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**BODY:**

The imam begins his trek before dawn, his long robe billowing like a ghost through empty streets. In this dark, quiet hour, his thoughts sometimes drift back to the Egyptian farming village where he was born.

But as the sun rises over Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, Sheik Reda Shata's new world comes to life. The R train rattles beneath a littered stretch of sidewalk, where Mexican workers huddle in the cold. An electric Santa dances in a doughnut shop window. Neon signs beckon. Gypsy cabs blare their horns.

The imam slips into a plain brick building, nothing like the golden-domed mosque of his youth. He stops to pray, and then climbs the cracked linoleum steps to his cluttered office. The answering machine blinks frantically, a portent of the endless questions to come.

A teenage girl wants to know: Is it halal, or lawful, to eat a Big Mac? Can alcohol be served, a waiter wonders, if it is prohibited by the Koran? Is it wrong to take out a mortgage, young Muslim professionals ask, when Islam frowns upon monetary interest?

The questions are only a piece of the daily puzzle Mr. Shata must solve as the imam of the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, a thriving New York mosque where several thousand Muslims worship.

To his congregants, Mr. Shata is far more than the leader of daily prayers and giver of the Friday sermon. Many of them now live in a land without their parents, who typically assist with finding a spouse. There are fewer uncles and cousins to help resolve personal disputes. There is no local House of Fatwa to issue rulings on ethical questions.

Sheik Reda, as he is called, arrived in Brooklyn one year after Sept. 11. Virtually overnight, he became an Islamic judge and nursery school principal, a matchmaker and marriage counselor, a 24-hour hot line on all things Islamic.

Day after day, he must find ways to reconcile Muslim tradition with American life. Little in his rural Egyptian upbringing or years of Islamic scholarship prepared him for the challenge of leading a mosque in America.

The job has worn him down and opened his mind. It has landed him, exhausted, in the hospital and earned him a following far beyond Brooklyn.

"America transformed me from a person of rigidity to flexibility," said Mr. Shata, speaking through an Arabic translator. "I went from a country where a sheik would speak and the people listened to one where the sheik talks and the people talk back."

This is the story of Mr. Shata's journey west: the making of an American imam.

Over the last half-century, the Muslim population in the United States has risen significantly. Immigrants from the Middle East, South Asia and Africa have settled across the country, establishing mosques from Boston to Los Angeles, and turning Islam into one of the nation's fastest growing religions. By some estimates, as many as six million Muslims now live in America.

Leading this flock calls for improvisation. Imams must unify diverse congregations with often-clashing Islamic traditions. They must grapple with the threat of terrorism, answering to law enforcement agents without losing the trust of their fellow Muslims. Sometimes they must set aside conservative beliefs that prevail in the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam.

Islam is a legalistic faith: Muslims believe in a divine law that guides their daily lives, including what they should eat, drink and wear. In countries where the religion reigns, this is largely the accepted way.

But in the West, what Islamic law prohibits is everywhere. Alcohol fills chocolates. Women jog in sports bras. For many Muslims in America, life is a daily clash between Islamic mores and material temptation. At the center of this clash stands the imam.

In America, imams evoke a simplistic caricature -- of robed, bearded clerics issuing fatwas in foreign lands. Hundreds of imams live in the United States, but their portrait remains flatly one-dimensional. Either they are symbols of diversity, breaking the Ramadan fast with smiling politicians, or zealots, hurrying into their storefront mosques.

Mr. Shata, 37, is neither a firebrand nor a ready advocate of progressive Islam. Some of his views would offend conservative Muslims; other beliefs would repel American liberals. He is in many ways a work in progress, mapping his own middle ground between two different worlds.

The imam's cramped, curtained office can hardly contain the dramas that unfold inside. Women cry. Husbands storm off. Friendships end. Every day brings soap opera plots and pitch.

A Moroccan woman falls to her knees near the imam's Hewlett-Packard printer. "Have mercy on me!" she wails to a friend who has accused her of theft. Another day, it is a man whose Lebanese wife has concealed their marriage and newborn son from her strict father. "I will tell him everything!" the husband screams.

Mr. Shata settles dowries, confronts wife abusers, brokers business deals and tries to arrange marriages. He approaches each problem with an almost scientific certainty that it can be solved. "I try to be more of a doctor than a judge," said Mr. Shata. "A judge sentences. A doctor tries to remedy."

Imams in the United States now serve an estimated 1,200 mosques. Some of their congregants have lived here for generations, assimilating socially and succeeding professionally. But others are recent immigrants, still struggling to find their place in America. Demographers expect their numbers to rise in the coming decades, possibly surpassing those of American Jews.

Like many of their faithful, most imams in the United States come from abroad. They are recruited primarily for their knowledge of the Koran and the language in which it was revealed, Arabic.

But few are prepared for the test that awaits. Like the parish priests who came generations before, imams are called on to lead a community on the margins of American civic life. They are conduits to and arbiters of an exhilarating, if sometimes hostile world, filled with promise and peril.

### An Invitation to Islam

More than 5,000 miles lie between Brooklyn and Kafr al Battikh, Mr. Shata's birthplace in northeastern Egypt. Situated where the Nile Delta meets the Suez Canal, it was a village of dirt roads and watermelon vines when Mr. Shata was born in 1968.

Egypt was in the throes of change. The country had just suffered a staggering defeat in the Six Day War with Israel, and protests against the government followed. Hoping to counter growing radicalism, a new president, Anwar Sadat, allowed a long-repressed Islamic movement to flourish.

The son of a farmer and fertilizer salesman, Mr. Shata belonged to the lowest rung of Egypt's rural middle class. His house had no electricity. He did not see a television until he was 15.

Islam came to him softly, in the rhythms of his grandmother's voice. At bedtime, she would tell him the story of the Prophet Muhammad, the seventh-century founder of Islam. The boy heard much that was familiar. Like the prophet, he had lost his mother at a young age.

"She told me the same story maybe a thousand times," he said.

At the age of 5, he began memorizing the Koran. Like thousands of children in the Egyptian countryside, he attended a Sunni religious school subsidized by the government and connected to Al Azhar University, a bastion of Islamic scholarship.

Too poor to buy books, the young Mr. Shata hand-copied from hundreds at the town library. The bound volumes now line the shelves of his Bay Ridge apartment. When he graduated, he enrolled at Al Azhar and headed to Cairo by train. There, he sat on a bench for hours, marveling at the sights.

"I was like a lost child," he said. "Cars. We didn't have them. People of different colors. Foreigners. Women almost naked. It was like an imaginary world."

At 18, Mr. Shata thought of becoming a judge. But at his father's urging, he joined the college of imams, the Dawah.

The word means invitation. It refers to the duty of Muslims to invite, or call, others to the faith. Unlike Catholicism or Judaism, Islam has no ordained clergy. The Prophet Muhammad was the religion's first imam, or prayer leader, Islam's closest corollary to a rabbi or priest; schools like the Dawah are its version of a seminary or rabbinate.

After four years, Mr. Shata graduated with honors, seventh in a class of 3,400.

The next decade brought lessons in adaptation. In need of money, Mr. Shata took a job teaching sharia, or Islamic law, to children in Saudi Arabia, a country guided by Wahhabism, a puritan strain of Sunni Islam. He found his Saudi colleagues' interpretation of the Koran overly literal at times, and the treatment of women, who were not allowed to vote or drive, troubling.

Five years later, he returned to a different form of religious control in Egypt, where most imams are appointed by the government and monitored for signs of radicalism or political dissent.

"They are not allowed to deviate from the curriculum that the government sets for them," said Khaled Abou El Fadl, an Egyptian law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Mr. Shata craved greater independence, and opened a furniture business. But he missed the life of dawah and eventually returned to it as the imam of his hometown mosque, which drew 4,000 worshipers on Fridays alone.

His duties were clear: He led the five daily prayers and delivered the khutba, or Friday sermon. His mosque, like most in Egypt, was financed and managed by the government. He spent his free time giving lectures, conducting marriage ceremonies and offering occasional religious guidance.

In 2000, Mr. Shata left to work as an imam in the gritty industrial city of Stuttgart, Germany. Europe brought a fresh new freedom. "I saw a wider world," he said. "Anyone with an opinion could express it."

Then came Sept. 11.

Soon after, Mr. Shata's mosque was defiled with graffiti and smeared with feces.

The next summer, Mr. Shata took a call from an imam in Brooklyn. The man, Mohamed Moussa, was leaving his mosque, exhausted by the troubles of his congregants following the terrorist attacks. The mosque was looking for a replacement, and Mr. Shata had come highly recommended by a professor at Al Azhar.

Most imams are recruited to American mosques on the recommendation of other imams or trusted scholars abroad, and are usually offered an annual contract. Some include health benefits and subsidized housing; others are painfully spare. The pay can range from \$20,000 to \$50,000.

Mr. Shata had heard stories of Muslim hardship in America. The salary at the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge was less than what he was earning in Germany. But foremost on his mind were his wife and three small daughters, whom he had not seen in months. Germany had refused them entry.

He agreed to take the job if he could bring his family to America. In October 2002, the American Embassy in Cairo granted visas to the Shatas and they boarded a plane for New York.

A Mosque, a Magnet

A facade of plain white brick rises up from Fifth Avenue just south of 68th Street in Bay Ridge. Two sets of words, one in Arabic and another in English, announce the mosque's dual identity from a marquee above its gray metal doors.

To the mosque's base -- Palestinian, Egyptian, Yemeni, Moroccan and Algerian immigrants -- it is known as Masjid Moussab, named after one of the prophet's companions, Moussab Ibn Omair. To the mosque's English-speaking neighbors, descendants of the Italians, Irish and Norwegians who once filled the neighborhood, it is the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge.

Mosques across America are commonly named centers or societies, in part because they provide so many services. Some 140 mosques serve New York City, where an estimated 600,000 Muslims live, roughly 20 percent of them African-American, said Louis Abdellatif Cristillo, an anthropologist at Teachers College who has canvassed the city's mosques.

The Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, like other American mosques, is run by a board of directors, mostly Muslim professionals from the Palestinian territories. What began in 1984 as a small storefront on Bay Ridge Avenue, with no name and no imam, has grown into one of the city's vital Muslim centers, a magnet for new immigrants.

Its four floors pulse with life: a nursery school, an Islamic bookstore, Koran classes and daily lectures. Some 1,500 Muslims worship at the mosque on Fridays, often crouched in prayer on the sidewalk. Albanians, Pakistanis and others who speak little Arabic listen to live English translations of the sermons through headsets. It is these congregants' crumpled dollar bills, collected in a cardboard box, that enable the mosque to survive.

Among the city's imams, Bay Ridge is seen as a humbling challenge.

"It's the first station for immigrants," said Mr. Moussa, Mr. Shata's predecessor. "And immigrants have a lot of problems."

Skip 911. Call the Imam.

Mr. Shata landed at Kennedy International Airport wearing a crimson felt hat and a long gray jilbab that fell from his neck to his sandaled toes, the proud dress of an Al Azhar scholar. He spoke no English. But already, he carried some of the West inside. He could quote liberally from Voltaire, Shaw and Kant. For an Egyptian, he often jokes, he was inexplicably punctual.

The first thing Mr. Shata loved about America, like Germany, was the order.

"In Egypt, if a person passes through a red light, that means he's smart," he said. "In America, he's very disrespected."

Americans stood in line. They tended their yards. One could call the police and hear a rap at the door minutes later. That fact impressed not only Mr. Shata, but also the women of his new mosque.

They had gained a reputation for odd calls to 911. One woman called because a relative abroad had threatened to take her inheritance. "The officers left and didn't write anything," Mr. Shata said, howling with laughter. "There was nothing for them to write."

Another woman called, angry because her husband had agreed to let a daughter from a previous marriage spend the night.

To Mr. Shata, the calls made sense. The women's parents, uncles and brothers -- figures of authority in family conflict -- were overseas. Instead, they dialed 911, hoping for a local substitute. Soon they would

learn to call the imam.

A bearish man with a soft, bearded face, Mr. Shata struck his congregants as an odd blend of things. He was erudite yet funny; authoritative at the mosque's wooden pulpit and boyishly charming between prayers.

Homemakers, doctors, cabdrivers and sheiks stopped by to assess the new imam. He regaled them with Dunkin' Donuts coffee, fetched by the Algerian keeper of the mosque, and then told long, poetic stories that left his visitors silent, their coffee cold.

"You just absorb every word he says," said Linda Sarsour, 25, a Muslim activist in Brooklyn.

The imam, too, was taking note. Things worked differently in America, where mosques were run as nonprofit organizations and congregants had a decidedly democratic air. Mr. Shata was shocked when a tone-deaf man insisted on giving the call to prayer. Such a man would be ridiculed in Egypt, where the callers, or muezzinin, have voices so beautiful they sometimes record top-selling CD's.

But in the land of equal opportunity, a man with a mediocre voice could claim discrimination. Mr. Shata relented. He shudders when the voice periodically sounds.

No sooner had Mr. Shata started his new job than all manner of problems arrived at his worn wooden desk: rebellious teenagers, marital strife, confessions of philandering, accusations of theft.

The imam responded creatively. Much of the drama involved hot dog vendors. There was the pair who shared a stand, but could not stand each other. They came to the imam, who helped them divide the business.

The most notorious hot dog seller stood accused of stealing thousands of dollars in donations he had raised for the children of his deceased best friend. But there was no proof. The donations had been in cash. The solution, the imam decided, was to have the man swear an oath on the Koran.

"Whoever lies while taking an oath on the Koran goes blind afterward," said Mr. Shata, stating a belief that has proved useful in cases of theft. A group of men lured the vendor to the mosque, where he confessed to stealing \$11,400. His admission was recorded in a waraqa, or document, penned in Arabic and signed by four witnesses. He returned the money in full.

Dozens of waraqs sit in the locked bottom drawer of the imam's desk. In one, a Brooklyn man who burned his wife with an iron vows, in nervous Arabic scrawl, never to do it again. If he fails, he will owe her a \$10,000 "disciplinary fine." The police had intervened before, but the woman felt that she needed the imam's help.

For hundreds of Muslims, the Bay Ridge mosque has become a courthouse more welcoming than the one downtown, a police precinct more effective than the brick station blocks away. 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.

Marriage, Mortgage, McDonald's

Soon after arriving in Brooklyn, Mr. Shata observed a subtle rift among the women of his mosque. Those who were new to America remained quietly grounded in the traditions of their homelands. But some who had assimilated began to question those strictures. Concepts like shame held less weight. Actions like divorce, abhorred by Mr. Shata, were surprisingly popular.

"The woman who comes from overseas, she's like someone who comes from darkness to a very well-lit place," he said.

In early July, an Egyptian karate teacher shuffled into Mr. Shata's office and sank into a donated couch. He smiled meekly and began to talk. His new wife showed him no affection. She complained about his salary and said he lacked ambition.

The imam urged him to be patient.

Two weeks later, in came the wife. She wanted a divorce.

"We don't understand each other," the woman said. She was 32 and had come from Alexandria, Egypt, to work as an Arabic teacher. She had met her husband through a friend in Bay Ridge. Her parents, still in Egypt, had approved cautiously from afar.

"I think you should be patient," said the imam.

"I cannot," she said firmly. "He loves me, but I have to love him, too."

Mr. Shata shifted uncomfortably in his chair. There was nothing he loathed more than granting a divorce.

"It's very hard for me to let him divorce you," he said. "How can I meet God on Judgment Day?"

"It's God's law also to have divorce," she shot back. The debate continued.

Finally, Mr. Shata asked for her parents' phone number in Egypt. Over the speakerphone, they anxiously urged the imam to relent. Their daughter was clearly miserable, and they were too far away to intervene.

With a sigh, Mr. Shata asked his executive secretary, Mohamed, to print a divorce certificate. In the rare instance when the imam agrees to issue one, it is after a couple has filed for divorce with the city.

"Since you're the one demanding divorce, you can never get back together with him," the imam warned. "Ever."

The woman smiled politely.

"What matters for us is the religion," she said later. "Our law is our religion."

The religion's fiqh, or jurisprudence, is built on 14 centuries of scholarship, but imams in Europe and America often find this body of law insufficient to address life in the West. The quandaries of America were foreign to Mr. Shata.

Pornography was rampant, prompting a question Mr. Shata had never heard in Egypt: Is oral sex lawful?

Pork and alcohol are forbidden in Islam, raising questions about whether Muslims could sell beer or bacon. Tired of the menacing stares in the subway, women wanted to know if they could remove their headscarves. Muslims were navigating their way through problems Mr. Shata had never fathomed.

For a while, the imam called his fellow sheiks in Egypt with requests for fatwas, or nonbinding legal rulings. But their views carried little relevance to life in America. Some issues, like oral sex, he dared not raise. Over time, he began to find his own answers and became, as he put it, flexible.

Is a Big Mac permissible? Yes, the imam says, but not a bacon cheeseburger.

It is a woman's right, Mr. Shata believes, to remove her hijab if she feels threatened. Muslims can take jobs serving alcohol and pork, he says, but only if other work cannot be found. Oral sex is acceptable, but only between married couples. Mortgages, he says, are necessary to move forward in America.

"Islam is supposed to make a person's life easier, not harder," Mr. Shata explained.

In some ways, the imam has resisted change. He has learned little English, and interviews with Mr. Shata over the course of six months required the use of a translator.

Some imams in the United States make a point of shaking hands with women, distancing themselves from the view that such contact is improper. Mr. Shata offers women only a nod.

Daily, he passes the cinema next to his mosque but has never seen a movie in a theater. He says music should be forbidden if it "encourages sexual desire." He won't convert a non-Muslim when it seems more a matter of convenience than true belief.

"Religion is not a piece of clothing that you change," he said after turning away an Ecuadorean immigrant who sought to convert for her Syrian husband. "I don't want someone coming to Islam tonight and leaving it in the morning."

Trust in God's Plan

Ten months after he came to America, Mr. Shata collapsed.

It was Friday. The mosque was full. Hundreds of men sat pressed together, their shirts damp with summer. Their wives and daughters huddled in the women's section, one floor below. Word of the imam's sermons had spread, drawing Muslims from Albany and Hartford.

"Praise be to Allah," began Mr. Shata, his voice slowly rising.

Minutes later, the imam recalled, the room began to spin. He fell to the carpet, lost consciousness and spent a week in the hospital, plagued by several symptoms. A social worker and a counselor who treated the imam both said he suffered from exhaustion. The counselor, Ali Gheith, called it "compassion fatigue," an ailment that commonly affects disaster-relief workers.

It was not just the long hours, the new culture and the ceaseless demands that weighed on the imam. Most troubling were the psychological woes of his congregants, which seemed endless.

Sept. 11 had wrought depression and anxiety among Muslims. But unlike many priests or rabbis, imams lacked pastoral training in mental health and knew little about the social services available.

At heart was another complicated truth: Imams often approach mental illness from a strictly Islamic perspective. Hardship is viewed as a test of faith, and the answer can be found in tawwakul, trusting in God's plan. The remedy typically suggested by imams is a spiritual one, sought through fasting, prayer and reflection.

Muslim immigrants also limit themselves to religious solutions because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, said Hamada Hamid, a resident psychiatrist at New York University who founded The Journal of Muslim Mental Health. "If somebody says, 'You need this medication,' someone may respond, 'I have tawwakul,'" he said.

Mr. Gheith, a Palestinian immigrant who works in disaster preparedness for the city's health department, began meeting with the imam regularly after his collapse. Mr. Shata needed to learn to disconnect from his congregants, Mr. Gheith said. It was a concept that confounded the imam.

"I did not permit these problems to enter my heart," said Mr. Shata, "nor can I permit them to leave."

The conversations eventually led to a citywide training program for imams, blending Islam with psychology. Mr. Shata learned to identify the symptoms of mental illness and began referring people to treatment.

His congregants often refuse help, blaming black magic or the evil eye for their problems. The evil eye is believed to be a curse driven by envy, confirmed in the bad things that happen to people.

One Palestinian couple in California insisted that their erratic 18-year-old son had the evil eye. He was brought to the imam's attention after winding up on the streets of New York, and eventually received a diagnosis of schizophrenia.

Mr. Shata had less success with a man who worshiped at the mosque. He had become paranoid, certain his wife was cursing him with witchcraft. But he refused treatment, insisting divorce was the only cure.

Time and again, Mr. Shata's new country has called for creativity and patience, for a careful negotiation between tradition and modernity.

"Here you don't know what will solve a problem," he said. "It's about looking for a key."

## TOMORROW

One of the greatest challenges facing imams in America since Sept. 11 is their relationship with law enforcement, which is marked by tension and often clashing loyalties. Sheik Reda Shata has tried to strike a balance that allows him to assist the authorities while preserving the confidence and respect of his congregants. That struggle faced a serious test when one member of his mosque was charged with plotting to bomb a city subway station.

**URL:** <http://www.nytimes.com>

**GRAPHIC:** Photos: Faith and Improvisation -- In the subway, Sheik Reda Shata wears Western clothes instead of his traditional robe to avoid being taunted.

ISLAM ON THE GO -- Each morning, Mr. Shata accompanies his daughters Esteshhad, 10, left, and Rahma, 6, to the bus stop of their Islamic school. Along the way, he quizzes them on passages from the Koran. (Photographs by JAMES ESTRIN/The New York Times)(pg. 26)

FULL HEARTS AND A FULL HOUSE -- Marking the end of Ramadan, Mr. Shata's mosque, the Islamic Society of Bay Ridge, attracted an overflow crowd. Since the mosque was founded a few blocks away in 1984, it has grown into a vital center for new Muslim immigrants.

TOUGH DUTY -- One of Mr. Shata's least favorite tasks is granting divorces. Still, he is often called upon to counsel congregants like this one who want to end marriages. (Photographs by JAMES ESTRIN/The New York Times)(pg. 27)

(Photo by James Estrin/The New York Times)(pg. 1)

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