

Barbados as Plan B

After the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit fiasco, the collapse of Venezuela, and a host of other spectacular failures in democratic governance, I began to use the phrase “the world is on fire” to describe my *Weltanschauung*, my world view. Then Australia literally caught fire, and my observation lost its metaphor status. Through a certain lens – not that of a raving doomsayer, but an empiric lens focused on climate change and resurgent nationalism – the end of modern civilization as we know it appears as a distinct possibility on the horizon, perhaps only one or two generations away.

What to do? We all need to keep up the fight for decency and good government, but if you’re like me your survival instinct will kick in, at least subconsciously, and you’ll ask yourself: *what’s my back-up plan?* Have you identified a place outside the path of the advancing chaos that you – and maybe your family – can escape to if necessary?

For example you might want to consider the island nation of Barbados, where I (an American citizen) have been living since Trump was elected president in 2016.

Mind you I had never promised to leave the US if he was elected, so my decision was not borne of any high principle. On election night, when confronted with the new reality, I realized I wasn’t tied to our family home in Westchester County, NY. My wife Jane had passed away earlier in the year, our sons live in Los Angeles and Beijing, and I’m a writer – I can work from anywhere. So I turned off the television (key step) and ran an on-line search for Caribbean islands that have a full-time bridge club (I’m a competitive bridge player) and a synagogue (to say *kaddish* for Jane).

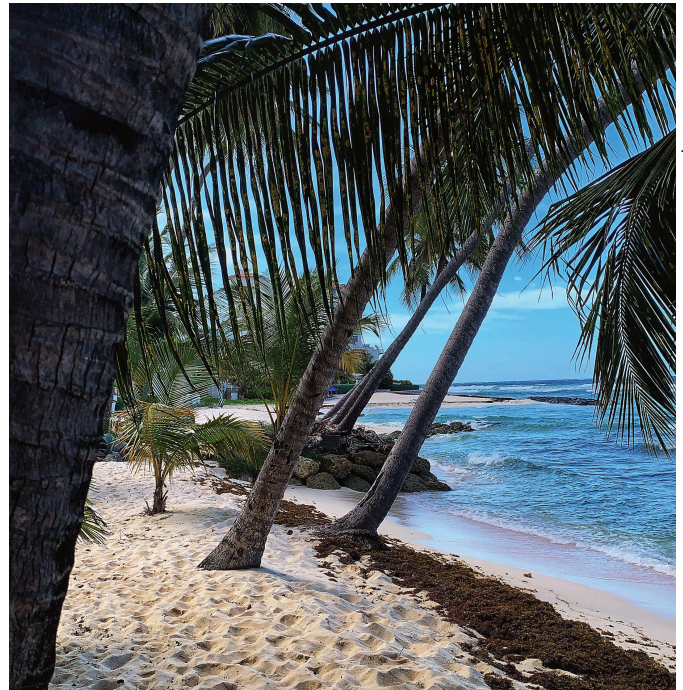
The Search Gods suggested I consider Barbados, an independent Commonwealth nation perched 300 miles off the shoulder of South America, where the local Bridge League hosts games five days a week, and the tiny Jewish community (50 people) gathers every Friday night in an historic 17th century synagogue to welcome the Sabbath.

I couldn’t think of a single reason to not try it. If it wasn’t right for me, I could learn that lesson in the sun-drenched eastern Caribbean at the height of the New York winter. How painful could it be?

Not very, as it turns out. I arrived two weeks before Trump’s inauguration, and the very first thing I appreciated – even more than the weather – was the absence of the American media and its constant drumbeat of partisan political tropes. The ex-pat community here is largely Canadian and British, so the foreign news is oriented to those markets. What a relief.

I didn’t know anyone, but in short order I visited the bridge club and the synagogue, introduced myself, and was warmly welcomed. After an initial stay in a hotel I located inexpensive long-term rental housing – an air-conditioned townhouse on a golf course that’s a botanical Shangri-La (there’s a mango tree in my back yard).

I’ve just marked my third anniversary here. Because I’m not trying to earn money (and I scrupulously adhere to my tourist visa limitations), it’s easy to portray Barbados as a paradise. For someone like me who has



David Cain / Unsplash

access to investment income in a foreign currency, it’s a safe, comfortable, low-stress environment. I’ve learned, however, that it is anything but a paradise for local citizens (Bajans) who are working to earn a living in Barbados dollars. Taxes are high, the economy is heavily dependent on tourism, and opportunities for advancement are limited. The government bureaucracy is not so much corrupt as antiquated and dysfunctional, costing citizens and businesses tens of thousands of productive hours every year. The on-line efficiencies we’ve come to expect in modern society don’t exist here; you still see long queues in banks and government offices in Barbados.

So it truly is a matter of perspective, but underlying it all – for visitor and resident alike – is a deep respect for the rule of law, a free press, an independent judiciary, and a stable, democratically-elected government. Everyone has access to clean drinking water, education, health care and internet. When you call the police they arrive in their crisp uniforms and don’t expect to be paid for their services. The only reason Barbados isn’t classified as a first world nation is its crumbling infrastructure – a colonial vestige suffering from chronic under-investment and neglect – and its anaemic economy. The island is outside the typical path of modern hurricanes and has not suffered a major storm hit since 1955.

I’ve taken to describing Barbados as “fifty years behind” the rest of the developed world. Considering the fact that the developed world is on fire, literally and figuratively, our half-century deficit here leaves us with a quaint but remarkably civil society. One fine example: in the absence of proper traffic lights and road signs, the long-suffering drivers of Barbados have devised their own system of reciprocal courtesy that keeps traffic flowing. You flash your lights to invite the other vehicle to go first, and that vehicle taps its horn, ever-so-lightly, to say thank you. It is astonishing how universally this etiquette is observed; in

the heaviest of traffic you rarely have to wait more than 30 seconds to be invited to make your turn.

This and other quirks of local life have endeared me to the island, and I reciprocate by trying to make myself useful in areas where I can contribute.

I discovered that the synagogue in downtown Bridgetown is not just historic, it's the oldest such structure in the Western hemisphere, dating from 1654, and has been restored as a national museum. So I dusted off my degree in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies from Brandeis University, applied for work as a volunteer docent, and have been leading tours of the old Jewish quarter. As it turns out, the whole history of the island, beginning in 1628, is intertwined with its Jewish community. Oliver Cromwell personally authorized the relocation to Barbados of 300 Sephardic Jews who were fleeing the Portuguese Inquisition in Brazil. Some of the wealthiest people of the 17th and 18th century – sugar tycoons – are buried in the adjacent cemeteries, along with Jewish pirates and the most travelled rabbi in history up to the invention of railroads, a Sephardic Ha-ḥam named Rafael Hayyim Isaac Carigal. This community thrived here for almost 200 years, but then vanished in the middle of the nineteenth century as the cane sugar economy collapsed. In the 1930's a handful of Ashkenazi (European) Jews who were fleeing the Nazi Inquisition found refuge in Barbados (if it's not one Inquisition, it's another), and their descendants are the core of the current community of 50 souls.

I also devote time to duplicate bridge in Barbados. I qualified to play on the national bridge team and recently travelled with five other Bajans to China to compete in the biennial World Bridge Championships. Even though we fared poorly in the results, it was a privilege to compete against some of the best players in the world. If I was playing bridge in the US I wouldn't have come anywhere remotely near this invitational tournament. My Masterpoint ranking in the US is 20,100th; in Barbados I'm ranked number five!

I recognize that not all seekers of a Plan B will find the same "fit" in Barbados that I have. Whether or not you will adapt depends on your particular interests and talents, and of course your *perspective* – the all-important factor that defines everything. My own view remains mixed: I see there are many serious problems here in Barbados, but they pale in comparison to the gun carnage and political and moral debacle in the United States.

For those who interest is piqued: economic and investment opportunities in Barbados abound in the agricultural and tourism sectors. The on-line economy here is in its infancy and poised for growth. Real estate is affordable, and there is a new progressive government, led by Barbados' first female Prime Minister, that seems to have gained the island's confidence. Like many Caribbean nations, paths to residency and citizenship are offered to visitors who bring economic growth to the island.

I continue to hope for the best, but am prepared for the worst.

Neal Rechtman

Author Neal Rechtman lives and works in Christ Church, Barbados. www.nealrechtman.com

His current novel, *The Ashwander Rules*, is a Supreme Court thriller: a secret Mossad operation in Washington DC works to save a fictional (Jewish) chief justice from assassination at the hands of domestic terrorists.



SOUTH LONDON SYMPHONIC WINDS
DIMITRI CHRYSOSTOMOU
CONDUCTOR
PRESENT
MYTHS & LEGENDS
P.DUKAS / THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE
G.HOLST / JUPITER
D.ARNAUTS / JACK'S FORTUNE WORLD PREMIERE
28TH MARCH 2020 7:30pm
ST BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH
SE26 6QR LONDON
Doors and bar 7:00pm
Free entry with a retiring collection
www.slsw.org.uk is a part of South London Community Music
Email: southlondonsymphonicwinds@gmail.com

WORLD DAY OF PRAYER
6TH MARCH 2020
Evening Service at 7.30pm
All are welcome to attend the evening service for World Day of Prayer, which will be held at **St. Bartholomew's Church, Sydenham**. The theme for this year's service is "Rise! Take Your Mat and Walk" and the materials have been prepared by our friends in Zimbabwe. Light refreshments will be served after the service. Please come!

Let Us Know! Have you used one of our advertisers? Did you receive an excellent service?
Sydenham Life does not advocate or recommend the services of any of our advertisers: we print their contact details in good faith. Please be sure to obtain a quote and details of all the work needed before you agree to proceed. Trading standards recommend that you obtain at least three quotes.