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Finding a seed of hope in a field of hatred

By Margie Goldsmith

"Would you like to have your name written in Arabic?" the Jordanian owner asked. He held out a silver pendant as I browsed in his souvenir store in Petra.

"No, thanks," I said, thumbing through postcards of Jordan.

He looked at me with intense black eyes and said, "You're Jewish, aren't you?"

I felt my heart pound. I'd been in Jordan a week, visiting the major sites. At the Dead Sea, which the Arabs call "Lot's Sea," no one asked me that. Nor did they ask when I was at Mt. Nebo where Moses is buried, or at Bethany -beyond Jordan, where John is said to have baptized Jesus. Why was this store owner asking, and what was the right answer?

Although born Jewish, I wasn't brought up with any religion. My family celebrated Christmas -not Hanukkah, and Easter, not Passover.

"What makes you think I'm Jewish?" I stalled.

"You have Jewish eyes. I know Jewish eyes."

"Are you Jewish?" I asked.

"No, I am Muslim. But you are Jewish, yes?" I could see he wasn't going to let me out of the store without an answer.

All I could think about was what my friends had said when I told them I was going to Jordan. "Are you crazy? You're American, you're female. You're blond. You have a Jewish last name."

"But Jordan likes Americans," I had insisted. I particularly wanted to see Petra, so my friends suggested I fly to Ohio instead to see the current "Petra, Lost City of Stone" exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum.

Of course I hadn't paid any attention to them. I'd booked my flight, and here I was.

"Well?" he said. "You are Jewish, yes?"

"I was born Jewish," I replied finally.

"At least you don't try to say you are Canadian," he said, grinning. "I knew you were Jewish." And that was the end of the conversation. That is, until I brought up the topic myself the next day, after a full day touring the pink sandstone monasteries and tombs of Petra.

When I asked my guide, Ali, how he felt about Jews, he said that Jews, Christians, and Muslims had lived happily side by side picking the olives together until 1948. Following the establishment of Israel as a country, the longstanding harmony quickly unraveled for a variety of reasons, both

religious and political. Arabs and Jews were taught to hate each other, Ali said. They learned it in school, in the newspapers, at home, and on the streets.

"We were taught that the Jews are our enemies," said Ali. "They took our land, they killed my people. Of course, the same was done to the Jewish kids, though no one told us that at the time. So for more than 40 years, an entire generation from both sides grew up hating each other. So yes, I hated Jews based on what I was told, and also because of what I saw going on in Palestine as I was growing up."

In 1998, Ali went to New Jersey to attend college. There he says he was shocked to learn that the only thing Americans knew about Palestine was what they saw on TV. "All I saw was Palestinians killing the Jews. And what was even more surprising was that no one knew anything of what happened in Palestine during the years I was growing up," Ali said.

In America, Ali was offered a job selling used cars for Danny, a Jewish man in his neighborhood.

"I couldn't believe it." Ali said. "I thought I would kill myself before I'd work for a guy whose people killed my people and took our land. But I needed a job, so I went to meet Danny. The meeting was very comfortable, and I felt I had known him for a long time. He told me to think about it, that he knew what I must be feeling as a person who'd just come from the Middle East. He said he'd been like me when he first came to America. The next day he called me.... I took the job and worked for Danny for more than three years."

Ali looked me in the eye. "I loved Danny more than anything in America. When I came home to Amman, I told my family about him and invited him to come to Jordan to meet my family and prove to everybody that what our government had taught us was totally wrong. I also wanted to show everybody that Judaism and Zionism are two different things. That was a big shifting point in my life.

Because if I am going to say I hate Jews, then I must say to Danny, 'I hate you.' And that will never happen, because I love Danny even more than my biological brother."

Ali paused, then added, "I have met lots of Jews who were like Danny. I know the current situation in the Middle East is bad, and it needs somebody to save it because now people are starting to hate each other without anybody teaching them to do so."

"How will you bring up your son?" I asked.

"I will teach my son to treat others as they would like to be treated."

I looked at him and nodded. It gave me hope. Maybe by the time Ali's son grows up, Christians, Muslims, and Jews will live peaceably side by side again.