

Margaret Marcus, Ex-Jew, USA (part 5 of 5)

Description: Talking to Jews about Islam, and the impact of Islam on Margaret's life.

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Q: Have you ever had the opportunity to talk about Islam to the other Jews?

A: There is one particular incident which really stands out in my mind when I had the opportunity to discuss Islam with a Jewish gentleman. Dr. Shoreibah, of the Islamic Center in New York, introduced me to a very special guest. After one Juma Salat, I went into his office to ask him some questions about Islam, but before I could even greet him with "Assalamu Alaikum", I was completely astonished and surprised to see seated before him an ultra-orthodox Chassidic Jew, complete with earlocks, broad-brimmed black hat, long black silken caftan and a full flowing beard. Under his arm was a copy of the Yiddish newspaper, "The Daily Forward." He told us that his name was Samuel Kostelwitz, and that he worked in New York City as a diamond cutter. Most of his family, he said, lived in the Chassidic community of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, but he also had many relatives and friends in Israel. Born in a small Rumanian town, he had fled from the Nazi terror with his parents to America just prior to the outbreak of the second world-war. I asked him what had brought him to the mosque. He told us that he had been stricken with intolerable grief ever since his mother died 5 years ago. He had tried to find solace and consolation for his grief in the synagogue but could not when he discovered that many of the Jews, even in the ultra-orthodox community of Williamsburg, were shameless hypocrites. His recent trip to Israel had left him more bitterly disillusioned than ever. He was shocked by the irreligiousness he found in Israel, and he told us that nearly all the young sabras, or native-born Israelis, are militant atheists. When he saw large herds of swine on one of the kibbutzim (collective farms) he visited, he could only exclaim in horror: "Pigs in a Jewish state! I never thought that was possible until I came here! Then, when I witnessed the brutal treatment meted out to innocent Arabs in Israel, I know then that there is no difference between the Israelis and the Nazis. Never, never in the name of God, could I justify such terrible crimes!" Then he turned to Dr. Shoreibah and told him that he wanted to become a Muslim but before he took the irrevocable steps to formal conversion, he needed to have more knowledge about Islam. He said that he had purchased from Orientalia Bookshop some books on Arabic grammar and was trying to teach himself Arabic. He apologized to us for his broken English: Yiddish was his native tongue and Hebrew, his second language. Among themselves, his family and friends spoke only Yiddish. Since his reading knowledge of English was extremely poor, he had no access to good Islamic literature. However, with the aid of an English dictionary, he painfully read "Introduction to Islam" by Muhammad Hamidullah of Paris and praised this

as the best book he had ever read. In the presence of Dr. Shoreibah, I spent another hour with Mr. Kostelwitz, comparing the Bible stories of the patriarchs and prophets with their counterparts in the Holy Quran. I pointed out the inconsistencies and interpolations of the Bible, illustrating my point with Noah's alleged drunkenness, accusing David of adultery and Solomon of idolatry (God Forbid), and how the Holy Quran raises all these patriarchs to the status of genuine prophets of God and absolves them from all these crimes. I also pointed out why it was Ismail and not Isaac who God commanded Abraham to offer as sacrifice. In the Bible, God tells Abraham: "Take thine son, thine only son whom thou lovest and offer him up to Me as burnt offering." Now Ismail was born 13 years before Isaac but the Jewish biblical commentators explain that away be belittling Ismail's mother, Hagar, as only a concubine and not Abraham's real wife, so they say Isaac was the only legitimate son. Islamic traditions, however, raise Hagar to the status of a full-fledged wife equal in every respect to Sarah. Mr. Kostelwitz expressed his deepest gratitude to me for spending so much time, explaining those truths to him. To express this gratitude, he insisted on inviting Dr. Shoreibah and me to lunch at the Kosher Jewish delicatessen where he always goes to eat his lunch. Mr. Kostelwitz told us that he wished more than anything else to embrace Islam, but he feared he could not withstand the persecution he would have to face from his family and friends. I told him to pray to God for help and strength and he promised that he would. When he left us, I felt privileged to have spoken with such a gentle and kind person.

Q: What Impact did Islam have on your life?

A: In Islam, my quest for absolute values was satisfied. In Islam, I found all that was true, good and beautiful and that which gives meaning and direction to human life (and death); while in other religions, the Truth is deformed, distorted, restricted and fragmentary. If any one chooses to ask me how I came to know this, I can only reply my personal life experience was sufficient to convince me. My adherence to the Islamic faith is thus a calm, cool but very intense conviction. I have, I believe, always been a Muslim at heart by temperament, even before I knew there was such a thing as Islam. My conversion was mainly a formality, involving no radical change in my heart at all but rather only making official what I had been thinking and yearning for many years.

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