous people. So I wanted to write a book about Jerusalem that was also about the families that lived there over many centuries. And so I didn't just want it to be about massacres, although there are lots of those. I wanted it also to be about music, about love, about family, about food, about sex even, and about women, because women have played, the women have played huge roles.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Give us an example.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Well, you know, I mean, I mentioned the Empress Helena, for example. She was really the person who kind of arrived to oversee the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. A better example is Queen Melisende, the Crusader Queen, who was sort of the Margaret Thatcher of the Crusades. She was a powerful woman, beautiful, half French, half Armenian, so very much sort of caught that moment of the Middle Eastern history, and the Crusaders' sort of fusion of local Christianity, Middle Eastern Christianity, with sort of French Crusader life. She was an amazing character, she ruled in her own right and she built the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as it stands now. It had been destroyed by the insane al-Hakim in 1019, the Fatimid caliph, and it had been destroyed right down to the ground rock, and it had been slightly rebuilt, but it was still a pitiful mess. And in an amazing masterpiece of sort of

architectural virtuosity, they united the various Christian, Golgotha and so on, and they brought it together into the façade, the Romanesque façade that we see today, which also contains—I love this about Jerusalem—in the façade if you look carefully it contains a balustrade that was in Hadrian's pagan temple which he built on the very same site and which the Crusaders found and stuffed into their new church, so it's typical of Jerusalem.

But I wanted to show this and I wanted to show the families, because history isn't just made—isn't just made by destructions and wars and so on but also by the traditions of families. And that's why I took special trouble. I mean, obviously, you know there are the great dynasties, the Umayyad, the Herodians, who I love writing about. But there are also the great Palestinian families.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Yes, the families.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: And I call them the families because in the history books they're usually called the notables, which I thought was a kind of boring jargon for them, so I call them the families. And the families are all different, but I managed to meet a member of each of the families, the Palestinian families, and find out their family stories. Some of them are descended from holy men, some of them descended from Sufi sheiks, and all of them have amazing sort of family stories. I mean, the two most famous, the Nusaybahs, who are still—still open the door every day and close it every day in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre—are some of the most famous. And of course in Mamluk and Ottoman times, they and the governor of Jerusalem, the Ottoman or Mamluk

governor, would sit in the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and take money from every single Christian pilgrim who visited Jerusalem, so the Nusaybahs became hugely rich on this.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: It was a very profitable industry.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: I mean, holiness has always been Jerusalem's great industry, and there are two sayings, incidentally, there are two interesting sayings. One is, "Never trust a pilgrim to Jerusalem," which was in Ottoman times, and those of you who know your Chaucer, will know the Wife of Bath, I think, she went five times to Jerusalem, sleeping with many people on the way, so it was a disreputable—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: People became very afraid of the pilgrims' effect in general.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: And the other thing, the other saying was, "There is no one more evil than an inhabitant of the holy city," which is the other one, because there was so much sale of relics and so on and so forth. So those are different sides of the holy city, if you like.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: In all this tableau, if you had to pick an era to live in in Jerusalem's history, what would it be?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: I'd pick now. If you really want a real answer, I'd

pick now. This, the twentieth century has not been a violent time by Jerusalem's standards, amazingly, which gives you an idea. I mean, yes, there were long periods—there have been long periods when Jerusalem, as I said, was completely desolate and it was dangerous to even be there, so that wasn't a good time to be there. The Crusades and the Byzantine times, if you were Jewish or Muslim you'd be killed—well, the Muslims didn't exist then. But in the Crusader times, if you were Jewish or Muslim, you'd be instantly butchered. So that wasn't a good time to be there, for me anyway.

And this is the only time, believe it or not, when it's freest to worship for all three faiths, which is surprising when you read what's happening there and, you know, the conflict, but it is actually the freest—it has never been freer for all three faiths to pray in Jerusalem. Despite all the conflict, despite the bureaucratic and the harassment, and many of the Israeli policies, some of which I disagree with, some of which, some of which, you know, have allowed this kind of freedom to pray.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: What about—I mean, sticking for a moment with the city today—what about something that is spoken of less in this country than it is in Israel certainly, but I think you would probably agree one feels very much on the ground there, the rise not of Palestinian-Jewish tension but the mounting tension between religious and secular Jews, which in Jerusalem really has reached some kind of a crisis point.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Well, I think, for me that's a sort of tragedy, the triumph of the Heradi. But all ultra-religious people are intolerant. I mean, researching

this book, no one was ruder to me in my researches than extremely religious people in all three faiths. That's tactfully point. But nowhere did I find more resistance, nowhere was I treated more appallingly than by the holy people. So I think that secular Jews are leaving, and fundamental—but the interesting thing about fundamentalism, and I use fundamentalism, not just Islamic fundamentalism, but Christian fundamentalism and Jewish fundamentalism and Islamic fundamentalism is as I said, there is no second route, there is no alternative with that. If you believe fundamentally that this is going to happen, if you believe in this apocalyptic scenario, there's no way you can compromise, and it is one of the tragedies of Jerusalem that while, you know, in New York or Paris or London people sort of regard extremely religious people with a slight smile of mockery almost and lack of comprehension, in fact, the numbers of fundamentalist believers in each of those three religions is increasing all the time and of course that piles the intensity and pressure onto the sort of fragile stones of Jerusalem in a way that one day Jerusalem may not be able to take the pressure.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Certainly in terms of the demographic majorities, it's not very far off at all, is it, before there's going to be a majority of ultraorthodox?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: No, but I mean, this is why—I would also—this is why this expectation, this kind of belief that when you arrive in Jerusalem it's going to be a sort of wonderful sort of peaceful, white-towered, white marble golden sort of place rising up on this holy mountain towards clouds where God sits with a white beard beaming down at pilgrims. This is why there's the Jerusalem syndrome, the madness of

the Jerusalem fever, the Jerusalem syndrome which is actually a sort of genuine psychiatric term for the madness that people suffer when they get to Jerusalem. There's the Kfar Shaul mental institution in Jerusalem, which specializes in the Jerusalem syndrome. I went there, and it's one of the few places on earth when you walk in and say "Jesus," about six people turn round and smile at you. So when it was—sometimes it's empty, but when there was the millennium, for example, there was a huge number of you know there were hundreds of people committed there.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: It's people from the outside, isn't it?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: It's people from the outside.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: And in fact the whole syndrome, isn't there some debate about whether some of these people have acquired it really even before touching ground, just because of the idea of Jerusalem is so strong that in the same way that Jerusalem becomes a figure for conquerors on the grander stage?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: That's right. But there is also the fact that, you know—there is a thin line between the frenzy of ecstasy and the Jerusalem syndrome. But when I was doing this book I found this wonderful psychiatric paper by Israeli, American, and English psychiatrists who'd studied the Jerusalem syndrome and sort of had agreed that it was a genuine condition. But—it's all in psychobabble, I couldn't understand a word of it—but at the end of it there's a guide to how if you're a tour guide

leading a group to Jerusalem, you should keep an eye out for five patterns of behavior, that you can keep an eye out and if you see this, you should call up this thing. I'll just tell you what they are, quickly if I may. The first one is if you see someone in your group ritualistically cutting their toenails and fingernails and keeping the clippings in a fetishistic manner, that's the first thing to worry about. The second thing is the cutting of hair, maybe all your hair, all over your body, and again the keeping of that in a special fetishistic pouch of some sort. The third one is the fashioning of a togalike robe from hotel bed linen. **(laughter)** And the fourth one is procession to a high place. And the fifth one is course giving a sermon from said high place. **(laughter)** While wearing the hotel bed linen.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: If anything at all, as I understand, right? You know, that's a good segue to something else that you say that I want to take up. You say that in Jerusalem the truth is often much less important than the myth and you quote an eminent Palestinian historian who said to you, "Don't ask me the history of facts. Take away the fiction, and there's nothing left." However, you say, there are facts and this book aims to tell them. Again, what's the symbiosis and the agon between those ideas? I mean, how do you work with that if the truth is less important?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: I guess you start off by saying, there's no point in writing about Jerusalem if you're going to mock religion or, you know, not take religion seriously. So one of the things I do is I don't sort of say, I don't look at any of these great moments in Jerusalem's holy history—whether it's King David and Solomon, whether

it's Abraham, whether it's the night journey of Muhammad or the resurrection of Jesus—I don't look at any of those, and go, "Now look what they've come up with." No, I tell it how it's believed to be, and then I say, if you're a believer you don't need to read the next paragraph, because you know what happened, but if you're not a believer, you might be interested, it could be this, it could be that, we think this, we think that.

I mean, for example, it's a fact that many of the sites in Jerusalem that were believed to be one thing are actually nothing of the sort. The most famous probably is the Via Dolorosa, which almost 99 percent likely is not the route of Jesus Christ with his cross, because the early pilgrims in the Middle Ages got the Praetorium of Pilate in the wrong place, so it's developed that. And yet does that—what does that mean for the millions of Christians who walk up that site carrying crosses, praying, every day but especially at Easter? Does that mean they're in the wrong place? No. Because the place has become holy. It's become holy because other people have found it holy. It has the heritage of holiness, it has the aura of holiness. So you know if people are interested in where it really was, this is where it probably was.

And that applies not just to Christian sites but to many of the—interestingly, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is almost certainly in the correct place. There is a famous row going on now where Israeli settlers are trying to build the tomb of Simon the Just in the Sheikh Jarrah Palestinian neighborhood. And it is almost certain that this is not the tomb of Simon the Just, it's the tomb of a Byzantine aristocratic woman whose name is engraved on it. But does that make people praying there wrong? No, I don't say it does,

because, again, there's a heritage of holiness there.

But on the other hand, in Jerusalem people die for the myths, people die for the stories, people die for the holiness that to secular people are fables. So the myths have an absolute reality in Jerusalem, which is what, you know, which is one of the themes of the book. Here, mythology really does matter. Mythology, holiness, call it what you like, the word of God, whatever. It matters in Jerusalem. But I'm a historian and I wanted to write facts, too, and I wanted to know what really happened. Now, when I started writing this book, my father said to me, "Simon," he said, "I want to tell you one thing, I'm eighty-five years old. If you say King David didn't exist, I'll kill you and disown you."

(laughter) But someone from every religion has had said something similar to me about their own thing which I'm not to say. And so, first of all, I didn't sleep for the whole of writing this book, because I had so many people telling me what I had to put in it and shouldn't put in it and so on. But the fact is I wanted to get as close as I could to a truth about Jerusalem, a history. Which, you know, is very hard, especially from my background, as a Jewish background, as a Montefiore, as an Englishman, too. But I was as able to do it as anybody is, on the other hand. I didn't want to write a Zionist history, I didn't want to write a pro-Palestinian history, I didn't want to write a history that excused English behavior and so on and so forth.

I wanted to write as close as I could, and it's impossible to get it absolutely right. I realized I wouldn't be popular with everybody. And indeed if I was too popular with anybody, that would be a problem. So I always remembered the great quote of Sir Ronald

Storrs, who was the first British governor in Jerusalem in 1918. And he started off well but after about six months he was hated by both the Jews and the Arabs. So he went to his boss, Prime Minister David Lloyd George, and he said, “Prime Minister, what do I do? The Jews are complaining. The Arabs are complaining.” And Lloyd George, quick as a flash, said, “Well, if either side stops complaining, you’ll be fired.” **(laughter)** So I had this quote next to me when I was writing this book, and I basically followed Lloyd George’s dictum.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: You know, I mean, that reminds me you do a beautiful job of speaking of these times where there’s a bit of a breather from some of this mythological energy, of showing what you called the Golden Age of the British Mandate, where suddenly Jerusalem is bursting with cafés and jazz music and women riding around in shimmering outfits in Fords through the city and, you know, after so much, so much anguish, and self-inflicted and externally inflicted barbaric evisceration of bodies and souls, there’s something really nice suddenly feeling like, “wow, in this period everyone’s just kind of doing little shimmy dances around town.” Can you say anything about whether you think that that was really like that or what?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: There are two lovely periods. One is just the late, sort of just before the First World War, basically, when Jerusalem was so international, it was really an international city. The Kaiser had visited. The Kaiser’s visit in 1898 was really the first real sort of official state visit in the way that we would understand—there was a press corps and he had brought photographers and he had a special Crusader

uniform to ride into the city. And of course they knocked a hole in the wall so he could ride in as sort of a German Crusader. That was the beginning of international Jerusalem. From then until the First World War, Jerusalem was absolutely chockablock with foreigners and it was prospering enormously. So that was the beginning of the period you talk about.

And there is this wonderful diary of Wasif Jawhariyyeh, the oud player, the lute player, which is published in Arabic but isn't yet published in English. And I had it translated for myself—I didn't speak Arabic, read Arabic. And it gives an amazing picture. First of all, I think it's probably—it's one of the greatest diaries ever written. But I also think it's probably a great, one of the great Palestinian masterpieces. But it's the diary of this guy who was both the lute player, but also worked for the great families, gave parties for them, played in orchestras, often with Jewish Sephardic musicians as well, went to all the Jewish festivals, he went to all the Islamic festivals. He was a Palestinian Orthodox Christian. He also organized orgies for everybody.

And the women in these orgies were overwhelmingly Russian pilgrim women who had come in their thousands. I mean, Russia dominated Jerusalem until 1914, absolutely dominated. There were ten to fifteen thousand pilgrims every year. They came with their death shrouds to dip into the Jordan. They lived in vast dormitories in the Russian town, and they dominated everything and many of the women, the peasant women got stranded there and became mistresses of the powerful Palestinian families, the Nashashibis, the Husaynis, and so on. And this diary tells this story and reveals this Jerusalem that the

foreigners never saw. So that's fascinating.

And then of course the First World War was a tragedy. Thousands of people died in Jerusalem. It suffered from an Allied blockade. The population sank. There were many thousands of teenaged Jewish whores on the streets. It was ruled by a sort of semi-mad, one of the weirdest tyrants to rule Jerusalem, Djemal Pasha, who was one of the Ottoman three pashas who ruled, who was a kind of mini-Napoleonic figure, who had a Jewish mistress, and loved champagne, and rode around with a guard of five hundred guys on camels with guns, so he was mad.

And then of course the British took it, and that was the beginning of this golden age which you refer to. That was a special period because the Zionists always believed that if the economy was good enough, then everyone would get rich, you know, including the Palestinian Arabs. And they believed that that would bring the Palestinians around to the idea of Zionism. And it sort of almost happened under a third party, under the British, because it's an interesting fact that—because of course Jews were pouring in. There was vast Jewish immigration into Jerusalem at that time, thanks to the Balfour Declaration. But there was also huge Arab immigration into Jerusalem at that time, too. Huge.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: That's written about less. Can you say a little bit about where it was coming from?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Well, it was coming from all over the Arab world.

You know, it was coming from Iraq, it was coming from Syria, it was coming from even from Lebanon. Because the country was suddenly prospering and the economy was booming. So there were as many Arab immigrants as there were Jewish immigrants, funnily enough, into Jerusalem at that time. But of course it was destroyed by politics. And it was destroyed by some of the decisions. I think one of the interesting things about this period one has to say is that I don't believe that anything was inevitable about where we are today.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: What were some of the moments that it could have turned in other directions?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: The biggest moment, the biggest thing, which nobody talks about today but is very funny because President Abbas of the Palestinians said today—it was in the *New York Times* today, which you probably read, that in 1947 the Arabs made the wrong choice. They should have accepted the partition. So that was a big moment. I mean, had they accepted the partition, Israel would be—it would be—it would essentially be an international country. If they had accepted it, Jerusalem would be a UN entity, would be a UN protectorate. Israel would be in various small bits, cantons almost, more of it would be Arab. I mean, there's a map of it in the book, but you can see exactly what it would have looked like, and if it had been enforced at that time, and if the Arabs had accepted it, if the countries around, if the five countries had not invaded at that time, which put the Israeli, put the early Israeli fighters, the Haganah, in a position that they were fighting for the lives with their backs against the wall, it really would have

been very different. And of course there'd be a Palestinian state, there would have been no Nakba, there would have been no catastrophe for the Palestinian people and so on.

Another key one which is even less well known, is 1939, is St. James conference. In 1939, Neville Chamberlain basically, the British Prime Minister basically reversed the entire Lloyd George policy of the Balfour Declaration of being pro-Zionist. And he said, he actually said, "The war's coming. If we're going to offend the Arabs or the Jews, let's offend the Jews, they're less important to us." And which is exactly the opposite of what Lloyd George had thought, of course, he had thought, "If we're going to offend anybody, let's offend the Palestinian Arabs." Fascinating. So Chamberlain made this decision in the Saint James conference to offer the mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin el-Husseini, this deal. Ten years' time, full Palestinian independence, limited Jewish immigration in that period for five years and full Palestinian independence in ten years, which would have been 1949, almost exactly the time the state of Israel came into existence, and he said, "There will be no Jewish state, there will be full Palestinian," there was no mention of a Jewish state. This is in 1939, totally forgotten period, and insanelly, this is one of the things about the peace process you realize so much is down to leadership. Disastrous leadership in this case.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Well, I think the point that you made early on with six people and holiness. I mean, it's also—we can look at such a small number of individuals who have been there at the pivotal moment to really turn things horrifically awry.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: The mufti of Jerusalem. This has to be one of the most disastrous decisions ever made in political history. And certainly in Palestinian history it's the biggest decision. Can you imagine if he'd said yes at that point, they would, you know, Britain would have been committed.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: In '39.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: In 1939, Britain would have been committed to create a Palestinian state, there would have been no Jewish—and I don't know what would have happened to the Jewish, the pretty large Jewish population at that time. You know, who knows what would have happened? But that's a pretty interesting moment. That's one of those key moments, and you have to wonder about his leadership, which was, you know, absolutely disastrous. So there were various times when these things could have been different. And as Mahmoud Abbas said today that in '47, had the Arab states not invaded them, again—

GEORGE PROCHNIK: It was remarkable he said this.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Yeah. It was remarkable that he said that. It was astonishing that he said that. And no one's ever said that, you know, from the Palestinian side ever, as far as I know. So we're seeing some interesting things at the moment.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: Right, well, I mean, when you said that this would be the

moment that you would choose to live in because there is greater tolerance. And you use a lovely phrase near the end of the book about nowhere else do we search for that elixir of tolerance more intensely than in Jerusalem. I mean, does that sense to you that there is more opportunity, equal opportunity, to practice one's faith translate for you into hopefulness about the future?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: You know, I see sort of—I mean, I am ultimately optimistic, because I am an optimistic person, but I must say my nature is tried by Jerusalem. **(laughter)** I mean, I do sort of—I mean, those of you who know the politics of the area well will know that the deal for the division—the peace deal is all negotiated. I mean, it does actually—everyone knows pretty much, with one or two Jewish settlements under, you know, which are not decided—the deal is known, but it's all a question of the timing and the will. I mean, one of the things Abbas said today is that, you know, in 2008 he almost made a deal with Prime Minister Olmert of Israel.

So, you know, the deal is so close, but there has to be will on both sides. So it's not a kind of pipe dream, but there's more to it than that. And I think this is probably one of the themes of the book and you said it at the beginning, did I have a mission, and what was I trying to achieve with the book? I think the interesting thing is you can make these deals as they did in '93, and you can make deals, you can enforce them with United Nations legality, with howitzers and M16s, with maps and clever plans that keep the underground Jewish and the surface Islamic and so on, and you can do all these clever tricks, and there have been something like sixty plans for dividing Jerusalem over the last century. But

none of it is worth the bullets that are fired, the paper it's written on, without a recognition of each other's heritage, or each other's story, or each other's history, if you like. And that's the problem.

You know, there was a key moment in the Palestinian Papers, as they were called—those leaked papers a few years, a couple of years, actually a year ago I think it was—when they said, the Palestinian negotiators were very criticized because in the secret negotiations with the Israelis, they said, “Look, you've got your Jerusalem, what about our al-Quds?” And the—across the Arab world these negotiators were criticized, “What traitors, what lickspittles to the Israelis.” But actually they were doing something. I think they were doing something noble, I don't regard it as servile at all. What they were doing is saying like, “Now you've got a Jewish Jerusalem that you never could have dreamed of.” Which is a wonderful thing, by the way, I think. “But now you've got to recognize al-Qud's, our heritage.” Now, this is something that has been a fault, in fact I think a crime of both sides. Because you know there was a time in 2000 when President Clinton was negotiating at Camp David, and Yasir Arafat said, “You know, by the way, there was never a Jewish temple in Jerusalem,” and everyone was just gobsmacked that he could really believe that. And I don't know if he really believed it or if it was a negotiating ploy.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I know someone who lives in the old city who tells me that—someone who lives in the Jewish quarter, who tells me he still will have conversations with shopkeepers he's very friendly with, and they say, “Well of course there wasn't a

temple up there.” He’ll say, “These buildings pre-date Islam.” “But they’re Roman,” is the answer. So I think it is this issue of narratives which in a place that values its stories so much, how can those stories in a healthy way, in a fruitful way, contaminate each other?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: The thing is that each has to embrace the other. It’s a hell of a difficult thing to do, but without it all of these political agreements are worthless.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: You make a good point about how in a way the stones, as much as they’re a threat because so many people input their own particular doctrine into them, the stones themselves in the different buildings are already hybrid, are already representative of multiple different regimes and multiple different faiths. So it’s almost as if the model of cohabitation exists within the physical city.

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: That’s such a good point. I mean, I should just say because I mentioned Yasir Arafat, that the Jews and the Israelis are just as bad at denying the narrative of the Arabs and the Palestinians, and are just as bad, so I just didn’t want to leave that out. Because that’s also one of the things—people often come up to me at the end of the lectures like this—now no one’s going to do it—and say, “By the way is it true that Jerusalem’s never mentioned in the Quran?” Which, it isn’t mentioned by name in the Quran. And then they say, “So, the Jews have been there for three thousand years, so the Arabs have no claim we’re older.” And I always say, “They’ve been there since 638.” How long do you have to live in a place before you can call it your home? I mean, you

know, because if we live in a home for twenty years, we regard it as a long time, so a hundred years it's definitely your home, so if you're talking about one thousand five hundred years, I think you've just about passed the test of having some right to residency.

I think it's sort of, I think both sides, one of the things I really want to do with this book is, if possible—negotiating this book in a sense, that words were so important and I had it sort of, with later bits I had it read by both the Israelis and Fatah and PLO people, and I had it read by both sides. Of course they both gave me incredibly long lists of corrections, but they never corrected anything that was to their advantage, obviously. They only corrected—but the point was, in the end, I just ripped up—I realized I just had to come to my own opinion about the thing, which would suit neither, really.

But the point is if I have a mission for the book, yes, it's to tell the history correctly. Of course it's to entertain and you can read it as a saga, you know, if you're into that, if you're into saga and conquest and adventure and massacre and all the rest of it. But ultimately it's about the nature of holiness and it's about recognition of each other's narrative. And if people read it and recognize that, then I'd be thrilled if even in the smallest way that worked.

GEORGE PROCHNIK: I think it does. Maybe that's a good note to pause, or perhaps even to stop. Is there something you'd like to say?

SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE: Perhaps I'd like—one thing I'd just like to say is

thanks so much for doing this beautifully with me. Thanks for coming through the snow. And I want to say is whatever happens with Jerusalem, I mean, whether the Arab Spring, whatever happens with the Arab Spring, and in some ways whatever happens in Cairo and Damascus must always—as you’ll read in the story, and those of you who know the history well will know—it always impacts on Jerusalem. So, you know, with so much afoot at the moment, with the Palestinian bid for statehood in the UN and so on, we simply don’t know what’s going to happen and certainly one would be an idiot to predict it, but, you know, since Jerusalem is definitely going to be for all three religions, the setting for the apocalypse, for the judgment day, the one thing we know for certain is it will all end in Jerusalem. Thank you very much. Thank you.

(applause)