

DR CHRIS JAMES, EX-JEW, UK (PART 1 OF 2)

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Description: How the call to pray (Adhan) had an everlasting impact on Dr. Chris. Part 1: Early childhood, struggle during teenage years, and trip to Morocco.

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I took my Shahada on 17th May 2021. I expected it to be difficult, but it was remarkably easy, it was also very emotional. People warned me that I might cry, but I did not believe them. However, the words caused my eyes to be filled with tears, like those of a newborn baby. It also brought me back to my childhood and raised many memories.



I was born in England in 1948, when the Second World War was still raw in the minds of everyone. The family home had been destroyed in the Blitz so my parents and grandmother moved into a new house about thirty miles from the centre of London. It took a while for them to settle. By the time I started school, there were still unpacked boxes sitting in my grandmother's bedroom and like any small child I was curious to see what was in them.

One day my grandmother and I started unpacking the boxes. In the first box there were many old books. They were my grandmother's treasures, she was a very scholarly woman. She took out two volumes, which she said were very important and she showed them to me. The first was the Torah and the second was a copy of the Qur'an. The Torah had a plain black cover and it was the Holy book of the Jews. My Grandmother kissed the cover before placing it at her bedside. The Qur'an was very different, it had been brightly decorated in a blue geometric pattern and the letters were embossed with gold leaf. It looked more like a jewelry box and it was very beautiful. Seeing the smile on my face, my grandmother handed the book to me for further inspection. The text was written in a language that was unfamiliar to me, it looked as though someone had scribbled across the page. My grandmother told me the book was written in Arabic and it was acquired in Egypt by my grandfather when he had been stationed there during the First World War. The Qur'an was also placed beside my grandmother's bed, not for any religious significance, but in memory of my deceased grandfather.

I had a happy childhood in my grandmother's Jewish household, but she died when I was eight years old. After she died all of my grandmother's belongings gradually disappeared including the two precious books. Life after my grandmother's death became very difficult.

My parents were past middle age when I was born and my father had tuberculosis so my mother had to earn the income. From birth I was cared for by my grandmother, she was my nurse, my teacher, my mentor and my trusted friend. After my grandmother's death I was raised by paid help and our Jewish traditions were largely forgotten.

We lived in a Christian country so I went to a state school where Christianity was the given religion, I hated it! The lessons never seemed right to me. I was told that Jesus was the son of God, so where was God's wife I wondered.

There were very few Jews in my school, but a lot of antisemitism because people blamed the Jews for the war. Hitler got his money for weapons by stealing from Jewish businesses, so it was said that Jews were responsible for the mass devastation. It was said that Jews were always the cause of the world's troubles.

I was always in trouble at school and I was always being punished. I got the cane across my hands or I was kept in after school and had to walk home in the dark. It was not unusual to be set upon by groups of older school pupils.

During those early years I grew into a very angry young person. I saw the world as being full of injustice. As a teenager I was very withdrawn and lived my life through books, the same way my grandmother had done when something troubled her.

My father died when I was fifteen. A year or so later my mother sold the house and went to live with her sister. I was pushed into a marriage which lasted for only a few months. I left England and travelled with friends across France and Spain to Morocco. Very few westerners had been further than Madrid in those days so going to Morocco was a big event. The journey was long and tedious in an overcrowded six-seater bus, but we made it to Tangiers and then on to Marrakech.

Marrakech was amazing. It felt as though I had stepped into a dream, everything around me was brightly coloured, it was rich and noisy with exotic music and seductive perfumes. The weather was hot and the atmosphere was very engaging. I felt a sense of belonging that tugged at my heart-strings.

I was staying in a small room above a café in the Medina overlooking the Jemaa el-Fnaa market. On the first night I stood on the balcony overlooking the market breathing in every aspect of this unfamiliar culture. The bright orange sun was just moving above the horizon when suddenly I heard a strange and haunting sound. One of my companions told me, it was the call to prayer. It felt like angels had descended over the landscape. My grandmother used to tell me stories of angels and as a child, they had me captivated. My skin turned to goosebumps and I was having to catch my breath to

ward off the tears that were rising inside me. I could not say whether the tears were of joy for being in this beautiful place or grief for the loss of my grandmother, but something had changed in me. I felt like an arrow had touched my soul. It stayed with me. I never let go of that haunting sound of the call to prayer, it would visit me regularly, often when I was feeling tired or low.

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