

IMAD S. ENCHASSI

CLOUD MILES

*A Remarkable Journey of
Mercy, Peace, and Purpose*

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Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,
www.nurturingfaith.net.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-090-6

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Lani R. Habrock, editor

DEDICATION

To all the women in my life who made me the man I am today:

Especially my mom, Nematt Ades,

who taught me that love is unconditional

To my teacher, Ms. Samira Abou Rahma,

who instilled in me that mercy has no religion and no borders

To my wife, Judith Aguilar,

who believed in me when people doubted me;

who accepted me when everyone rejected me;

who consoled me when people attacked me;

who supported me when people opposed me

To my family:

Especially my father, Said Enchassi,

who was always looking for home

To my siblings, specifically my brother, Assaad Enchassi,

who found me a home in America

To my friends, teachers, and in particular

the interfaith community who made me

unapologetically Muslim, unapologetically Palestinian,

unapologetically American, and unapologetically human

CONTENTS

Foreword.....	vii
Acknowledgment.....	ix
Introduction.....	xi
CHAPTER 1: TRAIL OF TEARS.....	1
Palestinian Tears.....	4
Enchassi.....	6
Nakba to Nuptials.....	7
Syria.....	11
Life in Refuge.....	12
Childhood.....	13
Ms. Rahma.....	17
Ghalia.....	20
Ali.....	21
CHAPTER 2: UNCIVIL WAR.....	23
Sharon.....	26
White Helmets.....	27
Hate Speech.....	33
The Heart of Moses' Mother.....	35
Lady Liberty.....	38
CHAPTER 3: LEBANON TO LUBBOCK.....	41
No Cats in America.....	44
Red-Headed Lady.....	45
Robbery.....	48
Dream Fulfilled.....	49
Home.....	52

CHAPTER 4: NEW BEGINNINGS	57
The Usual Suspect.....	59
John Doe #2 (AKA John “Moe” #2)	59
9/11.....	63
Imad.....	68
Crossing Borders and Boundaries.....	69
Oklahoma Centennial Qur’an	73
State Question 755.....	75
Public Displays of Rejection.....	78
Parade.....	80
CHAPTER 5: STORIES OF MERCY	81
Khalid Jabara.....	84
Terrorist or Terrorized?	85
Bird’s-eye View	86
A Seat at the Table.....	88
Bob Ricks	90
Dr. Kimball.....	90
DeBorah.....	91
Food, Faith, and Festivals	91
Hiding Faith in the Face of Tragedy	92
Dilemma	93
“Different Kind of Catholic”	94
Fighting Hate with Love	94
Graffiti	97
Mercy	98
Epilogue.....	101
Endorsements	111
About the Author	117

FOREWORD

Both of my parents were Holocaust survivors. Never once in their lifetime did I hear them use the word “hate.” In my almost 20 years knowing Imad, as a colleague and more importantly as a friend, never once have I heard him utter that word either. *Cloud Miles* shows that we must focus on compassion, healing, and mercy.

At 17, Imad volunteered as a White Helmet during the civil war in Lebanon, helping the severely injured in the midst of unspeakable horrors, never asking what religion they were. His description of the massacre is haunting. Yet, in spite of seeing man’s inhumanity to man, Imad still believes in the goodness of people. He draws from his own tenacity, strength, and courage to help others.

Imad was helped as a refugee in Lebanon by Samira Rahma, a Catholic nun, whose name translates to “mercy.” Through her kindness, generosity and grace, he developed an undiminished capacity for mercy. One example not mentioned in the book is that each year, for more than a month at a time, he and his wife, Judith, travel to Lebanon and Syria to help refugees. And just as Samira Rahma would always give him sugar candies, Imad takes sugar candies to pass out to the refugee children.

When the swastikas and racist comments were painted outside of the Oklahoma Democratic headquarters, Imad was among the first to arrive. He made calls to local interfaith volunteers to come help clean it away. Instead of complaining, he focused on serving the community.

To anyone seeking to understand the importance of interfaith work of building bridges of love and understanding, I wholeheartedly recommend *Cloud Miles*. In this time of incivility in our country, this book is needed more than ever.

I was recently asked what gives me hope. I answered with two words: “Imad Enchassi.” This book personifies the reason I gave that answer.

Michael Korenblit
President and Co-Founder
Respect Diversity Foundation

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This book could not have been written without the skill and dedication of Lani R. Habrock, who helped me tell my story in both fact and poetry.

INTRODUCTION

Planes rumble when they take off. They jolt and bounce your insides like water in a balloon. My insides already felt like water. I had been back home to Palestine many times before, but never like this.

Like the pope, I had always entered Israel via Jordan. But this time, with a handful of Christian clergy and two rabbis, I would be flying in through Ben-Gurion Airport. Our group took up an entire section of the plane—at least six rows on the left side facing the cockpit.

I looked out the window and watched the wing cut through clouds. We were speeding through hundreds of clouds per minute. I started calculating speed per “cloud minute” in an attempt to keep my thoughts calm. I wondered how it would feel to set my feet on the grounds claimed by Ben-Gurion.

Would it feel like a betrayal? How many of my own people would see me as a sellout? Would it, in some way, feel like healing?

I was also worried about security. I am always “randomly” selected for additional security screenings and interrogations. I have started joking that my name is “Mr. Random.” On this trip, especially, I was prepared to be held up.

Already, even while still on American soil at Newark Liberty Airport, I had experienced two separate sets of screening: once through baggage with everyone else, and then again on the way to our gate to board for Tel Aviv. This latter screening was done by Israeli security.

The first time I entered Israel, through Jordan, I was interrogated by Israeli security in a room decorated with Qur’anic scripture and verses of Hadith (the written oral tradition of the Prophet Muhammed) painted in Arabic on the walls. These were all verses reminding the Muslim visitor of the virtues of telling the truth. This was the early 2000s—before social media was widely used. They knew everything about me.

After sitting in the room by myself for several minutes, Israeli agents entered the room to ask their questions. They knew everything about me. They knew I was active in my community and that I attended mosque

regularly. They knew my ancestors and that I was from a formerly wealthy family. When they asked why I was crossing the border, I told them to visit my aunt.

They then showed me four pictures and asked me to identify which one was my aunt. They asked if I had my Lebanese-Palestinian refugee ID with me. I did not. I was an American citizen by then and only had my passport. They then produced a copy of my ID. The sheer amount of information they had on me was unsettling, and I could tell this was their intention—to unsettle me by showing me they knew everything.

When I became an imam, it got much worse. They would ask what kind of sermons I give and if I give anti-Semitic messages. They knew of an incident of someone with ISIS threatening me, which I had reported to the FBI. I had told no one of this. My wife did not even know, as I didn't want her to worry.

Now, years later, the Israeli agent interrogating me knew of this occurrence and many other private details. All the while, I was sitting there stripped down to my underwear. Thinking of this, I was having anxiety thinking of how, if the group waits for me, they will no doubt miss most if not all the tours and destinations scheduled for the first day.

Finally boarding the flight, I sat down next to the window. I watched New Jersey disappear behind a sea of mist. My wife of 25 years sat next to me, leafing through a magazine. Many women, like my wife, were wearing head coverings, but they were not all Muslim. Many were Orthodox Jews.

As a Muslim, I pray five times a day. And often on long flights, prayer time falls while I am in the air. When this happens, I typically do my prayers discreetly in my seat, pretending I am yawning or stretching. On this flight, however, I was comfortable being open with my praying. Orthodox Jews pray three times a day, and their prayers on this flight coincided with mine, so I found myself in a corner of the plane prostrating and praying with my fellow Jewish travelers.

It felt like I was supposed to be doing this trip. It felt purposeful, and perhaps mandated by God. I was going back home, yet as a visitor. I was like a bird returning to its nest, only to find a new family moved in and my memory was forgotten.

I was viscerally aware of my overlapping identities. I am a Palestinian Arab, raised with the narrative that Jews and Israelis are the enemy of my people and not to be engaged with in discourse. I am Muslim and an imam

who holds every word of the Qur'an in my brain and spirit. I have verses seared into my consciousness telling me to respect and dialogue with those following the Abrahamic traditions. These are "people of the book," and we worship the same God.

We have believed in Allah [God] and what has been revealed to us and what has been revealed to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the Descendants and what was given to Moses and Jesus and what was given to the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and we are Muslims [in submission] to Him. (Qur'an 2:136)

We believe in that which has been revealed to us and to you [Jews and Christians] and our God and your God is the same. (Qur'an 29:46)

These verses played through my head as I stood praying next to the Jews accompanying me on this flight.

I am an American. This identity is deeply sacred to me because this is the one I chose. I am an immigrant who fell in love with Lady Liberty and ran to her shores, leaving everything and everyone I knew and cherished behind, just so I could have this identity, so I could hold this blue passport in my hand. I am seen as a traitor by some for having this citizenship.

All three identities of my being struggle against one another. I am canvas stretched over frame. But these quarrelling parts cannot be separated. Perhaps on this trip, I thought, they will find peace with one another.

There are so many lines drawn by humankind to define each other. Yet I am crossing them all, one cloud mile at a time.

Imam Imad Enchassi, Ph.D., is a senior imam at the Islamic Society of Greater Oklahoma City, the Chair of Islamic Studies at Oklahoma City University, and a visiting professor at Phillips Theological Seminary and Saint Paul School of Theology. Dr. Enchassi has received many interfaith, community, diversity and inclusion awards, and has been featured in media outlets including CNN, MSNBC, ABC, Al Jazeera, and Al Arabia. In 2020, *The Daily Oklahoman* named him a “Visionary in Religious and Education Outreach.” He is a founder of several educational, social, religious, and charitable organizations including Mercy Mission. His passion for peace and compassion stems from his upbringing in war zones and surviving the 1982 Sabra and Shatila Massacre.