

# THE JOURNEY FROM HATE TO LOVE

A FORMER TERRORIST  
SPEAKS OUT

BY YITTA  
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People would rather believe that Walid Shoebat is an undercover operative working for (choose one): A. the Arabs, B. the Israelis, C. the Americans, than what he is in reality—a former PLO terrorist who repented, converted to Christianity and now travels throughout the United States, Canada and England, advocating for Israel and the Jewish people, on his own initiative and at his own expense.

Tragically, we can more readily believe in people's capacity for evil than in their capacity for goodness and change. A Charles Manson we can accept as flesh-and-blood reality, but a Walid Shoebat makes us wonder if he's genuine.

I first learned about Shoebat from—where else?—the Internet. An online magazine published a report on Shoebat's successful forays onto troubled college campuses where turbulent clash-

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es among Arab and Jewish students had taken place. In September 2002, Binyamin Netanyahu, former prime minister of Israel, had been forcibly blocked from delivering a scheduled speech at Concordia University in Montreal by Muslim students, but Shoebat's pro-Israel speech on the same campus in March 2004 went off without a hitch. Perhaps the Arab students were seized by the same insatiable curiosity as everyone else, with the oddity of a reformed PLO terrorist piquing more interest and astonishment than ire. Certainly, those were my reactions.

I tracked down Shoebat and learned that by chance he would be in the New York area, where I live, within the week. We made arrangements for me to sit in on two different speeches he would be delivering to Jewish audiences—at the Hebrew Academy of Nassau County high school on Long Island and at Lincoln Square Synagogue in Manhattan.

Shoebat is short and wiry, dark haired and olive skinned, intense, edgy, with flashing brown eyes that alternately narrow in scrutiny, grow soft in sorrow, or blaze in anger. It's hard not to feel the tug of his personality pull you into his orbit.

He opens his talk at HANC with

a dramatic flourish. "I come here today to confess to you—like an alcoholic confesses in AA. AA states that confession is the beginning of healing. I come here today to confess to you that I once was a PLO terrorist. One day, I hope that I, too, will be completely healed."

Shoebat was born in Beit Sahour (a village just outside Bethlehem), the grandson of its Muslim *mukhtar* (chief-tain). Shoebat's wealthy grandfather was an intimate of Haj Amin al-Husseini, the grand mufti of Jerusalem, who was notorious for forging alliances with Adolf Hitler. His family members—on his father's side—had been prominent landowners in the area for generations, and were securely ensconced in the life of their community. But the DNA that Shoebat inherited from his mother was altogether different, and perhaps ultimately accounts for the dramatic U-turn his life has taken in the last ten years.

"My mother's saga eerily resembles the storyline of the Sally Field movie *Not Without My Daughter*," Shoebat tells both audiences. "She was an American and a Christian, the daughter of the mayor of Eureka, California. She met

my handsome, irresistible father in the mid-1950s at Humboldt State University where both were students. She fell prey to his charm and became pregnant with my sister. Abortion wasn't legal then, but it also wasn't an option she would have considered anyway. She was utterly infatuated with my father, and so she married him. Her first mistake," Shoebat adds wryly.

"My mother didn't know anything about my father's religion, but willingly agreed to convert to Islam. She gave birth to my sister and brother here in the United States, and was pregnant with me in 1960 when my Palestinian grandmother fell ill. She accompanied my father on what she believed would be a short trip to Bethlehem to visit his ailing mother. That was her second mistake. She remained trapped there for forty years. You know the song 'Hotel California'? The lyrics say 'You can check out ... but you can never leave'? That's the way it was with my mother. My father took away her American passport, and his family conspired with him to keep her a virtual prisoner inside their ancestral home. My mother made repeated attempts to escape, but each time they were foiled."

Shoebat's mother was consigned to the kitchen, together with the other women of the household (the entire extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins lived under one roof), and Shoebat's father took charge of his sons' education. Shoebat was enrolled in a Jordanian-run kindergarten, where, at the tender age of five, he learned his first nursery song: "Arabs are Beloved, Jews are Dogs."

Shoebat begins crooning in a soft, sweet voice the Arabic nursery songs he was taught at school. These are gentle melodies—the lulling notes of the universal nursery song. But when Shoebat translates the lyrics into English, chills run down my spine.

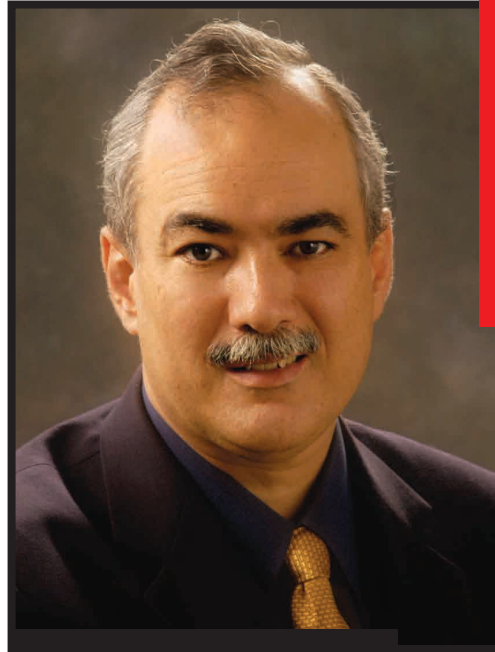
"Sharpen my bones and make

them swords.

I come in the name of death. Kill all the Jews;

Your blood is kosher to us."

"My people don't know that *your* nursery songs are only about peace and love," Shoebat tells the audience. "Our songs and our days are filled with hatred. You Jews have been painted as



*Photo courtesy of the  
Walid Shoebat Foundation*

monsters; your rabbis portrayed as people who dip matzah into our blood."

Shoebat's mother tried on occasion to enlighten her son about "the outside world," but she was rarely given an opportunity to spend time alone with him. Her rights, both as a female in an intensely patriarchal society, and as a mother, were severely restricted. In a traumatic episode that Shoebat still recalls with a shudder, his mother finally gave vent to her frustration at being ignored.

Shoebat's mother rarely saw or interacted with her husband; by day he worked as a principal of a Muslim school, and in the evenings he incessantly played backgammon with the other men of the household, oblivious to her needs and lack of company. One evening, she angrily approached the

group of men huddled over the table intent on their game, grabbed the backgammon set and hurled it to the floor, where it broke into a hundred little pieces. Shoebat's father beat her with a hammer until blood gushed from her head. Shoebat, then eight, grabbed his mother's arm and ran outside with her, looking for help, but local residents refused to get involved in a marital dispute. Finally, the two fled to a church, where the nuns stitched her up and sent her back home.

When Shoebat was ten, his mother made her first serious attempt to escape. Over the years, she had concealed a growing cache of money in the hollowed portion of a towel rack. Flight was perpetually on her mind, but opportunities were limited: She was constantly being watched by the other females of the household and, as the only American woman in her village, was regarded with suspicion and hostility by the neighbors. There was no one to whom she could turn for help.

But one fateful day when circumstances augured well for safe passage to West Jerusalem, she fled with her children to the King David Hotel, where they stayed overnight. In the morning, she headed to the American consulate, where she knew she could find sanctuary. Her heart expanded with thanksgiving and joy as the building came into view, haven only a few feet away. Giddy with relief, she advanced quickly, and then she saw them. Lined up in front of the consulate gate was a platoon of her husband's family members, waiting grimly. Before she could dart into the refuge the consulate would have provided, the men snatched her and dragged her away. There would be many subsequent attempts to escape after this one, but it would be another thirty years before Shoebat's mother would finally be free.

"And so I rarely had access to my mother," Shoebat says. "My education was mapped out for me by my father, and the hatred of the society in which I lived was my reality. Because of that education—the same education that all

# SPEAKING OUT AGAINST HATE

Growing up a Christian in Southern Lebanon, Brigitte Gabriel, like all of her peers, was taught that Jews were evil and Israel was the devil. These days, however, she is a strong advocate for the only democracy in the Middle East. Her outlook began to change in 1975, when she was ten years old, and the Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims declared jihad on the Christians in Lebanon and started massacring them. Gabriel lived in a bomb shelter for the next seven years. By the time she was twenty most of her friends had been killed by radical Muslims. She praises Israel for coming to her aid.

“My mother was wounded by a Muslim shell and was taken to an Israeli hospital for treatment,” she said in an address to students at Duke University in 2004. “When we entered the emergency room, I was shocked by what I saw. There were hundreds of people—wounded Muslims, Palestinians, Christian Lebanese and Israeli soldiers lying on the floor. The doctors ... treated my mother before they treated the Israeli soldier lying next to her. They

didn't see religion ... they saw people in need, and they helped... For the first time in my life, I experienced a human quality that I know my culture would not have shown to their enemy. I experienced the values of the Israelis, who were able to love their enemy in their most trying moments.”

Those three weeks in the hospital changed Gabriel's life. It was at that point that she realized her beliefs about Israel and the Jews were based on lies.

Gabriel's experiences as a victim of Islamic terrorism inspired her to write *Because They Hate: A Survivor of Islamic Terror Warns America* (New York, 2006). In an interview that appeared in *Frontpage Interview*, Gabriel says that she wrote the book “in the hope that



Photo: Brigitte Gabriel, author of *The New York Times* bestseller *Because They Hate*, and founder of *American Congress for Truth.com*

Americans and the west will recognize the eminent threat [of radical Islam's war for world domination].” In her book, Gabriel discusses the spread of Islamic terrorism throughout the world, and she warns America to take action.

A journalist who began her career as an anchor for *World News*, an Arabic news broadcast, Gabriel currently lives in the Washington,

DC area. A terrorism expert, she is the founder of the nonprofit organization American Congress for Truth—one of whose goals is to “speak out in defense of America, Israel and western civilization.”

*Dassi Zeidel is assistant editor of Jewish Action.*

Palestinian children are given today—I was brainwashed with tremendous hatred for the Jew. *Not* the Israeli, the Jew. As a result, I refused to believe that the Holocaust had really taken place; I was sure it was a fabrication. I used to watch the Holocaust shows on Israeli television and roar with laughter. I wondered where they found those skinny actors to portray the victims.”

By the time he was fourteen, Shoebat was already the successful product of this indoctrination, well on his way to becoming a martyr for the cause. He threw Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers, hurled stones at Jewish worshippers at the Wailing Wall, joined in anti-Israel riots and demonstrations and participated in the near-lynching of an Israeli soldier in Bethlehem. The gratu-

itous violence was propelled by the teachings of Islamic eschatology, Shoebat explains—the concept that the “end times” could not be ushered in until all the Jews were killed. “Among the phrases drummed into our heads was the prophecy: ‘The day of judgment shall not come to pass until the tribes of Islam defeat the tribes of Israel. And it was asked of the prophet where will this be, and he said Jerusalem and its neighbors.’”

At fifteen, Shoebat was already serving time in a Jerusalem prison. Ironically, it was there that he was inducted into the PLO, and immediately upon his release, he began working with Fatah bomb makers. He was given his first mission when he turned sixteen: Destroy the Israeli Bank Leumi in

Bethlehem. He was instructed to take a loaf of bread filled with explosives, smuggle it past the Israeli checkpoint and place it in a garbage can outside the bank. “But when I got to the bank, I saw Arab children playing nearby, and I was afraid to hurt them. So instead I hurled the bomb onto the roof of the bank, where it exploded with a deafening noise. When I saw black smoke pouring out of the bank, I fled.”

Later Shoebat would learn that no one had been seriously hurt in the incident, and much, much later he would rejoice in the fact that there was no real blood on his hands—neither Arab nor Jewish. But still the episode left him shaken and depressed. “It was my first major terrorist attempt, and also the first time I encountered the possible

consequences of my deeds,” he recalls. “Up until then, I didn’t really think about what it means to kill. I didn’t enjoy what I did, but I felt compelled to do it because it was my duty. How else was I going to go to heaven and bring salvation to my family?”

Shoebat’s initial twinges of disillusionment with the PLO came after a second unsettling episode. In this instance, he was told to place a bomb in a certain spot at precisely noon. The time was emphasized repeatedly by his superiors. Shoebat wondered why the exact time was so important, and, following a hunch, he flouted orders and placed the bomb at the assigned target a few minutes earlier. Then he hid nearby to watch. The bomb exploded—at precisely noon. He had not volunteered, nor had he been told, but had he followed the instructions he had been given, he would have become a suicide bomber.

Alarmed at the violent path his son was treading, Shoebat’s father, who deeply valued education, shipped him off to America, where at the age of eighteen he was enrolled at Loop College in Chicago. There, he continued his activism, albeit in a somewhat different form. He recruited for the PLO on campus, raised funds, organized rallies and served as the college representative of thousands of Palestinian students in the Chicago area.

In an eerie echo of his father’s youthful experiences, Shoebat proved irresistible to his female classmates, and began a relationship with an American student. Shoebat assumed that she, like his own mother, was a Christian with no real ties to her faith. The woman was so smitten with Shoebat that she constantly prevaricated about her background. Her religion was meaningless to her, but she knew it would be of tremendous significance to *him*. She didn’t want to lose him—so how could she tell Shoebat that she was Jewish?

Six months after the couple married, Shoebat’s new wife took him to visit her aunt, who lived in Chicago. Shoebat was stunned to see a *mezuzah*

affixed to the doorpost. His wife’s elusive family history—her secretive manner, her constant equivocations, her clearly contrived vagueness—suddenly made sense. “You’re Jewish, aren’t you?” he spat out at her. Hoping that their six months together had cemented their relationship, she admitted the truth. To Shoebat, however, her “sin” was unforgivable. At home, he beat her, and the next day, he filed for divorce.

Despite his residency in the United States for the next fifteen years, his exposure to American values and a pluralistic society, and despite his own unwitting marriage to a Jewish woman, Shoebat’s hatred for the Jewish people continued to run deep. Aside from his first wife, Shoebat actually had no experience with either Jews or Israelis; he had never interacted or even talked briefly with them. But hatred isn’t rational. Still, the keen intelligence that had saved him from becoming a suicide bomber also led to a natural curiosity that was hard to contain. When in 1991, Shoebat found himself seated next to a religious-looking Jewish woman on a flight from Paris to Israel, he decided to seize the opportunity and engage in discourse with the “enemy.”

“Hi, my name is Bill, and I’m from Dallas,” he dissembled, mimicking a Texas drawl. “This is my first trip to Israel. Where are you from?”

“Oh, I’m an Israeli,” the woman answered politely.

“Really?” he leaned forward eagerly. “What’s it like living in Israel? I hear the Israelis like to oppress Arabs; is that true?”

“Oh, no!” the woman protested. “That is not true at all.” And then she began to cry.

“Why are you crying?” Shoebat asked.

“My daughter is in the army,” she said.

“So how would you feel if your daughter killed Arabs?” he asked.

“I would hate it if my daughter had to kill anybody,” she answered. And then she cried some more. “But I’m so worried that *they* will kill *her*.”

*What kind of Jew are you?* Shoebat remembers thinking during the dialogue. *You’re not the Jew I learned about.*

Shoebat never told the woman that he was in fact a Palestinian and that this was his first conversation with an Israeli. He doesn’t remember her name, and he is sure that she in turn attributed little significance to their talk. But for Shoebat, communicating with and connecting to an Israeli humanized the enemy. “This discussion affected me tremendously, and softened my heart,” Shoebat recalls. “It conflicted with the notion of the Jew as monster that I had been taught all along.” A seemingly inconsequential conversation that reverberated with profound aftereffects helped shape the beginning of Walid Shoebat’s transformation.

The first stirrings began almost as soon as he deplaned and was met at the airport by his uncle. During the car ride home, Shoebat suddenly became aware that anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic graffiti was splashed on every single building, sign and wall that they passed.

“Uncle!” Shoebat exclaimed in dawning recognition. “Do you realize that there is not one square mile here that isn’t plastered with hatred? Why is there so much graffiti everywhere?”

And then, abruptly, he stopped himself. “Why am I asking you this? *I’m* the one who used to write it!”

Later that week, the crack in his armor of hatred would widen, as he witnessed an incident that was commonplace in Hebron—an incident that he previously would have been oblivious to, or simply dismissed. “I watched an armored bus of Jewish passengers drive through the streets of Hebron on its way to the settlement of Kiryat Arba. There was wire mesh around the outside of the bus, and the passengers looked like they were inside a cage. When the bus stalled for a minute, Arab women on the street starting throwing large rocks at it. For the first time in my life, I felt anguished by our treatment of the Jews. *This is not right*, I thought. *Jews have to travel like caged animals to their homes and we travel freely about and*

*without fear. How can the Jews live like this? People shouldn't have to travel and live like this! Who's treating whom badly?* For the first time, I watched with different eyes. This incident affected me a lot.”

But the real breakthrough for Shoebat occurred in 1993 when he was back in the United States, living in California: He met his second wife.

Maria wanted to marry Shoebat, but she wasn't pliable or easily influenced when it came to changing faiths. Shoebat asked that Maria convert to Islam, but she was from a Catholic family and reluctant to abandon her religion. Instead of complying with Shoebat's dictates, she challenged him theologically. *What made him so sure that Islam was the true religion? Had he ever actually read the Bible? No? Just the Koran? So how could he eschew the teachings of the Bible when he didn't even know what they were?*

“I set out to convert *her*,” Shoebat says with a laugh. “But what happened was that she converted *me* instead. Maria challenged me to read the Bible and find mistakes and inconsistencies. I claimed that the Jews had corrupted the Bible and were prophet-killers. ‘Prove those claims,’ Maria said. So I purchased my first Bible [the King James Edition] to show her the contradictions and corruptions introduced to it by the Jews. I did not begin my Bible study for pure reasons. It was pure selfishness that motivated me: I wanted to convince my wife to become a Muslim. But as I read the Koran and the Bible side by side, I was struck by the discrepancies between them. The Koran was a holy work, the foundation of our religion, but it was filled with hatred. The Bible, on the other hand, overflowed with kindness and compassion. I also began to understand the spiritual link between the Jewish people and their land. I was surprised to see their deep connections to Israel mentioned throughout and at the very beginning of the Bible. As a Palestinian, I had always been taught that Israel was *ours*—that the Jews had

expropriated it from us. But after reading the Bible, I saw this was patently false. I had also been taught in school that Abraham, Jacob and Moses were all Palestinian Arabs.

“After I finished poring over the Bible, I began to study the Prophets and was startled to read thousands of ancient predictions that I knew had already come true—many of them had come true in my own lifetime. And I asked myself: *How could it be that Allah is the true God if the Six-Day War in 1967 resulted in the greatest victory for the Jews since Joshua's encirclement of Jericho? And how do I explain to myself that Muslim conquests have always been filled with rape, pillaging and massacres, but in contrast, Israel's victories have only brought freedom for all people and religions?*”

**“The occupation is not that of Israel occupying the land. The true occupation is of the minds of the Palestinians, who are taught hatred.”**

A few months later, Shoebat was baptized and became a Christian. The reverberations—at least within his own family—were irrevocable and profound.

“Converting to a different faith from Islam is considered an act of apostasy, punishable by death,” Shoebat says. “When my family learned of my conversion I was denounced as a traitor and immediately disowned. The land in Bethlehem I rightfully stood to inherit was taken away from me. My brother made death threats, and I was warned never to set foot in Beit Sahour again. Islam allows no rights [whatsoever] to born Muslims who leave the faith—including the right to life.

“To compound matters,” Shoebat says, “I didn't merely become a Christian. I became an evangelical Christian, a Christian *Zionist*.”

Upon his conversion, Shoebat embarked on a path of reconciliation, experiencing deep regret for his past actions as well as anger toward those who had indoctrinated him to carry them out. He remains haunted by the memory of the young Israeli soldier he almost lynched, and wishes he could find him and beg his forgiveness. His only clue to his identity is the name “Amnon,” which he heard another soldier call him. “If I could find Amnon, I would beg him to understand that I underwent an educational occupation of hatred, which brainwashed my mind to hate Jews. I would say: ‘We were crazy and blinded with frenzy. Please forgive me and become my brother.’ I truly want to do *teshuvah* [repentance].”

Meanwhile, although he hasn't yet found Amnon, Shoebat is busy making amends in myriad other ways.

“When I finally realized the lies and myths I was taught, I felt strongly that I must speak out. The Jews don't speak up as much as they should, so I try to do it for them. I want to fight for Israel both from theological and political perspectives. Israel is a small state, and the Muslim world is a giant. My personal goal is to give strength to the Jewish people, to give them encouragement. I had a change of heart, and this is the way I atone.”

Shoebat has become a one-man pro-Israel campaign, traveling across North America and England, delivering passionate speeches to Christian and Jewish audiences. His aim, he says, is to build a “grass-roots movement like Martin Luther King.” He is particularly interested in going to universities and facing down the Palestinian students. At Concordia University in Montreal, Shoebat confronted his own cousin in the audience—Samer El Tarash, the Palestinian student leader who had successfully instigated the riots that blocked Netanyahu from delivering his speech there in 2002.

“My cousins remain passionate Palestinian activists,” he says. “One cousin ran his taxi into a Chicago synagogue several years ago. Another cousin was on his way to Ben Yehuda Street

# A CLASH OF CULTURES

with a bomb when he was intercepted by Israeli soldiers and killed. That night, my aunt—according to the dictates of our society—distributed candies to the other women in her town, in celebration of her son's martyrdom. But at night, alone, she wept.


"I, too, thought I would die as a martyr. But now it may be for an entirely different cause that I will die.... There is a ten-million-dollar bounty on my head. I don't know how long I will last. Yes, I am afraid. But I feel it is my duty and my mission to seek justice for Israel and the Jewish people. Eventually, I hope to go back to Israel and to live there, and to establish a program for the Palestinians, to un-brainwash them. This is essential if there is ever to be peace in the region.

"The occupation is not that of Israel occupying the land," Shoebat says. "The true occupation is of the minds of the Palestinians, who are taught hatred.

"I am still a terrorist," Shoebat says with a laugh, "but now I terrorize intellectually instead of physically.

"Don't ever think that *you* can't make a difference," Shoebat tells the HANC students gently, as he winds up his speech. "That you're only one person, that you're not gifted enough. Moses was a stutterer who couldn't even speak. I didn't know how to speak either when I first started on my crusade. What's important is to believe in what you're doing, even if the whole world tells you you're wrong. Noah warned his society of the impending flood, but they laughed at him.

"He lived. They drowned.

"Yes, I've lost my entire family," Shoebat states sadly. "But," he says, pointing to the members of the audience, "look how much family I've gained instead." 

Most people hadn't heard of Wafa Sultan until an interview on Al Jazeera television in February 2006 propelled her into the spotlight. Since then she has been named one of *Time* magazine's 100: "The People Who Shape our World." In the Al Jazeera interview, Dr. Sultan, a former Sunni Muslim who moved to Los Angeles with her husband and children in 1989, says, "the clash we are witnessing around the world is not a clash of religions, or a clash of civilizations.... It is a clash between a mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the twenty-first century. It is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality. It is a clash between freedom and oppression, between democracy and dictatorship." According to The Middle East Media Research Institute, the clip of Dr. Sultan's Al Jazeera interview has been viewed more than one million times.

The clip shows Dr. Sultan, a psychiatrist, being bombarded with questions from a Muslim cleric, but she remains strong in her stance. "The Jews have come from the tragedy [of the Holocaust], and forced the world to respect them, with their knowledge, not with their terror; with their work, not their crying and yelling," she explains in the interview. "We have not seen a single Jew blow himself up in a German restaurant.... Only the Muslims defend their beliefs by burning down churches, killing people and destroying embassies. This path will not yield any results. The Muslims must ask themselves what they can do for humankind, before they demand that humankind respect them."



Photo: John M. Heller/Getty Images

Dr. Sultan, who is in her late forties, grew up in a large traditional Muslim family in Syria. And while she followed the Islamic faith into adulthood, her views began to change in 1979, when, as a medical student, she witnessed the murder of her professor by ultraconservative

Muslim gunmen shouting "God is great!" According to an article in *The New York Times*, at that point, Dr. Sultan began to question the teachings of Islam. "I had to look for another god." Dr. Sultan's research into Islam's holy texts led her to reject the religion; now she considers herself secular. In the Al Jazeera interview she is repeatedly berated for being "a heretic." She still has family in Syria, but has not spoken to her mother in over two years. "She's ashamed of me," says Dr. Sultan.

In an interview with the *Jerusalem Post* some months ago, Dr. Sultan said that while she is pessimistic about the possibilities of reforming Islam, "transformation" is needed. She believes that women in particular have so much to gain by this. In her lectures, she recounts gruesome tales of "honor killings" in the name of Allah—killing victims of rape, for example, because they shame their families. Her goal is to liberate women living under Islamic oppression. Dr. Sultan reports that she has received a lot of support from the Jewish community.

She is currently writing a book tentatively titled *The Escaped Prisoner: When God Is a Monster*. Dr. Sultan told *The New York Times* that she has received several death threats, but she "has no fear. I believe in my message."

Dassi Zeidel is assistant editor of Jewish Action.