



Growing Up in an Interfaith Family



By Nadia Mikhail Abboushi

Preamble

It all started with a mixed-marriage ceremony at home, in August 1973. The marriage contract was officially recorded by a Muslim sheikh and blessed and witnessed by both the Anglican archbishop of Jerusalem and the pastor of our church in Ramallah. Excerpts from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* were read by several of our friends. Sameh and I exchanged marriage vows, adapted from the Anglican Prayer Book, which highlighted mutual love, trust, and respect. The ceremony, attended by close relatives and friends, was followed by an outdoor celebration under the spacious vine pergola of my father's garden. Dr. Daud Mikhail's pride and joy. I quickly exchanged my wedding dress for a white Palestinian *thob* from Beit Dajan. The guests were mostly actors and actresses, writers, singers, *dabka*-dancers and friends of the Balaleen Theatrical Troupe, of which we were founding members. Needless to say, the jubilant festivities lasted all night!

Our two sons, Faris and Tareq were raised in Ramallah. They studied at the Friends Schools, which focus on liberal Quaker ideals that recognize the presence of the divine in all humans, regardless of their religion, race, gender, or color. Sharing this firm conviction, our family celebrated both Christian and Muslim holy feasts equally.

Al-Adha and *Al-Fiter* holidays commenced the day before the *Eid* with memorable drives to their grandparents in Jenin, passing by the quaint towns and villages of the north, through the dramatic and bustling city of Nablus, and along the picturesque green pastures of *Marj Ibn Amer*. The boys were ecstatic with their brand-new clothes and shoes and trendy haircuts. *Teta* Sadouda hurriedly escorted them to the colorful *souk* to buy them chocolates, candy, and loud firecrackers. Very early the next morning they woke up to the mesmerizing sacred chants,

amplified by the loudspeakers of the nearby mosque, announcing the *Eid*. The *salon* was soon filled with relatives and neighbors who duly offered their felicitations to *Sido* Sameeh, the elder of the family, before quickly resuming their usual tour of visitations – but only after sipping Arabic coffee and eating *ka'ek* and *ma'moul*, the traditional *Eid* cookies stuffed with dates and nuts. Lunch was the highlight of celebrations, relishing *Teta*'s homemade sweet-spicy couscous à la Moroccan cuisine and *mahshi* (stuffed grape leaves and mixed vegetables). The next morning, breakfast was served on a big *tabaq qash* (straw tray) filled with warm *ftoot el eid* (a traditional Jenini homemade pastry kneaded with olive oil and anise seeds), local grilled white cheese, tomatoes, fresh mint leaves, *labneh* (yogurt), and sweet tea. We ate leisurely on the open terrace, overlooking the citrus orchard, with the scents of lemon, orange, bergamot, and grapefruit filling the air.

For Easter holidays, preparations would begin a week in advance with the whole family coloring eggs and engaging in a serious competition

"During our childhood," Faris and Tareq agree "...We had the best of both worlds... double celebrations and double the number of gifts, to the envy of friends and cousins. We felt lucky." As a university student, Faris wrote "...all faiths seek the one Truth, each in its own way. They resemble the instruments of the orchestra, where each family of instruments plays a distinctive role. But when they all play together, the wondrous harmonies that evolve are greater than the sum of their parts."

over sketching novel designs and patterns on each egg. Applying the delicate decoration of *ka'ek* and *ma'moul* Easter cookies was another ritual eagerly anticipated by the boys. When the cookies and eggs were finally laid out on the serving plate, the children would proudly point out their own masterpieces to the guests. Once Easter morning arrived, Faris and Tareq would run out into the garden for the egg-hunt fun, eagerly filling their baskets and



Faris and Tareq on the hills surrounding Ramallah.
Photo courtesy of the author.



Three generations. Photo courtesy of the author.



Gathering around the piano to sing Christmas carols. Photo courtesy of the author.

comparing their booty of collected eggs and chocolates.

Christmas brought a different kind of excitement. The season's choral music and Gregorian chants filled the air as we gathered around the table, cutting, gluing, and coloring window decorations, garlands, mobiles, and Christmas tree ornaments. Now the house would be set for the next day's Christmas-caroling party. Thirty-some guests arrived to a warm candle-lit house with the traditional olive-wood manger scene tucked under the Christmas tree. Glasses of warm spiced wine were passed around while the singers gathered by the piano, joyfully singing Gloria in Excelsis Deo. To this day our boys recall how they sang their hearts out on those evenings. However, nothing beats the fun and excitement of celebrating Christmas

Eve with the grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Santa's arrival at Khalto Hanan's house would spark a joyful frenzy as sparklers were lit and Christmas songs sung. Presents were quickly unwrapped and played with among the cousins. Staying up late and sleeping over were further treats to augment the boys' delight. The next day's Christmas-lunch table displayed grandma Wadea's famous Lebanese *kibbeh* and Palestinian-style *maftoul* with chicken roasted in lemon and garlic.

Faris and Tareq both say they feel 100 percent Muslim when celebrating Muslim feasts and 100 percent Christian when celebrating Christian feasts. One Easter morning, while we were still under direct Israeli military occupation, the curfew was lifted for a few hours. Fifteen-year-old Faris rushed downtown to buy a new pair of pants for the occasion. An hour later, I received a phone call from a friend telling me she saw him being arrested by Israeli soldiers who had blindfolded and handcuffed him to then take him away in a military jeep. He was accused of joining a demonstration against the occupation. When he was released on bail, we asked him how he was feeling. Faris confided to us, "I feel 100 percent Palestinian!" That thought stuck with me. In the end, it doesn't matter if he was buying pants to celebrate Easter or *Al Adha*, his identity remains Palestinian.

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