

Leora Eisenberg, age 17

My Arabic was progressing nicely. I was better at pronouncing 'ayn and could now hold a full-fledged conversation in the present tense as long as the topic was food or school. Yasmin, my Egyptian best friend, assured me that I was practically fluent and that my love for Mohamed Hamaki, a popular singer, made me an honorary Egyptian.

All I could do was bask in the attention of the natives. They found me to be an adorable novelty-- an American stumbling over words of Egyptian Arabic! Not unheard of, but decidedly rare. I Skyped with Yasmin and her brothers as often as I could, singing Hamaki's newest song lyrics or showing off my Arabic calligraphy. Her older brother, Ahmed, looked exactly like the Egyptian pop sensation Tamer Hosny, so I tried desperately to impress him. Her younger brother, Khaled, was particularly impressed by my painstaking work in Arabic script.

I had practically become a part of the family. We were Skyping several times a week at this point. When Yasmin's parents asked her what she was doing, she would just say "I'm Skyping with Leora," and all would carry on as usual. We were getting along splendidly, like pita and falafel, falafel and tahini. But, as far as she knew (and I felt), I was a very incomplete falafel ball. And I couldn't quite find the words to tell her why.

I knew I was Jewish. I knew she was Muslim. She knew she was Muslim. She did not, however, know that I was Jewish. But it hadn't exactly come up.

Okay, so, actually, I was terrified of telling her I was Jewish-- in English or in Arabic. I suppose that I hadn't *had* to tell her, but she hadn't she already told me she was Muslim? Or *had* she? It was pretty obvious from her copious *insha'alahs* and her multicolored hijabs. She hadn't told me; she had *showed* me. It was an integral part of her life, just as Judaism was an integral part of mine. But I didn't know how to show her.

I could Skype her one day wearing a large black hat, black coat, and fake black sideburns. ("Do they even have Hasidim in Egypt?" I asked myself.) But that seemed silly. I wanted to show her the real me, which meant being Jewish in a very nuanced, Leora-esque way. I wanted to be Jewish as naturally as I could-- just like I always was. I wanted to be Jewish in my own falafel-ball skin, just like her falafel-ball skin was covered with floral hijabs and spiced with *insha'alahs*.

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I was eating lunch with Yasmin over Skype. She had already eaten, but wished me "belhana we eshafa" as I chowed down on falafel and hummus in pita, my favorite lunch dish.

"Da la7ma?" she asked. "Is that meat?"

"Laaaaa2! Da falafel!" Noooooo! It's falafel!

She smiled. "Bass anti betkuli la7ma, sa7?" But you eat meat, right?

I shook my head, continuing in Arabic.

"I don't eat meat because it's usually not.... kosher."

"Kosher?"

"It's halal... but for Jews."

I exhaled deeply and felt the color drain from my face. I was nervous to see her reaction. Did she know any Jews? Had she *seen* any Jews before? Did she *want* to know any Jews? I hadn't planned for this, but it was bound to happen eventually. I told her the truth. I showed her my Judaism. It was her choice now what do with it. Our falafel-ball friendship was walking the fine line between kosher and treyf (non-kosher).

She nodded sagely and smiled.

"No pork?"

"No pork."

She smiled.

"We're very similar. We *muslimeen* don't eat pork either. Very similar, you know," she smiled.

"There are Egyptian Jews. You can be one of them. I'm sure Mohamed Hamaki likes Egyptian Jews too."

I had finally showed her my Judaism. And I still felt like an honorary Egyptian-- an openly Jewish honorary Egyptian. An openly kosher Jewish honorary Egyptian. An openly kosher Jewish honorary Egyptian whose best friend was an openly halal Muslim real Egyptian.

"My falafel is kosher. Your falafel is halal. But, in the end, we all eat falafel."

She nodded, and we continued on. I was Jewish; she was Muslim. And, in the end, we all just ate falafel.

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And, if the world were perfect, my story would end here. We would all just eat falafel and live happily ever after. But the world is not perfect. Hate and discrimination are real.

I'm sad to say that friendships between Jews and Muslims are not so common. Yasmin and I are a rare case -- and, unfortunately, one that has been fraught with political tension at times. All

around the world, we see cases of young people being incited to hate “the other”. And while we might dismiss incitement as “just words,” incitement leads to hate, violence and death.

I just returned from two months in Jerusalem, where I was at the crossroads of holy Muslim, Jewish and Christian life. I was living not a mile away from where the latest wave of violence in Israel began. That wave had been building for years until last September when something finally snapped.

I would argue that “just words” triggered that as well -- hate had been broadcast on Palestinian Authority television for years, inspiring children to murder and commit atrocities in order to supposedly secure better lives for themselves and their people. I watched a couple of these videos.

These words were broadcast to thousands of young children in the region, ensuring that the words they hear inspire violence and hate in their actions and thoughts.

These words have caused over one hundred deaths on both sides.

But if words can also cause so much hate, imagine the good they can do. If I learned Arabic and made a friend for life, imagine the other friends I can make. While in Jerusalem, I made a conscious decision with my words. I made the decision to use them to eat the proverbial falafel with those who would usually be predisposed to hate me because of my religion or political views.

The Muslim shopkeeper, Yahya, who called me beautiful, made me a pair of earrings. We drank tea together and discussed life in Jerusalem simply because I spoke to him in Arabic. We became friends, when the world thought we should be enemies.

I sent an email to my Christian friend in Bethlehem and asked if he knew any Christians in Jerusalem. He introduced me to his friend Wael who showed me around his holy sites, and confided in me that most Jews were too afraid to even visit the area. All I had to do was use my words to ask.

My Bedouin friend Mohammed texted me if I had plans one night, and I didn't. So we went out for pizza at one in the morning and laughed, and laughed and laughed. All because we had chosen our words carefully and decided to use them for good.

We often forget the power of language. The language that brought me and Yasmin together is a product of the same words that lead young people to stab others on the street. It is also a product of the same words that lead me to Yahya, Wael and Mohammed. It is a product of the words that bring peace instead of incitement.

Your parents always told you to watch your words. They were right.