

Reconciliation (n)

1: the process of making two people or groups of people friendly again after they have argued 2: the process of making two things in agreement which seem to be opposed.

ISSUES

A MESSIANIC JEWISH PERSPECTIVE



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VERSÖHNUNG

RECONCILIATION

For many, the concept of reconciliation conjures up feelings of hopelessness. We talked to three people, a Palestinian, a German, and an African Muslim, who all professed a love for the Jewish people. As we spoke with them about the steps they took to overcome histories of hatred and issues that seem irreconcilable, we realized that perhaps there is hope for peace after all . . .

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A CASE OF FORSAKEN IDENTITY?



Maha McDiarmid's father was born in the West Bank, and her mother is Egyptian. Maha is married to Dean, a Jewish believer in Jesus. She told her story to Naomi Rose.

As a young Muslim girl, what were your conceptions of God?

I lived in a culturally strong Muslim home; we were more concerned with the traditions than with the meaning behind them. We followed the rules of Islam for the sake of outward appearances. I fasted, I never talked to boys, and I refused to eat pork. As is the custom, my parents arranged a marriage for me when I was born. I guess my upbringing is the equivalent of growing up in a nominal Christian or Jewish home; you do certain things just because you have always done them.

There was only one other

Muslim family in our neighborhood, so I didn't have too many Muslim friends other than my cousins. My mother's uncle is an important holy man in Egypt, and he had a big influence on her eventually becoming more religious. When I was sixteen, she went to visit him in Egypt, and came back covered in the traditional garb of a Muslim woman. She began praying and fasting and reading the Koran more.

I, on the other hand, became increasingly disillusioned with Islam. I believed in Allah, but as a young Muslim I was frustrated because I wanted to be closer to him. I wanted to know him. But I knew that he was holy, and I was not. I feared his holiness. I knew that he could see my every move and thought. And I knew that if I had to stand before him, I would be ashamed. It's not that I was a really bad kid or anything, but I sensed that even the little white lies I told were wrong.

I was plagued by the fear that I would not be allowed to enter heaven when I died. Once I asked my mother how I could be sure I was going to heaven, and she reminded me about the Five Pillars of Islam.* I figured I could do the first two, but then there was the pilgrimage to Mecca. "What if you die on the way there?" I remember asking my mother. "Then you go to heaven," was her response, the idea being "at least you tried." After hearing that I thought, Then that's what I want to do, die on my way to Mecca. That

way, I thought, I would be guaranteed a spot in Paradise.

I could not accept the notion that God was unknowable. If I was going to submit to him, then I wanted to know him. I saw people around me participating in all these traditions, but the works they were doing seemed like they didn't mean anything in the long run.

Describe your feelings towards the Jewish people during these years.

I was scared to death of Jews. I only knew what my father told me about them. My father is Palestinian, and he passionately hated the Jews. Any time someone mentioned the Jewish people, anger would flare in his face. He said the word "Jehudi" with unimaginable contempt. To this day, I don't know how he managed to pour all of his hostility into one word.

I felt obligated to hate the Jewish people. One of my cousins lived in the West Bank. One night, he was caught outside after curfew. Israeli soldiers beat him and kept him in jail for two days. This made me more sad than angry, though. I felt sorrow for my family. I was sorry the Palestinians didn't have a country.

My father taught me to sing a PLO chant, but I didn't really know what it meant. I just knew that my father was extremely angry, and he passed that anger on to my two brothers.

If the news carried any stories about conflict in the Middle East, my father would get so worked up



that he would have to turn off the TV. During the Six Day War he stopped eating altogether and lost a lot of weight, despairing that he could not be there with the rest of his family, fighting for their country.

Inwardly, I was torn. I was not sure how to feel. For instance, I thought Saddam Hussein was a maniac, but it felt extremely disloyal to express such an opinion, especially to my father.

Can you recall how your perspectives of Christianity and Jesus were shaped when you were younger?

I had no opinion about Jesus. I just knew he was not for me, and that the Christians were wrong about him. For me the belief that God was incarnate was blasphemy. I thought Christians were weak and indecisive. Evangelists on TV

reminded me of lame salesmen. My mother told me that Christians sell the Bible to make money. I thought it was wrong to sell the word of God. I didn't perceive any unity among Christians, nor did I understand the denominational distinctions. To me, a Christian was a Catholic, and a Mormon and a Hare Krishna as well.

So how did a young Muslim woman find out the reverse?

When I was 19 I decided to move out of the house, which devastated my family. Even though we were not strictly religious we were very proud of our Arabic culture. You don't just move out. I was betrothed at birth to a man I had never seen, and I was walking out on that part of my future as well.

My parents were successful at

sheltering me from the harshness of the world outside our secluded little community in Chicago. I was shocked to find out about gangs, and I was surprised at how callous people could be. I constantly felt naïve. I started working as a waitress, and when I found out the restaurant chefs made their soup from a bag and not from scratch, I was floored.

I befriended a co-worker named Michelle. She was a believer in Jesus, and the first person I ever met who was passionate about her faith. She knew I had been raised a Muslim, and we spent hours talking about God. Many times, we both worked the night shift and then stayed up practically all night arguing. I had given up on Islam, but Christianity—now that was a joke.

Michelle was the first person I had ever met who not only claimed to be a Christian, but seemed intent on showing me that Jesus was for me, too. She seriously considered my objections to faith in Jesus, and countered them. "Of course we have to sell Bibles," she said when I brought up how put off I was by that. "It costs money to produce them," she reminded me. I kept calling her a "Catholic" even though she was Protestant, and she explained the difference, which nobody had ever taken the time to do before. "You believe in three gods," I told her. She replied that no, that wasn't true, but that she, like me, believed in only one God.

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My curiosity was aroused by her answers to my objections, but I still was not ready to accept her invitation to go to church with her. The only other time I had been inside a church was for a funeral, and I remember feeling uncomfortable. After Michelle asked me a few more times, I finally agreed to go to services at her church. But I told her I would only go as an observer, not a participant.

So I did. I sat in the back of the sanctuary, and just watched. I didn't join in the singing or anything. I just sat there. I was more impressed by the people than the service. After a year and a half away from home, I had expected people to be unfriendly initially, but these people were unusually nice. I could not take my eyes off their faces. They all had one thing in common, a sort of sweetness about them. I was surprised to sense that kind of unity among people who from the outside seemed quite diverse. When Michelle asked, I told her I would go to church with her again.

The people at the church put the words of the songs being sung on an overhead screen, and one night I was struck by some of the lyrics to a particular chorus. It was all about Jesus' life, his death, how he rose from the dead, and how he will return. He died for my sins, I thought. Only the Son of God could do that. As I read the words on the screen, they just made sense. It was a moment of absolute clarity, and I knew that I believed in Jesus.

I believed in Jesus, but I hardly acted like it. Michelle and her

family wanted me to move in with them, but I wanted to live on my own. So I moved into a home with a bunch of guys who partied all the time, and I sort of got caught up in that. I stayed in the basement of the house, and one day I woke up hung over, and I felt awful. Nothing was right about the way I felt. And God really met me there, even in that dirty place. I knew I needed to make my relationship with God a priority, but I felt incapable of doing so. I told God I would give him five minutes a day. I knew it wasn't much, but I figured I didn't want to commit to more than that, for fear I wouldn't be able to follow through with my intentions. So for five minutes a day I read the Bible or prayed, and it changed my life. My relationship with God blossomed.

It's interesting that Islam requires

a person to pray five times a day, but those prayers are obligatory. I was praying to God because I wanted to be closer to him. And I could pray then and there, even in the basement of a ratty Chicago house. Perhaps because of my Muslim upbringing's focus on deeds, I thought I had to clean up my act and then approach God. But the whole reason God sent Jesus is he knew we couldn't do that on our own. Little by little, I was able, through God's grace, to get rid of the bad things I was involved in. He gave me the strength to give up my destructive behaviors, one by one.

What happened next?

I moved out of the house, and into my own apartment. I was still working as a waitress, and I met some customers who just happened to be Christians. We started talking and they told me about a meeting for Muslims who had become believers in Jesus. I went to this meeting, and was

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astonished to see a familiar face, one of the daughters of the other Arab family in my neighborhood! She told me that when her parents found out about her faith, they had institutionalized her. But she remained strong in her faith, and it was actually through her and her husband that I met a Jewish man who would change my life.

Dean was the first Jewish person I ever met, and knowing him dispelled many of the fears I had about Jews. I was attracted to him before I knew he was Jewish, and finding out he was Jewish did not diminish how I felt about him. When he told me that not only was he Jewish, but a believer in Jesus, it did not seem any stranger to me than the fact that I was an Arab who believed in Jesus. It actually meant that we had more in common than I thought. Shortly after meeting him, I knew I was going to marry this man!

How did you tell your parents about Dean? What was their reaction?

When Dean and I got engaged, I called my parents. My mother answered the phone. When I told her, she asked, "What's his name?" When I said "Dean" she was silent for a moment, and then asked me about something completely unrelated. Then she told me not to call them again. I didn't even get a chance to tell them that Dean was Jewish or that he believed in Jesus; knowing that he wasn't Arabic was enough. My mother told me that if I ever get pregnant I can drop them a note, but other than that I am not to contact them again. It's too bad, because I know that they would

love Dean. My father and Dean are two of the smartest people I know, and I think they would get along extremely well. My mother would be impressed with how well he treats me. It really is a shame. To see all three of them sitting together will take a miracle.

Talk about some of the unique challenges of being an intermarried couple. What obstacles have you had to overcome?

Dean lived in Israel for four or five years, and was an active member in an anti-Palestinian group. He hated all Arabs. Then he became a believer in Jesus, and you would never know that he was once so hostile. Likewise, I was suspicious of all Jews until I met Dean. And if it weren't for my faith in Jesus, I could not have married him. I would have still been far too loyal to my Arabic heritage.

I do miss living around other Arabs, but really, you would be surprised at the similarities between the Arabic and Jewish cultures, at least in terms of the importance placed on togetherness. Dean and I live in a predominantly Jewish community now, and it is very close-knit, which is something God saw I needed.

You would think the fact that he is Jewish and I'm Arabic would be a huge issue, and we have had to learn to appreciate our cultural differences. Dean sometimes jokes that we will have the only kids who want to be in both the IDF and the PLO. Our focus, however, is not who we are as Arab and Jew, but who we are in the Messiah, and if we have children, that's how we will raise them.



So you no longer identify as Arab and Jew?

Dean and I actually feel more Jewish and Arab, respectively, since placing our faith in Jesus. Neither of us feels any need to prove our nationality to anyone. I'm Arab; he's Jewish. Period. There's no disputing that. But our primary identity is in what we have in common, and that is our faith.

When people ask you where you stand regarding the State of Israel, how do you respond?

I respond, "I believe in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. I believe that the Bible is the word of God. What choice do I have?" I used to think it was incredibly hypocritical for the Jewish people to claim they had a right to a land based on the promise of a God that so many of them have abandoned. "How can Israel rightfully belong to Jews who don't even believe in God?" I asked. After reading what the Bible says about

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WHY I, A GERMAN, LOVE THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Love often begins with a discovery. We discover someone to whom we feel deeply drawn and who then inspires our devotion. My love for my Jewish brothers and sisters started with a discovery. Discovery and an empty chair.

I carefully balanced the tray of food in my hand, trying desperately to avoid spilling its contents on the heads of the people already seated and eating lunch. The conference dining room was filled with the sound of hundreds of participants from around the world chatting in various languages, and I was one of several people searching for a vacant seat.

I was relieved to finally spot one, and sank gratefully into it. As I set my tray down, a woman's voice greeted me warmly in German, "Now you should take your time to eat."

I turned to my new neighbor, who watched me with two kind brown eyes. We started talking and I felt as though she had known me from childhood. Hansi exuded a motherly love that gave me a sense of safety, and I confided in her readily.

She told me that she was writing books, and that one of them had been published in German. However, she did not disclose the subject of the book. She only said, "*Kindete*, you can order in any bookstore, my dear."

When I returned home to Germany, I did read her book, which turned out to be her personal story of how she survived the Holocaust. I wept as I read how the Nazis had thrown her whole family in gas chambers. She was the only one to survive.

As I read further, I recalled the gracious demeanor of the woman I had met in the dining room. How was it that Hansi's experiences had not made her bitter and vengeful toward her family's murderers, or even to someone like me, a German?

Hansi's book described the many people who had risked their lives in order to rescue her. The man who coordinated hiding places for her was a believer in Y'shua, and because of his love for God's chosen people, he was prepared to bear any consequences for his actions. In the end, his love for the Jews cost him his life. When the Nazis discovered his role in hiding Jews, they shot him.

My friend saw the love of Y'shua in the life of this man. Because of his sacrifice, she began to read the Bible and learned that Y'shua was the promised Messiah, and that he had given his life for her, too.

Through the discovery of Y'shua's amazing love for her,

Hansi was able to release her bitterness toward Germans. That same love gave her the strength to forgive the Nazis for what they had done to her and her family.

Hansi's story struck me, and I could not get it out of my mind. I already believed that Y'shua was the Son of God, and that he was Jewish. Now I suddenly realized that through Y'shua, the Jewish Messiah, I had a place in the Jewish family. I was, in fact, an adopted family member.

Let me explain. The book of Romans describes the Jewish people as the root and branches of an olive tree. Addressing gentile believers in Y'shua, Paul writes:

... you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you (Romans 11:17,18).

God grafts the goyim who believe in Y'shua, the Jewish Messiah, into the olive tree, and these grafted branches grow along with the natural branches of the tree. The roots and the nourishing sap of the olive tree support the grafted branches and they identify with the tree.

So the connection I felt to Hansi was a completely natural one. Yet I, too, felt a need for

forgiveness. I was haunted by my heritage as a German. A maniac from my country had exterminated millions of people whom God calls the apple of his eye. Hitler had threatened to destroy the root of the tree. How could I apologize for my German history? Didn't I have to feel guilty?

I was driven back to the pages of the Bible. I realized that only Y'shua could grant the forgiveness I needed. In the life of my wonderful new friend, he had set free the floods of love, and he had set them free in me as well. Because of Y'shua's forgiveness of all our sins, I, a German, and Hansi, a Jew, were now bonded together in his love. We belonged together. She does not cease being Jewish, nor do I cease to be German, but we share a bond that, in a sense, makes us sisters.

I discovered it is only right that I love all of my Jewish siblings. As the man who rescued Hansi realized, God loves his chosen people. So should I. The New Testament clearly states that God will fulfill all of his promises to the Jews. As a gentile, I thank God for the Jews, through whom Y'shua the Messiah was born, and through whom I have inherited a relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

As a German believer in Y'shua, I love the Jewish people for giving me a place in the olive tree, and for giving me an empty chair next to them.

—Dr. Irmhild Barend

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Israel, I realized that through Israel and the Jews, God is going to work out his plan of salvation for the whole world to see. When Dean showed me just how small Israel is, I was astonished. The whole world has its eyes on this tiny country, and when Jesus returns and many Jewish people turn to him, like it says in the Bible, then this will show just how powerful, faithful and gracious God is. The fact that the Jewish people still exist is a testimony to the faithfulness of the one true God. So I'm not against the idea of a Palestinian state. I'm extremely sad that my people do not have a homeland. I'm grieved that the other Arab nations don't want them, but I have come to terms with the fact that this is not the Jews' fault. More importantly, the Bible says that God promised this land to the Jews. I would actually love to visit Israel, but it would be difficult for me there. I can't tell you how angry my father would be to hear me say that.

Since Jews and Christians are usually pro-Israel, do you sometimes feel you have to apologize for your nationality?

It's difficult to know what to tell people I meet. Even the word "Palestine" arouses anger in some people, but when my father was born there, the land was called Palestine. If my father ever heard me say he was born in Israel, he would be livid. I usually tell people he was born in the West Bank.

Based on what has happened between you and Dean, do you

think there is hope for reconciliation between the two people groups?

I think of my father, watching the current Middle East news, and I imagine his health deteriorating due to the stress of the situation. He and so many of the other Palestinian-born people have so much invested in their hatred of Israel. This hatred goes far deeper than any other racial conflict, I think.

The worst thing is seeing this same hatred in the eyes of children I see on TV. They are blinded by fury. Their anger controls them. My people have taken their children, filled them with anger, and put them on the front lines to be used as weapons. Every time I hear of Arabs attacking Jews or vice versa, I am dismayed, but I am more concerned about what my people are doing to themselves.

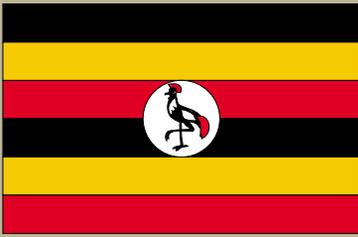
No peace talks can remedy the effects of years and years of hatred. Obviously, we need an internal change of heart.

That's why I think the only true peace to be attained is a personal peace with God through Jesus. Only when we are personally reconciled to God can we reconcile with one another.

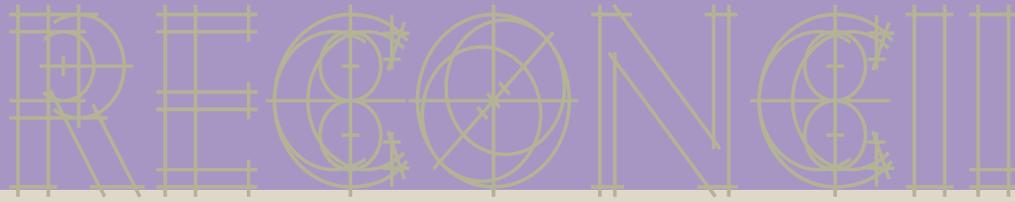
I don't know that there will ever be peace between Arabs and Jews in my lifetime. I do know that the joy of the reconciliation that has taken place between Arab and Jew in our marriage is superceded by the fact that God brought an Arab to himself and a Jew to himself, and then he brought us to each other. ■

**The Five Pillars of Islam are the framework of a Muslim's life. They are the declaration of faith, prayer, zakah (required expenditure [charity]), fasting, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.*

Introducing Islam: <http://www.salam.muslimsonline.com>



FROM UGANDA WITH LOVE



I go by James, though many people still call me by my Muslim name. My father is Al Hajj, and my great-grandfather was also Al Hajj.* I am from the capital city of Kampala, Uganda. I grew up as a Muslim, and from as early as I can remember, I hated Jews. This hatred increased after an event that happened in my country in 1976, when Palestinians hijacked a French plane and forced it to land at the Entebbe Airport. In response, the Israelis organized an operation to rescue these people from Entebbe. In the process, soldiers of the Uganda army were killed, and the airport was partially destroyed.

When we heard the news that the Israelis had freed the hostages, pressure was put on us to hate the Jews even more. In the mosque that Friday, they tried to incite us to violence. We were inflamed with hatred. Some people were being trained locally to help the Palestinians fight the Jews, and I wished that I were old enough to be a part of that effort.

Even though there were no “Jehudis” where I lived, I wanted to kill them. So I grew up with that kind of hateful sentiment instilled in me.

In 1987 I received the gospel of my Lord Jesus. It is difficult to explain fully what went on in my life. The moment I received Jesus, I was changed. I don’t know exactly what God did in my spirit, but suddenly, I had a love for the Jews that I cannot explain. After all, my savior was Jewish. The prophets who spoke of him were Jewish. How could I hate a people that my God loved so much? I longed to meet Jews and be friends with them, despite the persecution I got for turning away from Islam.

The first time I ever left Uganda, I traveled to Kenya and Nigeria. The first thing I did when I got to foreign soil was look for the Israeli Embassy. I wanted to look at these Jews for whom God had given me such an immense love. I did meet some Jews at the embassy, and they gave me some books designed for

tourists to Jerusalem. It felt so good.

I really cannot explain this new love for the Jewish people. I do not have a single Jewish friend. But I pray for them. In fact, I prayed that Israel would open an embassy in our country, because people from our country who want to go to Israel had to go through Kenya. So I prayed and prayed and now, by the grace of God, Israel has a consulate in our country. I believe that very soon I will visit Israel.

It is my prayer that my fellow Muslims will also realize this love for the Jews. I believe the hate I had towards them was from the devil. Nobody told me to begin loving the Jews; something just happened inside me. This was a gift from the God of Israel, I’m sure. And now I love them.

—James Muyunga Mwesigwa

* Al Hajj refers to those devout Muslims who have made the journey to Ka’ba and Haram, in Mecca, and performed specific Arka’n (rites) in a specific sequence.

Tear on the dotted line

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