

🕯️ ONLY FRIENDSHIP

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My Jewish daughter befriended a Muslim woman in her Islam class last Fall. She asked me where she could buy rosewater, saffron, and cardamom to make *halwa*. My kosher daughter was celebrating the end of Ramadan, *Eide-fetr*, with her first Iranian, her first Muslim friend.

At first, Yael was apprehensive about taking the class. The teacher employed anti-Israel rhetoric in his teachings, other teachers and students told my daughter, who is studying Hebrew and loves Israel. In class, Yael sat by herself, apart from Muslim men who segregated themselves, not making eye contact out of religious modesty, from Muslim women who acted shy and withdrawn. Ironically, her stance on a Jewish issue brought her and Anahita together.

When Yael's teacher asserted that Islamic societies respected and gave equal rights to minorities, my reserved daughter stood up and protested: "My mother is from Iran," she said. "The Jews were treated with animosity as second-rate citizens."

When I encouraged Yael to take the class, I told her that she needed to be strong and listen to views with which she disagreed; I told her of the importance of hearing people who dislike us. Knowing how difficult it must have been to stand up in a large classroom and contradict her professor, I was proud of her. She told me she felt uncomfortable, marked, as others stared at her in silent disapproval.

But when the class was over, Anahita approached her. "You're right,"

she told her. "My parents are from Iran. They told me the same thing."

Since the Iranian government didn't allow the voice of opposition, Anahita's parents left the country, fearing for their lives. Having seen the sense of loss and displacement my family feels, Yael empathized with the hardship of her classmate's family in exile. The simple acknowledgments bonded the young women. Yael did not have to sit alone in the classroom; neither did Anahita.

When I left Iran in the summer of 1975, I could have not imagined a child of mine making friends with Iranians or Muslims in the U.S. As Iran sizzled in pre-Revolutionary fervor, I abandoned not only my country of birth but also the culture and the language. Bitter and angry at the constant harassment I endured as a woman and a Jew, I stopped reading, writing, or speaking in Farsi.

My family traces our history to the destruction of the First Temple, when the Jews were taken into slavery from Jerusalem to Babylon, today's Iraq. A Persian king, Cyrus the Great, conquered the region and freed the Jews in 539 BCE, and encouraged them to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple, but many followed him to Persia. My home in Shiraz, a southern city in Iran, is about a twenty-minute drive to the ruins of the ancient palace in Persepolis. My mother was born in Hamedan, a summer retreat for the kings, and the burial site of Esther and Mordechai, the Jewish heroes who saved the Persian Jewish population from a massacre.

Subsequent rulers were less kind than Cyrus and confined the Jews to the ghettos, where I too lived until I was eight years old. Then we moved to an all Muslim neighborhood, where, as a welcome, the neighbor across the street erected a large red glass swastika in a bedroom facing our house. A gentle looking elderly neighbor scattered garbage on our doorsteps early every morning. The pine trees my father planted outside the house were set on fire one night. After neighborhood teenagers tore every branch off our mulberry trees, my father cut them down. The vegetable stands wouldn't let my mother touch the produce, fearing that it would become *najes*, a term meaning filthy, not a physical impurity as much as a spiritual one that cannot be washed away. At school, a fight broke out the first time I tried to drink from the water spouts in the yard; many students demanded that I keep away because my touch defiled the water, deeming it unusable for drinking or ablution before

praying. During Koran classes, my teacher asked the four Jewish students to leave. In the school's courtyard, we huddled under an overhang on stormy days.

On rainy days, if wet, my brother wasn't allowed to take a seat in his classroom. Water, his teacher believed, facilitated the transfer of his Jewish impurity.

A car filled with young men laughing hysterically chased my ten-year-old sister, who walked with a severe limp, in front of our house. The passengers whooped as if chasing a bull in a Roman theatre. Screaming and crying, my father ran after the car, begging them to be merciful, but the men didn't leave until my father lifted my sister and carried her into a shop.

In our new neighborhood, I became shy, depressed, and lonely. My family taught me not to trust anyone, to keep to myself, and not to make friends with the Muslims. Increasingly, I lived mostly inside my head and my books. Whenever a teacher made an anti-Semitic remark, I tried to look small, to disappear inside myself.

Then I met Shohreh in high school. We both majored in math in a city where only one women's school offered mathematics. My friend's long curly blond hair, bright blue eyes, and fair skin distinguished her from the crowd of olive-skinned Iranians. Once she went to the Shah Cheragh shrine to pray and caused a near riot. Fortunately, an influential family friend spotted her, convinced the crowd that she was a Muslim, and saved her from worshipers who had assumed that a foreigner, an infidel, had defiled the holy building.

For an Iranian woman, Shohreh was wild. She smoked; she didn't shy away from a drink or two; she danced many nights away in discotheques; she experimented with hashish. She was bright, outspoken, well dressed, and well-connected.

Such opposites, yet Shohreh and I became trusting friends. I don't know how since I was too insecure to have approached her for a friendship; she must have reached out to me. Until I left Iran in 1975, other than the sleeping hours, I spent more time at her house than my own. In her bedroom, surrounded with the pictures of Brigitte Bardot, the Rolling Stones and other western icons, I heard the Beatles for the first time. She would put a song on and force me to get up and dance with her. I had never danced before. My parents taught me that "good" women didn't dance, or sing, or smoke, or even laugh, but Shohreh shat

tered all these taboos. I laughed aloud with her even though I only giggled in public with my hand over my mouth. I didn't dance in public for a long time, but she finally convinced me that it didn't tarnish my character. The very first summer I knew her, she dragged me to the only women's pool in Shiraz. I was afraid. I had never seen so much water in my life. I wouldn't dip a foot in the water. She arranged swimming lessons for me, stood over the pool, laughed as I swallowed the water, and wouldn't let me get out and give up.

Shohreh's presence gave me protection; it opened doors for me that I didn't know existed. Eventually I became so comfortable that I forgot I had gained much of my freedom because I was attached to her; I forgot that those doors were still closed to many.

Partly because of Shohreh, I met many Muslim friends. Trusting them, I gradually assumed that education and the neutral ground of a western-style university could defuse centuries of cultivated hatred of two groups. Facing anti-Semitism in their daily lives, my grandmother, parents, aunts, and uncles kept warning me against Muslims; therefore, I rarely invited these friends over to my house. Other than Shohreh, most others didn't introduce me to their families either. We knew the social and cultural codes of conduct, aware of being the first generation in our city to connect through deep friendships despite barriers set up by generations before us.

In 1971, I enrolled at Pahlavi, an American-style university, where British and American-trained professors lectured from imported English books. Students wore American jeans; many women displayed mini-skirts and had blond highlights in their hair.

There I dedicated more time to studying Persian Literature than any other subject; I knew the interpretation of every poem before I entered the classroom; I couldn't afford mistakes.

My traditional Iranian professor started each lesson with a comment on my behavior, my clothes, or my religion. "Dayanim," he addressed me by my last name, "you know, many say the word *Yahud* rhymes with *sharur*." He coughed and spit phlegm in the trash can.

I heard a few students behind me choke on their laughs. I felt friends' gaze on my face. I never argued with this teacher. Instead, I looked directly into his eyes, and watched him squirm in anger. I was stone; nothing could hurt me. I didn't care if a foolish man equated the words "Jew" and "wicked."

When studying Sa'dee, he chose me to recite the poems written during the poet's incarceration in Iraq, lamenting the inhumanity of his captors, who humiliated him by forcing him to work with the Jews.

One day a classmate asked me for a pen. Before I could answer him, the teacher threw his chalk at me. Being caught off guard, something broke inside me like dry timber. I picked up my books and left the classroom, furious at myself for having let him see my tears. I stood in the hallway against the wall sobbing. Then the classroom door opened and most students poured out in protest. My Muslim friends screamed their disgust at him. The abuse stopped.

Yet I knew those who objected would have not done the same for another Jew. I didn't fit the description of a wretched people because they knew me well. That day, ten students didn't leave the classroom. Seven clapped for the teacher. The other three were Jews, too frightened to challenge a Muslim; also, they thought I didn't deserve their loyalty since I had betrayed them by befriending the enemy. At that point, I had only one Jewish friend, and I felt a lot more comfortable with the Muslims than I did with the Jews. With them, the world welcomed me.

Shohreh and other Muslim friends changed the course of my life; they empowered me to leave the country for the U.S. despite strong opposition from my family, and in spite of the legal and social barriers that were intended to prevent me from taking authority over my own life. Also because of my Muslim friends I knew I had to leave, and to leave as quickly as possible.

During my last year in Iran, I felt a changing mood among my friends. Secrets circulated to which I was not privy. Putting aside the latest western styles, many women covered their hair and discarded their French make-up; men grew stubble and exchanged their American jeans for ordinary pants. Adherence to strict Islamic teachings, and, as a consequence, hatred against the Jews and the west bonded the young and strengthened their resolve against the rule of the Shah. The sword of Islam became the lethal weapon that eventually destroyed the Peacock Throne.

One by one friends stopped talking to me, so I kept away. As always, I regarded Shohreh as my dearest friend, although she too, influenced by the rapid change in the political climate, sometimes said a derogatory word or two against the Jews. But then she remembered my heritage, and marveled at how I differed from the rest. I never dared to tell her that I

was unlike others because she knew me, her only Jewish friend. Once when Shohreh had returned exhilarated from participating in anti-Shah riots, I reprimanded her. The Shah was a crazy dictator, I told her, but wasn't he the better alternative for us? And as I said the words, both she and I knew that I meant us, the Jews. For a second, I neglected to remember her religious background as she sometimes forgot mine.

Shohreh was not the only friend who often forgot my religion because I didn't fit into the myths constructed around the Jews. Like a sister, Fahimeh went out of her way for me, but unlike Shohreh, she rarely invited me to her home. Her family was more religious. Her sister studied in a religious school in Qom, the city that became famous later for being Khomeini's hometown. She told me her sister awaited a man who would change the country. When I inquired about the man's identity, she realized she had let slip a piece of information to which, as a Jew, I was not entitled. She did not repeat that mistake.

During the exams, I met Fahimeh for tea in the morning before we headed to the library. One day as I said goodbye to her, I casually mentioned, "I'll see you tomorrow." A look of surprise crossed on her face. She told me she couldn't and maybe I should study at home too. Her attitude puzzled me since she knew I lived in a multi-family home, too chaotic to allow me quiet time for studying.

When I arrived at the library the day after, the students, somber and watchful, stood in small groups around the campus. Few Muslim students occupied the usually packed library, but Fahimeh waited for me by the door. I asked her if she too had noticed the "weirdness" that hung in the air. She didn't respond, instead she insisted that we abandon our regular seats by the windows and picked a space between the stacks. Fahimeh fidgeted, looked around, and I almost wished she had not come when I heard the loud shouts. Frightened, I jumped, but Fahimeh pulled me under the table. Rioters ran through the library, throwing chairs at full length windows. Large sheets of glass sliced the air. Fahimeh led me outside from a back door and talked our way through soldiers who barricaded the school with drawn guns and bayonets. Through iron fences, I watched the Shah's army rip the clothes off women and batter my classmates.

My architecture professor stood next to me screaming, "Not on their heads, please don't hit them on the head."

At first, my body shook uncontrollably, and then I was listless and

cold. While the brutality appalled me, I found the alternative more frightening. I didn't belong. My friends deserved a better government, but their choice would destroy me. I had to leave as soon as possible.

Fahimeh found a taxi, pulled me out of the frenzied crowd, and took me home. She told my mother that I was in shock and helped me get in bed. Although she could not trust me with the information, Fahimeh endangered her own safety to ensure mine. A few months later, she also gave me all her savings, 2000 tomans, to buy my ticket to the U.S.

In the summer of 1975, I told my father that I planned to leave Iran for the U.S. He dismissed the idea, a woman leaving by herself for a foreign land? Impossible. Why would I want to be a wandering Jew? he asked. Those years under Mohammed Reza Shah constituted the best of years, the pinnacle of Iranian Jewish renaissance. Where was I going? And where would my younger siblings go if I, as the oldest child, set such an example for them? Africa? China?

A revolution hid in the wind, promising to churn the hatred of Jews deep within the Iranian psyche. I had to leave, I told him. And I pleaded, "Sell the farm, the house, get your money out of the bank, take the family away before it's too late."

He laughed. Did I think he had his white beard from working in a flour mill? he asked. He had been through much worse. He was a child when fanatic Islamic clerics incited the Muslim community of Shiraz to raid the Jewish ghetto. They took even the spatula from the kitchen, left their home bare, taking even the doors off the hinges. Those days were gone. We lived in a nice neighborhood among Muslims. The Shah's rule established stability, law, and order. Unlike our fathers and mothers, we had access to education, to an honest and decent living. I was staying in Iran, he said. At age twenty-two, I needed to get married and settle down. My father had a husband in mind for me. I had other plans.

I told him that Jews could not serve on the judiciary system of the government. I told him that although I could vote, my vote was predetermined. As a Jew, I had to vote for the one seat reserved for a Jewish member of the parliament, who was pre-selected by the Shah. That was not a vote.

My father said that it didn't matter. That was still the best of times. We were mostly free.

I told him that the tolerant government wouldn't last; too many Iranians disapproved of the leadership. I confided in him that my

Muslim friends at the university had exchanged their western garments for head coverings and many would no longer talk to me.

It was fine to be separate, he responded. Mind your own business, he said. Don't worry about them.

Before Khomeini seized power in 1979, one hundred thousand Jews lived in Iran, ninety percent of whom left for Israel or the U.S. or any other country that allowed them entry. My family too escaped to Israel, fearing for their lives after Muslim fanatics stormed the Bahai neighborhood of Shiraz with machine guns and killed all its citizens. Then they vowed that the Jews would be next. My father had waited too long; he lost all his possessions. Although I was living in the U.S. and married to an American, I could not secure visas for them. Because of their Iranian nationality, the United States categorized them as enemies although they were victims themselves.

On TV, I once saw an old Palestinian man speak of his lost olive orchards. During Israel's war of independence, Arab countries encouraged the Muslim Palestinians to leave, and promised them that they could soon return to a destroyed Israel to possess empty Jewish homes. Fifty years later, the old Arab man in a white caftan, with white stubble, bent back, and weak eyes, sat on a stone by his mud-house. He said that he still remembered his olive groves. He leaned on his wooden cane and cried.

I visited my father in Israel last year. After two decades, he still recollected his fruit trees—little Persian apricots, the kind that melt in the mouth. Now the apricot orchard, the poultry farm, the house, and the car were gone. He remembered every stone that had to be cleared, every piece of dirt dug out to build a well that transformed a rocky land into an oasis. When thinking of his apricot trees, his wrinkles deepened; he put his balding head between his two hands, and I turned my head, not to see his humiliation, an old man crying in front of a woman.

My father bought a satellite dish and watched TV all day, especially its two Persian channels. After living in Israel for more than two decades, he still feared the foreign world outside his apartment. He showed me a tape he had recorded from an Iranian channel. Charged with spying for Israel and the U.S., thirteen Jewish prisoners from Shiraz sat in school-like chairs. They wore blue prison uniforms, which looked like brand new pajamas, meticulously ironed. Thirteen lawyers, each wearing a dark suit, white shirt, no tie (against Islamic rules), sat next to each prisoner.

The Jewish convicts were treated fairly, a woman, her hair covered carefully with a black kerchief, said from the TV screen. As the viewers could see, they had competent lawyers, she added without a smile. The prisoners and the lawyers pretended to be discussing the intricacies of the Iranian law.

I couldn't keep my eyes off one prisoner. Naser and I once attended the same class: The Foundation of Western Literature. He invited me to join a discussion on a Biblical issue with our British teacher. I had to get to the library and couldn't talk to Naser then. Now he looked directly into the camera as if saying, "I know I am on display." His once striking blue eyes looked sunken and lifeless on the screen. He had a deep cut on his forehead, left to heal without stitches. Eighteen years in an Iranian prison was his punishment, a price for his devotion to the Jewish community of Shiraz. I felt guilty. I had run away, but he stayed behind to help those who couldn't leave.

My youngest sister Niloufar entered as my father and I watched the tape. Now the same age as I was when I emigrated to the U.S., she was three years old when they left Iran. In the early years, ashamed of her heritage, she refused to speak Farsi and, therefore, could not communicate with those of us in the family who didn't understand Hebrew. She and I speak in English now, a borrowed tongue for both of us. She spoke to my parents in Farsi with a thick Hebrew accent and syntax. Since the language didn't carry the cultural experience for Niloufar as it did for our parents, they misunderstood each other and soon started an argument. When emotionally exhausted, not having common words to convey their love, they hugged. Once a close-knit family, we have become like the builders of the tower of Babel, wandering in different parts of the world, losing the language skills to communicate.

Family and friends, we are cut off from each other by our different languages, cultures, and religions. I rarely see my family; I haven't seen my friends since I left Iran.

I lost track of Shohreh and Fahimeh when I married and moved around the U.S. Still, they are always in my heart. I wonder if the revolution met their expectations or if they too had to escape. When I visit cities with big Iranian populations, I search the crowd for their faces. I ask myself if I wanted to lose touch with them on purpose because I feared that they now might hate me for being a Jew. I thought about them on the day the twin towers collapsed. I wondered if they mourned

the lost lives as I did, or if they celebrated America's "punishment." If they still lived in Iran, wouldn't they finally succumb to the popular notion of America as evil? But, deep in my heart, I supposed, I hoped, that they were as horrified as I was.

During the Gulf War, my parents and sister lived in their "sealed room" in a suburb of Tel-Aviv. I saw their neighborhood hit with a scud missile in a live news broadcast, and, hysterical, I called them.

My father was resigned to his fate. He told me that his destiny was to be chased by this fiery destruction. First in Shiraz, then in Tehran, and now in Tel-Aviv, he had to dodge the Iraqi missiles.

As I watched the attack on America, like my father, I too felt as if long arms reached over from my country of birth, Iran, or even from further away, from Iraq, where my ancestors were taken into slavery. Those arms tried to grab me, to take me back to my childhood in the ghetto, to my crying ancestors by the shores of Euphrates. I left Iran so that my children would not be exposed to the hatred I had endured. I left so they could be free and proud of being Jewish, so they would not need to hide or to be afraid. When the hijacked plane hit the Pentagon, I knew there was at least one other plane on the way. I assumed it targeted the Capitol, and I feared Yael could be working there that day. She wasn't, but she volunteered across the hall from Senator Daschle's office when another intern opened the anthrax letter. Like the rest of Americans, my reality has changed although partly in different ways.

As a Jew growing up in an Islamic country, I learned not to get attached to any land, to be ready to pick up my family and run if necessary. As I watched the twin towers on fire, my instincts commanded me to find a place to take my kids: Canada, Australia. Then I realized that I, like most world Jewry, have run out of places to escape to, and I realized too that despite all the mental efforts, I have become attached to the soil itself.

I wish I knew how to resolve this hatred the Jews and Americans face throughout the Muslim world. To change its course, we need to know one another, to understand and to respect each other's values and customs. The Saudis isolated their population from American service men and women who defended them during the Gulf War. How can we achieve lofty goals of understanding and reconciliation when the minorities are disappearing from the Muslim world? Once Saudi Arabia had a

thriving Jewish population whom the prophet Mohammed, a merchant himself, befriended in the bazaars. Now the government forbids Jews to step foot on its soil. There are no Jews in Jordan and Lebanon, few in Syria, Egypt, Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan. There has been a mass exodus of Jews from most Muslim countries, including Morocco and Iran, which has the lowest Jewish population in its history.

Once I was so comfortable with my Muslim friends that I expected we would eventually live side by side, if not with love at least with respect. I thought that our parents' attitude set the obstacles that separated us, and that my generation could change the perception of Jews and Muslims toward each other.

When my daughter Yael called to let me know she had joined the Iranian society on her campus, I didn't repeat the words my parents had told me. I didn't tell her to stay away, but I did tell her "Be careful! Don't get too close." It pains me to find myself in my parents' place, sometimes promoting similar ideas, but my daughter also gives me hope.

Halfway through the semester this year, she told me her Islam teacher was a nice man. He played a haunting middle eastern tune for the class on his flute, and encouraged and inspired by him, Yael decided to take a class in Islamic art. When she told me that she had found a dear friend in an Iranian Muslim named Anahita, I cried. The attack on America has strengthened their relationship because they understand and love the two opposite, sometimes hostile cultures of east and west, Jewish and Muslim. Two by two maybe we can rebuild again.

Part of this essay was first presented at a symposium titled "Jewish Women from Muslim Societies Respond to September 11," which was organized by Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women at Brandeis University.