

Peace Story

By Rabbi James Stone Goodman

What is Marabout?

I think it has to do with cement.

Cement?

Yeah. He is here on business. Cement I think is what he said.

Is that his business suit?

I laughed. Jake was referring to his long golden patterned robe that the almost seven foot tall African man was wearing, that attracted our attention in the first place, in the airport. He was with another man. The other man had brought him to the check-in, airport New York, but was not accompanying him on the trip.

The tall African man, shaved head, did not speak English. The other man was translating for him and walking him through the check-in ritual at the gate.

That is when I stepped up.

Look, I said to the English speaking man, I am on the flight to Baltimore. If I can be of any help, I speak French. I thought I had heard them speaking French, in addition to another language I didn't recognize.

As I was leaving, I found a small Pakistani man to escort the tall African man to the baggage to retrieve his luggage and find his way out of the airport in Chicago, his destination, not mine.

As we got on the airplane, we sat near each other but the roar of the plane was too loud to talk. I helped him get an apple juice and I watched him go through the ninety nine names of God with a string of silver prayer beads he had in his briefcase.

We arrived at Baltimore and my son and I got bumped from our plane to St. Louis and onto the same Chicago flight that our African friend was on. We

explained this to him and to our Pakistani helper, who did not seem to understand much more English than did the African man.

We checked in and sat down near the gate. I introduced myself to the African man, using a familiar form of my name that seems to register easier with non-English speakers. He introduced himself to me, Idrissa.

Idrissa. I wrote it out. No, he said, I write in Arabic. I wrote it out in Arabic, and he corrected a mistake. Good, he said, you write Arabic?

Yes.

Write your name, he asked me.

I wrote out my name in Arabic, and he looked at it for a while. Then he took out a piece of paper from his briefcase, wrote his name and my name in proximity, and made a series of jottings, pictures and calculations with lines and numbers underneath our names.

What is this? I asked.

Marabout.

What is Marabout?

Maybe your wife has left you. She has gone away somewhere. You have a problem. You come to me. I give you certain sacrifices and do certain calculations, your wife, she comes back to you.

I was wondering whether I understood him correctly, particularly the part about sacrifices.

Sacrifices?

Sacrifices.

My son was watching all this from a seat across the aisle from us.

Marabout is not about cement, I said to him.

Sacrifices, I said slowly to Idrissa, is it something psychological?

No.

Sacrifices, I said, is it something spiritual?

No. Sacrifices. Offerings.

My son strung some beads for Idrissa. Do you have a wife? I asked Idrissa.

Yes.

Does she have holes in her ears?

Yes.

Here, these are a gift.

Thank you, he said, and he put the earrings into his briefcase. He had a high pitched cartoon laugh that did not match his appearance.

He had finished his calculations and he began to tell me my future. Some can be repeated, some cannot. I am about to change professions. I will make a load of money. My son will marry and raise up many children. He also will have a lot of money. Maybe my money, I forgot to ask that.

Then he described the sacrifices that my son and I are required to make in order for these things to happen. They must be made soon. Mine will be rough.

What is he saying, my son asked.

You are going to have a bunch of kids. I am about to change professions. Lots of money all around.

That's good, Jake said.

One other thing, good news -- your sacrifice does not involve animals.

Sacrifice? What is my sacrifice?

Too holy to tell you now, I will tell you later when I can give it some respect.

Sacrifice?

Yes, that is what he prescribes. Sacrifices. It has something to do with Marabout.

Idrissa gave me his card, it read clearly, marabout.

Later I looked up Marabout.

It comes from the Arabic, Murabit, which means "one who is garrisoned," because it referred originally to a member of a Muslim religious community that

lived in a ribat, a fortified monastery. Marabout is a Muslim holy man. When Islam came to western Africa in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, its proponents became known as al-Murabitum (Almoravids), and every missionary who organized a community was known as a murabit. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, when the Sufis came to the Maghreb, northern Africa, any organizer of a Sufi fraternity became known as a murabit, or a marabout. A marabout is a Muslim holy man, a mystic, a Sufi.

Who is this priest, the Kohen that was prescribing sacrifices for me in an airport waiting room in Baltimore? I realized who I was meeting here: Myself. My Levitical progenitors. The sons of Aaron, the priests and Levites of the Holy Temple, dealing in sacrifices, though we did not call them sacrifices, they were not something psychological or something spiritual, they were what they were, the avenue of approach, korbanot, coming closer to God. They were not like anything, they were what they were.

Be like the sons of Aaron, seek peace and pursue it (Avot 1:12). Is this what he was doing? Seeking peace in the Levitical way, the prescribed peace offerings? He seems so certain about their efficacy.

Are you Muslim? he asked.

Jewish. Yahud.

Ah. So close he said.

There is a war erupting between us.

Yes, we will both have to make sacrifices. We will each have to give away something we think is dear. I am working on it. Truth and justice, peace, he said, and he winked.

We began to discuss the names of God that are cognates in our holy languages: ir-Rahman, ir-Rahim, Rahmana, HaRahaman, for example, the Compassionate One, giving, without restraint, and those that are not cognates. We sat there in the waiting room, moving through the beads, praying the names of God that are common in our holy languages, teaching each other the ones that were not common.

We got on the plane and flew to Chicago with Idrissa. I found the Pakistani guy and in Chicago they went off together towards the baggage claim.

Before he left, Idrissa held me, asked me to write down my phone number and address. "I will be calling you," he said to me in French, I think, I am not sure which language he was speaking.

Dad, what is the deal with your new friend? Jake asked.

Muslim holy man, I said. He knows the future, and as far as I can tell, it looks pretty good.

We left Idrissa in Chicago and during the short leg from Chicago to St. Louis, Jake and I got to frame the story in a way it should be remembered.

You know, Jake, I said, we were praying together. When we were going through his beads? We were speaking a common language of Godliness. It was the one language we truly shared, the names of God. That's a good sign for the future.

This conversation occurred precisely at the time when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was heating up. Jake and I agreed that we had experienced a secret glimpse into the future, like Abraham, we ascended to the top of the chariot of Ezekiel, it was covered with the dew of light, and we received a glimpse of the future. We saw the possibility of peace, real peace, deep peace, holy peace. Maybe through us, maybe through our children, maybe that's why it was Jake and me meeting Idrissa, two generations, one completing what the other could only begin, making our sacrifices, our holy offerings, for peace. A peace that might take generations, a peace that could not be completed by the ancestors, a peace that only the descendants could realize.

There was something broken in the generation of the parents that only their children could repair, this from the Zohar. Something broken in the generation of Abraham that only the children of Abraham, Isaac and Ishmael, and all the Isaacs and Ishmaels of the future, could repair.

Several days later, I came home from work and my daughter said, somebody called for you. No English. I couldn't understand him.

Did he say anything about sacrifices?

Sacrifices? Yeah, I think he did.

He has been calling frequently, every few days, chattering away with me about sacrifices, about the future, about the necessity to give your overflow away, because when you have as much as I am going to have, you have to give it away in order to keep it. I think that is what he said, I'm not sure because the truth is, he wasn't speaking French, I'm not sure what language he was speaking, but I have made a friend, and if I understand anything of what we have been talking about, I will receive just what I am willing to give away.

Great sacrifices will be required of us all, but if we have the courage to let loose of what we think we own, what we think we are, we will receive whatever it is we want, even peace. Peace above all.

Seek peace, he said, I think, pursue it.

Epilog;

A few days after the Twin Towers catastrophe, I came home and my daughter said to me, he called again.

Who?

The guy who speaks French, or whatever it is he is speaking. Your friend from Africa, the holy man.

What did he say?

Not sure, she said, his voice was sadder this time, but I did hear this: Marabout? he said, Marabout – not yet. Marabout is peace. If you kill peace, you kill God.

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