

DR. MOUSTAFA MOULD, EX-JEW, USA (PART 3 OF 5)

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Description: After a spiritual journey of almost 40 years, a Boston Jewish linguist finds Islam in Africa. Part 3.

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I returned home through the Middle East and Europe but I made a point of stopping in Israel. It was 1969. I was no longer a Zionist, but even so, I was surprised at how disappointed I was. I know that part of it was the culture shock of leaving a small, up-country African town, people and a job that I loved; still, I was surprised by the brusqueness and arrogance of the Israelis I met – much like the American stereotype of the French. From an archaeological and historical perspective it was a good experience, but I couldn't get over how alienated I felt from the culture and from the people who were supposed to be my people.

I refused on principle to visit the West Bank – that was before they started building settlements – except for East Jerusalem; I couldn't resist that. Standing at the wall of Solomon's temple, the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa gave me an intense feeling I could not describe at the time. I can describe it now: I was sensing a feeling of holiness; it's no wonder the Islamic name is Al-Quds. But it upset me a great deal to see first-hand the discrimination and second-class status of the Palestinians, even the citizens. I had grown up in an American subculture where Jews had always been in the forefront of civil rights, labor and civil liberties struggles. To me, what I found in Israel wasn't Jewish.

The next ten years, '69 – '79, I spent in Los Angeles. I had missed 1968, one of the most important and turbulent years in modern American history. Though not surprised, I was very disheartened upon my return to the U.S. Blacks were separating from Whites by choice; SDS had become a bunch of raving Maoists, free speech was degenerating into filthy speech. I couldn't be political again, except for an occasional anti-war or anti-Nixon demonstration. I was both attracted to and repelled by the hedonism of 70s California. I was tempted to indulge and half-heartedly did so, but - thank God for my *fitrah* and my good Jewish upbringing – I didn't go very far; I mostly grew my hair and beard long. I was too absorbed in my studies, getting my doctorate, teaching, getting married then divorced, and looking for a decent academic position.

Two things during that decade are relevant to this story. Briefly, the Likud government in Israel, the building of settlements and the brutal treatment of the Palestinians, not to

mention its alliance with South Africa, revolted and infuriated me, and turned me from a non-Zionist to a vocal anti-Zionist. Even worse to me was the knee-jerk support of the American Jewish community, which I'd thought would oppose Likud, at least quietly. Didn't we all agree just a few years before that Begin and his ilk were lunatics?!

Many of the settlers interviewed on the TV news were obviously American Jews. How could they have grown up in this country with these American - and Jewish - values, live through the civil rights revolution, and go do what they were doing there? There was more Jewish opposition in Israel than there was in the U.S. I felt betrayed, ashamed, disgusted. There were, of course - and are - other Jews who felt as I did, mainly those on the left, but only a few spoke out. Notable were I.F. Stone, a radical journalist and one of my heroes, and Noam Chomski, whose political writings on the Vietnam war and Palestine were as revolutionary as his theory of linguistics.

In 1979, recently divorced, unable to land a tenure-track position, and missing Africa, I returned as an assistant professor of linguistics at the University of Nairobi. My father had passed away just a couple of months before I was to leave. I became friends with several faculty members, particularly my department chairman and a history professor, both Muslims from Mombasa, and the Arabic professor, my Sudanese next-door neighbor. I often ate lunch in the faculty dining room with them, and out of respect for them (and embarrassment, because I knew they knew I was a Jew) I never ate pork when I was with them. Before long I stopped eating pork completely. We often discussed the Middle East, Islam and Judaism, and I was pleasantly surprised to see that they could be anti-Israel without being anti-Jewish; they were surprised that I could be a Jew and anti-Israel.

Having more time on my hand than I'd enjoyed in a long time, I decided to catch up on my ever-growing reading list. I re-read the Bible: the Old Testament to clarify some confusion about chronology in ancient history, I also read the New Testament because I never had. I also re-read the Quran. I knew nothing then of the early Islamic history. *Sirah* or *Hadith*, but I appreciated it more this time. I got that reaction again, though; why does it have to be so critical of the Jews; but, my memory recently refreshed, I recalled that the Torah itself and the rest of the Old Testament were equally critical, if not more so, than the Quran. But didn't the Jews finally learn their lesson and truly become the People of the Book when they were expelled from Israel and Jerusalem the second time, and when the rabbis, synagogues and prayers replaced the priests, temple and sacrifices? What was it, then, about the Jews of Madinah; they were clearly reprehensible but they sounded so different from us European Jews, even from the Sephardi Jews of the time of the Caliphs; had they, like the Ethiopian and Chinese Jews, lacked the Talmud? I'm still curious about that. Anyway, that insight was later to prove to be a barrier removed.

Someone wise once said that if your faith is weak, just pretend to have faith, and that will strengthen it. Africans, whether Christian, Muslim or Pagan, are spiritual people. To be an atheist is incomprehensible and ridiculous to them. Knowing this, I never said I was an atheist when questioned - as I constantly was- about my religion. I would reply

that of course I believed in God, one God, but not in any particular religion. I was almost true, or at least what I wanted to believe if I could. I cannot say that I had a sudden flash of inspiration, like Paul on the road to Damascus, or a near-death experience (I did have two, but without religious effect). It seems to me that, just by saying it and pretending it, it gradually came back to me.

I'd become a deist, like another hero of mine, Thomas Jefferson. Maybe I would join the Unitarian Church, a popular group, especially in New England, which accepts Jesus as a prophet, and which includes many socially conscious, formerly Jewish and Trinitarian Christian, liberal intellectuals.

Another contributing factor was my joining at that time the Nairobi symphony orchestra/chorus. It was an amateur group but they were excellent. I'd gone with some friends to their Easter concert to hear them perform the Mozart Requiem – music for a funeral mass. That music, intensely religious, was gorgeous, sublime awe-inspiring and inspirational. It wasn't only the beauty of the music, though it was a major part, but the message – glorifying God, speaking of death, resurrection, the final Judgment and eternal life – moved me to tears. The next day I went and signed up to sing in the chorus.

For the next three years I sang other masterpieces: masses, requiems, oratorios – Beethoven, Brahms, Bach, Verdi. It is all Christian, and some of it of course makes reference to Jesus as divine, but those words had no effect on me; I was just helping make beautiful music. But the parts that spoke of God did touch me deeply and helped me gradually regain my faith and belief in Him. Of course today I would not sing such things as “I know that my redeemer liveth,”

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