

BACKGROUND TO A DREAM

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to cast away stones,
and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from
embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to rend, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8)

I first went to Israel in 1981, on the road to India, intending to remain for a month. I stayed six. Hoping to find a cheap flight to my destination, I went down to Egypt but was robbed twice, and suddenly realised I had had enough and wanted to go home, via Israel. I raced from Cairo across the Sinai to Rafah and arrived at the

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Rafah/Gaza strip border on 5th June 1982. There I experienced what I rather grandly like to call my 'Road to Damascus Conversion', waking up to the existence of the Palestinian problem when I heard on the radio that Israel had just invaded Lebanon.

The next day I hitch-hiked, quite safely under the circumstances, through the Gaza Strip, wearing Doctor Marten boots and army trousers. Then I entered Israel, a very different Israel that was now at war. As I went further north, back to my old kibbutz, I got swept along by the curious sort of bonhomie that grips Israel-at-war: the lifts, the cake stalls at the side of the road: all of this was mine too. I knew an officer in the UN, and he told me that Israelis were using phosphorus bombs up in Tyre and Sidon. At some point I knew I was going to have to come back and see the other side, the Palestinian, the Arab side.

Later at university I felt very affected by the world, particularly the ongoing arms race and Third World starvation. One evening, watching the Ethiopian famine unfold on TV, I cried in despair and prayed to God to make me an instrument of His Peace. Use me as Thou wilt, I prayed.

In 1985 I went to work as a teacher in Gaza and then the West Bank. Palestine for me was always a difficult place to be. I had always had a tendency towards psoriasis and after about seven months my face started to break out in angry red patches. People thought I had been burned. There in Jericho, at the world's lowest point, I felt like the world's psychic garbage sorter had just overloaded.

At some point in all this I started writing a book that aimed to resolve the whole Israel-Palestine, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Stockton thing once and for all. I called it 'Facing the Shadow'. When I closed the book with the biblical quotation above, I immediately heard it on TV. Despite such signs, that book, and the situation in the Middle East, did nothing to improve my life. When I went back to Palestine in 1988 I wrote in a poem:

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*Lying on hard, stone airport floors
But all is well –
There is a time 'twixt to reap and the time to sow
That is something that anyone with the
 slightest knowledge of the relevant Biblical passage
Should know*

That monstrously elongated anticipation of 'the point of it all' in the penultimate line, that was my life, that was. I was not ready to 'arrive'. I was trying to understand God from a position that was somewhere between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, while knowing that that was no solution, for either myself or the Middle East.

In 1993 I went back again to Gaza as a teacher. I also went down to Sinai for a week under the stars. In what felt like a replay of the border incident of '82, I hurried back across Sinai at the end of the holiday and arrived at Rafah too late to cross. I found a Palestinian on the Egyptian side who offered to look after me for the night, and together we watched the news of the day: Arafat and Rabin were shaking hands on the White House lawn. I was beginning to think this was all my fault.

At some point after this I had a dream. I was living in Stamford Hill, an Orthodox Jewish area of North London, and had recently seen the film *Schindler's List* when it came out in 1993, during a late show in a Hampstead cinema with a significantly Jewish audience. I found it shattering. During Lent, as I was travelling through France, I saw news of the Hebron massacre, where 29 Palestinian worshippers were massacred by Dr Baruch Goldstein in the city's central mosque. Staying in the mountains in southern France I felt hypersensitive to this three-sided monotheistic collision which I'd been following since my first visit to Israel at the age of 18; and I dreamed a dream. With hindsight this prefigured my own conversion to Islam; and, in a different way, it explains the big 'why' that, at least in my mind,

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hangs over Israel and Palestine. The dream had me driving a horse and cart around Stamford Hill. The area had been made into a ghetto and I was transporting Jews around it. I then made a trip outside, with one Orthodox Jewish man sitting in the back of the cart. The streets outside were lined with people venting their rage against him. For me, this moment had a Jesus-on-the-road-to-trial quality. The onlookers were screaming, 'World War III against the Jews!' I felt for him and stopped at a roadside stall to buy him, of all things, a sugar bun, recalling my wartime cakes of '82. When I turned away to buy the cake the man was dressed entirely in black, jacket, trousers and fur hat. When I turned back to offer him the cake he had become an Arab, dressed in sparkling white *kaffiyeh* and *jalabiya*, headscarf and robe. The question did not immediately pose itself but did this transformation represent my destiny? That of the Jews? Both?

There was perhaps a question of who was going to go first. During the mid-90's I met a Palestinian woman on one of my trips to Palestine. The liking was immediate. In 1995, when I became a Muslim, we married. This book is, in a way, about the other possible interpretation of that dream.