The Culture Clash That Wasn't –

A Jewish Teacher and His Muslim Students

By Michael Gold

Nothing in my background as a bookish Jewish kid growing up in an insular, comfortable suburb on Long Island prepared me to teach public school starting in 2009 in the east Bronx, in the Westchester Square neighborhood.

Tall, squat industrial warehouses with no windows, auto body shops, lumber yards, storage units, and small factories border the neighborhood, which butts up against Westchester Creek, a stream extending from the East River. It's polluted with garbage, road run-off and gasoline.

The one bright spot in this dusty, bleak landscape was the presence of a commercial bakery called Sweet Sam's. The smell of cinnamon sugar often floated on the air after school dismissal.

Rows of three- and four-story apartment buildings were stacked like pancakes along Westchester Avenue, the main street in the neighborhood, a five-minute walk to my school. Westchester Avenue ran under the IRT Lex 6 elevated line. Hundreds of pigeons nested on the underside of the rail tracks. They walked the street as if they owned it.

Joining the long-time Spanish population of the area in the early 2000s were thousands of Muslim immigrants from Bangladesh.

My only personal exposure to Muslims up until this point had been minimal. I grew up in a flat suburban town populated by Irish, Italian and Jewish families who had fled Brooklyn and Queens in the 1950s. Everybody was Christian or Jewish. We generally lived together in peace. The bullies in town never expressed any hatred of Jews. They just wanted to beat up other kids.

The only thing I really knew about Muslims was that they hated Israel. In Hebrew School, we were occasionally told how much Christians and Muslims hated Jews.

One of my teachers claimed that Christians invented Halloween so they could torment Jews without being identified.

In terms of Israel, we learned that Muslim lands surrounded Israel, and they were extremely hostile.

The strong spice of tribal incitement against Muslims was often mixed into their speeches, between lessons on the Bible and Jewish history.

"They want to drive the Jews into the sea." We heard that a lot.

Before teaching, I had worked in public relations for fourteen years. My very first client at an agency was the Saudi Arabian Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), a petrochemical company, owned by the country's ruling monarchy. The client was told I was Jewish when I came on board. Our client contacts were okay with that.

My supervisor at the agency was also Jewish. The SABIC executives were okay with that too. But they didn't like her last name, which was "Israel." When she wrote them correspondence, she was required to drop the "s" from "Israel," so the clients wouldn't be offended in seeing the word on our memos. As if they would be instantly blinded if they saw the name. Pretty silly stuff. But this is what the Saudis wanted.

Everyone on the account team, up to and including an agency vice president elided the issue and did our work as if this was all normal. This quiet surrender to the client's wishes all blew up for me when the King of Saudi Arabia called for the destruction of Israel in late 1987. It made the front page of the Times, in the right-edge column, the lead story of the day.

I immediately asked to be taken off the account. Working for SABIC meant that I was also working for the Saudi government, and its king. And if the king hated Israel, I didn't want to help him. One of the senior vice presidents at the firm told me the Saudis were our allies. If so, they had an interesting way of showing it.

The agency granted my request, and I went on to work for DuPont, Owens Corning and other industrial firms. A decade into my career, the work began to lose its excitement, so I ended up changing careers to become an elementary school teacher in New York City, working in the early grades.

At a huge union rally early in the Bloomberg Administration, with thousands of teachers gathered in front of City Hall and the surrounding streets, a man came up to me as we waited for the union leaders' speeches to begin.

He started talking, very friendly. He was a teacher, he said, who had emigrated from Iran.

He asked me for my contact information – my name and email address.

The guy had come directly from the land of the stern-faced ayatollahs, where women are required to wear head coverings and modest dress under pain of prison, and where Jews are officially loathed and reviled as devils.

If the man had left Iran, maybe he had rejected these religious dicta?

Not a chance.

As soon as he saw my last name he walked away without another word. Like I had leprosy.

So, when I started teaching in the Bronx, the incidents with the Saudis and the Iranian man at the rally were the big things I had in my mind about Muslims. Hanging in the background too were my Hebrew School education and what feels like the eternal bitterness between Israel, the Palestinians and the surrounding Arab countries.

In addition to the large Hispanic and African American populations, many of the city public schools are filled with Muslim students, from Pakistan, Yemen, and Bangladesh. As a teacher, I was constantly paranoid that I would be called out as a Jew by a Muslim parent, that one or more of them would do to me what the Iranian immigrant teacher had done.

We saw fathers who picked up their children at dismissal or came to parent teacher conferences wearing skull caps and white ankle-length robes. Many of the mothers wore full-length robes too, with a head scarf. A few wore black gloves on their hands and black veils over their faces. It was often very hard for me to understand what they were saying to me at dismissal, amid the din of the schoolyard, with hundreds of kids talking and laughing, excited to go home.

They didn't seem to know I was Jewish. As far as they were concerned, I was white. Also, I was a teacher, and for that, I deserved respect. They came to parent teacher nights and sat through my entire presentation. Even after I finished, they would sit in the little kid seats, determined to stay until the hour was up, whether I had something to say or not. I went into minute detail about every little bit of our daily routine to fill the time.

The tension in my thoughts about whether any parent was going to single me out for being Jewish never went away. But as the years in the school rolled on, I understood the far bigger issue for the parents and their children was learning.

In this sense, my love for books, instilled in me by Jewish culture, helped me fully connect with the students, the core idea being that books can lift you into new worlds. They can give you an awareness of a bigger reality beyond yours, that they can help make you into something new.

My worst subject in Hebrew School was Hebrew. English was a different matter – it was the language of the world. My enthusiasm for it helped in teaching phonics and basic reading skills.

I loaned my students books all the time. We had our own little class library going.

And while the children didn't know what a Jewish person was, no parent ever brought it up either. What the parents were really worried about was getting a good education for their children.

The parents, no matter how tired they were after their workdays, spoke to me constantly about what they could do to help their children improve.

A lot of students had come directly from Bangladesh, right off the plane. They didn't speak any English.

I remember one girl in particular, whom I had as a student in first grade. Let's call her Rokeye. She spent her first days in my first-grade class with this funny look on her face. She didn't understand anything I was saying.

I gave Rokeye picture books to take home. I spent time with her going over each letter and the different sounds it made.

The thing she had more than anything was raw determination. I could see it in the way she clenched her lips together and set her eyes to focus on each letter and phoneme. She became a little star. In three or four months, her command of English was quite good. By the end of the year, she was fluent. Her reading skills were among the best in the class.

As I looked at the parents pick up the kids at dismissal, the scent of cinnamon weaving through the school yard, I saw in them a distant reflection of my grandfather's life.

Abraham Gold's parents had come here from Russia, with a brief stop in England, where he was born. Abe was a baby upon arriving in America. His father, mother, four brothers and two sisters settled on the Lower East Side. They jammed themselves into their new world, poor and hungry. Abe had to drop out of school in the eighth grade and work in a slaughterhouse after his father died. He labored through the days, succeeding in making a better life for himself, his children, and his grandchildren.

It's a classic story, maybe an old story. But I never get tired of it.

The story still speaks to me. I saw it in many of the Muslim parents' faces. Their eyes had a seriousness of purpose in them. They had a vision for what they wanted their future to be, and the drive to achieve it.

The Bengali parents impressed upon their kids how important school was. As new immigrants, they had bought into the idea of the American Dream – that if you study and work hard, you will get ahead, that the freedom this country offers is open to everyone, that, despite our different backgrounds and cultures, we can live together, we can accept each other as equals.

Our different religions, customs and skin colors didn't matter. They were fulfilling the idea, the dream of this country. And while the phrase, "melting pot" has become a worn-out cliché, I felt that my students and I had managed to meet on a common ground, a place where we were comfortable with each other and we could engage in conversations about the sounds of vowels, how butterflies are born, our system of government and hundreds of other things under the sun. We became a little village for six hours of the day.

I often felt more at home with them and their parents than I did in white Christian America.

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