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Contento De Semrik

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Senior editors and producers: Netanel and Osnat Semrik
Design: Studio Mooza
Translation: Eli Fisher

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24 Yehudit blvd.
Tel Aviv, Israel, 67017.
Semrik10@gmail.com
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I. Introduction

When the First Lebanon War broke out on June 5, 1982, I was called up to my reserve unit, the Lebanon Relief Unit (formerly the Northern Martial Law). From my perspective, this was the natural extension of my normal activities within the Arab sector, activities that had been ongoing for decades and through which I had become involved in the lives of numerous Arab families throughout Israel.

Our unit was situated in Sidon, the capital of South Lebanon and its largest city, and worked to restore the normal routine of life as quickly as possible both in Sidon itself, in its metropolitan area, and in the surrounding villages. My job, as a unit member holding the rank of Captain, was to join in the effort to establish contact with the civilian population, to identify the basic necessities that had been damaged in battle, and to do whatever possible to ease the return to normal civilian life. Our starting point was to get the message out to the population that Israel had no intention of occupying Lebanon and merely wished to assist the population in restoring life to its normal course as quickly as possible. To that end, the relief unit found a large abandoned building on Riad as-Solh Street, Sidon's main thoroughfare, and began stationing its upper echelons and administration there.

When the relief unit established its headquarters, the prevailing mood in Sidon was tense. The effects of the still-raging war could be seen everywhere: in houses damaged by mortar fire, roads furrowed by the treads of tanks rumbling northward, broken water mains spilling their contents into the streets, and IDF convoys of hundreds of reinforcement vehicles clogging the main road. The few residents who ventured out into the streets carried white flags

as they scrounged around in search of food staples and medicines, praying that a solution to the harsh conditions precipitated by a war that descended on them suddenly could be obtained just as fast. The relief unit was soon organized in its headquarters.

With the goal of calming the local population, a five meter-long sign was posted at the main entrance to the building, facing the main street, on which was written in Arabic: "Relief Unit for Residents of Lebanon." As though by magic, within 10 minutes people began to approach the building. Their initial hesitation and suspicion slowly dissipated as they ascended the steps to the headquarters and stammered that they would like to speak with the zabet, the officer in charge. Several of the high ranked officers in the relief unit, all of whom spoke fluent Arabic, received the people, who began circumspectly and emotionally describing their plight, especially the food shortage, medical problems, limited mobility in the city due to war damage, and lack of electricity and fuel.

Among all of the problems, special attention was required for the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp, immediately to the east of Sidon, where battle still raged. People from the highest political and social circles came to the unit's headquarters and expressed the opinion that the relief unit would not be able to cope alone with the burden of complicated problems. Rather, in light of the manifold needs required to restore normal life, they asked that the IDF allow them to play an active role, in coordination with the unit, in the rebuilding of the city and the removal of hazards using equipment at their disposal. They also advised the relief unit to make contact with the Sidon municipality, so that the latter might work in conjunction as well.

And in fact, once the people's requests began to be addressed, and once the locals sensed that the IDF's general goal was to provide relief and ease their lives, many residents continued to stream toward the relief unit headquarters with requests to address various issues, both public and private. Among the public issues, the IDF was asked to secure the city's financial institutions, including 120 bank branches, and the land registry office, or tabu, in which centuries' worth of records were kept. All of these requests were addressed immediately. Concurrently, requests were submitted for the Sidon port to be opened to allow vessels carrying food and blankets donated by Lebanese Europeans to dock. The IDF was also asked to secure the university and medical school in the village of Kfar Falous, to the east of Sidon, and to encourage the owners of private hospitals to restart their operations.

II. The Local Population

Over time, the relief unit became familiar with all of the different strands of the population in the city and throughout the region. Sidon and its immediate suburbs are marked by a number of population groups; the dominant element in both the city and in the Ein el-Hilweh and Mieh Mieh refugee camps, whose Palestinian population originated primarily in the villages of Western Galilee, were Sunni Muslim. Relations between Sidonians and their neighbors, the Ein el-Hilweh refugees, had always been tense. Life in the camps was difficult even before the addition of the travails of war. Ever since their arrival in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees had to cope with the governmental policy that saw them as 'temporary visitors' and did not allow them to integrate into the majority population as any migrant

group that could expect eventual Lebanese citizenship. Consequently, it was forbidden for them to purchase real estate, whether land or buildings, and to work for the government, including serving in the military or in the security forces. The status of Palestinians in Lebanon was so low that they were even precluded from holding public tenders, for example, to operating a taxicab. Worst of all, from their perspective, was that they were forced to live in crowded refugee camps adjacent to Lebanon's major cities – Tyre, Sidon, Beirut, and Tripoli – to await the day that they become naturalized Lebanese or return to Palestine…

Bordering Sidon is the large Shia town of Ghaziyeh. During our time in Lebanon, this population was well-established and affluent, and many of it members had relatives in Western Africa and South America. The Lebanese Shia community maintained close ties and had a strong sense of solidarity with its global Diaspora. Even though this population was Shia, religious fanaticism and hostility toward Israel had not yet developed and were imperceptible among them. To us, the Shia community, concentrated mainly in Southern Lebanon approaching the border with Israel, seemed friendly and proud. They refused to come to terms with the neglectful treatment that they received at the hands of the Beirut government; as the third-largest ethnic community in Lebanon, they had been consistently ignored and deprived for many years. These conditions explain the origins of Shia emigration.

The towns to the east of Sidon are of a mixed Christian and Shia population, such as the town of Roum. Further east is the Catholic city of Jezzine. Northeast of Sidon is the mountainous and enchantingly beautiful Chouf district, the heartland of Lebanon's Druze community. Greater Beirut with its teeming population of

Muslims, Christians, Palestinians, and refugee camp residents, begins north of the Chouf.

III. Activities of the Relief Unit

Not long after the unit established itself in the large, privately-owned building in Sidon, its owner, Mr. Hamdi Saadallah, showed up and subtly hinted to us that he needed it. Despite the dearth of suitable buildings, it was decided that the building would be given back to him. Before returning it, though, the relief unit was asked to go through the building room by room, checking and verifying that everything was in order, and reassuring the owner that the IDF would compensate him for any damage discovered. Immediately afterward, the relief unit moved to the seraya, the traditional palace and headquarters of the governor of Sidon, along with other military units operating in the region. The move to the seraya was timely as it streamlined the unit's operations within the broader military context and also contributed to the security of its personnel.

In addition to receiving the public, relief unit personnel began patrolling the Sidon area, in the towns of Jezzine, Nabatieh, Sarafand, and other towns in the region, the Druze area of the Chouf, and Ein el-Hilweh and Mieh Mieh refugee camps. Wherever we went, we established contact with the local leadership, clergy, municipal government, and chamber of commerce. We naturally forged strong ties with the Sidon municipality, under Mayor Ahmed Kalesh. Given the numerous problems prevailing in Sidon, we held many meetings to coordinate with the municipality, and there was full cooperation when consulting with each other to solve the constantly arising

problems.

It bears mentioning that the municipalities and government ministries largely presumed that the IDF would not stay long in Lebanon, at least in major cities like Sidon, and they were therefore prepared to cooperate with us in the interests of making life easier for the local population. A solid relationship was also made with the chamber of commerce, under the leadership of Mahmoud Zaatari, with the goal of enabling the chamber to renew its activities, which had been interrupted by the war.

IDF policy regarding the local population was based on the desire to build a relationship of trust and friendship and to provide as much help as possible in the resolution of the more difficult and pressing concerns. For example, they found a solution for the Ein el-Hilweh refugees by bringing (portable) buildings into the refugee camps, to house, at Israel's expense, those whose homes were damaged during the war. Eventually it also became possible to send the sick and injured, who local hospitals either could not or refused to treat due to lack of money, to Israeli hospitals. The high point of this policy came when local merchants were allowed to visit Israel to purchase goods (this policy did not changed even after the assassination of Bachir Gemayel in September 1982).

In the context of this policy, the unit's command decided to show Israel's good side to the Lebanese. To that end, it was decided to arrange a one-day tour of Israel for key figures from four regions – Tyre, Sidon, Nabatieh, and Jezzine. One bus was organized from each region. It was determined that all of the buses would leave for Rosh Hanikra at five o'clock in the morning. Each bus would be chaperoned by an officer from the unit who would administrate

the bus and also serve as a guide during the tour. The general goal was to include key figures from each region in the trip, so that they could then enhance Israel's public image among the residents of their region.

I was assigned to chaperone the bus from Nabatieh. The day before the trip, I met with some local dignitaries, explained that we would be touring Israel the next day, and asked them to spread the word to other key people from the area. I stayed in Nabatieh all that day so that I could leave with the participants at the crack of dawn. I was unsure whether there would even be any participants – after all, this was a trip to an "enemy country" and there was no guarantee that it would not be boycotted. To my great surprise, registration for the trip was full within two hours. Fifty people, including ten women, enthusiastically expressed their desire to visit Israel. Early in the morning, the bus was surrounded by hundreds more who wished to be included. Just before we left, a prominent participant led the passengers in the Wayfarer's Prayer, and upon its completion, the signal was given for us to depart. The participants brought all sorts of quality provisions, especially cash with which to buy as much as possible of the products whose shortage in Lebanon was most pronounced.

The four buses met up in Rosh Hanikra, and they proceeded in a convoy to Tel Aviv, and in particular to the open-air market at the fairground. We stopped in Haifa for breakfast at the Matar restaurant next to a gas station by the beach. The owners of the restaurant, operated jointly by Jews and Arabs, received the Lebanese warmly and wished them a bon voyage. When we arrived at the fairground, the participants were given a lot of free time to look and shop. Their

excitement was beyond our expectations. It is worth recalling that since the beginning of the war, most of them had been disconnected from the greater part of Lebanon, and as a result, at the moment in which they were given the opportunity for a change of scenery, to spend the money that they had been saving up, they felt free as birds. They bought whatever caught their eyes at the market; I was concerned that the bus would not fit everything that they bought. On the return trip, they sang with gusto and spared no words as they expressed excitement for all they had seen. They asked that we arrange additional trips to other parts of the country.

Several days after our return, some notables came to complain that, intentionally or unintentionally, we had excluded the Palestinian population, the residents of Ein el-Hilweh, from participating in the trip. They asked that we organize a trip for the Palestinians as well. After some deliberation, the request was approved. It was agreed that a group of 50 Palestinians from the Sidon area, including the Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp, would visit the Western Galilee region of Israel. We knew ahead of time that such a visit would stir up strong emotions, as the visitors would identify the remains of their native villages and want to disembark and give expression to their feelings. Despite everything, the trip proceeded as planned and included visits to several sites around the region. They were hosted for lunch and given a tour at Kibbutz Matzuva, where they saw the various kibbutz industries and even watched – with great excitement – the picking of avocados using a crane. At the request of a few participants, we went to Akko and allowed them to pray at the Jezzar Pasha Mosque in the Old City. Word got out among Akko's Arab residents that a group of Palestinians from Lebanon were staying in the Old City, and within a short time many of them came to the mosque to seek

out potential relatives. There were emotional reunions that lasted well into the night. We managed to round up the participants with difficulty, and returned to Sidon at midnight. On the way back, they voiced pain about their situation in Lebanon, a pain that was exacerbated when they compared their condition with that of Israeli Arabs. They expressed hope that the war in Lebanon would lead to a solution for them as well.

The direct contacts generated by the human encounters between Israeli military personnel serving in Lebanon and the local population, and between Lebanese citizens who visited Israel to tour and shop but also experienced the Israeli society, led to a positive turning point in the feelings of the two populations and to mutual aspirations to deepen these relationships. Everyone expressed hope that a window had been opened for direct dialogue between the two nations.

IV. Nazem Badran

Among the many citizens who appealed to the relief unit for aid was Nazem Badran, a resident of Beirut and the owner of a large business selling spare auto parts. During the fighting, his store in the western part of the city, near the beach, was hit by a mortar shell that destroyed his entire inventory of parts. Nazem explained to me that he was well into the process of rebuilding his store, and he hoped to reopen it within a few months if he could find any available suppliers.

Because of the living conditions in Beirut, it was tough to get to

Europe to order spare parts, so he had the idea of going to Israel to find merchandise that he would import via the "Good Fence" at Rosh Hanikra. The fence, erected prior to the outbreak of the First Lebanon War, was supposed to be an official border crossing between the two countries and advance trade between Israel and Lebanon.

Nazem applied to me for an entry permit to Israel, so that he might, on his own, find wholesalers and importers with whom he could do business. Nazem's application was handled in accordance with the standard protocols for merchants, and two weeks after he applied I happily informed him that he had obtained an entry permit into Israel. Before his first trip to Israel, he asked me to equip him with some basic information about our country to facilitate his orientation there. As we began a lengthy discussion, I noticed his impressive athletic build and his meticulous style of dress. He was a tall, handsome, 45-year-old man with impeccable manners. He described at length his extensive business experience in the automotive field. I observed that the Lebanese he met accorded him great respect, attesting to his status as a member of the upper classes.

During his first visit to Israel, Nazem faced numerous difficulties. He spent long hours negotiating the damaged roads to the Rosh Hanikra crossing, passing through many military roadblocks on the way. He was also subjected to extensive searches by IDF soldiers at the border and had to rent a car on the other side. But from Nazem's perspective, the worst difficulty was the atmosphere of suspicion that surrounded him and all other Lebanese merchants, as manifested in the probes and interrogations into their motives and Israeli contacts, which they underwent at the border. It was a nuisance to Nazem and the other merchants. His entry permit was for only two days, which

included travel time – short enough to prevent him from reaching even the most preliminary stages of a potential deal. As regulations were streamlined, longer-term permits were granted, allowing the merchants to make even-larger deals, bound only by the limitations of the Lebanese market. As his dealings expanded, Nazem's profits grew; his temptation to diversify into other areas of the automotive industry – like filters, motor oil, and batteries – prevailed.

In early January 1983, after my discharge from reserve duty in Lebanon, I started a business to develop commercial ties between Israel and the Arab world. Trading with Israel was the only way for Nazem and other merchants to keep their businesses running in a manner approaching normalcy, despite the enmity between Israel and Lebanon. On one occasion, I asked Nazem how his commercial activity, dependent as it was on Israeli imports, would be received within his Lebanese culture. He responded that it was with great hesitation that he decided to do business with Israel; it was well known that trade with Israel had always been banned by the authorities, and whoever engaged in it was taking a big risk. Nevertheless, the war and the resulting commercial paralysis left him with no choice. Commercial businesses must run in an orderly manner. A merchant who cannot maintain a supply line will lose his customers to the ever-present competition. So the key to staying in business in tough times is flexibility and maneuverability, finding the openings that allow a businessman to keep his edge. The car part business, by its very nature, is built on international brands like Mercedes, Peugot, and Fiat; it was possible to procure parts and accessories in Israel that would have no Israeli 'fingerprints' on them. Thus, the Lebanese authorities as well as customers, motivated as they were by commercial interests, closed their eyes to the illegality

of importing from Israel.

Nazem's social status was very much reflected in his external appearance. When I asked him about his family's reaction to his commercial ties with Israel, he noted that he and his family enjoy a large degree of immunity, thanks to their high pedigree. The Badran family is well-known in Lebanon and is connected with many different parts of the regime, which closed its eyes and even lined its pockets from trade with Israel. In those uncertain times, this gave them a great opportunity to improve their condition.

From a business perspective, Nazem's main problem was the price of the merchandise. He was disappointed when he compared the prices in Israel with those in Lebanon, fearing that he would not be able to close any deals at Israeli prices, which were 25% higher than what he was accustomed to. Additionally, he had difficulty communicating with Israeli suppliers – because of both the language barrier and the sense of strangeness and suspicion that prevailed in relations between Israelis and Lebanese. The main concern of the Israeli suppliers was to get paid in cash, while Nazem's primary concern was to meet the demands of his customers on time while still turning a reasonable profit.

Over time, the situation changed for the better. The regulations for entry into Israel were relaxed, and it was sometimes even permitted for Lebanese to enter Israel with their own cars and to stay over several nights. Hapoalim Bank opened a branch at Rosh Hanikra to facilitate business deals between Lebanese merchants and their Israeli suppliers.

Slowly, Nazem and his Israeli suppliers began to build trust. He

always brought gifts for his Israeli friends – candies from the factory in Sidon, known for their excellent quality, and bottles of Arak Zahlawi from the Bekaa Valley. Among the Israelis' favorite Lebanese products were hand-crafted ivory silverware sets from Jezzine. Nazem would bring these gifts to Israelis with whom he developed excellent relations. In turn, the Israeli suppliers would send back exotic fruits from Israel – avocados, persimmons, macadamia nuts, and dates – for Nazem to share with his family and friends, and which were devoured in Lebanon with great relish.

Nazem's frequent visits to Israel naturally led to a much better relationship between us. We met more and more often at various points along the way as he traveled through Israel, and I gained ever greater respect for his energy, responsibility, and seriousness. As is common in the Middle East, our conversations became more personal over time, and with this I realized that I had won Nazem's confidence. I can attest that my instincts never betrayed me in all of my work in the Arab sector over the course of decades. These relationships were built on mutual respect and esteem, even admiration. All of the academic theories that I had learned coalesced into a pattern of behavior and an ethical system that I applied all my life when working with the Arab population.

The constant improvement of the conditions in Lebanon created an ever-increasing demand for the importation of more and a greater variety of goods. Nevertheless, commerce suffered significantly from the economic situation in Lebanon. The Lebanese lira, worth about half a US dollar at the beginning of the First Lebanon War, rapidly lost value during the course of the war, to the point that businessmen had a hard time meeting market conditions. Once,

when Nazem came to Israel to buy goods from a supplier but did not have enough cash on hand, he asked to buy on credit and pay for the goods within two weeks. The supplier, Aharon Ouzan, responded, with all due respect and despite the trust that he had in Nazem given the number of successful deals that they had concluded, that he could not accept the risk entailed by extending that much credit. It was clear that Ouzan's concern was not that Nazem would breach his trust, but that security conditions might prevent Nazem from being able to return to Israel. Nazem explained that the money would be wired from his corporate account in France directly to the Hapoalim Bank branch in Rosh Hanikra, and therefore would not be subject to the situation in Lebanon. They continued their discussion, with Nazem urging Ouzan to trust him and immediately give him the merchandise, explaining that his buyers in Beirut needed it urgently and failure to provide it would cause damage to them and, consequently, to Nazem's reputation.

Eventually, the two parties approached me to mediate between them. By that time I had already been discharged from reserve duty and was helping Nazem to develop business contacts in Israel. As a result of my intervention, it was agreed, as a compromise, that the size of the deal would be cut in half, Ouzan would extend $15,000 of credit to Nazem, and I personally guaranteed the other $10,000. The matter was agreed, the goods were sent across the border, and Nazem returned to Beirut.

Those next two weeks were very tense. My theoretical understanding of Arab culture faced a litmus test. I placed my hope and faith in a man that I had met in the circumstances of the Lebanon War, and I wholeheartedly believed that I had done the right thing. I impatiently awaited for the money's arrival in Nazem's account. The manager

of the Rosh Hanikra branch told me that Ouzan and I had taken on abnormal risk for wartime. He was astounded that we would have the guts to guarantee such a large sum for a Lebanese merchant, who is "here today and gone tomorrow; good luck finding him over there." I responded that the relationship we had developed provided the basis for my hope and belief that Nazem would not disappoint us. Sure enough, on the morning of the due date, fourteen days after the deal, the branch manager called me up to tell me that $50,000 had been deposited into Nazem's account.

During Nazem's longer stays in Israel, I would occasionally take him on various short sightseeing trips in Israel. Once, on a visit to Nazareth, he saw a large industrial building near the southern entrance to the city. Responding to his query, I told him that it is an automotive assembly plant called Nazareth Automotive Industries. Nazem wanted to see the plant, as he was interested in everything connected in some way to motor vehicles. I promised to try to contact the plant's management to arrange a visit, and sure enough they responded several days later with the affirmation. On the scheduled date, we went to the plant and were met by the deputy director-general, who was happy to be hosting a Lebanese businessman. Nazem got a comprehensive survey of the assembly process of off-road vehicles – jeeps and command-cars. He learned that some of the vehicles were earmarked for the IDF while others were sold on the local market. He asked for, and was granted, a test drive in one of the jeeps. He was very impressed by the vehicle's performance, and during the ensuing discussion he expressed amazement at the advanced technology used in the plant. He also noticed the large number of Arab employees at the plant, several even in key positions. Nazem said that he would never have guessed

that Israel had such a highly developed automotive industry, and he wanted to look into the possibility of being the middleman for the sale of the jeeps in Lebanon. The company told him that their goal was indeed to market their products in new markets, but that two issues had to be addressed: First, would Nazem be able to finance such an endeavor, and second, how would it be possible to market an Israeli vehicle in Lebanon while the two countries were at war. Regarding the first question, Nazem expressed confidence, as a citizen of Lebanon who is very familiar with its automotive market, that the Israeli jeeps would be received well in Lebanon. Yet it was clear to him that it would be impossible to do business directly under the current condition. Indeed, he had not come with a shopping list, only with the belief that the situation would eventually improve and it would be possible for the two countries to engage in trade. He therefore had an interest in getting himself into the company's Rolodex as potentially the plant's exclusive dealer in Lebanon. Nazem added that once the situation improved, Lebanese merchants would be banging down the company's door to obtain exclusive dealership rights, so it behooved him to make that initial contact so that he would have a leg up in the future. The meeting ended with an exchange of business cards and with Nazem leaving with a bundle of the company's English-language catalogs under his arm. It is worth noting that just about every Lebanese merchant who made contact with an Israeli supplier in those days asked in advance to be the Israeli company's exclusive dealer when the time came.

V. Crisis

One morning when I went to Rosh Hanikra to meet Nazem and drive him into Israel, I sensed that something was bugging him.

"What's wrong, ya Nazem? Why are you sad and worried? Problems at home? Did someone who owes you money disappear?" I asked.

"No, ya Abu Jad, money is not everything in life. Some things are more important," he responded.

"Like what?" I persisted.

"Forget it. It's not important. What's our plan for today? Where are we going? Who are we meeting?" Nazem steered the conversation toward business.

I got the hint and stopped bothering him with personal questions. We drove to Tel Aviv for a scheduled meeting with a supplier of spare auto parts. After three hours of heavy haggling, the two of them reached an agreement and shook hands on a $10,000 deal. The supplier, Aharon Ouzan, then invited us to lunch at a fish restaurant to celebrate the completion of the deal. Later, as Nazem and I drove back north, Nazem decided that it had gotten too late and that he would spend the night at the Netanya Park Hotel, his regular lodging during his stays in Israel. Despite the success of the deal, I felt that his mood was darkening. By the time we got near the hotel, he was not speaking at all. Because of his dejected mindset, I accompanied him into the hotel and stayed with him. That evening, on the balcony overlooking the seaside promenade, the two of us sat over of bottle a Lebanese arak, listening to the crash of the waves and the whispers of the cool wind. After a prolonged silence, Nazem began to unburden himself of what he had been holding in his heart, revealing to me the reason for his sadness.

"Ya Abu Jad," he began, "Allah has blessed you and given you a

wife, children, and property. But for me, God is teasing. I have a prospering business that I built with my own two hands. I live in a two-story villa, each floor encompassing three hundred square meters. It's equipped with the latest electrical appliances and furnished with furniture imported from Italy. The house is surrounded by a wide garden full of fruit trees and with a grapevine awning that stretches from one end of the yard to the other. I am, thank God, perfectly healthy. My five brothers and three sisters, Alhamdulillah, are all married and live in homes adjacent to mine in wealth, comfort, and tranquility.

"The war that you have brought upon us, may Allah forgive you," Nazem continued to pour out his heart to me, "will soon pass, Inshallah. But tell me this: what's the use of all of the wealth and comfort that Allah has given me if, at the same time, He deprives me of the joys of fatherhood? For twenty years I have been married to Ibtihaj, my cousin from Tripoli, but where is the bahaja? Where is the joy? Our home is like a haunted house, devoid of the sounds of kids playing or babies crying. The only crying that can be heard, with no respite, is that of Ibtihaj, who has not made peace with her barrenness," Nazem summed up bitterly. He then added, "Behayatka, ya Abu Jad, tell me honestly: what good is all the effort I make to keep the business going, when danger awaits me every time I come here, giving rise to the fear that this will be my final journey? Why must I humiliate myself at your checkpoints, where the inspection of every single vehicle, of my belongings, of my body, steals precious time, sometimes delaying me to the point where I have to turn around in the middle of trip? Why should I put myself at risk by disclosing my commercial ties with you to the ulad al-haram, the unjust ones, who view negatively every one of my trips to Israel? What's the purpose

in all of this if I have no one to bequeath all that I accumulated with my ten fingers? Look at my brothers who live near me – they are all married and all have children. All of my sisters are married and live happily with their husbands and children. Of the whole family, only I am burdened with this curse, and I don't know why!"

I understood the magnitude of this moment. Nazem chose to share his deepest longings, his most private family secrets, with me. This was a display of absolute trust, and I felt as though I had been awarded a very great honor. I thought for a second, and then responded, "Ya Nazem, you have been married for twenty years, but what have you done in all this time? Did you treat the problem? Did you visit doctors and consult with specialists? There are medical solutions to issues of barrenness and fertility. Why don't you make use of them?"

"Ya Abu Jad," Nazem scolded, "do you think that we're ignoramuses and fools? There is not a single hospital or clinic in Lebanon that we did not visit and where we did not undergo a thorough examination – and every one of them told us that there is no chance that we would be able to bring children into the world. We went to Egypt and were examined at a world renowned fertility clinic in Cairo, but came home with the same verdict. Before the war we thought about going to France – there's a clinic famous for its successful treatment of infertility in women; but the current situation makes that impossible. This is the situation! We're desperate and frustrated. We have no idea what the future holds. The situation just gets worse and worse. Ibtihaj refuses to visit her sisters-in-law, who constantly bother her with questions and comments. Even my mother torments her constantly, needling her with hurtful words and comments. So

I've been forced to run away from my troubles and put all my time into the business, keeping myself occupied at all hours so that I can avoid spending time in my depressing home. Even my decision to do business in Israel and to commute back and forth while suffering the difficulties of travel was primarily to pass time and distance myself from the gloomy atmosphere of my own house."

As a graduate of the Middle Eastern Studies department of the Hebrew University, I was well aware of the premium that Arab society places on raising the next generation, a value rooted in thousands of years of tradition and custom and saturated with religious injunctions obligatory on each individual. Arab society places the responsibility to establish posterity squarely on the man. It is he who is required to meet society's expectations, and his situation within it is determined, in no small measure, by the quantity and "quality" of his offspring. For this reason, traditional Arab culture allows a man to marry more than one wife, actually granting him the right to rule over his private family harem – like a lion reigns over the lionesses in his pride; ensuring that another generation will live to fight for its existence. The concept of "family honor" is considered the highest value in Arab society and is always connected to the family's interpersonal relationships, the position of the next generation within it, and the sexual culture within the family. The degree of importance of this value ranges from the pinnacle of honor and esteem afforded to the paterfamilias, by virtue of his honorable leadership of the family, to the lowest depths that are reached when a family member is suspected of "dishonoring the family."

Nazem's revelation regarding the most personal facet of his life clarified for me the degree to which he had placed his absolute confidence in me. I knew that I was being led toward the realm of

his deepest secrets, and that I was now expected to demonstrate my complete trustworthiness in protecting Nazem's honor and status.

Carefully and sensitively, I formulated my next words to him: "Ya Nazem, you've told me that you've had problems for many years and that you've been examined in several hospitals; you've reached the conclusion that Ibtihaj is barren! If that's the case, why don't you marry another wife who can bear you children? It's permitted in your religion, so there shouldn't be anything keeping you from taking that course."

The thought that I had made a mistake this time fleetingly passed through my mind. Could my question have been an affront to that which is nearest to Nazem's heart? Was I too bold this time…? Nazem remained silent for a long time, then turned to me angrily and said, "Ya Abu Jad, you have some nerve suggesting that I marry a second wife in addition to Ibtihaj and then justifying it by the fact that Islam permits it… you should know that Ibtihaj is my childhood sweetheart. She's eight years younger than me and has only now reached her highest level of refinement. She's an educated woman, speaks several languages, is knowledgeable, modern, and cultured, of noble birth, and bears her burden proudly and silently. She works at the library of the American University of Beirut, which enables her to search out potential solutions to our family problem. She gains whatever information she can from every medical establishment she comes across, and she has complete faith that one day she will bear a child, the fruit of her own womb. So how can I betray her – betray myself – by bringing another woman into my home? You should also know that bringing another woman home would cause Ibtihaj to leave me and return to her parents' home. This would cause a rift

between the families, be commented on in the press and on TV, and generally become a big stink. Aristocratic families do not expose themselves to scandal; they'd rather suffer silently, even for a long time."

I understood his agitation and responded, "Ya Nazem, I have an idea for how you can deal with the problem. I suggest that we sleep on it, and we can discuss it at greater length tomorrow."

The next day we ate breakfast together in the hotel. Before he left for Beirut, he asked me what idea had occurred to me. I explained that in Israel there are several common solutions for childless couples – adoption, for example. I asked if they had ever considered that option.

Nazem stared at me like I had lost my mind and responded angrily and mockingly:

"This is your brilliant idea? I stayed up all night expecting to hear something practical from you, and you're trying to sell me an adoption… It's unthinkable that we would adopt. Don't you know that Arabs don't adopt children? They bring abandoned children to orphanages, not into their own homes. Do you think that I, Nazem Badran, of a noble family known throughout Beirut, would bring some strange child who is not of my seed into my home? That I would call him my son?"

I insisted: "Ya Nazem, for us Jews adoption is not only for the reasons you described. It can also be done out of solidarity with the suffering of a fellow human being. During a war, children are occasionally abandoned by their parents or their parents are killed or go missing, and there are no orphanages in the area. In such a

situation, childless families, or even families with children whose financial situation is good, volunteer to help these abandoned children for humanitarian reasons. From my experience – and this includes Arab society – adoption does not bring disgrace to these families. On the contrary, they are shown honor and respect. I remember the case of a well-known dignitary in Israel named Faras Hamdan, a Knesset member and a respected resident of Baqa al-Gharbiyye. He was unfortunately childless. In 1956, during the Sinai Campaign, a Bedouin baby girl was found in the dunes of El Arish. The IDF sought an adoptive family for her. When word got out, many Israeli families were prepared to adopt her, but the upper echelons of the IDF felt that it would be more appropriate for her to be adopted by an Arab family – and that's what happened.

Sheikh Faras Hamdan adopted her, named her Sinaya, and she grew up to be a source of pride for his family. She is now happily married to a Bedouin doctor. Everyone praised Sheikh Faras Hamdan for this act of kindness. In your case, if you wish to view my example as a model solution, it will certainly not be difficult for you to adopt an abandoned child or two wandering around one of the refugee camps like Bourj el-Barajneh, Sabra, or Shatila. That way you'll become parents to a boy or girl while also doing a great humanitarian deed. Everyone around you will praise and bless you, and God will repay you in kind."

I added as an afterthought, "You should also know that in some cases women are able to conceive and have a baby only after adopting a child."

Nazem peered at me and responded, "Ya Abu Jad, are you serious, or are you mocking me? Haven't the Palestinians caused us trouble

in Lebanon, including causing the last two wars? How will those around me respond? They will definitely view it unkindly. And what about Ibtihaj? Will she be able to embrace a foreign child who is not from her womb and who, moreover, is Palestinian? You can forget about this idiotic idea, and never mention such thoughts to me again. Otherwise, our friendship is over for good."

Despite his threats, I tried a different angle, so as to exhaust all options. I replied, "True, I didn't consider the degree to which adopting a Palestinian child is too sensitive a matter to be applicable in Lebanon. But that doesn't mean you should completely rule out adoption. The kid can be from anywhere." I described the Israeli practice at length: due to the lack of babies up for adoption in Israel, babies are brought from all over the world – from European countries like Romania, Ukraine, and Russia, and South American countries, especially Brazil. I detailed the effort and suffering that this entails – the financial burden on the adoptive family, the tiring trips to the country where the child awaits, the anxiety of waiting for the authorities of those countries to approve the adoption – and ultimately the sublime joy that inundates these families once the adoption becomes official.

Nothing of what I said in praise of adoption was met with any sort of response or gesture. I felt like I was talking to a wall and that it would be best to just leave it alone. After a prolonged silence, as we approached Rosh Hanikra, I turned to Nazem again and said: Look at me, ya Nazem. If you absolutely reject the idea of adoption, I promise never to mention it again. But let's try something else – treatment at an Israeli fertility clinic. Our country, thank God, has a good number of hospitals and clinics that specialize in the treatment of infertility and barrenness. Through my work, I've come across

many similar cases over the past thirty years that these places were able to treat successfully in one way or another. Please, let me speak to an Israeli specialist; once I explained your situation to him, we can decide together how to proceed. You've tried unsuccessfully in a few countries; now try the closest country, which has also accumulated more experience in the field than any other country in the region. Come to Israel, get the best treatment, and Inshallah we'll find a solution!"

Nazem looked at me and thought and thought. He finally stated, "La hawla wala quwwata illa billah ilaliya ilazim," acknowledging that all power and strength comes from God, but adding, "if not for my own sake then for Ibtihaj, I am willing to suggest to her that she come to Israel for fertility tests, in the hope that despite everything a miracle will happen through this country, and her barrenness will disappear."

VI. Initial Treatments

Armed with Nazem's agreement to try fertility treatments in Israel, I went to a fertility clinic near Tel Aviv, run by Dr. Baran, one of Israel's top specialists. I had known Dr. Baran for many years. I told him about the plight of Nazem and Ibtihaj and awaited his reaction, but he responded that he was not willing to examine the couple.

I asked why he referred to "the couple" if the problem was with Ibtihaj. He responded that his extensive experience in the field had taught him that it is impossible to know which spouse had a problem, and therefore it had become standard procedure that both are tested as part of the initial infertility examination.

Two weeks had passed since my last meeting with Nazem. I anxiously awaited his next round of purchases, as I imagined the conversations between the spouses in their empty, childless home. I knew the kind of emotions such conversations could stir up and was concerned that one or both of them would simply dismiss the idea of coming to Israel for treatment. Another two weeks passed before Nazem called again wanting to meet so that he could procure his next quantity of spare parts. I kept mum about the planned treatments.

The meeting with Ouzan progressed quickly and with minimum haggling. The two had finally become accustomed to one another and could conclude a deal without a profusion of talking. After the transaction, we went to our regular kebab joint in Tel Aviv. Nazem was in a particularly good and spry mood, and I found an appropriate moment to broach the subject of Dr. Baran's opinion that both Nazem and Ibtihaj should be tested.

Before I even finished speaking, Nazem fired back, "Exactly what kind of test does he want to run on me?"

"A semen analysis," I responded, somewhat hesitantly.

Nazem blanched, then blushed. He bowed his head in shame and began mumbling like someone caught doing some sinful act, searching for the words that might help him save face. Eventually he recovered enough to look me straight in the eye and say, "Do you really believe that I would agree to strip down and let you examine my semen here in Tel Aviv? Had I known that this would be expected of me, I would never have come. I will not consider taking this test. It would be an unbearable disgrace, a disgrace that I am incapable of coming to grips with. I don't understand you. Why

do I need to be tested at all? I swear that I am strong as an ox and that marital relations between me and my beloved wife are normal and enjoyable. So what about me needs to be tested? Everybody knows that the problem is with Ibtihaj!"

Because I was familiar enough with Arab culture, I could read between the lines and understand what Nazem simply could not bring himself to utter: undermining, or even casting aspersions, on someone's manhood could completely destroy his social standing and turn him into an object of ridicule among his acquaintances. Numerous legends recount tragedies that resulted from questions of manhood, and every Arab girl is imbued with the hope that she will marry someone who will make her fertile. I explained to Nazem that the semen analysis is a required procedure for all men treated in the fertility clinic – Arabs and Jews alike, with no exceptions. Everyone understands that the test is vital. I explained that it is useless to argue the point because it would be impossible to go any further unless both spouses were tested. I patiently explained that the reason for this requirement is that there might be some medical reason, unknown to the man, that affects the quality of his semen even if it does not impair sexual function.

Nazem did not let up. "What will Ibtihaj say when she learns that I must also be tested? She is liable to want to forget about the whole thing in order to preserve my honor." I knew that his question was quite relevant. Many Arab women would behave in just that way in order to protect their husbands' honor. They would rather suffer their entire lives and even remain childless than be seen as playing a role in hurting their husbands.

Nazem's entrée of roast beef no longer interested him when it was

served. After a prolonged silence, he tried attacking the subject from a different angle. It was clear that he was seeking pretexts to get out of the inevitable. He wondered how he would be able to bring his wife into Israel; after all, she was not a businesswoman with an entry permit. He feared that they would run into trouble if they got to the border without a special permit. I promised him that I would quickly arrange for a medical need-based permit.

It slowly dawned on Nazem that there was no way around the examination, and he more or less made his peace with the circumstances. However, he insisted that he first must visit the clinic and meet the doctor so that he could get an impression of the place and its operations and properly prepare Ibtihaj for the exam.

I worked quickly.

I called Dr. Baran, apologized for the short notice, and asked him for an initial appointment as soon as possible. His schedule had an opening two days later. I spent those two days with Nazem, who had decided to utilize them to seek out additional suppliers for his Lebanese businesses. When we arrived at the clinic, Dr. Baran greeted us warmly, coffee was served, and Nazem was given an explanation of the clinic's activities. The staff explained to him that the purpose of the clinic is to help childless families overcome the problems that prevent them from having children by providing special treatments. The doctor noted that in general half of those who undergo treatment are women, and the other half are men. Whereas in the past it was common to see the woman as the sole responsible party for childlessness, it is now well-established that many men have some problem with their sperm that renders them incapable of getting a woman pregnant. As such, the goal of the clinic is to

identify which spouse has the problem, diagnose the problem, and then decide on the best course of treatment to correct the problem.

As Dr. Baran explained the clinic's activities and cited the fact that half of its patients are men, I studied Nazem's face to discern the degree, if any, to which he absorbed and internalized the ramifications of the data on male infertility. But I sensed that the doctor's words did not reach him or make any sort of impression on him.

Dr. Bran continued, stating that many women treated at the clinic were in need of in vitro fertilization, or IVF, developed for women who could not produce satisfactory ova, whether because of advanced age or illness. Egg cells are donated by healthy women in their twenties, and the treatment can cost tens of thousands of shekels by the time the baby is born. For this reason, the expenses of this treatment are covered by the health funds – essentially by the state. Dr. Baran explained that many women came to Israel from abroad for this treatment, but in such cases they had to cover the costs on their own. On the other hand, Dr. Baran explained, the costs entailed by the treatment of infertile men are minimal when compared with the costs for women.

Dr. Baran then detailed the testing process of the couple, and we were then given a tour of the various branches of the facility. All the while, Nazem was plied with information about the clinic's treatment process and the vast expertise that it had accumulated over the years since it began treating people for infertility. Dr. Baran noted the high success rate of the clinic's fertility treatments, which accounted for its world renown and high demand. Its patients included people from throughout the Middle East, including the United Arab Emirates, Cyprus, Turkey, and Greece. The level of care and hospitality were

very high – each woman was given a separate room, ensuring her privacy and the confidentiality of her medical record.

Before we exited the facility, Nazem tarried in the wide foyer, whose walls were covered with pictures of babies born to mothers and fathers whom the clinic treated. Dr. Baran proudly explained to Nazem that parents who were blessed with a child after many years of suffering often returned to the clinic each year, on the child's birthday, to bring along a picture of the child who would never have been born without the expertise and dedication of the clinic and its staff. Nazem meditated on the pictures for a long time and finally whispered to me that if his and Ibtihaj's treatment went successfully, he too would send a picture to grace the walls of the clinic.

After the meeting, the tests were scheduled for the following Wednesday. I successfully implored Dr. Baran to have an Arab doctor and an Arabic-speaking nurse on staff that day. Terms of payment were set, and Nazem was advised to arrive in Israel early on the day before the tests, so that he and Ibtihaj could get a good night's sleep and be refreshed and calm on the day of the tests. Nazem was further instructed to bring along the results of all prior tests that had been conducted in Lebanon and Egypt.

On our way back to Rosh Hanikra, Nazem was restless. On one hand, he could not hide his amazement at the medical achievements of the clinic and the impressiveness of Dr. Baran. On the other hand, he remained very uptight about everything that was supposed to happen the following week. At some point during the drive, he told me that perhaps it would be better to forget about the whole thing and cancel the tests because everything had gotten too complicated – their lives could even be in danger, God forbid. He repeatedly

emphasized the difficulty in making the long trek from Beirut to Rosh Hanikra and the need to pass through military checkpoints and undergo bodily inspections, to make the effort to apply for an entry permit into Israel and then hope that it was granted without delay. Regarding Ibtihaj, Nazem expressed concern about what she would have to go through, lying in a hospital bed in a foreign country that she had never visited and where she knew not a word of the local language. He wondered how the doctors and nurses would relate to them once they found out that they were Lebanese. Most of all, he was worried about how he would conceal the nature of their visit to Israel from their brothers and sisters and the rest of the extended family, especially his mother, who watched over them with eagle eyes. I had confidence in Nazem. I knew him as a seasoned businessman who could "sell" his wishes with the right words and with the necessary enthusiasm. I prayed for him and Ibtihaj to find the formula that would allow them to return to Israel for the fertility treatments.

Upon arriving home in Lebanon, Nazem informed his wife that she would be joining him on his next trip to Israel, where they would both be tested. Ibtihaj flatly refused to be tested in Israel, explaining herself by saying, "I don't believe that the Israeli tests will show us anything new that wasn't discovered in all of the thorough and extensive tests that we went through in Lebanon and Egypt. It's not worth the trouble or the effort. If we're already planning to go somewhere for more tests, let's go to Europe, to Switzerland, France, or Belgium, where there are famous medical institutes and where the level of medical expertise is certainly no less than in Israel, and may be even greater." She looked lovingly at her husband and added, "You, Nazem, go to Israel a lot to keep your business going. You're

even willing to risk your life by traveling to an enemy country. But why should I risk my life for a journey that I don't believe for one second will lead to better results?"

Nazem embraced Ibtihaj tenderly and said, "The tests we had in Lebanon and Egypt were years ago. You know that medical advances are being made all the time, every year. Israel's medical expertise is greater than any other country in the region. It's for good reason that people from all over the Middle East, even countries that have no diplomatic relations with Israel, come to Israel for medical treatment. When you arrive in Israel, you'll see for yourself that right next to the hospitals are hotels specifically for foreign patients who go there for treatment. They go to Israel because they know that it's their only hope. For that reason, my dear, sweet Ibtihaj, it's so important that you go to be tested at Dr. Baran's clinic, which is known for its excellence. This test will tell us what treatment you need. I too will be tested there, not because I want to, but because that's the protocol there, that both spouses are tested before any treatment is prescribed."

Nazem hesitated briefly and continued, "And regarding your refusal to visit Israel because of security, I promise you that you have nothing to be afraid of. Israel is not an enemy state. A country that allows Lebanese citizens to come for medical treatment in the middle of a war – I can't call that an enemy country. I've made dozens of trips to Israel over the past few years, and nobody has tried to harm me, insult me, or cheat me. From my perspective, it's a friendly country, incredibly similar to Lebanon – its sister country in many respects – primarily because of its physical landscape, but also because of its human landscape.