

Yasmeen Abed

Professor Rubinstein

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Shajaraat Zaytoon

Every September my sisters and I help baba pick all of the olives off the olive tree in our backyard. The bark is rough and thick and the leaves are a vibrant dark greyish-green color with gnarled branches that are teeming with ripe olives. The decade-old tree stands strong even during the driest of California summers. We strategically place buckets around the tree to catch any olives that might fall. My baba directs my sisters and I to various sections of the tree so we can maximize our picking. We gather around the tree and ask baba about his memories of growing up in Kuwait and what his father and grandfather's lives were like growing up in a small village in Palestine called Aseerah. He tells us a romantic story of simplicity. His grandfather, Saeed, was classically handsome. He had gentle blue eyes that always held a faraway look in them as though he were seeing the world for the first time again. He was never seen without wearing the traditional keffiyah, or scarf, which has come to be a symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Saeed would sit under the shade of his olive trees and eat za'atar with bread and olive oil. He would sit among his children and sing Palestinian folk songs while reflecting upon his life and future. Sometimes, he would become so enamored by the beauty of nature that he would sleep under the olive trees. Passed down through generations, the shajaraat zeytoon has been the main source of income for my father's family. Inherited from their ancestors, the olive trees are a symbol of

Palestinian identity. Even all the way in America my father planted an olive tree to remind himself of his roots. Each olive picked represents a hardship, a victory, a sadness, a happiness.

As my baba tells us stories of his family, we fill our buckets full to the brim with ripe green olives. Baba slips in and out of his native tongue, Arabic, as he recounts the times he and his brothers would visit Aseerah. As my father begins to tell us about a particular amusing memory that sticks out to him, his voice becomes animated and his warm brown eyes light up. He recalls he and his brothers wanting to ride donkeys whenever they visited Palestine. Villagers who passed by would laugh at them for choosing to ride donkeys instead of cars. Aseerah is famous for its olives and the village's name is actually derived from the phrase "Asir-as-Zaytoon" which is the activity of extracting oil from the olives. As my sisters and I help baba pick olives from our own tree he tells us how his grandfather, Saeed, would collect the olives from his olive tree orchard in Palestine. Saeed would hit the trees with a stick and the olives would fall onto blankets. He and his sons who worked with him would gather all of the olives and place them in burlap sacks. They would hoist the heavy sacks of olives onto donkeys who would then walk for miles to transport the olives to the oil extraction presses.

Baba passionately remarks that his grandfather would meticulously clean under each olive tree with his bare hands. Saeed's intimate connection with the land was not simply economic - it was never an exchange but a partnership. The tenderness that he showed the soil was reciprocated in the most delightful of ways. His life and family's future relied on whatever the land produced, and the land reciprocated this trust. Olive trees were his livelihood. Olive trees were his birthright. Saeed's legacy was his orchard of olive trees. He intended for his six

children to divide his land between themselves. Now, that same land is a point of contention. He was deprived of his heritage because of a choice that his children were forced to make.

Baba paints a picture of vitality. The land his father grew up on was rich and the soil was fertile. He recounts sprawling orchards of olive trees that go on for miles. The aroma is green and almost edible and as I continue to pick the olives, I too can imagine the Mediterranean sun shining down upon me as I enjoy the fruits of my labor. A quiet contentment fills me as I think about the beautiful memories I am able to share with my father. I feel like I am partaking in a history that I otherwise might never have experienced.

My baba swears that the olive oil that comes from these trees is blessed. Olive trees grown in the “Holy Land” produce olive oil that he believes is healing for the mind, body, and soul. My father, a deeply religious man, believes that the Zaytoon is sacred as its name has been invoked by God in the Quran. Spirituality is critical in maintaining a connection to land, so my father has found that planting an olive tree in America helps sustain this connection. Land is not simply soil, it relates to all aspects of existence. This implied sanctity necessitates the land’s preservation and protection. Baba aches for a taste of the olives from the same olive trees that he imagines his ancestors tended to for thousands of years. No other olive can evoke the same imagery or legacy that these olives can. The olives in California, while tasty, do not capture the same history that the Palestinian olives do. The blood shed, the physical labor, and the tears wept all due to the loss of an orchard of olive trees.

The Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish proclaimed that, “If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears.” The olive harvest is a celebration in Palestine where farmers take pride in their hard work. It is a beautiful tradition that has been

stained by the ugliness of war and occupation. Orchards of olive trees have been cut down and burnt by settlers, stifling farmers' abilities to provide for their families. But olive trees have a robust root system that can revive itself even when the above ground structure is destroyed; they are indestructible. Just as the olive trees stand strong in the driest of conditions, Palestinians remain resilient in the harshest of conditions. Baba preserves his family's stories by retelling them, by replanting them. In the early 1950s my grandfather, Mohammad, was forced to leave behind his beloved orchard of olive trees. He left to Kuwait for work but after his village was occupied he was unable to return. In his absence his father, Saeed, passed away so many of the olive trees were left unattended and died. And any other trees that were salvageable were seized by the settlers. My grandfather, Mohammad, has dementia so it was difficult to get information in the form of memories about olive trees and leaving Palestine. But even with this handicap, he has never forgotten that he cannot return. Sometimes I think that planting an olive tree in his own backyard is my baba's form of resistance. He cannot recover what once was but he can ensure that he never forgets.

As I watch my baba pick olive after olive, I can feel his longing. What he would give to run his hands through the soil that his grandfather so cherished. I struggle to fully understand what connection it is he feels to the land. This distance is hard to overcome when I have never personally faced those struggles. My memory cannot extend to what it does not know. I hope that participating in tradition will forge a link between myself and my ancestors in Palestine. Maybe one day I will have an olive tree in my own backyard where I will tell my own children the stories of my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. For now my best contribution is to put words to the feelings I know so many Palestinians experience, especially in a time where we

associate Palestinians only with war and sacrifice. We ignore the simplicity of their pleasures. It has never been about having the most land; it has been about having land they can call their own. A simple dignity that every Palestinian begs to be afforded.