

The View from Cairo



Dr. Reuven Firestone, Professor of Medieval Jewish Studies, HUC-JIR/Los Angeles

As Cairo came into view while we were readying ourselves for landing last January, and the city of 18 million inhabitants stretched before us even to the horizon, I asked myself one last time whether it was a responsible thing for me to bring my family to live with me in Egypt for my sabbatical. I had been awarded a prestigious fellowship funded by the Fulbright Binational Committee in Egypt and the U.S. Department of Education to study Arabic literature under the tutelage of esteemed Egyptian professors who would be invited to work with me one-on-one. I had chosen two areas of intense personal interest: medieval Arabic commentaries on the *Qur'an*, and modern Arabic writings on religion, including Judaism and Israel.

My children were going to attend an English-language school, but one populated

almost entirely by Egyptian students with their eyes on an American college education, and my wife, Rabbi Ruth Sohn, had decided to study Arabic and do some writing. But how would they be received in Egypt, a country that was becoming increasingly “Islamic” and traditional, where the Muslim Brotherhood had become the only viable opposition to the secularist and increasingly entrenched repressive government? We were informed by the school administration that no other Jewish students were enrolled in our children’s school. In fact, they had no recollection of any Jewish students in its entire history. And they urged us to tell our boys not to let their new friends know that they are Jewish – at least not until they had developed some strong friendships at the school. Imagine this precaution, when our children, whose parents are both rabbis, happily attended Jewish day-schools their entire lives!

Writing this some weeks after our return to the United States, I am extremely gratified with our decision to come to Egypt as a family. We all had wonderful, if not always easy, experiences living in the Muslim world. Our children grew both as Jews and as humanists. They developed deep friendships with their Muslim friends, and learned to live in and appreciate a society and culture that are in many ways profoundly different from their own. We grew as a family as well, as we processed the differences and changes that we faced every day. We traveled up the Nile to the border with Sudan and down to the Mediterranean. We had our own *yeti’at mitzrayim* (Exodus) before *Pesach* when we traveled through the Red Sea (in a tunnel) to Sinai, climbed the mountain that is called Mt. Sinai, wandered the desert in buses and mini-vans and taxis for four days rather than forty years, snorkeled among the coral reefs

of the Gulf of Aqaba, and finally had our *Seder* among friends in Jerusalem.

But mostly, we lived in the great city of Cairo, and we learned to navigate a world that was once foreign but had become familiar and beloved. We learned enough Egyptian Arabic to get around town, and we grew to appreciate and even love the warmth and good-heartedness of the Egyptian people.

I studied the *Qur'an* and its commentaries with a professor who knew the *Qur'an* by heart and who recited it at the mosque according to the strict rules of musical recitation called *tajweed*, something similar to *Torah* trope that ensures that all the words are pronounced properly so the listeners will hear the divine word correctly. He helped me to appreciate the deep spirituality and intellectuality of these Islamic religious sciences.

improving Jewish-Muslim dialogue through the Institute for the Study and Enhancement of Muslim-Jewish Interrelations.

But the most profound lesson I learned from living in Egypt was through the experience of living a very different “narrative” than what we are used to as Jews and as Americans. The world looks different through the eyes of most Egyptians. It is shaped by language, culture, history, religion, and social mores that are very different from our own, and the result is an interpretation and understanding of current events that are often profoundly different from what we might expect back home. Dorothy was right when, in “The Wizard of Oz,” she so astutely said to Toto “we’re not in Kansas any more!” Yes, one can buy McDonalds’ hamburgers in Egypt, and KFC and Pizza Hut, and Levi’s jeans and Nokia cell phones and Dell computers. But

I do not agree that such a fault line must lead to insoluble conflicts and war. We have the ability to understand the “other,” but only after having really made an effort to try on the other’s shoes, to spend time living in the other’s world. It is not necessary and certainly not possible for everyone to do so, but we would be light years ahead of where we are today if more political, cultural, and religious leaders tried this out for themselves, or were at least willing to learn from those who have.

The native Jewish community of Egypt is miniscule, with less than one hundred Jews remaining throughout the country. We met a number of these Jews during our visits to the one synagogue on Adly Street that remains open for services. Another dozen synagogues may still be found in Cairo, all closed and in various stages of disrepair, and great and ancient Jewish cemeteries may still be found in



(Facing page) Dr. Reuven Firestone and his son Amir in Cairo. (Left) Noam and Amir Firestone in Upper Egypt. (Middle) Dr. Firestone and his wife Rabbi Ruth Sohn (at right) and their friends in al-Azhar Park overlooking the Citadel of Cairo. (Right) Dr. Firestone (right) with his friend, Ashraf, in his stall in the Tent-Maker’s section in the medieval part of Cairo.

Islamic philosophy, theology, law, liturgy and even the rules of Arabic grammar and linguistics emerged through intense study of the *Qur'an*, and my studies in Egypt deepened my knowledge and appreciation of Islam in ways that are difficult to articulate.

We tend to oversimplify things that we know little about, and this is certainly the case with our Western perceptions of Islam. My readings of contemporary Arabic essays on religion deepened my appreciation of the range of thinking in the Arab world on religious trends in Islam and on Muslims’ views of other religions as well. The lessons learned through my Egyptian studies will undoubtedly have a profound impact on my scholarship, and certainly also on my work in developing and

this kind of globalization is superficial, and local culture in the broadest sense is very much alive and well. And that is good.

I have learned that it is the greatest hubris and arrogance to expect that everyone should see the world as I see it. I do not necessarily agree with the perceptions and insights of my Egyptian colleagues and friends, but I have learned to understand where they are coming from and to appreciate even when I disagree. This realization has helped me gain greater insight into the complexities associated with Israel’s place in the Middle East.

My experience has demonstrated to me that Huntington’s theory of a “clash of civilizations” describes a certain level of reality, but

Egypt. The community tries to retain these properties even if it cannot afford to keep them up, because it believes that someday the situation in Egypt and Israel and the Middle East will change and Jews will return to Egypt as they are returning to Spain and even Germany.

The continued survival and wellbeing of the Jewish world, and particularly Israel, requires that Jewish leaders develop greater and deeper understanding of the range of views, perceptions, and developments in the Muslim world. My invaluable experience in Egypt will be reflected in my teaching at the College-Institute. At this point, my experience and insights will be shared in my teaching the standard curriculum, but I will soon offer courses to deepen the particular knowledge base and skills necessary to serve the Jewish community in its enduring relationship with the Muslim world. ■