

Shaul Adar



# On the Border

The Rise and Decline of the  
Most Political Club in the World



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# The Syndrome

*'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the  
prophets and stone those sent to you.'*

Luke 13:34 (New International Version)

THE GOLDEN Gate is the most interesting of the gates of the walled Old City of Jerusalem. It's a double gate on the eastern part of the wall, facing the Mount of Olives and the spectacular Church of All Nations at Gethsemane. It leads directly to Temple Mount and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre further down in the Old City. Legend has it that Jesus Christ entered the city through this gate on Palm Sunday. In March 630, Heraclius, emperor of the Byzantine Empire, rode a horse in front of a parade that marked the return of the True Cross on its way to reside in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre.

'The emperor dismounted to carry the true cross into Jerusalem,' wrote Simon Sebag Montefiore in *Jerusalem: The Biography*. 'It was said that when Heraclius tried to enter in Byzantine robes the gate became solid wall, but when he humbled himself, it opened for his imperial procession.'

The ornamented double gate was sealed and reopened by the rulers of Jerusalem many times, but it had been walled up since Suleiman the Magnificent built the impressive and familiar walls of the city in 1541, that we know today. He did it for defensive reasons as the Golden Gate is easy to breach, but many believe it was done for other motives.

According to Jewish belief, the Messiah will arrive at Jerusalem through the Gate of Mercy – its Hebrew name – riding a white donkey, and will enter Temple Mount from the east. That's the reason why it was sealed by the Muslim rulers of the city and a Muslim cemetery was dug around it, in the hope it would stop the Messiah in his tracks. It's worth remembering that Jews, Muslims and Christians believe the Gate to be the setting of the Apocalypse but it's not clear in which order the coming of the true Messiah and the Apocalypse will occur.

Until then, there's no shortage of people with a direct line to God here. This town has seen its fair share of messiahs/false messiahs, and if you walk around enough times, you're certain to meet one or two even today. The coming of the Messiah is a crucial pillar in the belief of observant Jews but also a derogatory term – Messianic – from secular Israelis to the fanatic believers. It's the hope of his arrival by the former and the fear of the consequences of this kind of thought and politics of the latter, which colours the Israeli political discourse.

In 2009 Beitar Jerusalem met their very own messiah. The club has had many saviours over the years but none like Guma Aguiar. Like all other messiahs it ended in a personal apocalypse.

Guma, a warm and charismatic person, came out of nowhere and became the 'king' of Jerusalem overnight in 2009. The handsome 31-year-old drove a flashy car

and planned to take over Beitar Jerusalem from Arcadi Gaydamak, the reluctant owner. Guma was doing it in the name of God.

Sivan Cohen of Israeli TV's Channel 10 followed him around and brought us this moving story in a 'Guma Aguiar Superstar' piece.

Born in Brazil to a Jewish mother, Guma was raised in the US state of Florida as a Catholic. A tennis prodigy turned tennis instructor due to an injury, he met businessmen and started to work in the natural gas trading pits of the New York Mercantile Exchange. With this new knowledge, his uncle Thomas Kaplan took him under his wing, looking for investments in gas and oil. Searching in a public library, Guma met John Amoruso, an expert geologist, who explained his theory on drilling in the deep Bossier sands of east Texas. According to *Forbes*, Amoruso was convinced that large quantities of natural gas could be found there because the sand was thick, the very type of high-pressure formation that was conducive to the development of natural gas deposits. Based on this theory, Kaplan set up Leor Energy and installed Guma as its CEO, forming a joint venture with Encana, Canada's biggest natural gas company, and Goldman Sachs.

For months nothing happened; time and money were running out. According to the TV piece, one night the bored young Guma, only 25 years old, was passing time watching TV when he learned about the actions of Rabbi Tovia Singer, founder and director of Outreach Judaism. The organisation is a self-declared 'counter-missionary' organisation 'dedicated to countering the efforts of fundamentalist Christian groups and cults who specifically target Jews for conversion'. Furious, Guma contacted Singer to berate him in the name of Christ, but after five hours of talking, he was convinced to embrace

his Jewish roots again. 'I came back home and everybody probably thought that I'm on a crazy drug trip or something,' he said. 'I announced to everybody that I don't believe in Jesus and right away I got on to the wrong foot with just about everybody.'

Guma, however, managed to convince the rest of the family to follow him. Four months later he and Leor Energy struck oil – well, gas actually. It was one of the biggest discoveries in the US in recent years. When Encana finally drilled the field, it found 2.4 trillion cubic feet of gas and the Canadian company bought up all of Leor's assets in the field for \$2.55bn in 2007. Guma netted himself an estimated fortune of \$200m.

'He felt it was God-sent and I feel the same way,' said Amoruso. 'I felt like I made a huge jump towards God and grubbing and kissing him or her. I felt I've got closer to God,' he testified to Cohen.

Now an extremely rich man, Guma asked his rabbi for advice on what he should do with his life and got his blessing, so Guma and Jammie, a beautiful cheerleader of a wife, moved to Jerusalem. He started donating large sums of money to religious organisations and Zionist causes, among them March of the Living, an annual educational programme that brings youth from around the Jewish world to Poland, where they explore the remnants of the Holocaust. There, in transit between one camp and another, Guma was told for the first time about Beitar Jerusalem, a club in urgent need of a new boss.

So, there you have it: a chance meeting in a tennis court led to Guma working in the New York Mercantile Exchange and a new enterprise with his uncle. His conversion to Judaism resulted in finding a huge gas field and him becoming wealthy. Donating money to charities paved his

way to Beitar. Nothing is without a purpose or is accidental in Jerusalem. If you just look at it, you'll see it.

Guma was fun; adored by the fans and loved by the cameras. Before a match against arch-rivals Hapoel Tel Aviv 'a light and smoke show was under way on the pitch' wrote James Montague in *The Blizzard*. 'Dance music thumped out as beautiful Israeli girls danced in the centre circle. On the sidelines Aguiar was jumping up and down to the beat, dancing with a man dressed in a dog suit. Aguiar moved into the centre circle and wiggled his hips in time with the music next to the singer. He closed his eyes, arms in the air and stumbled through the choreography. The dancers didn't miss a beat. "This is Aguiar's night," said Danny Neuman, a Beitar legend commentating on the match for the night. "He has saved Beitar."

"I want to see the flagship name of Jerusalem, bring some outsiders to Israel to visit and create awareness about this place," he [Aguiar] said. "Raising the profile of Jerusalem would be the most positive outcome. It's torn apart by a lot of conflict. But there are Christians, Jews and Muslims here that love the land they live in. I want Christian and Muslim fans here too."

Guma danced on the pitch and at endless parties, hugged everybody, gave warm interviews and charmed his way around. He gave \$4m to the club and was looking for a great season. 'It's my first time in the Teddy Stadium,' he said to the camera. 'They say, "Are you some kind of Messiah?" I say, "No, I don't want to be associated with a word like that." I have no idea [about the outcome of the Hapoel game]. Only God knows. Maybe he's feeling extra sympathetic to Jerusalem tonight. And if not, perhaps he'll feel extra sympathetic later in the year.' For the first time there was a hint of a different, angry tone to his voice.

Guma immediately stood out in the barren landscape of football club owners in Israel. He wasn't afraid to speak his mind, brought fresh hope to Beitar fans and a sense of relaxed fun for all football lovers. In a short time he became the talk of the town, the man who 'saved the city' as he was introduced at a public event. Even Beitar haters had a soft spot for him.

For the whole time, Guma was embroiled in a bitter legal dispute with his uncle over each share of the Encana deal windfall. Guma demanded some of the \$2bn that Kaplan had received and Kaplan counter-claimed that Guma had misspent the company capital. Guma then went on a shopping spree of real estate in the city – a big penthouse in Mamilla with a breathtaking view of the Old City, and a flat with a stunning panoramic view of the Wailing Wall were the star assets. The place at the Jewish quarter in the Old City was a front seat to one of the most important places on earth and he had a Beitar flag on the porch to prove it. 'What do you think, that I'll be in row 56 or something? It's like VIP seats. I want to have these seats if something happens. I pray and hope that I will get the chance to be part of building it [the temple] together with the whole nation or seeing it drop from the sky,' he told a reporter.

'Why don't you live here?' she asked.

'You should try and live here for a week, and when you start talking to the ceiling you'll understand why. When the ceiling starts to talk back, you'll understand why – it's not a place you want to stay in for too long. It's freaks me out.'

Sadly, it wasn't a joke or hyperbole. The ceiling talked to Guma, as did the cobbled alleys in the Old City, the prophets of the Bible, the kings of the Kingdom of Israel and 3,000 years of history. So did the drugs, manipulation, interests and court battles. Guma didn't stand a chance. It took just six

months for him to lose his grip on reality. In January 2010 he told reporters of the local *Kol Ha'ir* newspaper that he had released Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who had been held hostage in Gaza. 'I did it to prove that I could enter Gaza and come out alive and that Shalit could come out alive as well,' he said. 'He [Shalit] said that he wants me to tell his family how much he loves them and Israel, and that he hopes this ends soon.'

The next day Guma was sectioned in Abarbanel Mental Health Center in Bat Yam, just south of Jaffa. The sports press had a field day, laughing and making fun of a man having a public meltdown, in a shocking lack of empathy and decency.

After recovering at Abarbanel, Guma returned to Florida to rebuild his life. He cut his ties with Beitar and other Israeli organisations. However, in 2011 it was announced that he had bought a majority stake in the Hapoel Jerusalem basketball team, to which he had donated \$1.5m two years previously. On 19 June 2012 he took his 28-metre yacht, *TT Zion*, out of its mooring. According to the US Coastguard's report on the boat's GPS signal, it travelled north-east at before abruptly coming to a halt, then turning and drifting back to the shore. Guma was gone; his phone and wallet were found on board.

Only then did the truth come to light. A jaw-dropping investigation by Nir Shahak for the *Uvda* TV show revealed how badly Guma had been used and abused in Jerusalem. Suffering from a bipolar disorder from a young age, he was fair game in a merciless city. Soon after his arrival many people were aware that there was a new rich guy in town who wasn't careful with his money. He was targeted daily by rabbis and donation collectors and, in most cases, they didn't leave his home empty-handed. He gave \$3m to a far-

right politician and a militant yeshiva (a Jewish educational institution), and \$175,000 to an extreme rabbi who wanted to rebuild the Jewish Temple and who was leading a group of devotees getting ready for the big day, among other generous donations. Some felt it was wrong to obtain money from a person in Guma's condition, but most didn't care. It was just too good an opportunity.

'I left Israel with a really bad taste in my mouth,' Guma told Leah Stern, a friend of the family, in 2012. 'I'm very disappointed. I gave my heart, I gave my bank account. I wanted to make a life there and the second I lost control all backs were turned on me.'

Worse than that, crime organisations tried to swindle him. He was supplied with drugs in order to destabilise him and push him out of control. He was even gaslighted. A team of detectives followed him night and day to drive him into paranoid delusions. The criminals tried to transfer money from his bank account but were stopped by a vigilant clerk at the last moment.

The lovely legend of the big-hearted *oleh* (immigrant to Israel) was instead a horror tale of a helpless victim. Footage of his 'March of the Living' speech reveals his mental state even before he took over Beitar. There he was, in a Holocaust site in Poland, shouting, 'Without the God of Israel we are nothing! How pathetic is that? This [the death camp] is where we belong without the God of Israel.'

And then there was Beitar. The love was genuine, but it was a drug of another kind. Where Guma walked, he was told how great and beloved he was, how he had saved the team, that he was no ordinary citizen. That Beitar was the team of the country, that there was a calling for him to lead Beitar among the nations, that he had been chosen for that role. No wonder that when he took drugs in public and a

concerned friend asked him not to do so he said, 'I'm going to buy Beitar. Show me one cop who will dare to arrest me in front of the fans.'

According to a Florida court judgement that found against Guma Aguiar in 2010, 'Aguiar's psychosis manifested itself in both grandiose and paranoid delusions. In the spring of 2008, Aguiar expressed the grandiose belief that he is or could be the Messiah. With respect to his paranoid delusions, Aguiar has stated on multiple occasions that Kaplan was trying to kill him. Aguiar believes that he was poisoned, that he was shot in the back from a helicopter, that snipers were following him and that the medical staff at an Israeli hospital were injecting him with poison in order to kill him. Aguiar's bipolar disorder first manifested itself in 1997 when he was Baker Acted [involuntarily detained as per Florida state law] at a Florida psychiatric hospital for approximately 12 days. At the time, Aguiar was 19 years old.'

Most interestingly, the documents claimed, 'Aguiar experienced the onset of another manic episode in mid-June 2009 and is still recovering from this episode. From approximately June 2009 through January 2010, Aguiar was also psychotic.' It was also stated that Aguiar was abusing 'alcohol, marijuana, Xanax [an anti-anxiety medication], Ambien [a sleeping pill], anabolic steroids and OxyContin [an opiate].'

The Shalit rescue mission wasn't a delusion but an act played out by his guards who had no choice. They drove him to Ashkelon, near the Gaza border, and staged the whole heart-breaking farce for him. 'He was a wounded animal and when the animal is wounded the crow comes,' said one of his bodyguards.

Guma was never seen again. It could have been suicide, accident, murder or faking his own death and starting to

live all over again far away from Florida or Jerusalem. There were rumours that he might have gone to the Netherlands, where he had family and friends. In 2018 a rumour was doing the rounds in Israel, spread via WhatsApp: 'Guma Aguiar, who used to be the chairman of Beitar Jerusalem and was reported to drown in a lake near his home in the USA, is alive and was found in a mental institute in Dubai. He is currently on his way back to the USA with his family in a good condition and once he lands he will be quizzed regarding his disappearance.'

Guma Aguiar was declared dead by a Florida judge in January 2015 at the request of his wife and mother. All the family's ugly legal disputes between the mother, widow and uncle were settled and only the memory of a loving husband, father and a fan was left.

'He was a brilliant guy,' says Itzik Kornfien, Beitar chairman at the time. 'He understood very fast what is happening at the club. Usually, it takes people some months and some never get it, but he understood everything, including financial matters, and that turned him on. But when a very rich young man is carried around on the shoulders of the fans, when the whole stadium is chanting his name, it affects people. Even experienced businesspeople. It's hard to stop and it's hard to ignore. It was fun working with him and his ideas were right until the problem sadly began.'

Asked by the Walla! news website whether he thought Guma really had died, Kornfien replied, 'Certainly. He was a reckless thrill-seeker. He took me and friends for an unforgettable spin on this yacht. He sailed on full speed, riding the boat's own wake. At one time the yacht bumped to a huge height and came crashing down. We were all bruised. He was irresponsible on land as well. Driving 100kph in

a tiny street with his little kid on his lap, speeding and laughing.'

Guma is one of the many people who have been affected by the 'Jerusalem Syndrome'. It used to be called 'Jerusalem Fever' but in the 1930s it was recognised as a syndrome. It's a group of mental phenomena involving the presence of either religiously themed obsessive ideas, delusions or other psychosis-like experiences that are triggered by a visit to the city of Jerusalem. It's not endemic to one single religion or denomination but has affected Jews, Christians and Muslims of many different backgrounds. Every year about ten tourists are referred to the local mental health institute due to effects of the syndrome. There's also a subtype to the syndrome: those who come with magical ideas of Jerusalem's healing powers.

'Over the years we believed that people came to Jerusalem and got mad here,' said Dr Moshe Kalian, the regional psychiatrist, in an interview to Israel paper *Haaretz*. '... that there is something about the city that makes them go mental here, but our research shows that they come here with history of mental problems and Jerusalem is the stage on which they perform their big play.'

Usually they're referred to Kfar Shaul, a mental health centre in West Jerusalem, built on the ruins of Dir Yassin, an Arab village destroyed in the 1948 war. Usually after a short period of hospitalisation, they're free to go back to their homes.

It had affected visitors such as Nikolai Gogol, and Homer Simpson, when the famous yellow family visited the city, plus numerous ordinary visitors. But maybe to a lesser degree the syndrome has influenced the leaders of the city.

Guma was a tragic footnote in the rich history of Jerusalem and Beitar but he revealed something deep about

this environment. If you march through the gates of the city claiming you're the Messiah it will end in tears because the Yerushalmim can spot a fake. When you think you're the voice of history, the leader of the people, the protector of Jerusalem, you're most likely to lose your touch with reality sooner or later. There will be enough people who will make you think you're such but, in the end, reality will catch up with you.

It's not unusual in the football business to get carried away but it's happened in Beitar repeatedly. The city, the status of the club, the fans and constant contact with the owner are making the club prone to the syndrome. Maybe there's a 'Beitar Jerusalem Syndrome'.