

How can I forgive?

By Shaimaa Taha

Sealed documents bearing my name—Halima Dalal— that determine my temporary validity in the country. We got the permits and entered the country for the first time in over 50 years... I won't mention this journey, only that we entered.¹

In Haifa, in my aunt's house, where we once had a home nearby, the inhabitants are now Jews. They refused to let us enter our own house, they closed the door in our faces, cursing us, as the locals have become accustomed to, although it is not us who are refugees.

But it's alright, my aunt tells us they're different, that among them you find the best and the worst, just like among us. I truly don't know how a person can be both righteous and a thief at once! I don't know how I can forgive what happened and consider this person a neighbor and a friend, when he took my house, my land, and my dream!

My aunt tells us about her good Jewish neighbor who will visit us today. She has become a friend to my aunt, enjoying her company in her exile from her own country! The country today is not the same as the country before 1948. If I am the refugee still trapped in 1948, then my aunt who is a resident of Haifa is trapped in day-to-day estrangement.

The time of the visit has come, and it's my first time sitting with one of them. Curiosity is killing me, and so many questions are eating away at me: who are they and how are they? How do they live, how do they speak, how do they talk and what do they say, and how do they think? How have some of them befriended some of us here? How has this stranger become a friend to my aunt?!

She came in and sat comfortably, as if the house were her own. She brought us lemons from her land which is actually our land in the first place. Oh, how well-mannered are the Jews, and what sense of hospitality! Such Arabic values, just like us! It seems we have found ourselves on this land together for peace indeed!

I test the Lemon
Is it still as we left it?!
Is it our same lemon?!
I squeeze it over the mulukhiyyeh to taste its flavor
I watch it drop by drop
The first one is a drop of the martyr's blood
The second one is another drop from the wounded's blood
Another drop from the tears of the martyr's mother

¹ Halima Mahmud Dalal, born in 1944, Haifa - Palestine, interview dated 18/11/2022, Al-Wafa House of the Elders - al-Jalil camp, Nakba Archive interviews

And another one from the tears of the prisoner
And another one from his mother, and his beloved, and his sister, and his son, and his daughter
And a drop from the tears of a child staring at an empty school desk next to him, finding it empty
except for the fantasy of a friend assassinated by the bullet of those who took his land's lemons,
as he was on his way to buy bread and lemons for his mother.
And a drop of refugee tears, of my own tears...
And a drop of sweat from a feda'ee running, hiding from an enemy who took his land and his
lemons
And another from the sweat of a resistance fighter digging his tunnel, shaping it as a path
towards either his victory or his martyrdom
And another one from the sweat of a prisoner digging his tunnel towards his freedom...
And I saw many drops... Enough bitterness, it seems this lemon's taste is not the taste of our
lemon.

And I test it again; this time its smell
I add its peel to the tea
I place it on the heater
I search for the scent of the earth, but all I smell is the odor of death...
It seems this lemon's smell is not the smell of our lemon.

And I test it again; this time its effectiveness
As we used to do in our childhood days here
I rub it on my elbows and knees to brighten them
They don't brighten... But what darkens is the wound I thought I had folded away fifty years ago
And the darkness grows stronger
And the darkness grows more hateful
It seems this lemon's effectiveness is not the effectiveness of our lemon.

I'm telling you, this lemon is no longer as we left it
It is not our same lemon
And I curse them a thousand times and more
Our lemon is no longer our lemon, so how can I forgive?!

Does the taste of lemon truly change, or is it my feeling that gives it its flavor?!
Does the lemon recognize its owner?
Does it bear fruit and ripen willingly and of its own accord, or in spite of it?
Does it coexist like us? Compelled but not content?!
I think it resembles us, and everything on this land resembles us
It refuses to die even if its life is unpleasant
Everything in it denies them, and reminds them, and us, who the true owners of the land are
I think that this neighbor's lemon, had it been planted in the same place and under the same
circumstances, but cared for and watered by a Palestinian, would have truly tasted differently.
It would have been a lemon embracing life willingly, not forcibly.

And I curse them a thousand times and more, with the same bitterness as the life that our native lemons have been subjected to.

And I test life here, and I feel both refusal and acceptance for everything. I want to reassure my heart and bring peace to my soul, I affirm to myself and I repeat “No, it was never theirs and it never will be.” Nothing will welcome them, nor anyone. My aunt remains evasive... She pretends, I don't know if she's lying to herself to ease her helplessness, or lying to me, thinking that this image of “false peace” might entice me or satisfy me... Or if she's trying to prove to me that life is still beautiful in this land. She doesn't know that it is indeed beautiful, but not in this image, rather in the image of refusal instead of acceptance, resistance instead of submission.

I think my aunt herself doesn't know that she resists, she's unaware that her staying here is resistance in itself. She is unaware that everything and everyone in this land resists, even this lemon resists; and this is the only image that entices and satisfies me.

My aunt tells me about another Jewish neighbor who is kind, as she says, and we owe her many thanks!! For she acknowledges our right to life! I don't know whether she acknowledges our right to the land, or if this acknowledgment is beyond her human competences!

She says that her son is a pilot in the Israeli army and received a military order to bomb Palestinian camps in Haifa. But his mother refused and forbade him from committing this inhuman act, and when he disobeyed his superiors, both he and his mother were expelled from Haifa to 'Akka. My aunt narrates the story, glorifying and praising this Jewish neighbor of hers, and I don't say a word, I just wonder: does my aunt not know that this house her neighbor lived in, in Haifa, and that other one in 'Akka, are stolen houses, and that the titles have been stolen from their original owners?! Does inhumanity not include theft?! And although this act of “refraining from killing” is indeed humane, for me, it doesn't justify the act of theft, and I shall not forgive.

And were I to forgive, how could others forgive? How can Maryam al-Bahri forgive, remembering what the Jews did to them, whether they were Arab Jews or foreigners? She was a three-and-a-half-year-old girl, and this scene remains engraved in her memory after more than 70 years: a sky-blue shirt stained with Palestinian blood, spilt by Jewish hands. It was her grandfather Abu al-Mustafa's shirt and it was his blood, and it was his soul that they stole, and his self that they killed repeatedly, in installments, until the traces on his shirt would always remind them to never forgive.²

Maryam recalls the incident in detail, some of which she witnessed with her own eyes, and others she heard with her own ears. In the Haifa auction market, the vegetable market, or “Souq al-Mizan”, as Maryam describes it and as the locals call it, there were many bloody events and bombings carried out by the Jews, who placed explosives either in trash containers or among the produce stands, choosing a day when the market was crowded and when the number of

² Maryam Ahmad al-Bahri, born in 1934, al-Tantura - Haifa - Palestine, Nakba Archive <https://libraries.aub.edu.lb/poha/Record/4354>

victims could be higher and more satisfying to them; as though our blood quenched their thirst and our limbs satiated their souls. On one of those bombing days, as fate would have it, her grandfather went to the market at six in the morning to buy vegetables. It wasn't in his habit to get there early, but when the arrows of death choose you, you say, 'I hear and obey,' you do not disobey fate, nor disobey death, specifically in Palestine. The explosion occurred, and I won't add to Maryam's description, what she said suffices: "The explosions were terrifying, human flesh, heads, hands, body parts flying over rooftops, over electrical wires, over a terrifying state."

Her grandfather was among those whose fate was sealed by these explosions, while he was carrying the wounded and the martyrs, assisting with their transportation in ambulances and on horses (carriages), with the help of his neighbor's son, Hafzi, who was from Nablus. Her grandfather, "al-Abd", did not notice his own injury in his waist, mistaking his blood for the blood of the victims he was carrying in bulk, wrapped in his shirwal. It was not until Hafzi alerted him to his injury that al-Abd Abu Mustafa was able to sense his wounds with his own hands, and see the blood flowing between his palms. His complexion turned yellow, his strength weakened, and they transported him to the government hospital, to save the one who was the savior. The likely death became certain, in this graveyard where the medical staff was Jewish.

The news reached them through Hafzi, and they rushed to the hospital to check on him. His injury was not as severe as his pain was immense, but a nail had pierced his liver, and it was the negligence and the humiliation from the Jewish medical staff that killed him. One night, he was screaming, begging for water which he was denied. He kept moaning with pain and thirst until morning arrived. Someone brought him a cup of water, held it in their hands for him to drink, and suddenly, a slap landed on his cheek from the hand of a Jewish nurse. I never once imagined that the angels of mercy could turn into devils—until I heard this phrase from Maryam al-Bahri. The witness to this slap was her daughter (Um Maryam) upon entering, she went out of her mind seeing the Jewish nurse slap her father, Hajj al-Abd, with all her strength. She was burning with rage, and without thinking, she raised her hand and returned the slap to the Jewish nurse (and had she killed her and seen her with her own eyes, lying lifeless on the bed instead of her father, it would still not have assuaged her anger or mine). I believe this slap was deadlier than all the explosions combined, and I believe it alone was enough to kill al-Abd Abu Mustafa.

Another night passed with his pain and moaning, and another morning came, and the following night, a group of doctors and nurses entered the shared room where al-Abd and other wounded individuals were staying. One of them was his neighbor, Hasan Staytiyyah, who recounted what happened at that moment. They came up to his bed with a syringe, al-Abd had been screaming in pain all night, they closed the curtains, the sound disappeared, they opened the curtains and left without saying a word. His neighbor Hasan called out to him: "Ya al-Abd, ya Abu Mustafa!" But there was no life left in the one being called. Moments later, they came with the stretcher and took his lifeless body to prove, brazenly and ruthlessly, that they were the ones who killed him. When morning came, his family arrived to visit him expecting to see him in a better state, and found nothing but an empty bed. Hasan informed them of what happened to grandfather al-Abd. They killed him repeatedly, reveled in humiliating him, fed off his pain, and al-Abd died. The news reached Maryam along with the ragged blue shirt that bore the marks of the explosion

and was stained with her grandfather's blood. She raised it high, waving it like a flag of war and martyrdom, wailing, lamenting, mourning and repeating his name, he had died. But this scene never died in Maryam's mind, nor will it ever die.

How can his soul forgive? How can his family forgive? And how can Maryam al-Bahri forgive? And how can Halima Dalal forgive? And how can I forgive? And how can any of us forgive?!