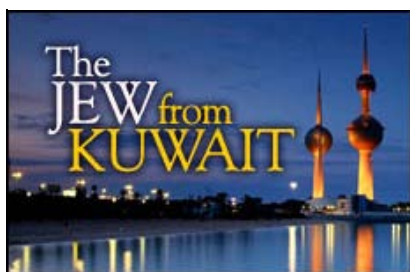


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My Muslim background left me unprepared for this shocking discovery.

by Mark Halawa

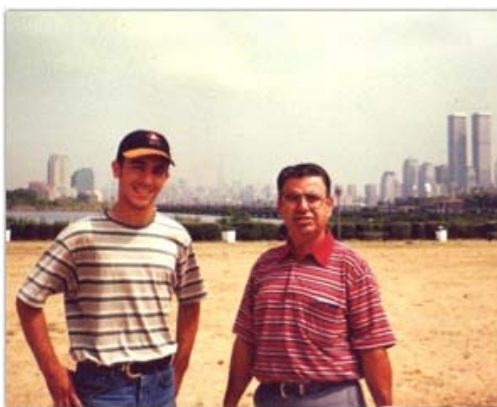
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Growing up in Kuwait, I had the best of everything. My father owned a successful construction company, and provided us five children with amenities like piano lessons, swimming, calligraphy and trips all over the world. Although we were Muslims like everyone else, we were totally secular and my father always aimed to shield us from religious people whom he described as crazies.

I grew up being told that Israelis and Jews were the lowest type of creature in existence, put on Earth only to kill us Arabs. In math class the teacher would say, "If one rocket killed X number of Jews, how many would six rockets kill?"

My father was rabidly anti-Israel. He was a product of Nasser's school of thought: secular from a Muslim point of view, yet deeply dedicated to the idea of pan-Arab unity. Israel, he believed, was an American proxy in the post-colonial Middle East.

My father was a supporter of the PLO since the 1960s when Yasser Arafat (who founded the PLO while living in Kuwait) was raising money from wealthy Palestinians working in Gulf States. As an engineer, my father participated in a program where the engineering association in Kuwait would deduct money from his monthly salary to be sent directly to the PLO. He insisted that war and resistance was the only way to deal with Israel.



Age 18 -- on a visit to New York City with my father's cousin.

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In the summer of 1990, when I was 12 years old, our lives changed completely. We were on vacation when Saddam Hussein invaded and annexed Kuwait. My father's business -- along with much of the country -- was ravaged. Our savings became worthless pieces of paper. We could not go back to Kuwait, so we immigrated to Canada. My father did manage to sneak back in for a few days to retrieve important business documents that would later be useful in recovering compensation from a United Nations fund.

### Praying in the Dark

Of my family, I'm the only one who stayed in Canada. My father never really adjusted to life in the New World, and he had good business contacts back in Jordan, so my parents returned there. All my siblings also moved back to the Middle East. One brother runs a successful company in Jordan, two brothers are studying in Egypt (one dentistry and the other business), and my sister lives in Dubai where she works in the banking industry.

One evening in 2003, I was studying at the university library in London, Ontario, when I happened to notice an older man. From his chassidic garb, he looked like a religious Jew. My curiosity was aroused, so I approached him and asked, "Are you Jewish?"

With a gentle smile on his face, he said, "No, but I like to dress this way." I didn't know whether he was joking or not. All the religious people I had come across in the past were pretty scary. Are Jews supposed to be funny?

His name was Dr. Yitzhak Block, a retired professor of philosophy. We exchanged a few words and then he asked about my background. My family history is pretty complex, and I get a headache every time I have to explain it all. So I simply told him that I'm an Arab from Kuwait, and mentioned that my grandmother from my mother's side is Jewish.

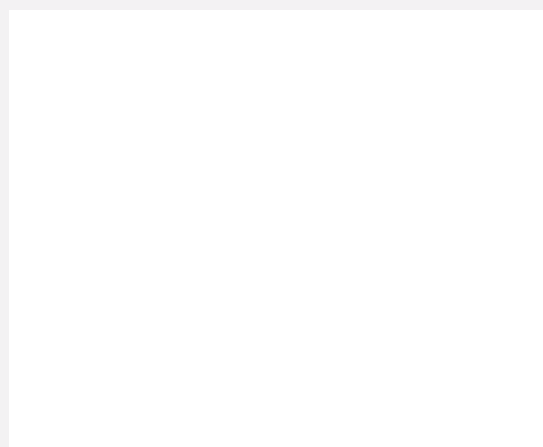
My mother's parents met in Jerusalem when my grandfather, an Arab from the West Bank, was serving in the Jordanian army fighting the Zionists. He was 18 years old and my grandmother was 16. Her father ran a school in Jerusalem -- the same school where she would jump off the wall to meet my handsome, uniformed grandfather. They fell in love, got married, and lived for a number of years in Shechem (Nablus).

After my grandfather was discharged from the Jordanian army, the family moved to Kuwait, where oil profits were fueling huge business and construction projects. That's where my mother met my father and got married.

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My grandmother, Rowaida (nee Mizrachi), would jump from a wall to meet my grandfather, Mohammad Al-Masri, the "handsome Jordanian soldier."

Knowing about my grandmother's Jewish background always made me curious about Jews. Whenever we were on vacation in Amman, Jordan, I used to constantly watch the Israeli channel -- when my parents weren't around. My favorite was the Israeli national anthem, and I would stay up late waiting to hear them play it at the end of the TV transmission.

Standing there in the university library, this religious Jew, Dr. Block, looked at me and said, "In Muslim law, you're considered Muslim, since the religion goes by the father. But according to Jewish law, you're Jewish, since Jewish identity is transmitted by the mother."

My head started to spin and memories of my childhood in Kuwait began to surface. I recalled how my grandmother had a funny name on her documents, Mizrachi, which I never heard before. She also had a small prayer book with Hebrew letters, and she prayed in the dark crying. (I thought the Wailing Wall was so named because crying was a part of prayer.)

Aside from a vague family legend, my grandmother never mentioned anything about being Jewish -- but now the pieces were fitting into place. I thanked Dr. Block for the conversation, and ran home to tell my roommate what I heard. He smiled and said, "So you're a Mus-Jew!" I was not amused.

I went to my room and called my mother. She rebuffed the story, saying, "Don't listen to people like that. We are Muslims and that's that."

I decided to call my grandmother myself and bring up the subject.

I beat around the bush a bit -- after all, she'd been denying it for the past 50 years -- and then finally blurted out, "Grandma, are you Jewish?"

She didn't answer the question directly, but she started crying and spoke about the years of Arab-

Israeli conflict. She told me how her brother Zaki had been killed in Jerusalem



My Jewish link -- at a family event with my maternal grandmother, Rowaida.

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before the rebirth of the State. To me that was sufficient confirmation of her Jewishness and I decided to leave it at that.

Over the next few months, I avoided the whole issue of Judaism, mainly for the sake of not upsetting my mother. Besides, I was just finishing university, and career was my main priority. I was content with telling myself that I belonged to a mixed-faith family.

### Streaming Tears

About a year later, I was rollerblading one day in my neighborhood when I took a hard fall and badly sprained my wrist. The road was smooth so I couldn't figure out why I had fallen. I couldn't stop thinking that it seemed like a push from Above. These thoughts caught me by surprise, since I wasn't into spirituality and I never had any religious connection. I was a bodybuilder, had tons of friends, and was on the heels of a successful career as a foreign exchange trader. So why had this happened?

Because my wrist was heavily bandaged, I was forced to take off work for a few days. Dr. Block had mentioned the name of his synagogue, so that Saturday morning, I decided to go check out the scene. I was hesitant at the thought of everyone being from European background and me the only Middle Easterner, but I decided to go anyway.

I called a cab and got dropped off at the synagogue. As I walked in, the first person I saw looked Indian. He shook my hand, said "Shabbat Shalom," and handed me a kippah. Then I saw a black man which really surprised me. And Dr. Block was there, too.

I was handed a prayer book, shown the proper page, and before I knew it everyone was singing, V'Shamru:

*"And the Children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath an eternal covenant for their generations. Between Me and the Children of Israel, it is a sign forever that in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested and was refreshed."*

Something hit me and I felt as though I knew this song. I just stood there taking in the sounds, the smells and the sights. Everything felt whole and perfect. It was the opposite of everything I'd ever heard about Jews or Judaism. At this point my tears were streaming in freefall.

**It was the opposite of everything I'd heard about Jews.** After the services finished, I met everyone over Kiddush. I spoke with an Egyptian couple and we shared our personal stories. Jews from all backgrounds were gathered together and I was another piece of this puzzle.

After Kiddush, I accepted Dr. Block's invitation to join him for lunch. I told him: "I can't believe I'm here, singing and praying in Hebrew. I could never have imagined it."

He smiled and said, "It's not so hard to believe. Every Jew is born with a little Torah and a little Menorah inside." He then pressed his shoulder up against mine and said, "All it takes is for another Jew to bump into him and light it up."

## Dreams of Peace

My interest grew from there, and I began studying Torah and keeping Shabbat. Last year I spent a month in Israel touring and studying on Aish HaTorah's Jerusalem Fellowships program. It was a great "homecoming."

I still keep in close contact with my family and old friends. They're wonderful people and I love them very much. Yet it's hard to relate to them on many levels. In the Arab world there are tons of misconceptions and misinformation regarding Israel. So I am working to develop a program to educate Arabs about Jews and Judaism, to dissolve the stereotypes propagated by the Muslim media and schools. I hope that my unique background can help bridge some of that divide.



2008 -- my first trip to Israel. Looking out at the Temple Mount, from atop the Aish HaTorah building.

Another way I hope to achieve this is to help establish economic relations between Israel and Arab countries. That would create trust and shared experience, which could be directed toward the goal of a genuine and lasting peace.

Another issue I'm trying to address is how the Arab world is filled with Holocaust denial. This past summer I went to Auschwitz, and I am working to produce the first-ever Arabic documentary about the Holocaust. I want to explain to Muslims in their own language exactly what happened.

It often seems like the Arab-Israeli conflict is intractable. Yet I believe in today's world, there is a real opportunity for a breakthrough. Arabs today have a more universal education, which makes them more open and curious. Also they are meeting Israelis and Jews in their travels around the world, which breaks down misconceptions. And as we saw during the recent protests in Iran, many young people in the Muslim world are yearning for reform. On top of all this, they have high-speed Internet access which opens up all kinds of new avenues of communication, and the possibility of forming new friendships unrestricted by borders or political agendas. Perhaps this can be the basis of a grassroots movement to mend relations and hopefully one day achieve peace.

**My Jewish cousins are all living as Muslims in the Middle East.** The other issue that needs urgent attention is intermarriage in Israel. Unfortunately, a story like my grandmother's is not so rare. Many young Jewish women are wooed by Arab men and brought back to live in their villages. The children and grandchildren are never told the truth, especially with political tensions and the emotional unrest this would cause a family. As a result, many Jews are lost to our people. My mother has five sisters, and from there I have a few dozen cousins who are all Jewish -- all living as Muslims in the Middle East. I recently met a seventh-generation Israeli, whose cousin married a Palestinian

and went to live in Saudi Arabia; her descendents are Jews living in Saudi Arabia.

All my relatives know that I'm practicing Judaism, and for the most part they're accepting. I can talk to them about Judaism and they're politely interested. We love and respect each other. My father is resistant, however, given that secularism and war against Israel are the two ideological pillars of his life. When I first became interested in Judaism, I didn't tell him straight out. We were having a political discussion and I mentioned that I support the State of Israel. That ignited a big clash and I've learned to only discuss these matters with him in an indirect way. I always know when I've crossed the line; he gets angry and calls me a "Zionist."

The other big exception -- not surprisingly -- is my grandmother. I've asked her a number of times for more information about her family background, but she refuses to talk about it. Maybe one day I will find the key to opening her up.

Growing up, I was taught that Jews were the source of all evil, descended from monkeys and pigs. On the other hand, I had the image of my grandmother holding her small prayer book with the Hebrew letters, praying with tender devotion. She is the sweetest person I know and there's no way she came from a bloodthirsty gang of murderers. She gave me a Jewish soul, and in her own way, it was she who kept my Jewish spark alive.

*Click on a player below to hear Mark speak about his experience.*

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(116) Nurit Greenger , December 4, 2009

Dig into your heritage.

Mark, before your grandmother passes away, force her to tell you her family entire history story so you can do roots search. Perhaps you can find many relatives living in Israel. Also, when your father gets mad with you and calls you Zionist, you need to tell him that Grandma Rowaida Mizrachi is a Zionist too. Your story is like the Chanukah story; although the "blood-line" is pretty thin, there is enough to last not just 8 nights, but perhaps 8 generations and more, henceforth.. I suggest for you to read Elie Wiesel's wonderful collection of essays called 'Legends of Our Time' and his book 'Testament of a Jew from Saragossa'. Welcome to the arms of your Jewish brethrens. One more Jews is saved!

(115) Vi , December 3, 2009

Awesome

What a great experience. I am convinced that this is the way HaShem is using to light the Torah in his people's hearts not the way other religions do it. Baruch HaShem. I am not Jewish but I know that Jews are the vehicle that HaShem will use to bring the world back to HaShem.

(114) Bruce , December 3, 2009