

Tolan, Sandy- The Lemon Tree . Bloomsbury, New York (2005); pp. 220-228

By way of background, Dalia Eshkenazi and her family originated in the town of Plovdiv, Bulgaria. During World War Two, Jews in Bulgaria received a degree of protection from the government that prevented the majority of them from being sent to the Nazi death camps; although at one point all the Jews in her town were rounded up and held at the rail station to wait for the order to board trains, but the government granted them a last minute reprieve.

At the conclusion of WW 2. Dalia's family took advantage of the opportunity to emigrate to the newly formed state of Israel.

Bashir Khairi and his family lived for many generations in al-Ramla, Palestine. In 1948 the Israeli army drove the families in al-Ramla and surrounding villages from their homes and relocated them in refugee camps or communities. Bashir was 6 at this time. His family eventually settled in Ramallah.

When Dalia and her family settled in Israel, they were allowed to occupy Bashir's former home. Initially she was led to believe that the Palestinians were not driven from their homes by force, but that they fled like cowards when faced with the might of the Israeli army.

In 1967, Bashir, accompanied by a brother and cousin, traveled back to al-Ramla to visit his home community. When he rang the bell at the door, Dalia, who was an 18 year-old University student at home during summer vacation, invited them in to tour the house and offered them tea. When Bashir left, he invited Dalia to some day visit him in Rahmallah. Four months later, Dalia took him up on his offer, and this is what transpired.

In Ramallah it was just as Bashir said. As soon as Dalia and Richard pulled up near Manara Square in the heart of town, they asked a man on the street for the house of Bashir Khairi. The man knew who he was and where he lived. Within minutes they were standing at the base of a concrete stairway as a neighbour went up to notify Bashir of his arriving guests...

It was cold, and dark skies threatened more rain, but Bashir made no move to invite his guests upstairs. "I don't know if it's safe for you to come and visit" he told her. "Because I've just come out of prison".

"Why were you in prison?"

"Because I love my country"...She realized he was trying to protect her. Bashir was being watched, and if Dalia came upstairs, she, too, would risk surveillance....She was faced with a decision, and she came to it quickly: She would not allow anyone to tell her whom she could or could not see..."Please," she said, "let us have a visit"...

Upstairs...Bashir introduced his mother, Zakia, who greeted Dalia warmly, and within minutes, Dalia would remember, "things suddenly began appearing on the table: teas, cakes, date pastries, Arabic sweets, Turkish coffee..." Dalia was overwhelmed by the generosity.

"So", Bashir began in his hesitant English, "how are you, Dalia? How is your family? How are you doing at school?"

"I am fine. Fine"

There was a pause.

Basir regarded Dalia. He was content to let her determine the course of their conversation. After all, she was his guest. “You are welcome here Dalia” he said, “I hope you will spend a nice day with us. You are generous and very nice to us.”...

Dalia took a deep breath; she had come to Ramallah for the opportunity to learn their story. “Bashir, I know this is a sensitive issue.” She hesitated. “It must be very difficult that someone is now living in your house”....

His sense of Arab hospitality dictated that he not challenge a visitor. This, however, was extraordinary. Dalia needed and deserved to be engaged.

“Listen, Dalia,” Bashir said slowly. “How would you feel to leave your home, all of your belongings, your entire spirit, in one place? Would you not fight to get it back with everything you have?”

“Come, Dalia, let me show you something”. ..Bashir walked toward a glass cabinet in the dining room. Dalia followed Bashir, and the two stood looking through the glass.

“Look at the cabinet and tell me what you see”

“Books, vases, a picture of Abdel Nasser. Maybe some things hiding behind. And a lemon.”

“Do you remember when me and my brother came to visit?...”Yes? Do you remember that Kamel asked you for something as we left? And what you gave him as a gift?”

Dalia was silent for a moment. “Oh my God. It’s one of the lemons from that visit. Why did you keep it? It’s been almost four months now.”

“To us, this lemon is more than fruit, Dalia,” Bashir said slowly. “It is land and history. It is the window we open up to look at our history. A few days after we brought the lemons home, it was night and I heard movement in the house...I heard the noise, and I got up. The noise was coming from this room right here. Do you know what I saw? My father, who is nearly blind.”

“Yes”, said Dalia. She was listening intently.

“Dalia, I saw him holding the lemon with both hands. And he was pacing back and forth in the room, and the tears were running down his cheeks.”

“What did you do?”

“I went back to my room, sat in my bed, and I started thinking. Then I started talking to myself until the morning. And I understood why I love him so much.”...

“What would happen if your father came to the house in Ramla?” she asked Bashir.

“He might have a breakdown. He always says he’d have a heart attack before he got to the door.”

“And your mother?”

“And my mother, too. You know what a house means to a wife. She entered the house when she was a bride. And, she gave birth in it, too.” Bashir was born in that house, nearly 26 years earlier.

“We can see ourselves in you, Bashir,” Dalia said. “We can remember our own history of exile over thousands of years. I can understand your longing for home because of our own experience of exile.”...

She told Bashir, “What you have gone through, it must have been a terrible experience.” Dalia was deeply moved and believed she was connecting to her new friend.

Bashir had never been able to understand how another peoples’ ancient longing—their wish to return home from a millennial exile—could somehow be equated with an actual life of generations of Palestinians who lived and breathed in this land, who grew food from it, who buried their parents and grandparents in it. He was sceptical that this longing for Zion had much to do with Israel’s creation. “Israel first came to the imagination of the Western occupying powers for two reasons, he told Dalia.

“And what are they?” she asked in reply, now feeling her own scepticism grow.

“First, to get rid of you in Europe. Second, to rule the East through this government and to keep down the whole Arab world. And then the leaders started remembering the Torah and started talk about the land of milk and honey, and the Promised Land.”

“But there is good reason for this,” Dalia objected. “And the reason is to protect us from being persecuted in other countries. To protect us from being slaughtered in cold blood just because we are Jews. I know the truth, Bashir. I know that my people were killed, slaughtered, put in gas ovens. Israel was the only safe place for us. It was a place where Jews could finally feel that being a Jew is not a shame!”

“But you are saying that the whole world did this, Dalia. It is not true. The Nazis killed the Jews. And we hate them. But why should we pay for what they did? Our people welcomed the Jewish people during the Ottoman Empire. They came to us running away from the Europeans and we welcomed them with all we had. We took care of them. But now because you want to live in a safe place,

other people live in pain. If we take your family, for example. You come running from another place. Where should you stay? In a house that is owned by someone else? Will you take a house from them? And the owners—us—should leave the house and go to another place? Is it justice that we should be expelled from our cities, villages, our streets? We have a history here...Many Jews who came here believed they were a people without a land going to a land without people. That is ignoring the indigenous people of this land. Their civilization, their history, their heritage, their culture. And now we are strangers. Strangers in every place. Why did this happen, Dalia? The Zionism did this to *you*, not just to the Palestinians.

For Dalia, The love of Zion was not something she could explain quickly to her Palestinian friend. “For two thousand years we were praying three times a day to return to this land,” she told Bashir. “We tried to live in other places. But we realized we were not wanted in other places. We had to come back home.”

The two young people stared at each other in silence.

“Okay, Bashir, I live in your home,” Dalia said finally. “And this is also my home. It is the only home I know. So, What shall I do?”

“You can go back where you came from,” Bashir said calmly.

Dalia felt as if Bashir had dropped a bomb. She wanted to scream, though as his guest she knew she couldn't. She forced herself to listen.

“We believe that only those who came here before 1917”—the year of the Balfour Declaration and the beginning of the British Mandate in Palestine—“have a right to be here. But anyone who came after 1917,” Bashir said, “cannot stay.”

Dalia was astounded by the audacity of Bashir's solution...She was struck by the total contradiction of her situation: complete disagreement across a seemingly unbridgeable gulf, combined with the establishment of a bond through a common history, in a house where she felt utterly protected and welcomed...

Dalia looked straight at Bashir. "I have nowhere else to go, Bashir. I am staying here. The best thing is for you to live and leave us to live, too," she said. "We have to live together. To accept each other."

Bashir stared calmly at his new friend. "You are living in a place that does not belong to you, Dalia...This is my country. We were driven out of it."

"Well, you realize it's also my country," Dalia insisted.

"No it's not. It's not your country, Dalia. You stole it from us."

The word *stole* Dalia experienced as a slap; somehow it was made worse by Bashir's utterly placid demeanor. She sat on the couch, silent, feeling insulted and aggravated.

"You are leaving us in the sea," Dalia finally said. "So what do you propose for us? Where shall we go?"

"I'm very sorry, but it is not my problem," Bashir said quietly. "You stole our land from us. The solution, Dalia, is very hard..." Bashir then repeated his idea, still prevalent among Palestinians in the wake of the Six Day War, the Jews born after 1917, or born outside of what is now Israel, would go back to their land of origin....

Each had chosen to reside within the contradiction: They were enemies, and they were friends. Therefore, Dalia believed, they

had reason to keep talking; the conversation itself was worth protecting. “I think I have stayed here long enough,” she said to Bashir. “My father must be worried. I have to go.”

Dalia reached for Bashir’s hand. “Really I enjoyed spending time with you. And I feel that every time I understand more and more than before.”

Bashir’s mother and sisters came. Dalia thanked them, and everybody said goodbye. “You are not a guest in this house, Dalia,” Bashir said. “It means you have to come again and again and we’re going to do this, too.”

Dalia turned as she reached the door. “I’m only one person searching for truth,” she said. “And I found the thread that’s going to take me there.