



Yossi Klein Halevi

At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden
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An Islam Much Forgotten

JERUSALEM — Outside my window, I hear the sirens of ambulances transporting the dozens of victims of the latest suicide bombing, offered for the glory of God and Islam. From the Palestinian village across the road comes the muezzin's call to prayer, which for some Jews has become a reminder of violence and murder. However tempting, I resist that linkage, because I've known a different Islam.

In the year before the current intifada began, I undertook a pilgrimage of religious empathy to my Muslim neighbors, visiting mosques in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel. Though clearly identified by my skullcap as a religious Jew, I was invited to join the Muslim prayer line. My goal wasn't to blur the borders between faiths but to test whether Muslims and Jews could share a common language of devotion and transform religion into an instrument of peace rather than holy war. The faltering Oslo process had tried to reconcile secularized Israeli and Palestinian cities, ignoring the centrality of faith among our two people; I was searching for a dialogue of the heart.

Despite the anti-Jewish incitement that would soon help ignite the intifada, I found eager partners — mostly among the Sufis, or Muslim mystics, on the periphery of Palestinian Islam. One sheik dismissed rival Israeli and Palestinian territorial claims by insisting that the land belongs to neither side, only to God, echoing a rabbinic teaching.

In showing reverence for Islam, I was able to elicit a reciprocal gesture from some Muslims, who acknowledged that the return of the Jews to Israel wasn't a colonialist imposition but in accord with the will of God.

The culmination of my journey occurred during the festival of Lailat al-Miraj, the night Muslims believe that Muhammad ascended to heaven from Jerusalem. I was invited to join services in a little Sufi mosque located in Gaza's Nuseirat refugee camp. The building was so forlorn that it lacked a minaret; its narrow prayer room could barely hold 50 worshippers. Eight years earlier, during the Israeli occupation, I'd served as a reservist soldier in Nuseirat, the heartland of Islamic extremism, and had been hit in the head with a rock while on patrol near the mosque.

Now, together with the mosque's devotees, I participated in the Sufi service known as zikr, or remembrance of God's presence. For perhaps an hour we chanted, leapt and rapidly exhaled in a dance of controlled ecstasy, celebrating God's oneness and the mystic's transcendence over human fragmentation.

Since the violence intensified last September, the conciliatory — and sadly marginal — voices within Palestinian Islam have been intimidated into silence. Clergy on Palestinian television urge the faithful to kill Jews, while children in white shrouds, with simulated bombs, march in processions of martyrdom. My Muslim friends are unable to publicly express their shame as their faith is sullied...

Today, my forays into Palestinian Islam seem like fantasies. Islam has once again become untouchable, pervasive and elusive as air. Many Arab Muslims, encouraged by official media and leading clergy, now embrace a medieval kind of hatred of Jews. While religious extremists are hardly lacking among Jews, Israeli society has repudiated their theology and their actions; not so with the Palestinian mainstream. And while no Israeli leader denies the sanctity of Jerusalem for Islam, Palestinian leaders have repudiated the historical connection between Jerusalem and the Jewish people.

Still, my religious journey taught me that Islam contains those qualities necessary for peacemaking — humility before God and an acute and fearless awareness of mortality. I know that Jews and Muslims can share wisdom, if not doctrine. Even as suicide bombers explode in our streets, and as Israel confronts a war that is being forced upon it, I recall the Muslim mystics who opened their doors and their hearts to me, and I refuse to despair.

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