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Rating: 5.0

Description: After a spiritual journey of almost 40 years, a Boston Jewish linguist finds Islam in Africa. Part 1.

Category: Articles Stories of New Muslims Men

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Published on: 23 Nov 2010
Last modified on: 20 Dec 2010

An odyssey is a long, wandering journey. The word comes from Odysseus (in Latin, Ulysses) a hero of the Homeric epic poem, The Odyssey. His journey home took ten years and was fraught with many mishaps, detours, dangers and adventures. In retrospect, my road to Islam – my journey home- seems like an odyssey. As I look back over my life, from my early childhood up until I finally made *shahadah*[1], a journey of almost 40 years, it seems that there were many signs, many turning points, many incidents, some significant, some trivial, that were all preparing me for and pointing the way to Islam.

I grew up in Boston. It was very much a Catholic city, mostly Irish and Italian, with small but significant communities of blacks, Jews, Chinese, Greeks, Armenians and Christians Arabs, and in those days especially, each group had its own neighborhood. There were lots of Greek and Syrian restaurants, and I grew up loving Greek salad, *shish kebob*, *lahm mishwi*, *kibbi*, grape leaves, humus, anything with lamb, etc.

My family were mostly working-class, conservative Jews. My grandparents had fled the anti-Semitism and pogroms of czarist Russia around 1903. They and their families had found work in the sweatshops of the garment district, a few were in craft skills, and they were quite active in their labor unions. I was to become the first in my family to get a university degree. Our home was not strictly kosher, but we would never dream of eating pork. All the holidays and fasts were observed, and for years I went to the synagogue every Saturday and holiday with my father and uncle.

The synagogue we belonged to was conservative, close to orthodox but modernist: it was very traditional, but women were not totally segregated. I began "*Madrasah*" (Hebrew school) at age six. It was 1948, which saw the birth of the state of Israel, and Zionist propaganda filled the atmosphere, as did conversations and sermons about the Nazis and concentration camps, and there were many recent immigrant refugee survivors.

At that time there was still a lot of anti-Semitism in the U.S., especially in the South and the Midwest, but also in Boston. The Greeks, Syrians and Italians were fine, but the Boston Irish were a big problem, dating back to my parents' generation in WWI and the

1920s. During my childhood I was often chased, spat on, insulted and beaten. They even held me down and pulled my pants down - in addition to the humiliation they wanted to see what a circumcision looked like.

My Hebrew teachers were two Israeli brothers, who were orthodox, and veterans of the 1948 war. From them I learned modern Hebrew and absorbed a lot of Zionist ideology along with the religious teachings. I became more religious and an avid Zionist. I believed that Jews needed their own country in case of another Hitler - those Irish kids were doing nothing to allay my fears and I did not feel “at home” in America. I decided I would go and spend my life on a kibbutz (communal farm).

My father was a musician and a cantor (prayer leader). He had a beautiful tenor voice, preferred the more traditional, rather oriental, melodies, and chanted the prayers with lots of *huzn* (sorrow) (when I learned that word recently I began to wonder if it might be related to Hebrew *hazan* = ‘cantor’). In our synagogue, the Torah reader used a very oriental sounding tajwid which I loved listening to. Believe it or not, I recently heard a friend reciting from the Quran and it sounded almost identical.

One thing that stands out clearly in my memory, even now during salah, is that in the Jewish prayers there are regular references to prostration (*sujud*). In fact, it is a custom in the more orthodox synagogues that during Yom Kippur , the holiest fast day and the equivalent of ‘*Ashurah*’ , the cantor, on behalf of the congregation, actually makes *sujud* , while still chanting. This is no mean feat, and my father, with his powerful voice, did it extremely well. I remember thinking then that it would be really nice if we all actually did prostrate, instead of just bowing as a symbolic *sujud*.

Around the age of eight or nine, I chanced to discover a radio station that broadcast programs of the local ethnic communities. I began to listen to the Yiddish, Greek and Armenian ones, and especially to the Arabic Hour. I fell in love with the music and the sound of the language. Using the Hebrew I knew, I tried to understand the news and figure out the sound correspondences; I noticed the differences between *hamzah* and *‘ayn*, *kh* and *h*, *k* and *q*, distinctions which modern Hebrew has lost. This greatly improved my Hebrew spelling and I won prizes in Hebrew class. I also remember helping my friends cheat during spelling tests by repeating the words under my breath in an “Arabic” accent.

By High School, I had discovered the Boston Public Library and its record section: besides classical, I discovered ethnic folk music from all over the world, but I especially gravitated to the Middle Eastern: Arabic, Turkish, Persian, then Indian-Pakistani. I learned to identify various regional styles, instruments and rhythms. I most loved the *‘oud*, and I taught myself to play the dumbeg and accompany the recordings. Once, a group of Yemeni Jews came to Boston from Israel to perform folk songs and dances. I was fascinated by their appearance, costumes and music. They even pronounced Hebrew like me during a spelling test.

I mention all these little things because there is an undeniable cultural component to Islam: the language, the melodies of *adhan* and Quran, social interactions and other

features, which are really quite exotic and strange to the average Westerner, including westernized Jews, but which, by the time I encountered them years later in a different context, were already very familiar and pleasant to me, even to the point of nostalgia, and which helped make Islam easier for me to accept and follow. More on that later.

My best friend in high school was also a strong influence on me. He read a lot of philosophy, poetry and religious literature. I didn't care much for the first two, but I did read some of the religious writings, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist – and the Quran. I noticed that its stories were quite similar to the Bible stories, but I felt it was anti-Jewish. I was quite impressed, though, by its depiction of Jesus as a prophet, not just a rabbi. I accepted that, and that became my answer to my Catholic classmates when they would ask me what I believed about Jesus. They seemed not too displeased by that.

Footnotes:

[1] *Shahadah*, the Islamic testimonial of faith, i.e. "I testify that there is no god but God, and I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God."