

DR. MOUSTAFA MOULD, EX-JEW, USA (PART 5 OF 5)

Rating: 4.9

Description: After a spiritual journey of almost 40 years, a Boston Jewish linguist finds Islam in Africa. Part 5.

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The first thing I noticed was the murmuring of many voices as men read from the Quran while waiting for the Imam (leader of the congregation) to give the *khutbah*. I was instantly transported back in my mind to my old synagogue and the identical susurrus of old men reading from the Psalms (*Zabur*) at the start of morning prayers. It gave me a comforting feeling of nostalgia. A little while later, walking back the other way, I would hear the Imam reciting a surah. It sounded much like the Torah readings I'd enjoyed on Saturday mornings, again comforting and nostalgic. Not that it made me want to return to any synagogue; rather, it made Islam feel more comfortable and familiar to me.

I'm a linguist, and had been a specialist in field research. I found a book on learning the Somali language and I hired myself a tutor, who was a better friend than a teacher. I quickly learned the greetings, common nouns, and verbs, kinship terms, numbers and telling time. Some of the vocabulary, borrowed from Arabic, was just like Swahili and Hebrew. Somali is also very distantly related to Semitic languages. The grammar was something else, though, really hard to figure out, and as I got busier and more tired at work, our lessons turned more to conversations about culture, politics and religion. He was knowledgeable enough to distinguish between genuine Islam and some prevalent aspects of indigenous, pre-Islamic culture and superstition that had bothered me.

Before long, he offered to bring a sheikh to my home so that I could profess the *shahada*. Despite everything, I still felt hesitant, thinking of my family. But they were ten thousand miles away and I was living comfortably in a Muslim society. I had good friends and colleagues, and it was clear to me that much of their goodness was due to Islam. I asked him to bring the sheikh and he did. He questioned me about my beliefs, and I told him I'd been a Jew, not a Christian (no problems with the trinity) and that I'd long ago given up pork, alcohol, gambling and *zina*, and after he was convinced that I understood what I was about to say and knew the five pillars, I declared the *shahadah*. My fiancée had suggested the name Mustafa, which I liked very much.

After all the hesitation and procrastination I felt enormous relief, and a restored sense of belonging that I'd missed more than I'd realized. All my Somali friends were of course delighted and very supportive. They began calling me *seedi* ('brother-in-law'). As soon

as I could get away I bought some gold jewelry and flew to Nairobi. To get married I had to go to the office of the chief *qadi* and declare the *shahadah* again before some witnesses, in order to get an official certificate of conversion, there being no such thing in Somalia.

We went to the *qadi* and made our *nikah*. A couple of days later I had to fly back to Mogadishu to resume my work. Less than a year later, at 43, I was overjoyed and blessed by God to become the father of a wonderful Muslim baby boy. I flew to Nairobi, and after a brief discussion we agreed on my wife's suggestion for a name. Now I even had a *kunya* (nick name); I was Abu Khalid, and he was named after the great Companion, Khalid Ibn Al-Walid, may Allah be pleased with him.

You are probably wondering if I told my family about my converting to Islam, and the answer is, not for quite some time. Of course I told my family about my marriage and they were neither surprised nor upset.

I was a middle-aged man who ought to know what he was doing, and they were mainly happy for the sake of my happiness. When Khalid was born they were positively delighted and were most eager to meet him and his mother. When Khalid was a little over a year old, I went to Boston on my vacation and brought my wife and son with me. The two boys, Ali and Yusuf, were away at a Muslim boarding school in north-eastern Kenya.

The reception was as warm and loving as anyone could wish for and we had a great visit. There's no question that a baby, especially a grandson, has a most salutary and beneficial effect on people. My wife had brought little gifts for my mother, sister and aunts, and they all had little gifts for her. I suppose they all assumed, as I had once done, that Muslim can marry a Jew or Christian. They knew my wife and our sons were Muslims that Khalid was being raised as a Muslim, and they had no problem with that. They knew I hadn't been a practicing Jew for nearly thirty years, and I'd married a non-Jew before. I'd decided that if they asked I wouldn't lie, and if they didn't I'd just wait for a more opportune time – some other time. A few years ago they finally asked me and I told them. I cannot say they were pleased, but neither were they surprised, angry or cold to me, and we still have warm, loving relationships.

Another year, another contract went by and then I lost my job. Like the new Pharaoh "who knew not Joseph", a new director came, who saw no value in the English programs and decided to end them. I kind of saw it coming and had applied for a similar job in Yemen, so I didn't fight it very hard, but in the end the job in *San'a* fell through, and, as my family had predicted, I was back to square one – well, not quite.

In 1988, leaving my family in Nairobi, I returned to the States alone and jobless. It was again very tough (winter, too) but this time I had some savings, new skills and a stronger resume, I knew better how to job-hunt; I knew my way around Washington and had a few contacts. I still had the suit. Best of all, I had my faith instead of anti-depressants. I quickly got a couple of part-time teaching jobs and a job in a men's

store. The teaching jobs dried up, so I sold suits full-time for over three years, always looking for a better job, but finally – it took two years – I managed to bring my family over and we did our best, trusting in God.

Then, four years ago, a Muslim neighbor told us about a new Islamic institute that had recently opened, where they were looking for an English teacher. I immediately called, made an appointment and met the director. By the grace of God I was hired to teach some of the staff and to do some editorial work. Ironically, I am now in a cubicle in a windowless office in northern Virginia, but what a difference! I am in an Islamic environment, surrounded and inspired by good Muslim brothers, many of them excellent scholars and all of whom I love and respect very much, and whom I learn from daily. And what is my job? To read books on Islam, to edit manuscripts on Islam, to write about what I read. In essence, I am being paid to study Quran, *Hadith*, *aqidah*, *Fiqh*, *Sirah*, Islamic history and Arabic. I thank and praise God every day for leading me to Islam and for showering me with all these blessings. *Alhamdulillah Rabbil-amin.*

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