

Our Childrens' Clothes & The New York Times Read Differently

(The Blasphemy and Tyranny of Religious Intolerance)

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~I am one more powerless person who reads the New York Times on a daily basis and despairs whenever



I read about the events in the Middle East. Years ago, I read about an Arab father who was grateful for the friendship that existed between his young son and an Israeli girl whom he had befriended during his stay in a hospital in Jerusalem. “We are one family,” the father said. I told my husband that I wished to write to that father and thank him for saying so. My husband was quick to remind me that it would be impossible to contact that Arab father in Jerusalem. He then asked if I was going to cry about the *good news* coming out of the Middle East as well as the bad. My tears stopped instantly and I promptly left the house for an early morning run along a nearby creek. It was still dark and a large owl was silhouetted against the sky. On my return, day had

dawned, and walking toward me was a man wearing a prayer shawl. His attitude was that of someone reading from a prayer book. We passed one another. But then, a question entered my mind. “Excuse me, sir,” I said. I am sorry to interrupt but I wonder if you can answer a question for me.” And I did indeed have a question. Only day before, a complete stranger had knocked on our front door. She introduced herself by saying that she walked frequently in the neighborhood, admired our small house, and wanted to meet its occupants. She mentioned just having returned from Jerusalem and that our small yard brought to mind her experience of the “Sukkot.” I was not familiar with the word and her explanation left me with just enough wondering to intrude on the stranger and ask if he, being Jewish, knew what it meant. Graciously, he explained. I thanked him and prepared to set off running again. But then, out of politeness, I inquired if he was a visiting professor at nearby Stanford University. “No,” he said. His son was ailing and his family had come to Stanford Hospital from Jerusalem to seek medical care. He went on to say that his family would remain in the U.S. for another six months and that they were fortunate enough to have been given a house in the neighborhood for the duration of their stay. Their house was but two blocks for our own so I naturally welcomed the man to our neighborhood and insisted that his family come over to our house for a lunch or dinner. Then, I could not help but mention the New York Times article I had read that very morning. “Oh yes! I know that Arab man,” he exclaimed. My son was in that very same hospital. In fact, his bed was next to that of the Arab father’s little girl. Such a moment! “Was there a way for me to personally contact that father and thank him for the reminder that “we are one family,” I asked. “Of course!” he replied. And so was a friendship born. I walked with man back to his house and met his family.

The family did come to our house but unfortunately the meal I prepared could not be eaten for religious reasons. No matter. We had a pleasant visit while their four young children ran wild in our garden and lost their caps in the shrubs. Thereafter, we met at a stone circle on the creek and read stories aloud. When their youngest son left the hospital, the kids had another romp in the yard before they departed for home. Thereafter, every time I ran by the oak tree where I had interrupted the Jewish man in his devotions I was glad for it. I miss that family now that they are gone and wish them well. *One family....* I sincerely hope that they are all safe and sound.

~It was after the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City in 2002, that I read in the New York



Times about Muslims who were being dragged from their cabs and beaten. In that time of sorrow and grief, I was most fearful about the rising tide of religious intolerance and the escalation of violence in the Holy Lands, in New York, and elsewhere. After reading the New York Times one morning just days after the attack, I decided to call a local mosque to see if, as a non-Muslim, I would be allowed to enter a mosque if only as a friend and fellow American who wished

show solidarity with those present. However pitiful, it was a response to the claim of that Arab father and perhaps it was my way of defending myself from the impending threat to my humanity, our humanity, as a result of backlash against innocent Muslims and their faith.

Needless to say, I had never been to mosque before nor did I know where to find one. Against the protestations of my husband who again found me crying over the morning paper instead of reading it, I picked up the now defunct phone book and called several mosques in the San Francisco Bay Area. I inquired if there might be a service or ceremony that I could attend in the wake of the attack in New York City and the subsequent backlash against Muslims. But those with whom I spoke had fear in their voices - I could hear it. I could understand it. However, it just so happened that one of the mosques I had called was within driving distance. So I got into the car and drove to the address. Finding there a carpet shop and blonde haired woman behind a desk, I explained what I was looking for and why I had come. As the woman gave me a bemused look, a young man stepped out from behind a tall stack of carpets. "Yes, there was a mosque on the premises but it was upstairs." He then invited me and my family to attend the ceremony that would be held that very evening. A "dikkur?" Here was yet another word for my limited vocabulary.

That young man's father was Sheik Jamil, and when even came it was Sheik Jamil who met us at the top of



A crowd of migrants rushed to cram aboard a train at the 19th-century Keleti train station on Thursday in central Budapest.

the stairs where we removed our shoes before entering the mosque. I felt a bit awkward meeting Sheik Jamil. In the background was the clattering of pots and pans and the chatter of women in the kitchen preparing a meal for the worshippers. Between that clatter and his kindly but severe face, there to define the moment a hole in the sock of my son-in-law and the sudden glare of my daughter's toe nail polish - a blinding firehouse red. Besides this, there was only one other worshipper present. It

crossed my mind that true believers might have stayed home once they caught wind of that fact that non-Muslims were coming. I also worried that my husband's bad back would prevent him from kneeling much less touching his head to the floor. More awkwardness. However, the good Sheik Jamil must have intuited the perils of our presence there and his face remained a calm, safe shore. It was touching that his good man prayed in Arabic, then English, for our sake, and that he gave us the time necessary to follow his cues as best we could. In no time at all, we were grateful to be there, kneeling and rising and kneeling again. In our grief over the events at the World Trade Center, it felt right and good to close our eyes and touch our foreheads to the floor, the ground, the earth – and to pray in a place where we were made welcome even if there were those, perhaps even multitudes, who were probably right to think that we did not belong.

But...*one family*.... Before long, many other worshippers arrived and I forgot my fear of having driven others away by our presence. I even forgot that my religion was different because I felt at home in the spirit that was gathering. If grief and a desire to avoid more grief had driven us to the mosque in the first place, then all concerns gave way to the joyful possibility God, the Merciful, had smiled having caught his misbehaving kids in the act of forgetting differences. When the mealtime came, we were seated on the carpet among many male worshippers who had questions for Sheik Jamil. Before I had even the chance to ask how and why I had come to be an *infidel*, Sheik Jamil spoke to the tragedy that had occurred at the World Trade Center. He explained that when one person dies as a result of injustice we all die and our humanity dies as well. We die slowly, imperceptibly, but we die. We die in spirit without realizing the extent to which we are *one family in God*.

Questions answered, the meal was delicious to say the least and the warmth among us could not be ignored. My husband, however, was ready to leave. Happily, he did not get the chance. Then came even more worshippers and the chanting began. Those present chanted the names of God such as Allah, the Merciful, Allah, the Compassionate and hours passed during which time those of us who did not understand the language understood the beauty and the power of the language not to mention the presence of something

that would not be named. My husband had inched his way toward a wall where he propped himself up and endured as an amazed witness to the devotions of an ever widening circle of believers. Our daughter and son-in-law were humming, occasionally mouthing syllables, as I was, with an obvious yearning to be close to that closeness we felt by virtue of understanding a language we did not speak and surrendering to the simple fact that in spite of ourselves, our differences, we had come to a place where it was right to be. When the chanting stopped, my husband struggled to his feet and thanked Sheik Jamil for allowing us to be included in the circle of worship. "But wait," said Jamil with a clever grin. "There is dessert!"

We did not leave the mosque until after midnight. We laughed at my husband who lurched toward the car like Cosimoto the Hunchback making a bee line to the bell tower. He hadn't been on the ground, on his knees, in decades. But the stars that night were so high and the night itself so clear after our time spent in the mosque that we never knew existed. In truth, we were all happy, so very happy.

Now it is 2014. I have lost touch with the Jewish family that returned to Jerusalem after their son's treatment. I know that Sheik Jamil has passed. He died in the car accident that his young grandson survived. As I continue to read the New York Times, my worst fears are being realized. Palestine is in ruins. The Holy Lands are in flames. There is ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Crucifixions are taking place. Today I read that the cease-fire between Palestine and Israel has been broken again. I also read that an American journalist is presumed to have been beheaded.

Today I do not cry. I finished with that last week after I reading about the missile that fell at the school in Gaza and killed the child, Ibrahim Dawawsa, among many others. That is when I cut the photograph of Ibrahim out of the newspaper and went to remove my daughter's handmade christening gown from the drawer. That is when I removed all the baby clothes that I have kept for my children who are now grown and placed a number of photos from the New York Times on top of the very clothes that my own children had worn.

There was much crying then but I had to stop....I had to stop so that I could cut out the pictures I have kept ever since little Muhammed Al Durrah was killed in Gaza on October 2 in 2000. I didn't know exactly why I was keeping these newspapers that chronicled the murder of innocents and marked the evolution of horror in the Middle East over the years, but I do now. Jamil was right. I am dying, my humanity is dying, and what is worse: *My children are dying....Our children.* And I have here given to the images of loss so faithfully put forward by our news media for so many years, my condolences to the mothers in the Middle East who have been lacerated by our word – PEACE – and who will rise one day on behalf of the one family, and do what mothers do. Defend!

So now it is 2018....I have to believe that were Sheik Jamil alive, he would be speaking out in a loud and clear voice against the violence of crimes being perpetrated in the name of our Creator. And I have to hope that the good man from the creek who turned out to be an Orthodox rabbi is elsewhere doing the same. But what am I doing? What are we doing? Where are those who can speak loudly and clearly in defense of our Creator as the Lord of Love? And where are they joining arms with others and speaking in one voice? Where are they walking together and making their voices heard? And where can we, the people who are powerless, who do nothing better than cry when reading the morning papers, join them and unite our voices with theirs? The dead are so eloquent. At present, I call to them with my tears.

“We are one family,” as the man was quoted to have said in the New York Times.

Thank you, sir.

