

Two days and we will be back

Two days and we will return.. This is exactly what I said to my family when I left the house as a refugee to the Deir al-Balah area in central Gaza on Friday 10/15/2023, and that sentence is precisely what my grandfather Hajj Fares said to his children and my parents when they immigrated from our original town in Damra in 1948. My father and mother kept repeating that phrase for more than sixty years until they passed away.

Two days and we will return.. My father kept telling me about the sycamore tree planted in the courtyard of their house in Damra and how delicious its taste was, there is nothing as sweet as it. Its fruits do not cease throughout the year, and it bears seven bellies, and you will never taste better throughout your life. He keeps remembering it and sighing. Is it still planted, or did the occupation uproot it as it uprooted our souls when we left the town? My mother kept remembering the town, every corner, street, house and family. How did she hide the precious dishes under the sycamore tree until she could retrieve them on the day of her return?

One day, thirty years after the Nakba, a relative of mine returned from Saudi Arabia after an absence of years, and a few days after his arrival, he asked to visit Damra, which is now called (Erez). I went with him to Damra and took my father and mother with me. When we arrived there, we saw nothing, an almost empty land. Village ruins along the width of the town. They all started to revolve around themselves, trying to remember or repeat the details of the place, including the remains of the accumulated stones, what remained of the mud houses, and some trees, which my father's sycamore was not among them. They all began to redraw the map of the village: here was Bir al-Balad, there was the sycamore tree, and this eucalyptus tree was in front of our house. So here was our home.

My mother ran in amazement, with tears filling her eyes, towards the place of the sycamore tree, digging the ground with her bare hands, searching for her dishes, which she had buried at the time of the Nakba, before she left the house. She kept digging in that place, changing the location of digging, all around the imaginary tree until she made several holes to no avail. Amazement, tears, heartbreak, pain and silence surrounded the place. I was standing there looking at them, not realizing the extent of the catastrophe they had been subjected to. I was only very sad because my father did not find the tree and my mother did not find the dishes. We got on the bus and went back home. My father kept talking to us about the sycamore tree, and my mother and I talked about her dishes.

Now we have been displaced for 109 days in the Deir al-Balah area. In the first days of displacement, our first concern was to save ourselves from the scourge of war, trying hard to stay away from the sites of battles and clashes. After months, we began to dream of returning and remembering every detail of the house, inch by inch, piece by piece. We return to the pictures of our house on our mobile phone. We zoom in until we see the fine details of the kitchen and a spontaneous shot of the bedroom and our bed that we used to sleep on. We realize the meaning of a person only resting on his pillow and bed... Oh No! we did not take a photo of the bathroom that we now spent in our hostel at one of my friend's house; who

hosts approximately 130 people in his large house, we stand in line until we can enter the bathroom with a bucket of water in our hand, due to the difficulty of providing water and operating the flush and bidet. We returned to the early use of toilets; a use of a bathtub, has become one of our dreams since the beginning of the war until now, to be able to return and lying down in it. I do not think that any of the displaced people shower properly... we all carry a bucket of water, pour it on our bodies with a little shampoo, if any, and leave the bathroom.

Two days and we will return.. The days of the war have been long and we are only dreaming of returning home and following the news of the truce in its details every day and its never-ending failure. For the displaced, the truce means returning to their homes. Even if we die there, we will die happy. It has been a long time, time has slowed down, the days are long and the nights are longer. All the time we revolve around ourselves around two unparalleled things: providing food for the family and waiting to return to our homes.

Today is not like yesterday.. Two days and we will be back.. When my father was telling me that sentence, I was asking myself: Were they so foolish? Didn't they realize that it was an occupation, that it was a war, and that the return would take a long time? Have we also fallen into the same trap? Or will we soon return to our homes? The important question is: Are the houses still standing and the city still there?

Sometimes I feel afraid of the day I will return to Gaza City, because of the severity of the destruction I heard and saw. I love Gaza, my beautiful city, I miss it, for every inch of the roads and alleys of the camp, the beach camp where I grew up, the fishermen's port and the seashore, the unknown soldier, the square, Omar Al-Mukhtar Street, Al-Nasr Street, the Thalathini, Firas Market, Sheikh Radwan, the beach and the Friday market. We will definitely return, Gaza. We will definitely return, Father.

Two days and we'll be back...

Ali Abu Yassin

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