

## Yom Kippur Helps Muslim Woman Rediscover Her Jewish Roots



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It was a few years ago that Reima Yosif, a devout Muslim, discovered a surprising family secret: she was Jewish -- kind of.

The revelation came while Yosif, who lives in North Brunswick, N.J., was mourning her grandfather's death. A cousin who had inherited his belongings came upon old identification papers for their grandmother, who had died many years before.

The woman, who was raised in Italian-controlled North Africa, was of Jewish decent. She had hidden her background to protect her safety as Jews in Italian colonies were sent to concentration camps during World War II and fled Arab states after Israel was established. Two generations of Muslim children just like Reima grew up unaware of their Jewish side.

As Jews begin to observe Yom Kippur, the holiest time on the Jewish calendar, at sundown Friday with Kol Nidre prayers and a day of fasting, Yosif will be joining the spiritual journey for the first time.

"I don't see any contradiction in taking part in Yom Kippur. It heightens my own devotion to my own faith," said Yosif, who likens it to the Islamic month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast during the daylight hours.

"The idea of dedicating a day for repentance. The idea of the rights of God and of human beings. God will forgive what you have done against him but you won't be forgiven for your transgression of others until they forgive you. That God renews your contract. This is also what Ramadan is about," she said.

Yosif, who founded Al-Rawiya, a nonprofit that works on Muslim women's empowerment, admits she isn't the first person one would expect to take part in Yom Kippur -- or in Rosh Hashanah celebrations, as she did last week.

"I dress in full Islamic garb, with my head covered, arms covered," she said. "People sometimes have fear or curiosity. There's always an ice-breaker moment."

One such moment came in July, when Yosif went on a two-week trip in the United Kingdom as part of the Ariane de Rothschild fellowship, a cross-cultural and social entrepreneurship program for Jewish and Muslim professionals. On the flight to the London and the subsequent bus ride to Cambridge University, she struck up a conversation with a woman who was also coming from the United States for the program.

"It was just two of us in a car for two-and-a-half hours. It was very obvious because she wears a headscarf that she is a Muslim. And then she told me about her grandmother, and I thought it was so interesting," said that woman, Sara Green, who founded Art for Refugees in Transition, a New York-based nonprofit.

Sitting through long lectures on topics such as the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the business of running nonprofits, Green, who grew up in a Conservative Jewish household and lives in Manhattan, formed a quick bond with Yosif, the only other participant in the international program from the New York area. That led Green to watch her first Friday prayers at a mosque as Yosif and other colleagues explained Islamic rituals. Yosif, meanwhile, attended her first Shabbat dinner. After the program was over, the two parted ways. Green stayed in Europe for another month to travel.

"When we got back home in the middle of September, I was talking to my husband and thought, 'Hey, it'd be really nice to invite Reima. I don't think she's been to Rosh Hashanah.' My husband is a Persian Jew, so his dinners are a little more elaborate," Green said.

The dinner, prepared according to Green's husband's family recipes, reminded Yosif of her parents' festive meals. There was nargisi, a traditional cake-like dish made of vegetables and eggs, and a simple dish of black-eyed peas and cilantro that Yosif says she can still taste on her tongue. When Green and her relatives took out the family's old chalices for ceremonial wine, Yosif, who doesn't drink alcohol because of her religion, joined the kids and drank grape juice.

The prayers, the candles and the outpouring of ritual brought her to tears.

"Religion and holidays are about families, love, devotion -- though being with Sara's family was the cherry on top," Yosif said. "To think that my grandmother could have been at that Rosh HANSHANAH table eating similar foods in a past life just really got to me."

At sundown Friday, Reima starts her 25-hour fast. She will reflect on the last year and of her relationships with family, friends and God. She will pray -- in Arabic -- to the God that she believes is the same one to whom her Jewish friends will turn. And when the fast is over, Yosif will join Green at a neighbor's apartment in New York for a fast-breaking meal and, perhaps, for a walk in the park.

"A lot of people dwell on the differences between Muslims and Jews. But when you look at it, they are very close. There's a verse in the Quran where God reminds us, "Have I not made a covenant with you, Adam?"' Yosif said. "God on Yom Kippur reminds you to be God-conscious, to remember that you belong to him in the end."