Letter to a Jewish friend

31.05.2015 | Mohammed Khallouk

This summer a remarkable book will be published in Germany's prestigious publishing house "Rimbaud Verlag". It is a travelogue written by the political scientist Mohammed Khallouk, born in Morocco and living in Germany, in which he describes the impressions and experiences of his first visit to Israel. The very special charm of his travel report stems from the fact, that it is written by a Muslim who shows an impressive openess that gives the text a convincingly authentic character. The travelogue ends with a "Letter to a Jewish Friend" that Khallouk wrote after his return from Israel. JCR proudly presents this letter below in an English translation.(JCR)

Dear Abraham,

I grew up in an Arab-Islamic country. My image of Jews and especially Israelis came almost exclusively from media reports on the political conflict that has afflicted the Middle East over the past one hundred years. You Jews were our sworn enemies in my consciousness. For me, Israel was a country on the verge of eradicating the habitat not only of Muslims but also of Arab Christians and destroying our existence.

We associated the descendants of Isaac with an octopus using its many arms to penetrate into the country and lives of Muslims in order to devour them. The only voices that reached us from Israel were of those who labelled the sons and daughters of Ishmael “terrorists” and accused Arabs of desiring nothing more than to drown all the Jews in the Mediterranean.

Only in adulthood was I given the opportunity to learn how Jews as individuals think and feel. The center of my life was now in free, pluralistic Germany, a country that, despite its dark past in which especially Jews were among the victims of a misanthropic ideology, was once again characterized by cultural and religious diversity. I came to realize that in Morocco, the country of my birth, Judaism has also been a fundamental part of the national culture for centuries. Even today Jews are represented in the leadership elite there. Their social commitment is not only directed at their peers, but serves the entire country.

The great Jewish exodus in the 1950s and early 1960s ensured that the majority of Muslim Moroccans today have had no direct contact with their Jewish fellow citizens. Although I was also denied this opportunity for many years, it was no doubt one such experience that helped me to put aside my aversion to Jews long enough to even consider boarding a plane to Israel.

Especially the encounter with Simon Levy, the founder of the Jewish museum in Casablanca, so far the only Jewish museum in the Arab World, left a lasting impression on me. His openness coupled with his charisma made me realize that Islam, Judaism and Christianity share a common ethical foundation. According to this shared set of ethics, it is human beings who are important, how they think and act, and not physical or abstract parameters such as geographical territory or ethnic and family origins.

That there could be this human interconnectedness despite all the differences only became completely clear to me, however, when I was in Jerusalem. Here in the Holy City of the Jews, Christians and Muslims alike, I got the opportunity to directly experience how the different religions

with their respective outlooks were able to coexist and cooperate.

My stay in Jerusalem was not entirely of my choosing. It was not adventure tourism that had led me to the place where our common ancestors dwelled. My scientific research ultimately left me no choice. The annoying border checks and interrogation-style interview at the Tel Aviv Ben Gurion Airport seemed to confirm the prejudices of my youth. I imagined I stood opposite an Israel and a Judaism in whose consciousness we Muslims existed only as a “threat”, or at the very least as “foreign bodies”.

My numerous encounters with people in Jerusalem, with Jews as well as Christians and Muslims, however, made me realize more and more that true humanity is not dependent on external attributes. Humanity knows neither cultural nor ethnic nor religious boundaries. Instead, our sense of humanity emerges from the spontaneity with which we are willing to reach out to one another. In concrete terms, it was revealed to me in the empathy you showed for my current problems. I was able to experience the humanity in your willingness to help and in the way you spoke to me and offered your support, completely casually and free of ulterior motives or expectation of compensation.

By your behaviour I could see that, as with sincere Islam, true Judaism is not determined by externals, even when these externals such as locks, kippas or black hats contribute to the Jewish identity and give West Jerusalem its typical character, much as the keffiyehs do East Jerusalem. Internalized religion manifests itself in the heart of the individual, in a person’s world view and in hospitality. These inner values keep those of us with different religions and faiths together and allow us to face one another openly and free from bias.

As a person, one always feels welcome, feels treated as a human being first and foremost and realizes what the following phrase means in practical terms: “Man is still holier than any Holy Land.”

You have served as an example that many Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem are now much closer to an Orient defined by the fraternal coexistence of their religions than are their political leaders. A closer examination not only of the history but also of current events in my home country Morocco has shown me that this unbiased and open-minded interaction between Jews and Muslims is actually the rule. It is the political conflict in the Middle East that paints a distorted picture far removed from reality.

I was able to experience just how normal it was for us Muslims as well as Christians to be granted access to the Western Wall. I was able to experience how many of us non-Christians could enter the Church of the Holy Sepulchre without the Christians praying there feeling disturbed by our presence. I became aware that the term “brother religions” is not a politically-correct neologism. The term has a true meaning that is expressed in the hearts of many people.

Even more than at the Holy Sites, I experienced this sense of brotherhood in Jerusalem’s everyday life. There were Jews like you who approached me as a fellow human with neither awkwardness nor fear. Appearance, origin and religious belief were unimportant. You saw me as a person who needed your assistance, and you spontaneously offered your help.

This human interaction has shaped my view of Jerusalem ever since. Jews are henceforth in my consciousness no longer my sworn enemies. I was able to experience them as my friends, soulmates and spiritual brothers. While I continue to disagree in many key points with the State of Israel’s political stand on the Middle East conflict, Jews in West Jerusalem now matter to me as much as do Arabs and Muslims in the east of the Holy City. You have shown that you understand the importance of humanity essential to both Islam and Judaism.

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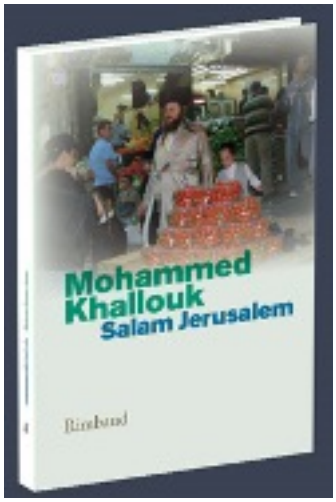
The experience of seeing people of different cultures and religions coexisting so closely makes me long to return one day to the Holy City. The warmth with which we dealt with each other makes me hopeful that it might also inspire the political and social leaders. This is how political conflict can be overcome. Brotherhood and solidarity need to be the dominant image that Jews and Muslims have of each other.

I recognize your human kindness as a model for the rest of the world as well. This applies not least to German society, in which despite its cultural and political pluralism sometimes indifference and self-centredness prevail. In Jerusalem I met a Judaism that reaches out to others. The guiding principle can be expressed thus: Only in dealing with the You, can the I find its identity.

Peace be with you

Your Mohammed



Mohammed Khallouk

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