

Arab Jews?

Stephen Shashoua explains why there is no contradiction between his Jewish faith and Arab ethnicity.

In calling myself an Arab Jew, I am not trying to rouse any negative sentiments, but simply employing terminology which may seem to some to be an oxymoron. To be specific, I am a Canadian born Jew of Iraqi origin.

The term Arab Jew, like Arab Christian and Arab Muslim create a harmony of adjectives and nouns – inshallah [God willing] that harmony will be realized on “the ground” and not only on paper).

Yes this is about “words, words, words” but at most times words are all we have to go on. Religion and geography have always raised difficult and interesting questions for us all, and they continue to do so.

Do we look at Britain and think merely Christian? Do we look at Israel and think merely Jewish? Do we look at the “Arab” countries and think merely Muslim? Conversely do we look at Muslims and think merely Arab?

If we do, then we are over-

simplifying our view of the world, by looking at the majority population as the only example of what is that country’s socio-cultural fabric. In so doing, we discount each country’s rich multiculturalism.

The reasons for these stereotypes could be based on ignorance, fear, politics or a combination of the three. It promotes an ‘us and them’ mentality, which unfortunately is good for some agendas.

This is much like the stereotypes created for Jews and Muslims, both interfaith and intra-faith. We must understand that these classifications are based on need wrapped around conflict; be they East vs West, Israeli vs Palestinian, haves vs havenots, majority vs. minority etc.

There are many Jews from Arab countries who would scoff at the idea of being called Arabs. It is true, as so-called dhimmis (non-Muslims, where Islamic law is implemented), Christians and Jews would want to differentiate

themselves from the majority.

But does this attitude come from a feeling of embitterment? Are there Muslims, Christians, and Jews among minority groups around the world who do not consider themselves countrymen of the nation of which they live?

Not to idealise the situation of Jews as dhimmis, but although there were various problems, Jews lived quite comfortably in the Muslim world. In Syria, Tunisia, Iraq, Morocco and Egypt, among others, they became members of legislatures and judiciaries, and played a strong economic role. Would my great-grandfather admit to being an Arab when life for his family in Iraq was “good”?

My question is, what is “Arabness”? And what are the criteria for getting into the club? My family speaks Arabic; we have grown up eating Arabic food; we have listened to the music, danced to the dances, etc. There



are obvious religious differences, but like Christian Arabs, for our families who have lived in the Arab world for millennia, do we not get a seat at the table?

Another question must be asked: What is a Jew? Nazi Germany had a stereotypical twofold answer for Jews in Europe in their propaganda films – a bearded man with a black coat and large hat, and the other who wore Western dress.

Both were branded as racially inferior through the ap-

plied eugenics pseudoscience.

Would all Arabs have had a similar fate as Jews, Roma, and others had they lived in Europe? Is modern Eastern and Western society also guilty of stereotyping its minority groups? An enemy is easily defined, and support is easily generated with such stereotypes. The boxes created need widening, or ideally, destroying.

Through my work with The Three Faiths Forum, Muslims, Christians, and Jews come together to learn more about each

other. Exploring answers to the questions raised in this article, learning of the many similarities that exist between the “People of the Book”, and destroying stereotypes and the ‘us and them’ mentality is what the Three Faiths Forum is committed to.

There are so many parts of all of us that need to be explored and celebrated, let us discover them together in peace.

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