

might have halted the downward spiral of negative self-image among our youth. Obviously in 1948 the situation was different: we were in opposite trenches. But once the war was over, from that time till now, I know of no real reason to believe that the people of Arrabeh, for instance, should be feared or distrusted by their Jewish ‘friends’.”

A couple of days ago I picked up a young Arab man who was hitchhiking home to his village of Sha’ab. Although his family is originally from the village and live there to this day, they are classified by the authorities as refugees. The family belongs to that peculiar class of Palestinian citizens in Israel known as “present absentees”—one of Israel’s more Kafkaesque contributions to the democratic world’s lexicon.\* After the young man had buckled his seatbelt and stopped inspecting my car’s interior, I surprised him with a direct question:

“How do you get along with the people in Ya’ad?”

Thrown off balance by a question about the Jewish settlement springing up next to Sha’ab and stealing much of its land, he started stammering. I rephrased the question:

“How are your new Jewish neighbors? How do you get along with them?”

He took his time, glancing again at the back of my VW Kombi, a strange and luxurious vehicle compared with most of the cars in Sha’ab. He gave me the blank look of a child concocting a lie: “We get along fine. They’re alright.”

“How do they treat you?”

“Fine. No problems. We’re good neighbors.”

“Well, do you get to see each other? Have you tried to establish a relationship with one another?”

“Oh, yes! As a matter of fact we are planning to have a party in a couple of weeks to get to know each other.”

“Do you find them agreeable?”

“Yes! Great, great. No problem.”

\* *Present Absentees*: Internal refugees; Palestinians who, during the war of 1948, left their homes but did not leave the country as refugees. Though they became citizens of Israel, they lost their homes, land and bank accounts for the benefit of Jewish citizens. They and their descendants make up around a quarter of Arab citizens in Israel and half of Nazareth’s residents.

Throughout our exchange he was looking at me and at the back of the car. He probably thought I was one of the many engineers freshly arrived from South Africa to work in the large weapons industry complex under construction near Ya'ad—and for some inexplicable reason I knew Arabic. So I reassured him:

“Listen, never mind all the bullshit, I'm from Arrabeh.”

“Yes, sure, I knew that. But your questions are unusual. Are you with the Shin Bet?”

I told him my name and that I am Arrabeh's doctor.

“Of course I know you. I brought my mother to your clinic once.”

As he began reminding me of her medical story, I interrupted to repeat my question about Ya'ad.

“Well, you know just as I do that very few Arabs love Jews, and very few Jews love Arabs. What kind of relations do you expect between us and these newcomers in Mia'ar?”

He used the name of the destroyed Arab village on whose remains the new Jewish settlement of Ya'ad is being built.

“One relationship is that they have our land, the land we're driving through right now, the land of Mia'ar and Sha'ab, including my family's land. Now it is illegal for us even to pick mushrooms or gather greens from our own land. They have sued about eighty of our villagers for trespassing on 'their' land, which is in fact my land and my father's land. If I try to pick mushrooms, I am taken to court and fined. What kind of relations do you expect?”

“What about the party, then?”

“That's bullshit. Nobody is having any party. I made that up for you before I knew who you were.”

Present absentees, it is clear, learn to be pragmatic. They are easily intimidated, they lie low and are willing to make up stories on demand. They kiss ass to make a living or to get a job, or to hitch a ride home.

“You know, I work with the Jews in Kfar Ata all week, and, believe me, there's no love lost between them and us,” he added before thanking me and leaving the car.

No wonder there is a common perception among Jews that the average Arab is *tzavoa*, a play on words that has a double meaning. Initially, it sounds like reference is being made to the Arabs' ability to

change color, or their lack of reliability and transparency. But the hidden reference is to a hyena, a dangerous and treacherous scavenger.

I have another connection to a “present absentee” from Sha’ab: Wahsh al-Sha’aby, aka Abu-A’atif, who is married to my cousin Samiyeh. Last week I spoke with him about getting a colt for Ty in the hope that it will take my son’s mind off toy guns. Abu-A’atif is a traditional sort of guy, born and raised in a very respectable Sha’ab family during the British Mandate days.\* He is very proud of the fact that he owns an Arabian horse from a good line, though it has to be admitted that nowadays he cuts a pathetic figure on it. Once he owned a lot of land, mainly olive groves, having inherited it all from his father because he was the only surviving son. He was given the name Wahsh (Beast) to protect him from the evil eye that had felled all his brothers in their infancy.

In 1948, during the Nakba, Sha’ab was one of the Arab villages that surrendered early to the Jewish army. The natural place for Abu-A’atif and his family to escape the fighting was to Arrabeh and his in-laws. Except that his old mother, out of an attachment to Sha’ab, adamantly refused to leave her home. She was in danger of being killed but took the view that she had lived long enough: she had seen her only son married and have a good number of children. If Sha’ab was going to be destroyed, then life had no purpose anymore—or so she told her son. Abu-A’atif never stayed away from his mother or his home in Sha’ab for more than a day or two at a time. He feared marauders could rob the old lady, or worse. So, in fact he never abandoned his house and property. Within months, as some semblance of security returned to the area, he and his wife started living there for periods of time to be with his mother. Within a year or so they finally returned permanently to their home in Sha’ab.

But as far as the Israeli authorities are concerned, Abu-A’atif and his family are “present absentees,” refugees who have abandoned their home and thereby forfeited their right to it. So Abu-A’atif no longer

\* *The British Mandate*: From 1918 (defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the Second World War) to 1948, Britain administered Palestine under a mandate as per the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 with France. This was reconfirmed in 1922 by the League of Nations. Britain took upon itself, as part of this mandate, the establishment of a Jewish homeland (Balfour Declaration) to the disadvantage and displeasure of Palestine’s native population.

owns any land in Sha'ab—or rather, the state holds it in trust while he seeks justice in a judicial system designed to legitimize the theft of his property. But while the infinitely slow wheels of Israeli justice turn, he continues to live in his family's home, a house which officially he does not own. In short, Abu-A'atif is a squatter in his own home, which now belongs instead to a state bureaucrat, the Custodian of Absentee Property. This proud "landless landowner" is unable even to fix the roof over his head without a permit from the state, and the state always refuses to grant him a permit because it does not recognize him as the house's rightful owner.

Abu-A'atif has one hope of being recognized as the house's owner: if he signs away his claim to the family's extensive farm land, which he also no longer officially owns, the authorities will allow him to rent his house from the state for fifty years at a nominal price. He continues to fight the case in court, like so many other internal refugees. Not one of them has ever won his case. But unlike Abu-A'atif, many have signed away their property in exchange for minor concessions from the state, and a small easing of their constant mental anguish and physical suffering.

Abu-A'atif is tall and has a thick moustache and booming manly voice. Despite all his woes, he acts ferocious and speaks big. Anyone who mentions land hears his well-rehearsed story: "When I was all by myself and my children were hungry and little, I did not kneel before Israel and did not accept its terms. Now that all my children are grown up, all my sons are big strong men and earn a good living, now that they are well-off and I have all the money I need, I am not about to knuckle under and be defeated by Israel." His sons are all plasterers, like their uncles in Arrabeh.

Abu-A'atif is very proud that he has resisted the system—his "*sumud*" or steadfastness. But in truth he was defeated many years ago. Long before his children could make a living, he had to earn one. The job that he found and holds to this day satisfies his sense of pride and his nostalgic yearning for the good old days. He is employed by the Jewish National Fund (Keren Kayemet Liyisrael) to guard the olive groves, including his own, now rented to Jewish agricultural contractors, and to guard the "national forests" that have been planted on his own land and the lands of other refugees from Sha'ab and the neighboring destroyed village of Mia'ar. "There is no sign of Mia'ar anymore," he says in a forlorn and lowered voice, "except for few fig trees and the

remnants of the cactus hedges on the outskirts of the village. I used to come up on my horse to visit friends in Mia'ar and in season we would eat delicious figs and many other fruits from the orchards there. Believe me, now when I try to eat from those same fig trees I can't swallow. The fruit has turned bitter since those pigs took it over."

I have heard this one before! It was in Acre from the old Patriarch of the Ashqar (blond) family, apparently named in pun for their clearly African features. I was with a Jewish nurse collecting blood samples to conduct a survey of Sickle Cell Anemia in the area. After the kindly old man welcomed us into his seaside shack by the industrial zone south of Acre I explained the reason for our visit. He was suspicious:

"You are collecting blood for the Israeli army. Ask someone else for blood donations. I have none; *nashafu dammi*—they have dried my blood up. I was born and raised on these sandy shores of Acre's Sea and my children and grandchildren have survived thanks to its generosity. I have savored its daily gifts from the day I was born; I swam before I could walk. Ever since 'your army' conquered these parts and started harassing us fishermen, even the fish in the depth of the sea have changed. I swear to you by the graves of my father and mother, the fish I catch have lost their flavor; they have turned foul tasting."

So paradoxically, Abu-A'tif is making a living guarding for the JNF the very same land he is fighting them to reclaim. He rides his thoroughbred horse, perhaps no longer so proudly or with such an upright posture, from one place to the other, checking that nobody has harmed the trees with their bitter fruit or the crops planted on the land he still claims as his own. And the party he does not recognize as the land's rightful owner, the JNF, pays him for his labor. While he refuses to accept that the land is not his, he is forced to admit it to the extent that it offers him the chance to earn an honest living. What he does is the reverse side of the same coin used by the state: it will recognize his rights to his land only in so far as he is prepared to sign away his ownership of it.

Abu-A'tif, in his booming voice, promised to give me the next pony his horse delivers so that I can raise it on my own little piece of land.

Another tragic hero from Mia'ar's yesteryears is Abu-Ahmad, who brings his Jewish friend, Swisa, to my clinic to be treated for a cold.

I have more than a passing acquaintance with Abu-Ahmad. His son, Ahmad, now a school teacher, was a classmate of mine and one of my best friends when we both attended high school in Nazareth in the 1950s. To all his classmates he was known as Ahmad al-Mia'ari, a reference to his village of origin in the Galilee, the same Mia'ar now destroyed and whose figs have turned bitter to Abu-A'atif's palate. Today he is called Abu-Hatim, because he named his firstborn son after me.

I remember visiting his family's encampment in the fields of Mia'ar one spring in my teenage years and, in my innocence, finding their life enviably romantic. During the Nakba of 1948, when Mia'ar was completely demolished by the Jewish army, Ahmad's extended family refused to leave the area, even though their homes had been destroyed. They put up tents and makeshift shacks in a secluded hillside close to the village that was out of view of the Israeli authorities. Somehow, they eked out a living from their land, although they were not allowed to farm it. They stayed on the hillside, persevered, and multiplied. They are now a big family. One of the children, Hasan, works as a cook for the nearby police station, the same police that have given the family no end of trouble trying to remove them from their encampment and to prevent them from planting crops on their former lands. So, not unlike Abu-A'atif, Hasan finally found a job making an honest living working for his persecutors.

After the destruction of Mia'ar, the authorities began establishing a new Jewish settlement, before Ya'ad, called Segev. It was planned as a farming community, mainly for Jewish immigrants from Morocco and Yemen. These immigrants were given homes and land but abandoned Segev and left shortly afterwards. Most had been brought over from cities where they were merchants, traders and craftsmen. They were city dwellers, not farmers. Although they tried to make a living by growing vines on the land they had been given by the JNF, they failed. The JNF was forced to reclaim the abandoned vineyards and, to make sure the former Arab owners did not return, planted a pine forest on the fertile land.

Although the family of my friend Ahmad al-Mia'ari was living close by throughout this failed experiment, they could not participate for obvious reasons: they were not allowed to farm their confiscated land after 1948. But that changed when they made the acquaintance of the Swisas, one of the Moroccan families that remained in the area despite

the failure of the vineyards. Over the years I have come to know this family well, especially old man Swisa himself. Abu-Ahmad is always bringing him to me to be treated for minor illnesses. It seems almost as if, when old man Swisa has a fever, Abu-Ahmad gets the shivers. He begs me to take good care of his friend and do my best to preserve his life. Abu-Ahmad is always reminding me that he was a personal friend of my late father, who had maternal cousins in Mia'ar.

In fact, Abu-Ahmad has a vested interest in old man Swisa's continuing good health.

Abu-Ahmad, who has no land, loves farming and that is what he knows best; old man Swisa has access to the land but does not know how to farm it. So the two families have found a living arrangement based on mutual trust and tacit understanding. Old man Swisa lets Abu-Ahmad farm the fields that were stolen from Mia'ar and passed on to him. Together they have found a way to bypass the racist discrimination at the heart of Israel's system of land control.

It works like this. Abu-Ahmad cannot rent his land from the JNF or the state because that might suggest that it actually belongs to him—an outcome that cannot be allowed. Official regulations do not permit Arabs in general, and internal refugees in particular, to rent state or JNF lands. Such restrictions are all the more strictly enforced if an Arab has an outstanding claim to the land in question. So, old man Swisa rents the land from the JNF under his own name instead, and then lets Abu-Ahmad and his family farm it without a written rent agreement. In return Abu-Ahmad pays old man Swisa the equivalent of rent and some of the profits from the produce he grows each year. As a result, the two families have developed a neighborly symbiosis and closeness. They live conveniently, even happily, side by side, despite all the ethnic hostility the state's official ideology, Zionism, tries to engender. One family, the Mia'aris, are not supposed to live where they do but have done so against all the odds; and the other family, the Swisas, are not capable of living where they do but have also done so against all the odds. Which just goes to prove that, if you put two families together out in the sticks, they had better find ways to be friends!

I reassured Abu-Ahmad that his neighbor, old man Swisa, would survive the cold. He thanked me warmly and offered to pay for the clinic visit. I refused for old time's sake. Later I found paper money slipped under the door.