Ramadan Conversation

by B. Burgoyne Chapman

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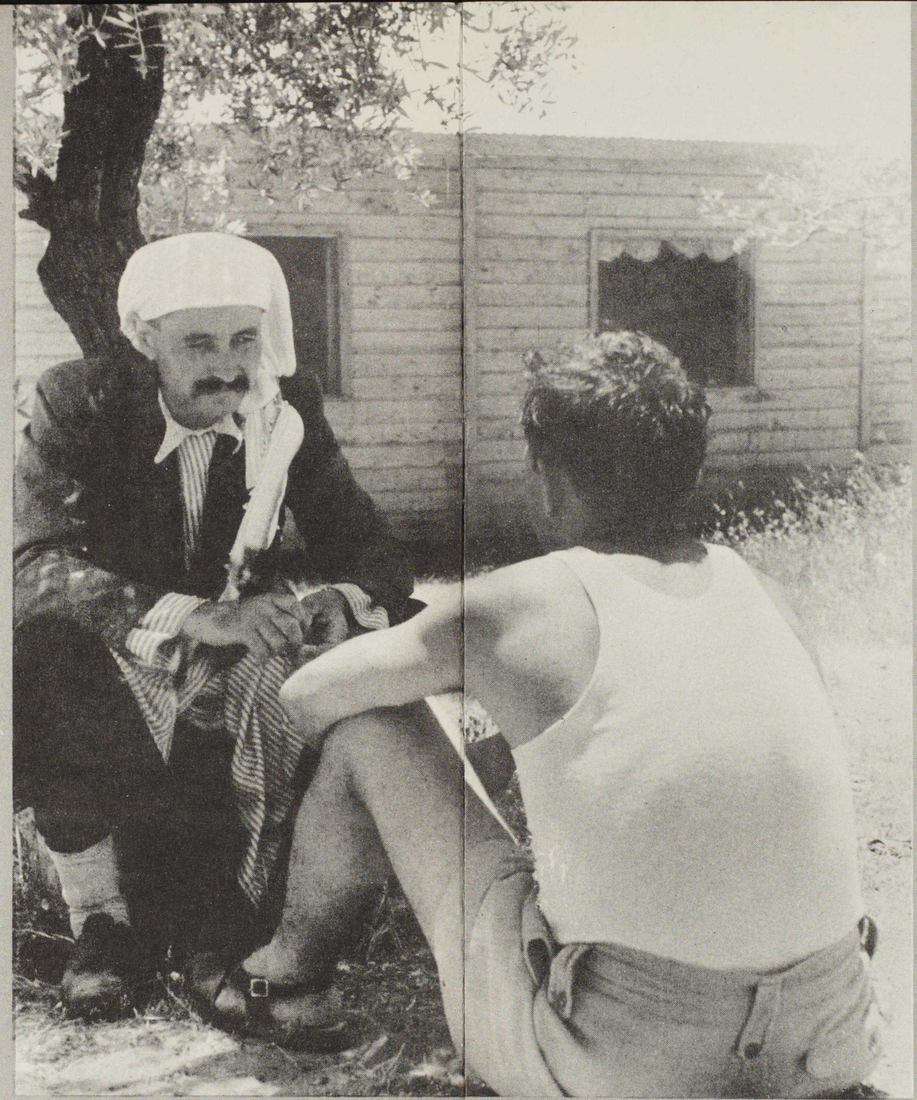

A Moslem and a Jew . . one Ramadan in Israel.

IT WAS during one of the last few days of Ramadan (the month in which all good Moslems fast from dawn to dusk) that I met my friend in a Haifa street. We had not seen each other for ages, and after we had chatted a while, he insisted upon my visiting his home before the holy month was over. The nights of Ramadan in a Moslem household are joyful with eating and song after the hard, day-long fast. "There's much to talk about," he said with a smile. "What time could be more suitable for the purpose?"

A few evenings later, I responded to his invitation and knocked at the door of his house on Mount Carmel. My host and his lady greeted me with many an *ahlan wasahlan* ("welcome"). After the initial pleasantries, we recounted to each other at length our respective adventures during the past two years. Then he bade me partake of the *iftar,* the main meal of the evening, which breaks the fast.

The table was laden with assorted foods and beverages, not exactly in keeping with austerity. "During Ramadan," my host explained, "we allow ourselves a little more than usual. The Food Controller allocated us extra rations especially for Ramadan. *Alhamdu lillah* (Praise be to God!)"

While the meal was in progress, my host switched on the wireless, and the intoned sing-song of a reading from the Koran filled the room. His face lit up, and he seemed to eat with greater relish.

"The Israeli Government has done well," my friend said, "to make the Ramadan evenings pleasant for us by broadcasting readings from the Sacred Book and tunes we like to hear. Yesterday, *yom eljum'a* (Friday), Kol Yisrael relayed the service from the *El-Jazzar* Mosque in Acre. The listener would have thought he was tuned in to a Moslem station, were it not for the announcement, every now and then, *huna Mahattat Israil* ('This is the Israel Broadcasting Station')."

My host expressed his complete satisfaction with *Wizarat Al-Adyan* (Ministry for Religious Affairs) of *Dawlat Israil* (the Israel Government). "What trouble they took," he said, "till they fixed up one of the Haifa mosques and made it fit for worship. They built, mended, whitewashed; and even got back for us the precious carpets of the mosque that had been kept all the time in the storerooms of the Department of Abandoned Property." In that connection he recounted to me the following story.

"A few days ago, a Turkish ship put into Haifa Port. The sailors, who were Moslems, could scarcely believe it when they received an invitation from the Moslem Community of Haifa to attend prayers at the Jareina Mosque. They had been told in Turkey that all the mosques in Israel had been utterly destroyed, and that the Moslems who had remained behind had 'gone underground.' When we told them that not only were such rumors false, but that, on the contrary, the Israel Government was helping the Moslems to observe their religion, and that a special Moslem Division of the Ministry of Religious Affairs was doing all it could to meet our religious requirements, some of them refused to believe us. Indeed, one sailor even went so far as to voice his disbelief aloud and said: 'Aren't you really Jews masquerading as Moslems?' "

"I hope," my host continued, "that those sailors will return to Turkey and give the lie to all the falsehoods spread about Israel."

The generous repast over, my host invited me onto the wide balcony looking out over the sea. The air was cool and pleasant, and fragrant with the scent of pines in the garden. My host was filled with a sense of well-being. He brought out his narguilah, and sitting down at his ease began to smoke, every now and then emitting a dense cloud.

Our conversation turned to the Arabs in Israel. This subject made him more animated. He removed the mouthpiece of his narguilah from his mouth, drew his chair up to mine, and said emphatically: "The influence of the Israel Government is destined to spread far and wide as a result of the spirit of progress and democracy that inspires it. Do you really think that the Arabs in the Ramallah-Nablus Triangle and beyond—even the most primitive among them—are incapable of distinguishing between a backward regime, with all the poverty, ignorance and foreign influence that it implies, and an enlightened, progressive and independent form of government?

"I recall the Prime Minister's statement about the non-Jewish citizens of Israel that he made on Independence Day. What is needed is that those 'above' should see to it that those 'below' respect and scrupulously carry out the instructions they are given. Then there will be no further grounds for false rumors about the State, and anti-Israel agitation will have nothing on which to rest. If that happens, you need not be surprised to read in the paper, one fine morning, that a progressive movement has come into being in one of the Arab countries and seeks the friendship of Israel. If the Israelis succeed in preserving their progressive spirit and at the same time deal justly and fairly with the Moslems and Christians in Israel, their influence in the Middle East will be assured. It often happens that, what you cannot get from an Oriental by means of force and pressure, you can easily get from him by means of wisdom and common sense. That will be to the good of both sides, and to that of the State of Israel, of which I am proud to be a citizen."