

## CROSSING CAIRO

### Prologue

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*A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.*

*~Arabic Proverb*

I am a rabbi married to a rabbi. My husband and I are on a plane bound for Egypt with our two sons, Noam, 17, and Amir, 12—not just for a family vacation, but to live in Cairo for six months.

A Jewish family moving to Cairo for half a year? Why, you might ask. I had asked this question too—and a few others—when Reuven first broached the subject of spending his next sabbatical in Cairo.

“Why Cairo?” I had asked, stomach tightening. “I can think of a hundred places I would rather live. Can’t you study Arabic in Istanbul?” I was only half-joking.

“Or,” I asked, more realistically, “maybe in an Arab town in Israel?” Israel was a second home to us. We had spent many summers and on two different occasions, a full year with our children, teaching and studying in Israel and we had a whole network of friends there. Returning to Israel to live in or near an Arab community was an option I could imagine much more easily than living in Cairo. It would also be easier for me to justify a leave of absence from the Jewish high school where I taught if I was doing something in Israel.

But for years already, Reuven had wanted to live in an Arab country. A rabbi and academic in the joint fields of Judaism and Islam, Reuven had devoted most of his scholarship to the historical development of Islam. He had no idea when he first went into this field in the 1980s that twenty years later Americans would be straining to understand the difference between Sunni and Shiite and “Islamic” and “Islamist.”

9/11 not only changed the course of history, it changed the course of Reuven’s career. Suddenly he found himself called upon to explain Islam to Jews and Jewish communities all over the country. As a rabbi, Reuven was someone who could make connections between Islam and Judaism, and someone Jews could trust. The growing number of speakers bashing Islam made Reuven stand out even more in the Jewish community, as someone who appreciated the richness of Islam and who could offer intelligent, nuanced analysis of contemporary and historical trends affecting Muslims.

Now, at this point in his academic career, Reuven felt even more strongly the need to live in an Arab country. He needed this experience

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in order to deepen his understanding of the contemporary Arab world and to establish credibility with some of his critics. He also wanted to improve his Arabic in order to gain freer access to contemporary Arab writings of a political and religious nature. I understood and wanted to support him in these efforts.

But at the same time, I was deeply apprehensive. What would it be like for us as Jews to live in Cairo? Would we be safe? While 80,000 Jews had lived in Egypt in the early 1940s, today there were almost none. Anti-Jewish sentiment and persecution after the creation of the State of Israel as well as Nasser's nationalization and exile of foreigners had sent most Jews packing from the late 1940s through the 1950s. Almost all the remaining Jews left after the 1967 war. Israel was still vilified in the Arab world. How much did this carry over to Jews in general, I wondered. It was one thing to visit Cairo, as we had briefly four years ago, but quite another to live there.

"Cairo is amazing," Reuven said, hoping to persuade me. "It is the intellectual and cultural center of the Arab world. And there are thousands of American ex-pats who live there ...all kinds of people doing really interesting things." I knew this was important to Reuven and I tried to be open to the idea, but I kept coming back to my memories of our earlier trip to Cairo. There was no question, Cairo was a fascinating place, rich in history and culture. I loved that aspect of it. But unlike other Middle Eastern towns and cities I had visited, like Istanbul, I had found Cairo uncomfortable and alienating rather than exotic and romantic. Where Istanbul conjured up memories of deep reds and blues and gold, when I thought of Cairo, the pictures came up in gray.

Cairo, with its ornate old buildings and splendid circles and squares downtown still carried hints of grandeur, but now the old European style buildings were tired and dirty. And even more off-putting than the grime was the presence of military police and security guards at every corner and in front of virtually every building. Seeing so many armed men in uniform might make other people feel more secure, but they made me feel nervous. Was this simply a way for the government to keep thousands of men employed and content, or was the government trying to keep the lid on something that might otherwise explode? Reuven was not sure himself.

And then there was the memory of walking together as a family on a quiet Sunday morning, on a deserted street between several prominent and strikingly beautiful old mosques near the well-known Citadel. Reuven stopped three young men, "Is this the way to the

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Mosque of Sultan Hassan?” he asked in Arabic. The tallest of the young men nodded, and then asked where we were from. “The U.S.,” answered Reuven. This clearly did not satisfy the young man. “Where did you learn Arabic?” was his next question, and then: “Why do you have a nose like *this*?” he asked in English, not just pointing, but actually lightly swiping Reuven’s nose with a brush of his fingers. Reuven’s nose is the most prominent feature of his face, and gives him the chiseled Semitic look I so love. But for this young Egyptian, the “Jewish Look” rang different bells and his tone and gesture were clearly hostile.

“I guess for the same reason you have *this* nose,” Reuven answered, looking the young man right in the eye and gently swiping his nose in response. “It’s no different.”

I liked that Reuven was not intimidated, but I did not like where this conversation might be heading. “Come on, let’s just go,” I said quietly, hooking my arm in his. “I don’t need to see the mosque.” And we turned and walked away, the kids by our sides.

“Relax,” Reuven said quietly and calmly under his breath. “They won’t do anything, they’re just acting stupid.” But I only began to relax when we reached the end of the block and I turned around just enough to see that the young men had made no moves to follow us.

That experience was not one I had dwelt on but it came back to me now. How typical was the antisemitic feeling of that young Egyptian, and how might it manifest itself if we lived in Cairo? Were we being adventuresome or naïve? How could we knowingly choose to put our two sons in a situation where there was a high likelihood that they would experience hatred just for being Jews? The thought repelled me, especially as the child of German Jewish refugees. Thank God we live in a world where we have choices, I thought. We live in a country where, like most places in the world today, we can contemplate living without fear of an antisemitic attack. My parents had not always had that choice, but we did. Why would we choose to live somewhere where we might have to fear for our safety as Jews?

My father, born in southern Germany, was sixteen when Hitler came to power. He managed to finish school and because of a family connection, he was able to secure a job in a leather tannery before finally fleeing Germany for England after Kristallnacht, “The Night of Broken Glass” on November 9-10, 1938. In two days, hundreds of synagogues were burned and ransacked, and thousands of Jewish homes as well as stores and businesses, schools, and

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hospitals were vandalized and torched, and between 25,000 and 30,000 Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps. More than windows were shattered during these two days of state-sanctioned and well-planned violent attacks against Jews that were simultaneously launched all over the country. Shattered as well were any remaining hopes that the anti-Jewish measures and violent rhetoric of the last several years in Germany might soon pass.

Never one to complain, and wanting to put the past behind him, my father said very little about those last years in Germany and England before he came to the United States. He preferred sharing stories about making ice cream as a young boy and cycling with his older brothers through the Black Forest. He probably saw no value in visiting upon his children the frightening and painful experiences of his past. I did know, however, about his hardships in the war years even after he fled Germany. One night in 1940, officials had come knocking on his door in London; he soon found himself crowded onto a ship called the *Dunera* with 2500 German refugees, most of them Jewish. As German-speaking immigrants, they had been arrested as enemy aliens and possible Nazi spies. The British soldiers refused to tell the men where they were being taken, but by looking at the stars over the next several nights, the men determined that they were on their way to Australia. Over the next two months, the men aboard the *Dunera* suffered severe crowding in a ship loaded to more than double its capacity, and such harsh treatment, that when they landed in Sydney on September 6, 1940, their weakened condition prompted an investigation and created an international scandal. “The Dunera Boys” were all transferred to the DP Camp in Hays, near Sydney, immediately upon landing and released a year later.

In 1948, my father was able to reunite with his parents and brothers in the United States. They had also managed to escape from Germany to safety before the genocide, but some of their extended family did not. I learned about my father’s aunts, uncles, and cousins, murdered at Auschwitz, Dachau, and other death camps, in later years. My father simply did not talk about it when we were growing up. He would sometimes speak lovingly of seders and other occasions with his mother’s siblings and their families, but these were isolated fragments of a story without an end. I was left to fill in the blanks.

When I was in my late twenties, my father suddenly started having “night terrors.” He would bolt upright in the middle of the night screaming “Help!” in German, not knowing where he was when my mother gently woke him. A family doctor advised two ways to end the

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nightmares—therapy or medication; my father chose medication, and I was left wondering what memories were too painful to be discussed or recalled.

My mother's family also came from Germany, but where my father's father simply could not believe Germany would ever turn against its Jews—and ended up among the last Jews to get out of Germany alive in 1940—my mother's father decided already in 1931, before Hitler even came to power, that Germany was no longer safe for Jews. He moved his family to Switzerland and opened up a branch of the family manufacturing business. In 1933, he invited his three brothers and their families for Passover, and when they arrived, he told them that they could not go back to Germany. Most of them listened and relocated to Switzerland and Italy. In 1938, those in Italy were forced to flee and several of the men ended up in concentration camps. My grandfather wore himself out in his efforts to save his and his wife's extended families; tragically, he succumbed to a serious infection in 1939 and died. My mother was thirteen.

As the various parts of the family eventually all fled Europe for England and the United States, my grandmother did not want to be left behind with her two daughters, so in 1941, she, my mother and her older sister sailed to Cuba, where they waited six months for a quota number to legally enter the United States.

Neither of my parents was in slave labor or concentration camps but both of them had experienced fear, dislocation, and loss. In our comfortable home in Teaneck, New Jersey, where my parents put their children's well-being first in every way, I grew up knowing that the world had real dangers in it and protecting one's children was everything.

Our different backgrounds—mine rooted in the European experience and Reuven's in the American West—rose to the fore as we talked about Cairo. Reuven's roots were also German-Jewish, but his family had been in America for generations, with ancestors first arriving in the mid-nineteenth century. He was raised in northern California as the youngest of three boys by parents who loved to go the Sierra Nevada mountains for skiing in the winter and backpacking in the summer. Where Reuven was raised to push himself physically—sailing, scuba diving, skiing—and to test his own limits again and again, violin lessons and academics were the arenas in which I was encouraged to push myself and excel. To this day, anytime I do something physically challenging or the least bit dangerous, “be careful!” are the words I hear

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in my head. Now Reuven was asking me to make a temporary move with our two sons to Cairo, where the possibility of antisemitic encounters, verbal or physical, was a real fear I had for them.

When we started to tell our friends and family that we were thinking of moving to Cairo for half a year, their reactions were mixed, but every conversation started with “Cairo?” Living in Egypt was just not something people in our world contemplated doing. Our friends’ reactions ranged from total lack of comprehension and anxiety on our behalf, to genuine excitement at the adventure of living in Cairo. The worst reactions came from Israelis. “Why would you want to live in Egypt?” one Israeli teacher at the Jewish high school where I taught asked with a visible shudder. “All the Jews have left. Aren’t you afraid?” Others didn’t say much, but their silent disapproval was clear. “Be careful,” they said again and again, with genuine concern. I could only hope their fears would be proven wrong.

Strangely, and to my great surprise, when we mentioned the possibility to my parents, they were supportive and encouraging, knowing what it meant to Reuven and his career. Looking back, I think their endorsement of the project helped me realize that this choice, as well as my fears, needed to be explored rationally.

As Reuven continued to try to pique my interest in the cultural richness of Cairo, I also wondered, what would it feel like for me as a woman, to walk around this Muslim Arab city on a daily basis? On our visit four years earlier I had gone everywhere with Reuven and the kids. Would I be able to walk around on my own? Would I, as some friends had asked, have to cover up with a *hijaab* (headscarf) to avoid people’s stares? And if I found I had this privilege as a *foreign* woman, at what cost would that privilege come? Would I ever feel “at home” in Cairo?

And yet, I knew that what Reuven was proposing presented unique opportunities for all of us. What most attracted me to living in Cairo was the flip side of my fears: if we could tolerate the emotional discomfort and push ourselves a little, we would have the chance to experience a very different world, one that was often at odds with our own. We would have the chance to listen to and get to know people with points of view markedly different from our own. The chance to see the world through the eyes of the other—this exerted a strong attraction and pull for me.

Six months in Egypt, I realized, offered us opportunities that related to several of my own long-standing interests. I had been an active

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supporter of dialogue and co-existence projects between Israeli Jews and Israeli Arabs for many years. During the 1980s and 90s I had worked as a campus rabbi and developed a number of projects promoting Black-Jewish relations and creative interfaith projects. I had always been drawn to the challenges of building relationships across the divides of ethnicity and religion, so I found myself drawn to this aspect of the experience, even while I was apprehensive.

In the end I decided to take the leap and go because it was unlikely we'd ever have this opportunity again. I won't say I didn't have second thoughts. One of those occasions was when we got a call early one morning from the American International School (AIS), the school we were hoping the boys would attend. While there are many schools in Cairo where the language of instruction is English, only two schools follow an American curriculum, and we had selected AIS over the better known Cairo American College because the student body was predominantly Egyptian so the boys would have more opportunity to make Egyptian friends. But that morning we learned that the more Egyptian school might be too Egyptian.

*"Ahlan w'sahlan!* We want to welcome you to Egypt and to the American International School!" The school's director spoke warmly from the other end of the phone. "We are very happy to have your boys study at our school for a semester. There are just a couple of things we need to talk about." He went on to tell us that AIS prided itself on being pluralistic and its population, while predominantly Muslim, included Coptic Christians, the largest group of Egypt's Christians, as well as Christians of different denominations. While students came to the school with different degrees of openness, the values of tolerance and mutual respect were actively taught and cultivated at the school. "But," he continued, "AIS has never had any *Jewish* students. Your sons will be the first." I couldn't believe my ears. In over ten years, they had never had a Jewish student, even with 20% of their students coming from the U.S. and Europe?

The director went on in a kind but businesslike manner. In order to test the waters, he had gathered a small group of student leaders in the high school and had discussed the situation with them to see what they thought about Jewish students coming to the school. The students' reactions were positive, but they had two suggestions he wanted to share with us.

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“First, it will be best for Noam and Amir not to tell the other students that they are Jewish.” Not tell anyone they are Jewish? Was he serious?

“It is particularly important for Amir,” he continued, “who will be with younger students who have had less time in our school to learn from our efforts to impart the values of tolerance and pluralism. After a few months, when your sons have made good friends, then it will be fine for them to share with these friends the fact that they are Jewish. But it is probably better for it still not to be general information. Second, when Israel comes up in conversation the boys should listen and not argue.”

The director tried to sound encouraging; he said that he hoped we would enroll the boys in AIS and he thought they would have a wonderful experience. “We are all very excited about your boys coming. We just wanted you to be aware of the situation and think about it,” he said, drawing the phone conversation to a close. We thanked him and said we would be in touch soon. Then we hung up the phone.

No way! I wanted to shout. We’re finding another school.

But it was more than the school that worried me. If this was the American International School in Cairo, what would the rest of the city be like? Images of our boys being taunted and bullied and pushed floated before me. What was I agreeing to?

A few days later Reuven and I had another conversation that helped us better imagine living as Jews in Cairo. Reuven had met Ari Alexander, the co-founder and co-director of “Children of Abraham” at a recent conference and had invited him to come over for coffee when Ari was visiting Los Angeles. “Children of Abraham” is a project that enables Jewish and Muslim teens from all over the world to share photographs and discussion about their religious lives over the Internet. We had a wonderful talk with Ari over an extended cup of coffee in our home about his experiences living in Beirut and Damascus as an American Jew and his experiences visiting Cairo. Ari strongly agreed with the advice we had been given by the boys’ school—not to openly share the fact that we are Jewish.

“I generally don’t tell people I am Jewish when traveling or living in any of the Arab countries,” Ari said.

“Really. What would happen if you told people you were Jewish?” I asked.

“You would probably get an angry tirade against Israel and an invisible wall would go up between you and the other person. It’s not so much a question of physical safety, but it’s just not a good idea,” he

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answered. Ari was very enthusiastic and encouraging about our moving to Cairo and promised to send me some names of people to get in touch with there. His enthusiasm was contagious and as we talked, I felt more confident and excited about going myself.

Later that evening, we brought up the conversation we had had with the director of AIS with the boys and asked them how they felt about it. Did they want us to look into other schools or did they want to stick with this school? They were both surprised but kind of excited at the thought of being the only Jews and the first Jews ever in the school. They wanted to go ahead with the initial plan of attending AIS. I had a rush of conflicting emotions. I felt their sweet innocence and trust, and their vulnerability too, and I felt the weight of responsibility as their parent, wanting to protect them, even as I wanted to join in their sense of adventure. At the same time, their enthusiasm and readiness to commit to the experience probably tipped the scales for me too.

In the weeks before our departure, we occasionally tried to speak some Arabic with Reuven at dinnertime, to give us a head start on some basic vocabulary. We started with greetings.

“How do you say good morning?” Noam asked.

“*Sabah al khayr,*” Reuven responded and we all repeated the phrase several times.

“But the response is different—you don’t just say the same thing back. It’s like Hebrew: *boker tov* (“good morning”) is answered with *boker or* (“morning of light”), right?’ In Arabic, the common response is *sabah an-nur*. It even means the same thing as *boker or* in Hebrew—‘May you have a morning of light.’”

“You can also answer ‘*sabah al fuul*—may you have a morning of beans!’” We laughed, remembering that cooked beans is a favorite breakfast item for Egyptians. “May you have a morning of beans!” the boys repeated, laughing. But the best was still to come.

“Or,” said Reuven, “you can respond ‘*sabah al yasmin*—may you have a jasmine morning.’”

“*Sabah al yasmin.*” I said the words myself, and suddenly—it was as if fairy dust, tiny specks of glittering silver light—floated slowly down over the four of us sitting there at the dinner table. The poetry of the words reached deep into my soul. I repeated the sequence of greetings a few times, enjoying the feeling and the sounds of the words rolling over my tongue. In the days ahead I found myself enthusiastically sharing this greeting with friends and colleagues and even my students,

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and realized that something profound had altered in me. “*Sabah al khayr, sabah al yasmin*, may you have a jasmine morning.”

“I think I actually know all the letters,” I said, turning to Reuven on the plane bound for Cairo. I was holding a single sheet of paper with the Arabic alphabet in large print before me, the exotic swirls of each enlarged letter—28 in all—identified in smaller English print by name and by the sound it makes. I was hoping to at least learn the alphabet before we landed in Cairo. Our sons were behind us—Noam, sprawled out as best he could and fast asleep, while Amir, wide awake, was engrossed in his third movie for this flight.

“That was fast,” said Reuven as he looked up from his reading. “Really great. Now you can learn the other forms.”

“What other forms—you’re joking,” I responded. Just when I was feeling like maybe I could do this.

“What you just learned are the forms for the Arabic letters when they stand alone. Each letter also has three other slightly different forms, depending on where in the word the letter comes—the beginning, the middle, or the end. It’s not as hard as it sounds.”

No way, I thought to myself, but I looked at the next sheet, curious to see how different the new forms were. Most were minor variations on the theme, but I could see that this would take time... more time than even the seemingly interminable plane ride to Cairo. I worked at it for a few more minutes and then sat back in my seat and closed my eyes to rest. I had made a good start, I thought. With the ten Arabic numerals and the 28 letters I had started with, I might be able to make out some street names—or at least the house numbers—when we arrived in Cairo.

The low humming drone of the air conditioning was lulling me to sleep. I found myself listening to the men next to us across the aisle speaking Arabic. The gutturals sounded harsh and ugly to my ears, I sadly realized. I pushed these thoughts away... after all, I had just committed to learning Arabic and spending six months in Cairo. And what about the poetry of Arabic I had so recently discovered in “May you have a jasmine morning!”

“Maybe I am just tired,” I tell myself, disappointed with my immediate reaction to the Arabic I hear around me. I close my eyes again and allow my thoughts to drift. After a few minutes I realize that I have slipped into a daydream and I am walking alone on a crowded Arab

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street with streams of men, women and children walking past me in both directions. I know this has to be different than the reality I will soon confront, but I suspend all disbelief and allow myself to drift with the images. Suddenly I realize my chest is constricted and my breathing more rapid, as the images I am spinning are evoking strong feelings of apprehension and anxiety.

Startled, I wonder, what is so scary about these people walking the crowded streets of my mind? Arabs, Muslims, judging from appearances, but nothing else is clear. Why this emotional reaction, I gently wonder, hoping to coax out whatever lies under my buried feelings, instead of chasing them away by my disapproval. Is it that I am so different from them? No, it is more... they hate us, I find myself thinking...they hate Israel, they hate Americans...they don't really understand what the West is all about, and they hate us.... I am shocked and even embarrassed at the raw fear and the unsavory stereotypes I carry so deep within me. I thought I was above such feelings. But it seems I am not.

The daily barrage of images and ideas in the media and our culture at large takes its toll. Even if my rational mind rejects the view of the Arab as "the Enemy," I have absorbed some of these sentiments that swirl around me, deep into my own psyche. And if I am honest, even with my left-leaning politics, my own understanding of the recent history and politics of the Arab world, particularly in relation to Israel, also contributes to these deep-seated emotions.

Personal experience, I remind myself, can broaden our views and change even our deepest feelings about the other. Wasn't that part of why we were going to Egypt? I remembered how in Israel too, especially during the Intifada, I had felt fear in relation to Arabs I saw around me on

the street. This had saddened me, though I understood where the feelings came from, given the tensions and real threat of terrorist bombings that were part of daily life. Still, it is a terrible thing when members of a nationality or ethnic or religious group are all automatically suspect.

My personal experiences with Israeli Palestinians, however, had always been different. Almost every interaction had opened up a human connection for me, not just to this individual, but towards other Arabs I saw later on the street. What would it be like in Cairo? In just a few hours I would begin to find out.