

**“LETTER TO A DEPORTEE”  
AND  
EXCERPT FROM *THE LEMON TREE***

*The story of Open House in Ramle must be told through the voices and the relationship of Dalia Landau, co-founder, and of Bashir Al-Khayri, whose family built and lived in the house until they were forced out by the Israelis in 1948. We offer below two pieces that taken together deepen our understanding of the Open House story, offering hope that through compassionate understanding a way past the on-going tragedy may be discovered.*

*Even if Dalia and Bashir have never been able to reconcile their historical narratives and ideological positions, they agreed to dedicate their shared home for interrelated purposes: Bashir wanted a preschool for less advantaged Arab children. Dalia wanted a community center where Jews and Arabs of all ages could engage in activities promoting reconciliation through the twin ideals of justice and loving-kindness. Open House offers tangible testimony to cooperation despite deep ideological differences caused by such disparate life experiences.*

**Introduction to Dalia Landau’s “Letter to a Deportee”**

*The following “Letter to a Deportee” spread the story of the house in Ramle internationally. In January, 1988, early in the first Intifada (Palestinian uprising), Dalia Landau was confined to a maternity hospital in Jerusalem, pregnant with her son Raphael. There she learned that Bashir al-Khayri was in administrative detention, facing deportation by the Israeli authorities.*

*She composed an open letter to make public their shared story. She felt the story, a microcosm of the Israeli-Palestinian tragedy, might serve as a resource for overcoming the mutual hostility that had bedeviled relations between the two peoples for decades. Her open letter appeared in *The Jerusalem Post* on January 14, 1988, the day after Bashir and three other Palestinians were deported to Lebanon in an Israeli helicopter.*

*The letter’s impact has been enormous. Almost immediately, media representatives from various countries interviewed her while she lay in her hospital bed. Over the years, the story of Dalia, Bashir, and their shared family home resonated throughout the world, her open letter translated into many languages, assigned in university courses on the Middle East, and included in Arthur Waskow’s *Passover Seder* book.*

*The letter clearly conveys a story with great symbolic power, demonstrating that one human being with vision, courage, and above all compassion, can impact minds, hearts and consciences of many. Who among us does not yearn for deeper meaning behind confusing headlines, for hope in the midst of cynicism and despair? Usually the mass*

*media adds to the demoralization. On that day in January 1988, amidst increasing violence, fear, and bewilderment among Jews and Palestinians, one woman's voice stood above the din, challenging people to see the conflict in a new light. The Open House Center carries forward the wisdom and the vision articulated in Dalia's letter. It is addressed specifically to Bashir al-Khayri but it speaks to all of us.*

### **A Letter To A Deportee**

by Dalia Landau

*(Originally published in The Jerusalem Post, January 14, 1988. Reprinted in many places around the world, including The Boston Globe.)*

*An open letter to Bashir al-Khayri, a lawyer by profession, who was deported to Lebanon the day before.*

Dear Bashir,

We got to know each other 20 years ago under unusual and unexpected circumstances. Every since, we have become part of each other's lives. Now I hear that you are about to be deported. Since you are in detention at present, and this may be my last chance to communicate with you. I have chosen to write this open letter. First I want to retell our story.

After the Six-Day War, you came with two other people to see the house in Ramle where you were born. This was my first encounter with Palestinians. My family and I had been living in that home since 1948, just after your family was forced to leave – you were a child of six then, and I was a year old. We had come to the new state of Israel together with 50,000 other Bulgarian Jews, and your house was considered "abandoned property."

Following your first visit in 1967, I accepted your invitation to visit you in Ramallah, where I found myself surrounded by hospitality. We talked for hours and established a warm personal connection. However, it became clear that our political views were very far apart. Each of us saw the other through the lens created by the suffering of his own people.

But some change in perspective was beginning to take place in me. One unforgettable day, your father came to our house in Ramle, accompanied by your brother. Your father was then old and blind. He touched the rugged stones of the house. He then asked if the lemon tree was still in the backyard. He was led to the abundant tree, which he had planted many years before. He caressed it and stood silent. Tears were rolling down his face.

Many years later, after the death of your father, your mother told me that, whenever he

felt troubled at night and could not sleep, he would pace up and down your rented apartment in Ramallah, holding a shriveled lemon in his hand. It was the same lemon my father had given him on that visit.

Ever since I met you, the feeling has been growing in me that home was not just my home. The lemon tree which yielded so much fruit and gave us so much delight lived in other people's hearts too. The spacious house with its high ceilings, big windows and large grounds was no long just an "Arab house," a desirable form of architecture. It had faces behind it now. The walls evoked other people's memories and tears.

It was very painful for me, as a young woman 20 years ago, to wake up to a few then well hidden facts. For example, we were all led to believe that the Arab population of Ramle and Lod had run away before the advancing Israeli army in 1948, leaving everything behind in a rushed and cowardly escape. This belief reassured us. It was meant to prevent guilt and remorse. But after 1967, I met not only you, but also an Israeli Jew who had personally participated in the expulsion from Ramle and Lod. He told me the story as he had experienced it, and as Yitzhak Rabin later confirmed in his memoirs.

My love for my country was losing its innocence. It was taking on new dimensions. While I was learning to live with these painful facts, you were imprisoned. You were charge with planting a bomb that killed several civilians. My heart aches for those murdered even now. For your crime, you sat in prison for fifteen years. Passing the Ramle prison on my way to work, I often wondered if you were there. I never had the courage to ask. It was too painful.

After my marriage and the death of my parents, I inherited the house in Ramle. I shared our story with my husband, and he and I both felt that we wanted to dedicate that house to some healing purpose. We wished to do this in conjunction with you but we did not know whether this was at all possible. Following your release from prison, we sought you out and met you. I felt that you and I, your family and mine, were bound by a strange destiny, that the house with which our childhood memories were connected had forced us to face each other. However, our conversations revealed that, despite the passage of time, your basic position had not changed – and this makes it impossible to find common ground. Perhaps some day, if we are both willing to make sacrifices, some kind of mutual forgiveness may yet emerge.

If you could disassociate yourself from your past terrorist actions, your commitment to your own people would gain true moral force in my eyes. I well understand that terror is a term relative to a subjective point of view. Some of Israel's political leaders were terrorists in the past and have never repented. I know that what we consider terror from your side, your people considers their heroic "armed struggle" with the means at their disposal. What we consider our right to self-defense, when we bomb Palestinian targets from the air and inevitably hit civilians, you consider mass terror from the air with

advanced technology. Each side has an ingenuity for justifying its own position. How long shall we perpetuate this vicious circle?

The first step out of this deadlock is to free ourselves from self-justifying moral relativism. We are taught that the essence of our Jewish tradition can be encapsulated in the following teaching: "What is hateful to you, do not do unto others." Unless both Israelis and Palestinians can embrace this basic human principle, we will not have a solid foundation for coexistence. That foundation entails the right to self-determination for both peoples.

You, Bashir, are a Habash supporter, rejecting the self determination of my people in this land. Most Israelis feel that the planting of bombs, as well as the throwing of stones by Palestinians is not just an expression of resistance to the occupation, but is a much deeper refusal to accept a Jewish state in even part of Palestine. As long as we experience this total rejection, you and your people will not achieve your own independence. For you will alienate all those Israelis who, like myself, are prepared to support the Palestinian struggle for self determination. People like yourself, Bashir, bear a great responsibility for triggering our anxieties, which are well justified, given the PFLP's determination to replace Israel with a "secular democratic state" and to use terror to achieve this aim.

Regardless of what you may have done recently to displease the military government, deportation is a violation of human rights and is therefore counterproductive for Israel. Not only do the expulsions create greater bitterness and extremism among the Palestinians, thereby escalating the violent confrontations, but the deportees will have greater freedom to plan actions against Israel from abroad. You, Bashir, have already experienced one expulsion from Ramle as a child. Now you are about to experience another from Ramallah forty years later. You will thus become a refugee twice. You may be separated from your wife and your two small children, Ahmed and Hanin, and from your elderly mother and the rest of your family. How can your children avoid hating those who will have deprived them of their father? Will the legacy of pain grow and harden with bitterness as it passes down the generations?

It is a natural reaction to hate those who have made us suffer. It is also a natural reaction to inflict pain because one has suffered pain, and to justify it ideologically. In this small land, both our peoples are stuck in a fateful embrace. I believe that our finding each other here is potentially for the greater unfolding of life. In order to fulfill this potential, we all need to become more fully human, which to me, means activating our capacity to understand the suffering of others through our own, and to transform pain into healing.

It seems to me, Bashir, that you will now have a new opportunity to assume a leadership role. By its intention to deport you, Israel is actually empowering you. I appeal to you to demonstrate the kind of leadership that uses nonviolent means of struggle for your rights;

a leadership based on education for the recognition of your enemy and his relative justice.

I appeal to both Palestinians and Israelis to understand that the use of force will not resolve this conflict on its fundamental level. This is the kind of war that no one can win, and either both peoples will achieve liberation or neither will.

Our childhood memories, yours and mine, are intertwined in a tragic way. If we can not find means to transform that tragedy into a shared blessing, our clinging to the past will destroy our future. We will then rob another generation of a joy-filled childhood and turn them into martyrs for an unholy cause. I pray that with your cooperation and God's help, our children will delight in the beauty and bounties of this holy land.

*Allah ma'ak* - May God be with you.

*Dalia*

### **Introduction to an Excerpt from *The Lemon Tree***

*It took several months for Dalia to receive Bashir's answer to her published letter. He was in exile in Tunis with the PLO leadership. He read the open letter many times, pondering a response. His poetic, poignant letter to Dalia conveys his own childhood traumas, with the feelings and attitudes they engendered, while providing his perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

*The content of Bashir's letter and Dalia's reaction are described in the following excerpt from Sandy Tolan's book, *The Lemon Tree* (pages 216-220), reproduced here with publisher's permission.*

### **Excerpt from *The Lemon Tree***

For months, Bashir had been thinking of the best way to respond to Dalia. He had something important to tell her, something that in the twenty-one years he had known her, he had never revealed.

Dalia doesn't remember exactly where she was when she received Bashir's letter or even who brought it to her. Perhaps it was delivered by a journalist coming to Jerusalem from Tunis; perhaps it was carried to her by a friend of Bashir's or an Israeli peace activist.

The letter had been translated from the Arabic; it was typed on single-spaced pages and stuffed into a thick envelope. Seventeen years later, Dalia still has the letter, along with the original in Arabic, in Bashir's hand. "Dear Dalia," the letter began.

It's true that we got acquainted as you mentioned in your letter in exceptional and unexpected circumstances ... And it's true that after we got acquainted, each one of

us has become part of the life of the other. I don't deny that what I've sensed in you, Dalia, of morality, sensitivity and sensibility, left a deep impact in me that I cannot ignore. There was even a sixth sense that was telling me that in this human being that I got acquainted with lives an alert living conscience that will one day express itself.

Your letter that came in the period of my exile from my land, from the land of my country, Palestine, after our dialogue, conversations and acquaintance had become the talk of the press in the media, and even the talk of all the people whose consciousness was moved to recognize the truth of what's really happening and to reassess what happened.

Allow me first to express my affection and respect as well as appreciation of your courage to write to me, and your courage to present the ideas contained in your letter. Please allow me to present my respect to your husband Yehezkel Landau, who I have a lot of appreciation for...

Bashir's letter, Dalia saw, reflected the many hours of conversation the two had had before Bashir went to prison in 1969: tremendous personal warmth that somehow bridged a chasm of anguish and mistrust. He told her that he had spoken of her to "my comrades" many times while "living in the graves of the living dead while I was spending my sentence—fifteen years of the prime of my youth" in prison—a sentence, he insisted, that was "for no reason except for my being a freedom fighter who had fallen in love with his homeland and was committed to his cause."

Now Dalia read as Bashir countered her suggestion that any of his actions had "planted hatred," as she had suggested in her open letter. Rather, he wrote, "the Zionist leadership has planted hatred in the souls of one generation after another."

He who plants barley, Dalia, will never reap wheat. And he who plants hatred can never reap love. That leadership has planted hatred in our hearts, not affection. It has destroyed all human values the day it destroyed our childhood, our existence, and our right to live on the soil of our homeland. Your change, Dalia, and your new perspective was attained through research and investigation. And your ability to see things the way they are in reality, not the way they were told to you.

We were exiled by force of arms. We were exiled on foot. We were exiled to take the earth as our bed. And the sky as a cover. And to be fed from the crumbs of those among the governments and international organizations who imparted their charity. We were exiled but we left our souls, our hopes and our childhood in Palestine. We left our joys and sorrows. We left them in every corner, and on every grain of sand in Palestine. We left them with each lemon fruit, with each olive. We left them in the

roses and flowers. We left them in the flowering tree that stands with pride at the entrance of our house in al-Ramla. We left them in the remains of our fathers and ancestors. We left them as witnesses and history. We left them, hoping to return.

Dalia read on as Bashir challenged her description of his actions as terrorist: “You cannot equate the struggle of the people for liberation and independence and self-determination,” he wrote. “You cannot equate that with aggression, expansionism and oppression of the other.” As for his trying a nonviolent approach, as Dalia had urged in her open letter, Bashir wrote:

Dalia, I have tried to go back to Palestine on board the Ship of Return (*Al-Awda*), following Gandhi’s road. I did not carry a missile or a bomb ... I was carrying my history and my love for my homeland. But what was the result, Dalia? The ship was sunk before it sailed. It was sunk while it was docked in a Cypriot port. They sunk it so that we would not return ... Why aren’t we given our right to return? Why are we prevented from determining our future and establishing our state? Why am I exiled from my homeland? Why am I separated from my children, Ahmad and Hanine, from my wife, from my mother, from my brothers and sisters, from my family?

“I want you to hear something new, Dalia,” Bashir continued.

Do you know, Dalia, that in 1948, with childhood innocence, I played with one of the booby-trapped toys that were scattered by the Zionists—Stern, the Haganah and Irgun? The gifts of the terrorist Zionist organizations to the children of Palestine...

The family was in Gaza, Bashir explained, late in 1948, shortly after arriving from Ramallah. Bashir, Nuha, and other brothers and sisters had been playing in the dirt yard outside their cement-block house. They saw something gleaming in the sun. It was bulbous, with a wick protruding. It looked like a lantern. The children brought it inside. Bashir held the new toy as the other children gathered around. A clay water jug stood on the kitchen counter; one of the children bumped into it, and it crashed to the floor. The other children scattered. Bashir was left alone with the toy in his hands. Suddenly there was an explosion.

The booby-trapped toy exploded in my left hand to crush my palm, to scatter my bones and flesh. And shed my blood, to blend it with the soil of Palestine, to embrace the lemon fruits and the olive leaves, to cling to the dates and the flowers of the *fitna* tree.

In the explosion in Gaza, six-year-old Bashir lost four fingers and the palm of his left hand.

Who is more entitled to a reunion, Dalia? Sharansky, the Russian who doesn’t have a

cultural linguistic historic attachment to Palestine? Or the Palestinian Bashir, who is attached to Palestine with the language, culture, history, family and the remains of my palm that I left in Palestine? Does not the world owe me the right to reunite myself, to reunite my palm with my body? Why do I live without my identity and without my homeland while my palm remains in Palestine?

Dalia stared at the page in amazement. She was astounded. How could she have known Bashir for twenty-one years and not know he was missing his left hand? Slowly it came to her: His hand was always in his pocket. It was always hidden—hidden so well, she never knew she never saw it. Now Dalia realized: She had only ever seen the left thumb, hitched over the top of the pocket. It looked so natural.

Since she was a girl, Dalia had carried the gift of empathy—for the children of Holocaust survivors, the Sephardic classmates at her school, and the Arabs, like Bashir, who once lived in Ramla. On each occasion, she had struggled to enter someone else's experience through the faculty of her own imagination. She thought of six-year-old Bashir, missing a hand in the Gaza of 1948.

Dalia realized that for nearly all his life, Bashir had blamed the Zionists for placing booby-trapped “toys” in the sands of Gaza in order to maim Palestinian children. “I was amazed at the intensity of his perception that Zionism was this incredibly evil manifestation and that this was his experience,” she reflected. But she was a child of Zion, the “mountain of God.” “There was no way I could accept this description of the Zionists, my people, me, as being the expression of darkness. To me Zion is an expression of my very ancient longing, for me it's a word that symbolizes a harbor for my people and our collective expression here. And for him, it's a regime of terror. Something that's an obligation to fight. And to resist in every way. Because for him if Zionism is a reign of terror, then terrorism is an appropriate answer!”

Dalia's voice was rising. She paused and gathered herself before speaking again: “And I say that I cannot afford to fight one wrong with another wrong. It doesn't lead *anywhere!*”

Bashir had neared the end of his letter. “I don't want to overburden you, Dalia,” he wrote.

I know how sensitive you are. I know how you hurt. I don't wish you any pain. All that I wish is for you and me to struggle together with all of the peace and freedom loving people for the establishment of a democratic popular state. And to struggle together to bring the idea of the Dalia child care center to life. And to struggle with me for my return to my old mother, to my wife and my children, to my homeland, to struggle with me to reunite me with my palm, my palm that has blended with every grain of Palestinian soil.

Yours with respect, faithfully,



## Bashir

Dalia sat quietly for a long time, “quite shaken,” gazing at the letter. She tried to enter the psychological reality of the person who wrote it. Bashir was making an appeal for Dalia to help him unite with his homeland. By what means? she kept asking herself. Dalia had long heard Bashir’s proposal that the land of Israel and Palestine be transformed into a single democratic secular state for all the people of historic Palestine. She believed, however, that a single state would mean the end of Israel, and for this reason she could not endorse Bashir’s idea or his belief in the right of Palestinians to return to their old homes. It was true that Dalia had offered to return her house to Bashir, or at least to find some way to share its legacy, but she would go to great lengths to explain that this was a personal choice, not to be understood as an endorsement of a broader right of return for the Palestinians. It seemed inevitable that Bashir and Dalia would never reconcile their differences.