

DR. MOUSTAFA MOULD, EX-JEW, USA (PART 4 OF 5)

Rating: 4.5

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

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Then I fell in love! She was Somali, intelligent, witty, charming, and a young widow with two handsome young sons. Her English was very limited and my Somali was non-existent, but we could communicate quite easily in Swahili. We discussed marriage, but there were a few practical problems.

I knew I could not stay much longer at the University of Nairobi; they were trying to Africanize it as quickly as possible, and to them I was just another white foreigner. Before I got much older I needed a new job, probably a new career, maybe with the State Department or a non-profit agency. From her point of view the obstacle was simply that I was not a Muslim. I had mistakenly thought that any Muslim could marry one of the People of the Book; she set me straight on that very quickly; men yes, women, no!

She was telling me about Islam, and I'd learned some things from my colleagues and others. I already believed in the One God who was the Creator of the universe and all that is in it. I already believed in the Islamic concepts of *tawhid* and *shirk* and I knew the fallacy of believing in anything like astrology or palmistry. I'd long believed that Jesus was one of the prophets and I believed that Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was a prophet and a messenger, and it had long ceased to be relevant to me that Muhammad was not a Jewish prophet.

I'd stopped eating pork; I didn't gamble, I rarely drank anything besides a glass of wine with an occasional gourmet dinner. I was, since my Peace Corps days, already more comfortable with African and Islamic notions of modesty, child rearing, etc., than with the "sexual revolution", and the me-ism and the phenomena of disintegrating families that were on the rise in the '70s and '80s in America. There didn't seem to be much to prevent me from becoming a Muslim. I was so close, so what in 1983, was the problem?

In fact there were two. First, there was the matter of my identity and my heritage. I imagine that it is not so traumatic for a Christian to change from one religion to another. If a German Catholic became a Lutheran, or even a Jew or Muslim, he remains a

German. I certainly felt like an American first and a Jew second – I could never consider myself Russian. But in America, nation of immigrants, even the most acculturated attach some importance to their families' national or ethnic origins. Even though I had no desire to deal with Jews as Jews or as a community, I was reluctant to lose that identity.

The second obstacle was my family. Though not orthodox, most were strongly traditional, all pro-Israel, some were avid Zionists; many considered Arabs as enemies, and I expected they would also consider Muslims as enemies. I feared they would disown me as crazy or even traitorous. Worst of all, because I still loved them, they would be hurt.

First things first: I left that problem up in the air, and when my contract expired I did not renew it but returned to the States hoping to find another job, preferably back in East Africa. It was terribly hard. I had no home, no income, not even an interview suit. I invested in a wool suit, three ties and a winter coat – it was my first winter in twenty years – got books on how to write a resume and a SF171, and stayed with a friend in Washington, trying all the government agencies, consulting firms and PVOs that had anything to do with Africa, until my money ran out. I had to return to Boston and stay with my sister, where I had food and shelter, but it was far from where the jobs might be. In addition, I was going through a severe case of culture shock. So there I was: broke, in the winter, in culture shock on top of a mid-life crisis, in love – and on anti-depressants.

I can joke now, but the pain and fear were unbearable then. For the first time in my adult life I began to pray. I prayed often and hard. I vowed that, if I could get back to Africa and marry my beloved, I would declare my submission to Allah and become a Muslim.

I got a really awful temporary job in a warehouse that at least paid for food, bus fares and dry cleaning, then a better, but embarrassing one as a receptionist in the counseling office at a local college. I could see that the four yuppie psychologists figured me for some 42-year-old loser, and I pretty much agreed with them. Out of embarrassment I didn't tell anything about myself, but when the phone wasn't ringing off the hook with students panicking over mid-terms, I was reading job notices and typing applications letters. I found that a government agency was hiring ESL teachers for Egypt - close enough - and I applied immediately. A week later another agency I'd applied to six months earlier invited me to D.C. for interviews.

As soon as I got to Washington I called about the ESL jobs to see if I could get an interview but the jobs were already filled! Nonetheless, I asked to meet with them anyways, just in case something came up later. I got the interview and it was there that I was told, "By the way, there is one position opening soon, but it's in Somalia."

"Somalia!" I nearly shouted, "That's wonderful!"

“Is it?” she asked incredulously.

“Sure, I’d love to go there. I’m already familiar with the culture and the religion,” I said aloud, but thinking to myself how it’s only an hour from Mogadishu to Nairobi, and how maybe I’d get to meet my future family in-laws. I told her my references, all of whom she knew personally. She would call them, and as far as she was concerned if I wanted the job I could probably have it.

I finished up my interviews at the other agency. They even showed me the cubicle in the windowless office where I would probably be working, and I returned to Boston, elated. I might even have a choice, praise God. But what a choice it was: a one year renewable contract in a hot, dusty – but African – post near the Indian Ocean, or a career civil service job with a pension plan in a windowless office in northern Virginia.

Two weeks later, she called to offer me the job of English program director in Mogadishu saying that I would have 48 hours to think it over. Everyone said it was a no-brainer; I should take the career job with pension in Washington, otherwise I’d be back at square one in a year or two. I argued that I was an Africanist, the experience would help me and I’d make good contacts. I accepted the job and started to get my shots. A couple of weeks later the other agency sent me a brief note, with no explanation, informing me I did not get the windowless job.

Alhamdulillah, I could so easily have ended up with neither, but Allah had guided me to the right decision. I was employed and probably about to get married. I gave my notice at the college, and on the last day I typed a letter to the psychologists informing them that I was leaving to take up a position as a project director at the United States Embassy in Somalia, signed M. Mould, Ph.D.

Of course I had to stop off in Nairobi for a few days on my way to Mogadishu where I had a tearful reunion with the Somali sister. I tried to make some future plans but the problem was that I’d been hired as a bachelor, which meant no family benefits or housing. Besides this, I had no idea what Somalia or my job would be like or how long I would be there. I thought I could visit often, and there was always the phone. As well, she could come to visit her family, whom she hadn’t seen since childhood.

The job was interesting, a little teaching, but mostly administration and management, and dealing with embassy officials. Most of my own students were senior government officials and a few of them became good friends. Outside of work was a whole different story. The culture and atmosphere in urban Somalia was more Middle Eastern than African. During my seven years in Uganda and Kenya I knew the languages and the people were open and friendly and I never had trouble adjusting or getting around; I’d always felt completely at home. Mogadishu gave me a culture shock. I didn’t know the language, no one knew Swahili and educated Somalis knew Italian, not English. All the signs were in Somali. The worst thing was the communications. Home phones were overcrowded; the post office was sweltering hot. The only service that was efficient was the telegraph service. The mail was totally unreliable except for the diplomatic pouch.

It was at times next to impossible to contact Nairobi.

Don't get me wrong. I was quite happy there, enjoying the sights and smells, the Italian and Somali food, my views of the ocean, which was within walking distance of my house and my office, discovering a new culture. I was living downtown, in one of the older sections, behind the Italian embassy, and I was awakened early morning by a beautiful adhan from the loudspeaker of a nearby mosque. We worked a Muslim schedule: Sunday – Thursday, 7 – 3. On Fridays I would walk around and often found myself outside a little mosque behind the American Embassy, and while myrrh and frankincense drifted from the doorways in the alleys and I would stop and listen to the sounds of *Jumu'ah*.

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