

The Guardian

My month of being Jewish

David Baddiel's new film *The Infidel* inspired one Muslim writer to immerse himself in Jewish life - would he enjoy the experience, or are the cultures just too different? *David Baddiel on faith, humour and *The Infidel**



Sarfraz Manzoor celebrating Purim with a Jewish family. Photograph: David Levene

Sarfraz Manzoor

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I am not, in a strictly factual sense, Jewish. But put to one side my Asian looks, ignore my Pakistani parentage and overlook my Muslim name, and I could easily be one of the children of Israel. When I read, in these pages, Jonathan Margolis's personal piece about being "Jew-ish" rather than Jewish, the bells were ringing in my head, too. What with my extensive collection of Woody Allen and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* DVDs, I've always thought I wouldn't have to change my life hugely if I were to wake up and find my name changed from Sarfraz to Seth.

And so, inspired by the release of *The Infidel*, a sweet new comedy written by David Baddiel about a Muslim taxi driver who discovers he is actually Jewish, I decided to put my theory to the test by spending a month "living Jewish".

My journey began in Golders Green in London on the last Sunday of February, with an

invitation to attend a family meal celebrating the festival of Purim. I'm not sure what I was expecting, walking into the house, but it certainly wasn't a throng of young children dressed in Chinese costumes and a rabbi with comedy contact lenses and a large clock round his neck, looking like a kosher hip-hop star. Purim, I learned, was one of the jollier Jewish festivals, and largely for the benefit of children. Well, that explained the costumes - the Chinese theme was never fully explained.

The hip-hop rabbi was Canadian and spoke in a declamatory voice, as if in permanent preacher mode. When he learned what I was, he immediately began firing questions and hurling accusations. I felt as if I was being put on the spot. "It isn't my fault," I said, nibbling on fried seaweed. "We are not all the same, we don't all think alike." It didn't seem to work - when will people stop thinking all Guardian writers are the same?

To lighten the mood, I asked how he felt about mixed-faith relationships. "It's treason," he boomed. "It is betraying your religion and everything you are." I concluded he wasn't strongly in favour and suggested he meet my mother: "You'd have a lot in common." Our conversation was interrupted by the photographer needing some pictures. "I hope all this chumming with Jews doesn't get me a fatwa," I said, as the rabbi mugged for the camera. "Don't worry, we'll find a place to hide you," I heard someone respond.

There was a knock on the door and another rabbi - this time dressed in a jester's hat - swept into the room, accompanied by a gaggle of children sporting brightly coloured Afro wigs. When I introduced myself, the jester-hatted rabbi promptly invited me to an event he had helped organise: "We are re-enacting the Exodus," he said. "Sounds great," I replied.

The re-enactment took place two Sundays later in a warehouse opposite the BBC - the British Bathroom Company - a short bus ride from the Brent Cross shopping centre in north London. Inside, the audience was entirely Jewish: men with brimmed hats and ringlets and women clasping half a dozen children. I thought Muslims had a lot of children until I started spending time with Jewish people.

Dressed in my tweed jacket and conspicuously not wearing a large black hat, I was the only non-Jew present - and I couldn't have felt more out of place if I'd been stark naked with "Long live Palestine" tattooed on my chest. The event had been organised by the youth wing of an ultra-orthodox Jewish sect whose name translated as "Army of God". I wanted to tell the organisers that we had an Army of God in Islam, too - better known by its Arabic name of Hezbollah - but I didn't have thechutzpah.

The rabbi had promised me that the Exodus Experience was a spectacular journey back in time, a chance to witness the brutal slavery imposed on the Jewish people, and to relive the 10 plagues and the parting of the Red Sea. In fact, the production was more B&Q than B DeMille: the parting of the Red Sea looked a lot like the opening of two painted wooden doors, and the plagues were revisited by dropping plastic frogs from the ceiling. Moses spoke with an American accent as he encouraged us all to join him in pleading with the pharaoh - also American - to "let my people go!" But while it may have been cheap and somewhat hammy, I could see why parents brought their children here. Religions are kept alive by the retelling of stories, and the Exodus Experience was a way of reminding these children where they had come from.

A few days later, I visited the newly re-opened Jewish Museum. The museum included

displays that recreated life in the East End of London when it was a primarily Jewish area; many of the working-class Jews there worked as tailors and seamstresses. That was also how my mother made money when I was young - dressmaking being an acceptable job for an Asian woman. The Jewish Museum also included a section on the racism suffered by Jews and, again, the parallels were stark: the same insults they faced in the early part of the last century resurface now against Muslims. History repeats itself, but how many Muslims visit the Jewish Museum to learn that lesson?

Feeling like I was beginning to overdose on history, I spent the following week delving into Jewish comedy and music. I went to see Ivor Dembina, a Jewish comedian who did a routine about his recent trip to Israel, and visited the Klezmer Klub in an upstairs room of a central London pub to listen to tales of East-End Jewish life sung in Yiddish, accompanied by fiddles and accordions. For Alex, a woman I spoke to during the concert, it was a way of remaining connected to her culture.

"My grandmother is 92 and a proper East-End Jew," she told me. "When I listen to this music, it makes me feel closer to her." I understood exactly what she meant - the soundtracks to old Indian films fulfil that same role for me. I cannot listen to that music without being reminded of nights as a young boy spent watching Bollywood classics with my late father.

I so enjoyed the concert that I signed up to join a klezmer band, and found myself, a few days later, in a brightly lit classroom with a ukulele in my lap, trying to play along with a couple of fiddlers, a guitarist and an accordion player. The teacher, Meg, plays in a brilliant klezmer ensemble called She'koyokh, but like most of the band and the students, she is not actually Jewish. "Why don't you just join in and play D and G chords?" she said. I tried to do this, but my lack of timing was quickly clear. "How about you stick with just the D?" When I was not even able to manage this, she suggested that I just try "to enjoy myself and not worry about joining in".

I felt my Jewish journey had gone well so far - but the two big tests were still to come: food and women. I love my culture's cuisine and had never tasted Jewish cooking, so I invited Denise Phillips, a chef who specialises in it, to my flat to teach me how to make chicken soup and challah bread. Both were, she told me, quintessentially Jewish dishes, but I had trouble believing that about the bread - it even had Allah in the name.

Denise was glamorous and terrifying in equal measure, and things started badly when it transpired that I had confused my food blender for a processor. Denise looked faintly appalled, but I tried to cheer her up by saying that, from my cursory understanding of Jewish history, Moses also managed without a food processor. We went to buy the ingredients. I had heard that Muslims could eat kosher meat but I wasn't sure, so I suggested we make halal chicken soup. Denise told me she couldn't be seen walking into a halal butcher's, because "I have a reputation to keep".

As we chopped the vegetables in my kitchen and plonked them into the water where the chicken meat was boiling, Denise told me about Jewish cooking - separating milk and meat; the importance of kosher; and the historical origins of meals such as unleavened bread. Meanwhile, the soup simmered away. A few hours later, the food was ready. Because my meal wasn't kosher Denise wasn't able to eat it, so it was up to me. The bread was delicious. I sipped the chicken soup. Denise had told me it was the

Jewish penicillin - and she was right: two teaspoons were about enough. "It tastes very homely," I said, but the truth was I found it too bland and not nearly spicy enough. Keep your chicken soup, I felt like saying to Denise, I'll stick to chicken jalfrezi.

It was the week before Passover and my Jewish month was almost at an end. I had sampled Jewish family celebrations, history, comedy, music and food. I already have a girlfriend, but I was still keen to find out about the dating lives of single Jews. The Jewish Community Centre was holding an alternative Seder and this was, I was told, the sort of event that single Jewish men and women attended in the hope of finding kosher love.

Throughout my month, pretty much everyone I met told me that dating outside the faith was a complete no-no. The rabbi had said so at the Purim dinner, Denise had said so while cooking chicken soup, and now 23-year-old Ella repeated the same line. "The things I am looking for in a man are rarely found in a non-Jew," she said. What are they? I asked. "A connection with one's Judaism," she said, and I had to agree that she would have a hard time finding that in a non-Jew. "But surely you can find connections about things that are not to do with religion?" I asked. "I just don't connect with people who are not Jewish," she replied, "and anyway, marriage is a way of passing on traditions and history - I want my kids to be able to share those traditions."

This preoccupation with marrying within the religion reminded me of what it is like being Muslim, and trying to convince one's family that love is no respecter of which god, if any, you pray to. But what was different was that among the Muslims I knew, that pressure was coming from parents, whereas here it seemed that it was young Jews themselves who were determined to marry within the religion. "It's all right for you," one man told me. "There's like a billion Muslims out there - there are only nine million of us Jews, so it's more important that we stick together."

It was the first Friday of April and my time being Jewish was almost at an end. I had met countless people whom I would never usually have encountered in my life. Some were self-declared orthodox, and others described themselves as cultural or even atheist Jews - but all were certain that they were Jewish. That Judaism was big enough to find a space for so many varieties of Jew I found really impressive - if only Islam was more like that. Jews seem more able to laugh at their religion than Muslims, although you might also say they find it easier to choose when they want to stress their Jewish identity.

Yet, despite these differences, what really struck me was the many similarities. I had always believed that Muslims and Jews had masses in common: we both love circumcision and ritualised slaughter - of animals, usually. I hadn't realised that Muslims can even eat meat that is kosher, but Jews cannot eat halal meat. Muslims and Jews also share a persecution complex: Jews complain that others think they rule the world, and Muslims complain that everyone thinks they want to rule the world. Muslims and Jews are so close that they both believe that the same piece of land is their historical home.

After a month of living Jewish, I came away wishing more people - both Muslims and Jews - would step outside of their social bubbles and spend time in the other community. That way they too would be reminded of that banal but powerful truth, that underneath the skull caps and the headscarves, whether we eat chicken soup or

chicken jalfrezi, we really are more similar than we are different.

This article was amended on 8 April 2010. The original referred to an alternative Cedar at the Jewish Cultural Centre. This was wrong on two counts. The correct spelling is Seder and the event was held at the Jewish Community Centre for London. This has now been corrected.

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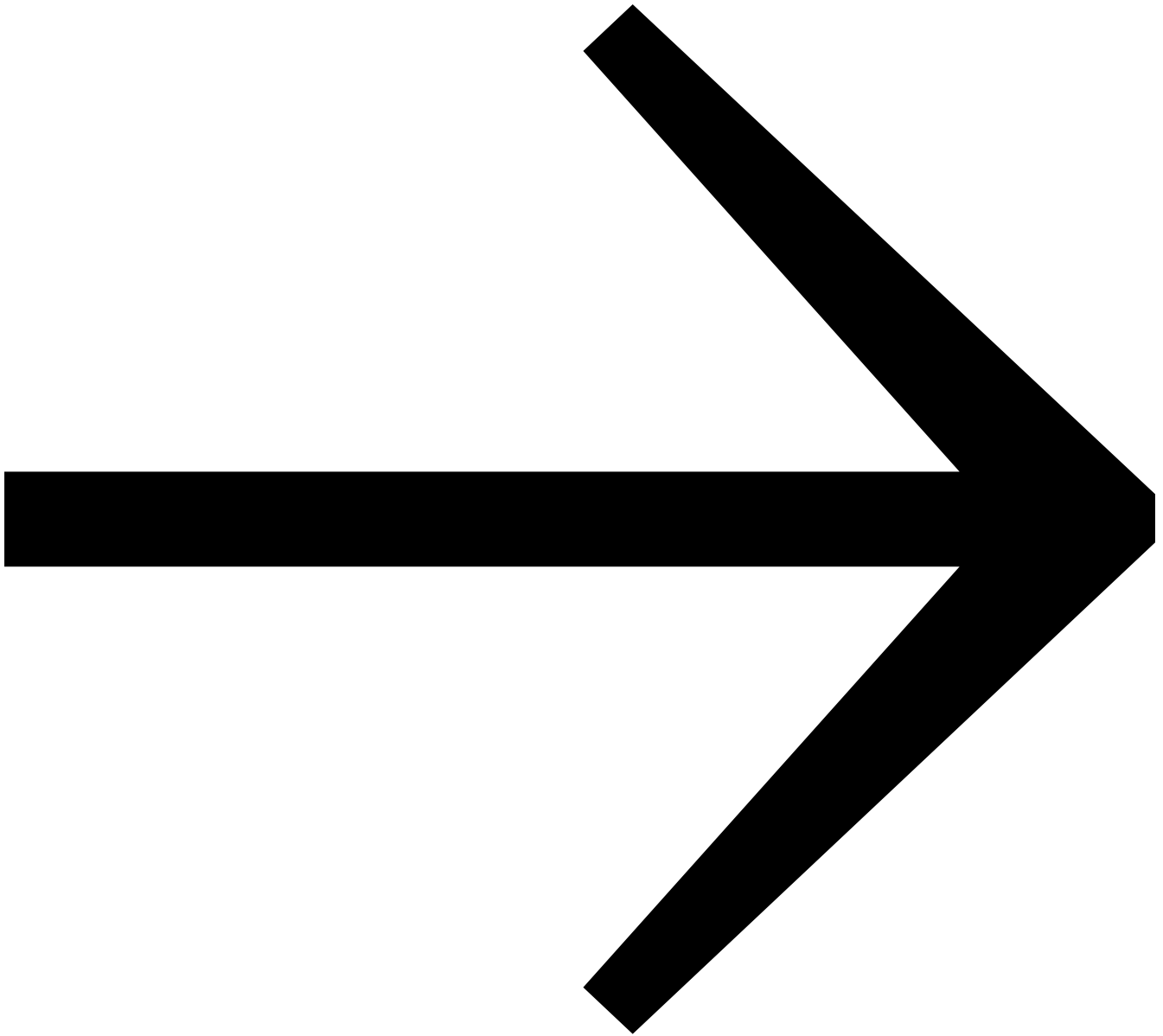
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- The Infidel
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