

Chapter 8 ►►

Imam Reda Shata: A Spiritual Leader with a Golden Heart

THE BEGINNING:

“Deep in my heart, I try to be more of a comforter than a judge. Passing judgment on others is not what I believe in. It saddens my heart to see people rushing to accuse others, to hurt others and to justify any act that lacks goodness and forgiveness.”, told me Imam Reda Shata, a highly respected and strongly visible Muslim leader in Bay Bridge, Brooklyn, New York, who made headlines in the American media. I heard a lot of good things about this man, but I did not know how to discern between facts and exaggerations. Or between what is said about him by those who are on the other side of the fence, and those who revere him and swear by his name. Nevertheless, Reda Shata is most unusual human being and chatting with him could be very useful and informative for both the skeptics and the believers.

Imam Reda: “A man’s greatest asset is his heart.”

I met with Imam Reda. He touched my heart, not because of an emotional weakness or a predisposition for liking him and believing in him, but because of that unmistakable goodness emanating from him and his legendary generosity. Imam Reda was born in 1968 in Kafr al Battikh, in northeastern Egypt. He lost his mother at a young age, and lived in a very modest home with his father and grandmother. They never had a TV, an air conditioning, running hot water or any item of luxury. At 18, he enrolled in Al Azhar University and four years later, he graduated with honors, seventh in his class; a large class of 3,400 students. To earn his bread, he went to Saudi Arabia to teach Al Sharia, (Islamic law) to Saudi children. In the Saudi kingdom, Imam Reda faced a very literal form or interpretation of Islam, quite different from the Islam he studied in Egypt, especially in matters related to women’s rights, social status and woman’s role in Muslim community. Five years later, Imam Reda returned to his homeland Egypt, and once again, to make a living, he opened a small furniture business. But teaching Islam was always on his mind. By then Egypt has changed politically, and amid this political change, the government began to monitor new social Islamic movements, allegedly fueled by radical imams. This would be the second dilemma Imam Reda will be facing on the religious landscape. Politics, power and truthful teachings of Islam do not blend well, thought imam Reda. So, he returned to his village, and to his great delight, he was appointed as the new imam of his hometown mosque. A dream came true for the young and visionary Reda Shata. One day, his visions and bright open mind will come handy and will serve him well, when he will face the Western world.

REDA SHATA IN THE WESTERN WORLD:

In 2000, Imam Shata left Egypt and went to Germany, where he settled in the industrial section of Stuttgart. Europe was a large window for the young imam. A large window from where he could and would see a wider view of the world, a universe of multiple societies and ethnic groups sharing equal freedom and the absolute right of free speech and free expression, privileges and rights which Egyptians did not totally enjoy. And so candidly he admitted. “I saw a different world. A larger world, I was impressed by the freedom of speech and the liberty people took in expressing their feelings, emotions and beliefs without fear or threat of being jailed or maltreated.”, told me Imam Reda. One year later, he made a trip to the United States and visited the Muslim society in Bay Bridge, Brooklyn. At that time, and following the attack on the World Trade Center, several Muslim communities in the United States were targeted and fell under the microscopic investigation of the government. Bay Bridge Muslim community and its mosque were not an exception. The previous imam of the Mosque in Brooklyn encountered continuous acts of hostilities and could not take it anymore. He resigned. Imam Reda was the obvious choice for succeeding his predecessor. Chosen by the community and highly

recommended by scholars at Al Azhar in Egypt, Reda Shata was nominated the new Imam and head of the mosque. He consented to take the job, provided that the US government will give him a work permit and allow him to bring his family to the United States. In October 2002, the American Consulate in Cairo granted visas to the Shata family. Imam Reda's wife and three small daughters boarded a plane for New York City.

Imam Reda: "Only goodness and forgiveness bring you closer to God."

With lots of personal efforts, charismatic persona, very likable personality, open mind policy, new constructive and peaceful visions, constant moral and financial support to the needy and the poor, and direct rapport with American Muslims and immigrants Muslims from around the world, Imam Shata transformed his new assignment into one of the most visible, active and affluent Muslim communities in the United States. Insiders told me that his generosity and personal sacrifices were the driving force behind the success of the Islamic Society of Bay Bridge, the very society he was entrusted to develop and ameliorate. Despite the fact that he does not speak English, Imam Reda managed to effectively communicate with Muslims and non-Muslims from multiple ethnic backgrounds and faiths. Amazingly enough, those who praise and highly admire him are not necessarily Muslims. Many of them are Christians and Jews. While I was on 5th avenue asking for direction on how to get to his office, I asked two men if they knew where Imam Reda's mosque or office is located, and with a welcoming smile, both of them said "Of course, right there, you can't miss it." I asked them again "Do you know Imam Reda?" and without hesitation both replied "Of course. Everybody here knows the Imam." One of them added "He is a very good man. He has a big heart." I dared to ask him, "Are you Muslim?" and the man replied: "No, I am Polish, I am Christian." I thanked them and headed toward the mosque, but I got lost again. So, I asked a third person how to get there. The man replied "The Imam? He is right there, ahead of you, at the corner of the street talking to these people."

I asked him, "Are you Polish? You look European to me." He replied: "No, I am from Binghamton originally, I have a shop here. I know the Imam, I like him, I see him here all the time." I got curious and I asked him again: "Have you talked before to Imam Reda?" The man responded: "No. I don't think he speaks English. I say hello to him when he passes by and he greets me back very gently and always with a friendly smile. I like him." I introduced myself and said I am so and so. He introduced himself and said: "Hi, I am Bruce Goldstein". It is self explanatory, folks! Imam Reda is highly cultured even though, he does not speak a word in English. As soon as he begins to talk to you, you will notice the abundance of his knowledge of comparative societies, his in-depth understanding of the fabric of Western values, traditions and principles, and above all his admiration for law and order. He praises the Americans for respecting the laws and conducting their business transactions built upon intelligence, commitment and professionalism. You sense the human warmth and depth in the way he constructs his sentences and the manner in which he explains the differences between the American Muslims and Arab Muslims. He is authoritative yet humble and funny. He makes you smile, laugh and by the same token, invites you to rethink your priorities. You can learn a lot from this man. And he is so honest and open about it. "No strings attached. I will help you in any way I can. It does not make any difference to me whether you are Muslim, a Jew or a Christian. If I have something with me, I will share it with you. And I do not expect anything in return."

HOW DOES HE SPEND HIS TIME?

You will be amazed. In prayers? Not really. Of course, he does pray many times a day, but he spends the greatest portion of his time solving others' problems. Teachers, shop owners, physicians, hot dog vendors, thieves, sinners, hustlers, humanitarians, good souls, taxi drivers, immigrants, married and divorced couples, beggars, cheaters, blind, flat broke people, evicted families, even policemen come to see him and solicit his help and guidance. And he deals with all these problems. "You see, this woman over there, she came to me and started to cry because she has been evicted from her home. She has two kids and no job. Believe me I did not know her name. All I knew about her is what she told me. She broke my heart. I had to do something to help her. So, the first thing I have done was paying her rent and buying food for her children.", said Imam Reda. I asked him "Was she a Muslim woman?", he replied: "I never asked her. What I saw was a family tragedy and I had to help. Another day, a woman came to me and she was scared to death. She told me that her husband abuses her all the time. She called 911 and the police came to her home. And nothing happened, the truth I tell you I don't know what the police did. But the abuse continued. I went to talk to this abusive man. I did not talk to him

about Islam or any religious matter. I just wanted to use common sense with him. I talked to him like an ordinary man who really cares about him and about his family. I did not act as an Imam but as a simple and considerate human being. You don't have to be an Imam to serve God and help others. Any good man, any good woman, any good human being can serve God well, if this person gives from his heart and treats others with goodness and fairness. This is what I do.

So I spent sometime with this troubled husband and persuaded him to apologize to his wife and to promise God all Mighty that he is going to change his behavior and become a good husband. I am delighted to learn now that both of them., the husband and the wife are living happily.” “What else do you do Imam”, I asked him. “Well, my day is full. I welcome everybody and I listen to all of them...I listen to all those who come to see me. Please, you have to understand that I am not a political leader, I do not talk about politics nor do I criticize any form of government. Politics frighten me and sadden my heart. This could be very difficult for some hardliners to believe that an imam -in this case, me- cares less about politics. I don't care about politics. I spend my days listening to the troubles of people and figuring out how to help and solve their problems...Today, a man came to me and asked me to introduce him to a good woman who is a good marriage material... and later in the evening, a married woman came to me to complaint about what her husband did to her. He invited a daughter from a previous marriage to live with them... Two days ago, a waiter rushed to my office to ask me if it is Ok to serve beer in the restaurant where he works. He was concerned because he was Muslim and Muslims as you know—at least good Muslims—don't drink alcohol Also, there is this Arab Muslim man who asked me if he should give all his inheritance to his children or if he should divide the inheritance between his wife and his children, because our Islamic laws are different from secular laws in the United States. He is an American now but he is still a Muslim, a Muslim who must abide with Islamic laws....You name it, all sorts of things I deal with. Also I spend a great deal of my time visiting people in hospitals, all kinds of people Muslims and non-Muslims.

And how about this story, a man came to me and complained about a relative of his who drives fast cars and wears short skirts...I asked him “Do they listen to you, Imam”. He replied “Let me tell you this, sometimes, the police catches bad people, people from our Muslim community. You know, they arrest them for something they have done, stealing a T shirt, a small fist fight, overcharging on a merchandise and always this hot dog street business. When the police finds out that they were Muslims, the police tells those bad teenagers, we are going to take you to the Imam. The kids get scared. They know I will be tough on them. They know I will call on their parents and lecture them and put them under constant surveillance. Besides, the kids don't want their parents to know what they did. They are afraid of their parents. So my dear friend, as you see, I am also a family friend and counselor...Yes, they listen to me. Once I lecture those kids, just once, they will never steal again...” A report published by the New York Times said, “Even the police have used the imam's influence to their advantage, warning disorderly teenagers that they will be taken to the mosque rather than the station. They say: ‘No, not the imam! He'll tell my parents,’ said Russell Kain, a recently retired officer of the 68th Precinct.”

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How does Imam Reda cop with Westernized laws and particularly American laws?

He perfectly understand the enormous differences between the American way of life and the Muslim religious and social codes. Although he remains loyal to Islamic Sharia (Law) and Al Fikh (Jurisprudence), Imam Reda accepts the pragmatic and legal reality of American laws, Muslims are facing today and required to abide by. With tact, wit, justified and necessary interpretations of the spirit of the Islamic law, Imam Reda tries to blend and unite what is fair, just and pragmatic for Muslims who live in the United States. For example, Muslims are not allowed to touch alcohol or pork meat. But a Muslim waiter is allowed to serve alcohol and pork to customers if this waiter could not find other job. If his livelihood depends on that job which requires him to serve alcohol and pork meat, then it is Halal (OK, Kosher) to do so. And how about Muslim women who do not wear or remove their hijab in public? Does Imam Reda allow that behavior? “A Muslim woman has the right to remove her hijab if she feels that her life is endangered by not doing so or threatened for keeping the hijab”, said Imam Reda.

CANDID CHAT WITH IMAM REDA

Q: Imam, besides prayers, how do you help the needy. How do you provide practical help and immediate assistance?

Imam: All sorts of help and financial assistance. For example, you are unable to pay your rent? We will pay your rent. You lost your job. We will inquire to find out why you lost your job. We try to talk to your employer and see if there is a possibility to get you back you job. If not, we will do all our best to find a job as soon as possible. You did not pay your utilities bills. Without questions, we will pay those bills. You got sick. We will buy medicine for you. If you need to check into a hospital. We will do that also and we pay all the hospital's bills. If you are not well trained or you lack career orientation, we will train you and assist you in job placement. You just arrived to the United States and you have no place to go to or a relative to offer you hospitality, we will make it easy on you and we will bring you home. You stay with us, in our homes, we will find a place for you. You are having problem with your siblings, parents, husband, wife, children, we come to the rescue, we mediate, we bring people together to understand each other and find out how we can bring unity and happiness to families. You cannot afford to go to school or college, you need to pay the tuition, buy books, etc., we will take care of that. We will find you a good school and we will pay for your schooling. There are so many ways to help each other. One of the greatest virtues of a person is his generosity. If you give, God will give you. If you forgive, God will forgive you.

Q: So, you help all the Muslims who are in need of a helping hand.

Imam: Correct. I am fully dedicated to them. However, my help extends beyond the Muslim community. Meaning, I will help or I will try to help any person regardless of his or her faith. Charity and goodness are not dictated by one religion and exclusively offered to those who belong to your community and religion. Generosity and good deeds are not the teaching or principles of one religion, and therefore, good deeds should come from all people, Muslims, Jews, Christians, all the world. I believe in this. This is why I help everybody, Muslim and non-Muslim people.

Q: The 9/11 tragedy had bitter consequences and alarming effect on the Muslim community in the United States. Right?

Imam: Correct. We are hurt. As a Muslim community, we have suffered some hardship and hostilities. I do not blame the American people. I do understand how they feel. It was tragic. I do not advocate violence. Violence cannot be justified. This is why, we should open a direct and honest dialogue with everybody. We have to trust each other. Believe me, not all Muslims are terrorists. The more you know about other communities, the more you will understand that ignorance and preconceived notions are self-destructive. When you understand how the others live, feel, think, cry, mourn, rejoice and share moral values and high ethics, you become aware of the truth and you will be amazed to discover that very few things in life separate us, and lots of beautiful things, honest feelings, sharing similar family values, arts, culture, respect, dignity bind us together. Islam reflects many Jewish and Christian values. Islam reveres and honors the prophets of Judaism and Jesus Christ. The Koran recognized the prophets of Israel and the values they taught. Many of our Muslim brothers have Jewish names...they were named after the Jewish Prophets, like Abraham, Yaacoub. And the Koran devoted pages and pages to Mary, mother of Jesus. In Islam. we call Mary "Sittina Maryam", meaning our Lady Mary. And we call Jesus "Min Rouh' Al Lah", meaning he is from the breath and soul of God. Before God, we are all brothers and sisters.

Q: So, who to blame, Imam?

Imam: Acts of violence are not to be tolerated. Violence is evil. Violence destroys communities, separates beloved ones, creates hatred, disrupts the peace and order, and deprives families from serenity and happiness. I tell you the truth my friend.

I was saddened and shocked by the 9/11 tragedy. Many Muslims felt the same way. Many innocents died. And among them were many Muslim people. Who is to blame? Those who caused these destructive violent acts are to be blame. But please, for the love of God, do not blame all the Muslims in America.

Q: What is happiness to you, Imam?

Imam: Give me a happy family and I give you a happy nation. It starts within the family. Family is the backbone of a country. Happy families create happy communities. And happy communities create happy countries. You begin by loving and respecting your parents. You love your parents. You show them gratitude and loyalty. You admire and respects your teachers, because they are your family too. You honor the elderly, because they cared about you when they were young. You respect your imam, priest, rabbi, because they teach you values, and they are too, members of your family. You show obedience and respect to officers of the law, because they provide security to your community, safety to your beloved ones, they sacrifice their own lives to protect yours. And they are also your family. You honor and revere your country, because your country unites you with others, provides you with a national pride and defines who you are. That is happiness. Respect, unconditional love, helping each other, welcoming each other with open arms and a warm heart... And I learn all these values from Islam. So you see, Islam teaches love, peace and happiness. Words of wisdom and love came from the mouth and heart of Imam Reda Shata.

And I came to believe that for Islam to be fully understood in America as a Religion of Peace and Love, Imam Reda Shata Must Take the Lead!

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