

## Margaret Marcus, Ex-Jew, USA

(part 1 of 5)



### **Q: Would you kindly tell us how your interest in Islam began?**

A: I was Margaret (Peggy) Marcus. As a small child, I possessed a keen interest in music and was particularly fond of the classical operas and symphonies considered high culture in the West. Music was my favorite subject in school in which I always earned the highest grades. By sheer chance, I happened to hear Arabic music over the radio which so much pleased me that I was determined to hear more. I would not leave my parents in peace until my father finally took me to the Syrian section in New York City where I bought a stack of Arabic recordings. My parents, relatives and neighbors thought Arabic and its music dreadfully weird and so distressing to their ears that whenever I put on my recordings, they demanded that I close all the doors and windows in my room lest they be disturbed! After I embraced Islam in 1961, I used to sit enthralled by the hour at the mosque in New York, listening to tape-recordings of Tilawat [Quran recitation] ... by the celebrated Egyptian Qari, Abdul Basit. But on Juma Salat (Friday Prayers), the Imam did not play the tapes. We had a special guest that day. A short, very thin and poorly-dressed black youth, who introduced himself to us as a student from Zanzibar, recited Surah ar-Rahman [A chapter of the Quran]. I never heard such glorious Tilawat even from Abdul Basit! He possessed such a voice of gold; surely ... Bilal [a companion of the Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, who was charged with announcing the call to prayer 5 times a day] must have sounded much like him!

I traced the beginning of my interest in Islam to the age of ten. While attending a reformed Jewish Sunday school, I became fascinated with the historical relationship between the Jews and the Arabs. From my Jewish

textbooks, I learned that Abraham was the father of the Arabs as well as the Jews. I read how centuries later when, in medieval Europe, Christian persecution made their lives intolerable, the Jews were welcomed in Muslim Spain, and that it was the magnanimity of this same Arabic Islamic civilization which stimulated Hebrew culture to reach its highest peak of achievement.

Totally unaware of the true nature of Zionism, I naively thought that the Jews were returning to Palestine to strengthen their close ties of kinship in religion and culture with their Semitic cousins. Together, I believed that the Jews and the Arabs would cooperate to attain another Golden Age of culture in the Middle East.

Despite my fascination with the study of Jewish history, I was extremely unhappy at the Sunday school. At this time I identified myself strongly with the Jewish people in Europe, then suffering a horrible fate under the Nazis, and I was shocked that none of my fellow classmates nor their parents took their religion seriously. During the services at the synagogue, the children used to read comic strips hidden in their prayer books and laugh to scorn at the rituals. The children were so noisy and disorderly that the teachers could not discipline them and found it very difficult to conduct the classes.

At home, the atmosphere for religious observance was scarcely more congenial. My elder sister detested the Sunday school so much that my mother literally had to drag her out of bed in the mornings, and it never went without the struggle of tears and hot words. Finally, my parents were exhausted and let her quit. On the Jewish High Holy Days, instead of attending synagogue and fasting on Yom Kippur, my sister and I were taken out of school to attend family picnics and parties in fine restaurants. When my sister and I convinced our parents how miserable we both were at the Sunday school, they joined an agnostic, humanist organization known as the Ethical Culture Movement.

The Ethical Culture Movement was founded late in the 19th century by Felix Alder. While studying for rabbinic, Felix Alder grew convinced that devotion to ethical values as relative and man-made, regarding any supernaturalism or theology as irrelevant, constituted the only religion fit for the modern world. I attended the Ethical Culture Sunday School each week from the age of eleven until I graduated at fifteen. Here I grew into complete accord with the ideas of the movement and regarded all traditional, organized religions with scorn.

When I was eighteen years old, I became a member of the local Zionist youth movement known as the Mizrahi Hatzair. But when I found out what the nature of Zionism was, which made the hostility between Jews and Arabs irreconcilable, I left several months later in disgust. When I was twenty and a student at New York University, one of my elective courses was entitled Judaism in Islam. My professor, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Katsh, the head of the department of Hebrew Studies there, spared no efforts to convince his students - all Jews, many of whom aspired to become rabbis - that Islam was derived from Judaism. Our textbook, written by him, took each verse from the Quran,

painstakingly tracing it to its allegedly Jewish source. Although his real aim was to prove to his students the superiority of Judaism over Islam, he convinced me diametrically of the opposite.

I soon discovered that Zionism was merely a combination of the racist, tribalistic aspects of Judaism. Modern secular nationalistic Zionism was further discredited in my eyes when I learned that few, if any, of the leaders of Zionism were observant Jews, and that perhaps nowhere is Orthodox, traditional Judaism regarded with such intense contempt as in Israel. When I found nearly all important Jewish leaders in America supporters for Zionism, who felt not the slightest twinge of conscience because of the terrible injustice inflicted upon the Palestinian Arabs, I could no longer consider myself a Jew at heart.

One morning in November 1954, Professor Katsh, during his lecture, argued with irrefutable logic that the monotheism taught by Moses (may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him) and the Divine Laws revealed to him were indispensable as the basis for all higher ethical values. If morals were purely man-made, as the Ethical Culture and other agnostic and atheistic philosophies taught, then they could be changed at will, according to mere whim, convenience or circumstance. The result would be utter chaos leading to individual and collective ruin. Belief in the Hereafter, as the Rabbis in the Talmud taught, argued Professor Katsh, was not mere wishful thinking but a moral necessity. Only those, he said, who firmly believed that each of us will be summoned by God on Judgment Day to render a complete account of our life on earth and rewarded or punished accordingly, will possess the self-discipline to sacrifice transitory pleasure and endure hardships and sacrifice to attain lasting good.

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It was in Professor Katsh's class that I met Zenita, the most unusual and fascinating girl I have ever met. The first time I entered Professor Katsh's class, as I looked around the room for an empty desk in which to sit, I spied two empty seats, on the arm of one, three big beautifully bound volumes of Yusuf Ali's English translation and commentary of the Holy Quran. I sat down right there, burning with curiosity to find out to whom these volumes belonged. Just before Rabbi Katsh's lecture was to begin, a tall, very slim girl with pale complexion framed by thick auburn hair sat next to me. Her appearance was so distinctive, I thought she must be a foreign student from Turkey, Syria or some other Near Eastern country. Most of the other students were young men wearing the black cap of Orthodox Jewry, who wanted to become rabbis. We two were the only girls in the class. As we were leaving the library late that afternoon, she introduced herself to me. Born into an Orthodox Jewish family, her parents had migrated to America from Russia only a few years prior to the October Revolution in 1917 to escape persecution. I noted that my new friend spoke English with the precise care of a

foreigner. She confirmed these speculations, telling me that since her family and their friends speak only Yiddish among themselves, she did not learn any English until after attending public school. She told me that her name was Zenita Liebermann, but recently, in an attempt to Americanize themselves, her parents had changed their name from “Liebermann” to “Lane.” Besides being thoroughly instructed in Hebrew by her father while growing up and also in school, she said she was now spending all her spare time studying Arabic. However, with no previous warning, Zenita dropped out of class, and although I continued to attend all of his lectures to the conclusion of the course, Zenita never returned. Months passed and I had almost forgotten about Zenita, when suddenly she called and begged me to meet her at the Metropolitan Museum and go with her to look at the special exhibition of exquisite Arabic calligraphy and ancient illuminated manuscripts of the Quran. During our tour of the museum, Zenita told me how she had embraced Islam with two of her Palestinian friends as witnesses.

I inquired, “Why did you decide to become a Muslim?” She then told me that she had left Professor Katsh’s class when she fell ill with a severe kidney infection. Her condition was so critical, she told me, her mother and father had not expected her to survive. “One afternoon while burning with fever, I reached for my Holy Quran on the table beside by bed and began to read and while I recited the verses, it touched me so deeply that I began to weep and then I knew I would recover. As soon as I was strong enough to leave my bed, I summoned two of my Muslim friends and took the oath of the “Shahadah” or Confession of Faith.”

Zenita and I would eat our meals in Syrian restaurants where I acquired a keen taste for this tasty cooking. When we had money to spend, we would order Couscous, roast lamb with rice or a whole soup plate of delicious little meatballs swimming in gravy scooped up with loaves of unleavened Arabic bread. And when we had little to spend, we would eat lentils and rice, Arabic style, or the Egyptian national dish of black broad beans with plenty of garlic and onions called “Ful”.

While Professor Katsh was lecturing thus, I was comparing in my mind what I had read in the Old Testament and the Talmud with what was taught in the Quran and Hadith and finding Judaism so defective, I was converted to Islam.

### **Q: Were you scared that you might not be accepted by the Muslims?**

A: My increasing sympathy for Islam and Islamic ideals enraged the other Jews I knew, who regarded me as having betrayed them in the worst possible way. They used to tell me that such a reputation could only result from shame of my ancestral heritage and an intense hatred for my people. They warned me that even if I tried to become a Muslim, I would never be accepted. These fears proved totally unfounded as I have never been stigmatized by any Muslim

because of my Jewish origin. As soon as I became a Muslim myself, I was welcomed most enthusiastically by all the Muslims as one of them.

I did not embrace Islam out of hatred for my ancestral heritage or my people. It was not a desire so much to reject as to fulfill. To me, it meant a transition from parochial to a dynamic and revolutionary faith.

### **Q: Did your family object to your studying Islam?**

A: Although I wanted to become a Muslim as far back as 1954, my family managed to argue me out of it. I was warned that Islam would complicate my life because it is not, like Judaism and Christianity, part of the American scene. I was told that Islam would alienate me from my family and isolate me from the community. At that time my faith was not sufficiently strong to withstand these pressures. Partly as the result of this inner turmoil, I became so ill that I had to discontinue college long before it was time for me to graduate. For the next two years I remained at home under private medical care, steadily growing worse. In desperation from 1957 - 1959 my parents confined me both to private and public hospitals where I vowed that if ever I recovered sufficiently to be discharged, I would embrace Islam.

After I was allowed to return home, I investigated all the opportunities for meeting Muslims in New York City. It was my good fortune to meet some of the finest men and women anyone could ever hope to meet. I also began to write articles for Muslim magazines.

### **Q: What was the attitude of your parents and friends after you became Muslim?**

A: When I embraced Islam, my parents, relatives and their friends regarded me almost as a fanatic, because I could think and talk of nothing else. To them, religion is a purely private concern which at the most perhaps could be cultivated like an amateur hobby among other hobbies. But as soon as I read the Holy Quran, I knew that Islam was no hobby but life itself!

**(part 3 of 5)**

### **Q: In what ways did the Holy Quran have an impact on your life?**

A: One evening I was feeling particularly exhausted and sleepless, Mother came into my room and said she was about to go to the Larchmont Public Library and asked me if there was any book that I wanted? I asked her to look and see if the library had a copy of an English translation of the Holy Quran. Just think, years of passionate interest in the Arabs and reading every book in the library about them I could lay my hands on but until now, I never thought to see what was in the Holy Quran! Mother returned with a copy for



me. I was so eager, I literally grabbed it from her hands and read it the whole night. There I also found all the familiar Bible stories of my childhood.

In my eight years of primary school, four years of secondary school and one year of college, I learned about English grammar and composition, French, Spanish, Latin and Greek in current use, Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, European and American history, elementary science, Biology, music and art-- but I had never learned anything about God! Can you imagine I was so ignorant of God that I wrote to my pen-friend, a Pakistani lawyer, and confessed to him the reason why I was an atheist was because I couldn't believe that God was really an old man with a long white beard who sat up on His throne in Heaven. When he asked me where I had learned this outrageous thing, I told him of the reproductions from the Sistine Chapel I had seen in "Life" Magazine of Michelangelo's "Creation" and "Original Sin." I described all the representations of God as an old man with a long white beard and the numerous crucifixions of Christ I had seen with Paula at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. But in the Holy Quran, I read:

**"God! There is no god but He,-the Living, The Self-subsisting, Supporter of all. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is thee who can intercede in His presence except as He permiteth? He knoweth what (appeareth to His creatures as) before or after or behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He willeth. His Throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth, and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory)." (Quran 2:255)**

**"But the Unbelievers,-their deeds are like a mirage in sandy deserts, which the man parched with thirst mistakes for water; until when he comes up to it, he finds God there, and God will pay him his account: and God is swift in taking account. Or (the unbelievers' state) is like the depths of darkness in a vast deep ocean, overwhelmed with billow topped by billow, topped by (dark) clouds: depth of darkness, one above another: if a man stretches out his hand, he can hardly see it! For any to whom God giveth not light, there is no light!" (Quran 24:39-40)**

My first thought when reading the Holy Quran - this is the only true religion - absolutely sincere, honest, not allowing cheap compromises or hypocrisy.

In 1959, I spent much of my leisure time reading books about Islam in the New York Public Library. It was there I discovered four bulky volumes of an English translation of Mishkat ul- Masabih. It was then that I learned that a proper and detailed understanding of the Holy Quran is not possible without

some knowledge of the relevant Hadith. For how can the holy text correctly be interpreted except by the Prophet to whom it was revealed?

Once I had studied the Mishkat, I began to accept the Holy Quran as Divine revelation. What persuaded me that the Quran must be from God and not composed by Muhammad (may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him) was its satisfying and convincing answers to all the most important questions of life which I could not find elsewhere.

As a child, I was so mortally afraid of death, particularly the thought of my own death, that after nightmares about it, sometimes I would awaken my parents crying in the middle of the night. When I asked them why I had to die, and what would happen to me after death, all they could say was that I had to accept the inevitable; but that was a long way off and because medical science was constantly advancing, perhaps I would live to be a hundred years old! My parents, family, and all our friends rejected as superstition any thought of the Hereafter, regarding Judgment Day, reward in Paradise or punishment in Hell as outmoded concepts of by-gone ages. In vain, I searched all the chapters of the Old Testament for any clear and unambiguous concept of the Hereafter. The prophets, patriarchs and sages of the Bible all receive their rewards or punishments in this world. Typical is the story of Job (Hazrat Ayub). God destroyed all his loved-ones, his possessions, and afflicted him with a loathsome disease in order to test his faith. Job plaintively laments to God why He should make a righteous man suffer. At the end of the story, God restores all his earthly losses but nothing is even mentioned about any possible consequences in the Hereafter.

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Although I did find the Hereafter mentioned in the New Testament, compared with that of the Holy Quran, it is vague and ambiguous. I found no answer to the question of death in Orthodox Judaism, for the Talmud preaches that even the worst life is better than death. My parents' philosophy was that one must avoid contemplating the thought of death and just enjoy, as best one can, the pleasures life has to offer at the moment. According to them, the purpose of life is enjoyment and pleasure achieved through self-expression of one's talents, the love of family, the congenial company of friends combined with the comfortable living and indulgence in the variety of amusements that affluent America makes available in such abundance. They deliberately cultivated this superficial approach to life as if it were the guarantee for their continued happiness and good-fortune. Through bitter experience I discovered that self-indulgence leads only to misery, and that nothing great or even worthwhile is ever accomplished without struggle through adversity and self-sacrifice. From my earliest childhood, I have always wanted to accomplish important and significant things. Above all else, before my death, I wanted the assurance that I have not wasted life in sinful deeds or worthless pursuits. All my life I have been intensely serious-minded. I have always detested the

frivolity which is the dominant characteristic of contemporary culture. My father once disturbed me with his unsettling conviction that there is nothing of permanent value because everything in this modern age except the present trends inevitable and adjust ourselves to them. I, however, was thirsty to attain something that would endure forever. It was from the Holy Quran where I learned that this aspiration was possible. No good deed for the sake of seeking the pleasure of God is ever wasted or lost. Even if the person concerned never achieves any worldly recognition, his reward is certain in the Hereafter. Conversely, the Quran tells us that those who are guided by no moral considerations other than expediency or social conformity, and crave the freedom to do as they please, no matter how much worldly success and prosperity they attain or how keenly they are able to relish the short span of their earthly life, they will be doomed as the losers on Judgment Day. Islam teaches us that in order to devote our exclusive attention to fulfilling our duties to God and to our fellow-beings, we must abandon all vain and useless activities which distract us from this end. These teachings of the Holy Quran, made even more explicit by Hadith, were thoroughly compatible with my temperament.

### **Q: What is your opinion of the Arabs after you became a Muslim?**

A: As the years passed, the realization gradually dawned upon me that it was not the Arabs who made Islam great but rather Islam had made the Arabs great. Were it not for the Holy Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, the Arabs would be an obscure people today. And were it not for the Holy Quran, the Arabic language would be equally insignificant, if not extinct.

### **Q: Did you see any similarities between Judaism and Islam?**

A: The kinship between Judaism and Islam is even stronger than Islam and Christianity. Both Judaism and Islam share in common the same uncompromising monotheism, the crucial importance of strict obedience to Divine Law as proof of our submission to and love of the Creator, the rejection of the priesthood, celibacy and monasticism and the striking similarity of the Hebrew and Arabic language.

In Judaism, religion is so confused with nationalism, one can scarcely distinguish between the two. The name "Judaism" is derived from Judah - a tribe. A Jew is a member of the tribe of Judah. Even the name of this religion connotes no universal spiritual message. A Jew is not a Jew by virtue of his belief in the unity of God, but merely because he happened to be born of Jewish parentage. Should he become an outspoken atheist, he is no less "Jewish" in the eyes of his fellow Jews.

Such a thorough corruption with nationalism has spiritually impoverished this religion in all its aspects. God is not the God of all mankind, but the God



of Israel. The scriptures are not God's revelation to the entire human race, but primarily a Jewish history book. David and Solomon (may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him) are not full-fledged prophets of God but merely Jewish kings. With the single exception of Yom Kippur (the Jewish Day of Atonement), the holidays and festivals celebrated by Jews, such as Hanukkah, Purim and Pesach, are of far greater national than religious significance.

### (part 5 of 5)

#### **Q: Have you ever had the opportunity to talk about Islam to the other Jews?**

A: There is one particular incident which really stands out in my mind when I had the opportunity to discuss Islam with a Jewish gentleman. Dr. Shoreibah, of the Islamic Center in New York, introduced me to a very special guest. After one Juma Salat, I went into his office to ask him some questions about Islam, but before I could even greet him with "Assalamu Alaikum", I was completely astonished and surprised to see seated before him an ultra-orthodox Chassidic Jew, complete with earlocks, broad-brimmed black hat, long black silken caftan and a full flowing beard. Under his arm was a copy of the Yiddish newspaper, "The Daily Forward." He told us that his name was Samuel Kostelwitz, and that he worked in New York City as a diamond cutter. Most of his family, he said, lived in the Chassidic community of Williamsburg in Brooklyn, but he also had many relatives and friends in Israel. Born in a small Rumanian town, he had fled from the Nazi terror with his parents to America just prior to the outbreak of the second world-war. I asked him what had brought him to the mosque. He told us that he had been stricken with intolerable grief ever since his mother died 5 years ago. He had tried to find solace and consolation for his grief in the synagogue but could not when he discovered that many of the Jews, even in the ultra-orthodox community of Williamsburg, were shameless hypocrites. His recent trip to Israel had left him more bitterly disillusioned than ever. He was shocked by the irreligiousness he found in Israel, and he told us that nearly all the young sabras, or native-born Israelis, are militant atheists. When he saw large herds of swine on one of the kibbutzim (collective farms) he visited, he could only exclaim in horror: "Pigs in a Jewish state! I never thought that was possible until I came here! Then, when I witnessed the brutal treatment meted out to innocent Arabs in Israel, I know then that there is no difference between the Israelis and the Nazis. Never, never in the name of God, could I justify such terrible crimes!" Then he turned to Dr. Shoreibah and told him that he wanted to become a Muslim but before he took the irrevocable steps to formal conversion, he needed to have more knowledge about Islam. He said that he had purchased from Orientalia Bookshop some books on Arabic grammar and was trying to teach himself Arabic. He apologized to us for his broken English: Yiddish was his native tongue and Hebrew, his second language. Among themselves, his family and friends spoke only

Yiddish. Since his reading knowledge of English was extremely poor, he had no access to good Islamic literature. However, with the aid of an English dictionary, he painfully read “Introduction to Islam” by Muhammad Hamidullah of Paris and praised this as the best book he had ever read. In the presence of Dr. Shoreibah, I spent another hour with Mr. Kostelwitz, comparing the Bible stories of the patriarchs and prophets with their counterparts in the Holy Quran. I pointed out the inconsistencies and interpolations of the Bible, illustrating my point with Noah’s alleged drunkenness, accusing David of adultery and Solomon of idolatry (God Forbid), and how the Holy Quran raises all these patriarchs to the status of genuine prophets of God and absolves them from all these crimes. I also pointed out why it was Ismail and not Isaac who God commanded Abraham to offer as sacrifice. In the Bible, God tells Abraham: “Take thine son, thine only son whom thou lovest and offer him up to Me as burnt offering.” Now Ismail was born 13 years before Isaac but the Jewish biblical commentators explain that away be belittling Ismail’s mother, Hagar, as only a concubine and not Abraham’s real wife, so they say Isaac was the only legitimate son. Islamic traditions, however, raise Hagar to the status of a full-fledged wife equal in every respect to Sarah. Mr. Kostelwitz expressed his deepest gratitude to me for spending so much time, explaining those truths to him. To express this gratitude, he insisted on inviting Dr. Shoreibah and me to lunch at the Kosher Jewish delicatessen where he always goes to eat his lunch. Mr. Kostelwitz told us that he wished more than anything else to embrace Islam, but he feared he could not withstand the persecution he would have to face from his family and friends. I told him to pray to God for help and strength and he promised that he would. When he left us, I felt privileged to have spoken with such a gentle and kind person.

### **Q: What Impact did Islam have on your life?**

A: In Islam, my quest for absolute values was satisfied. In Islam, I found all that was true, good and beautiful and that which gives meaning and direction to human life (and death); while in other religions, the Truth is deformed, distorted, restricted and fragmentary. If any one chooses to ask me how I came to know this, I can only reply my personal life experience was sufficient to convince me. My adherence to the Islamic faith is thus a calm, cool but very intense conviction. I have, I believe, always been a Muslim at heart by temperament, even before I knew there was such a thing as Islam. My conversion was mainly a formality, involving no radical change in my heart at all but rather only making official what I had been thinking and yearning for many years.

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