

S. E. LEVINE, EX-JEW, USA (PART 1 OF 2)

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Description: A Jewish lady gets an insight into how Muslims live, through her Muslim husband and some “Sisters” at a mosque.

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My husband and I had gone to the masjid (mosque) for a speaker’s program. It was the first time that he had invited me to the masjid since our marriage a year or so earlier. We had met and married while we were both working as substance abuser counselors in a rehabilitation center.

We couldn’t have been more different in the beginning, as we are from entirely different backgrounds — he is black and I am white, he was Muslim and I was Jewish. Although he hadn’t asked me to become a Muslim prior to our marriage, he did give me silent da`wah (calling to Islam) by his excellent example.

He had an extensive Islamic library, and because I was a keen reader, I naturally read a lot of his books. I also observed his modest behavior, watched as he made salah (prayer) five times a day, went to Jumu`ah Prayer on Fridays, and fasted during the month of Ramadan. So it was natural that I would develop an interest in his religion.

When we arrived at the masjid, he pointed out the entrance to the women’s section. We agreed to meet in the parking lot after the program was over. “OK, I can do this,” I thought to myself as I entered the dark dank hallway and walked down the steep steps.

I had never had trouble making friends before. I had always enjoyed multicultural situations and looked forward to the evening.

My husband had suggested that I wear something modest for the occasion. I ran my hands down over my long-sleeved dress, straightening and smoothing it out. I felt confident that the women at the masjid would approve of my appearance.

However, when I arrived at the bottom of the stairs and walked through the door marked “Sisters,” I could immediately feel it in the air: thick tension, suspicion, estrangement and confusion. Every veiled head turned in my direction and the Muslim women stared at me as if I had two heads. I stood frozen in place in the entrance way, staring back at them.

I had never seen so many Muslim women together in one place. Most of them wore the traditional hijab, but two women peered out at me through head coverings that revealed only their eyes. A few others sat with their scarves draped over their shoulders. When they saw me, they pulled them up over their heads.

But then one of them got up from where she was sitting, approached me, and introduced herself as Sister Basimah. At least this one had a welcoming look on her face.

“Hi,” I said. “My name is Sharon. I’m here for the speaker’s program.”

“Is anyone with you?” she asked.

“My husband is upstairs,” I replied.

“Oh! Your husband is Muslim?” she asked.

“Yes. Yes, he is,” I said.

“Al-hamdu lillah,” she said. “Come over here and sit with us.”

She led me to a table where three other women were seated. They were the most beautiful exotic women I had ever seen. Right after she made introductions, I forgot each one of their names, which were equally exotic. Sister Basimah then got up and went to greet more people who had arrived.

“Where are you from?” one of the women asked me. I replied that I was an American of Eastern European heritage, born in New York City.

“Where’s your husband from?” was the next question.

“He’s from America.”

“But where is he from?”

“Philadelphia,” I replied.

“No, I mean, what country is he from?”

“He’s American, born in the United States, he’s African-American, from Philadelphia,” I replied, thinking that there was a language barrier. I would later learn that most of the Caucasian women in the masjid were married to Arab men.

“Hmmm,” they all said in unison and they cast their lovely gazes downward.

“Are you thinking of becoming a Muslim?” another one asked, looking up at me with a beaming expression on her face.

“No,” I replied, “I’m Jewish.” Well, I wish you could have seen the look on their faces. As soon as it was politely possible, the topic was switched.

“Are your children Muslims?” one of them asked, returning to the interrogation.

“No.” I replied, “I don’t have any children.” That was it; their attempts to find a common ground with me had failed. They smiled at me and then something incredible happened for which I was not prepared: The conversation turned to Arabic.

I continued to sit with them at the table. They mostly spoke to each other in Arabic, and I mostly smiled. As more women would join the table, they would introduce me in English, “This is Sharon. She’s Jewish.” Then they resumed speaking in Arabic.

When the program began, the women gathered in the prayer room and everyone sat down on the plush carpeted floor. But after about five minutes, the women started chatting to one another, all but drowning out the sound of the program that was being delivered over a stereo speaker from upstairs.

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