

Making Sulha

by Lesley Dawson

Sulha is a very well recognized, Arabic community tradition that originates in tribal disagreements. I had heard lots about it and was intrigued to understand how it worked, communally and individually. Before very long I was to experience how it was done in a very personal way.

We had English visitors at the university. They were running some short courses for the students and qualified physios. One of them, an ex-student of mine from Bradford days, had become a recognized expert in stroke rehabilitation. I was particularly happy to host her and her husband as she was a late developer professionally. As a student she had never lifted up her head from her notebook and had now blossomed into this vibrant, knowledgeable expert. Her husband was also a keen exponent of a psychological approach to back pain that astounded our local physios. They were both very popular among the students and were escorted daily between my house and the university.

It was the end of a busy three weeks in which I had accompanied them to Gaza and to Nablus as well as supervising a course in Bethlehem. I was very happy to host my guests but was looking forward to having my house back to myself in a few days. I asked Anita not to encourage any of the students to escort them home on this last day as I knew they would expect coffee and cake as the minimum hospitality.

I had gone ahead and was relaxing at home when my visitors arrived, accompanied by their usual male escorts. Stifling a groan, I rose to fulfill my hostess duties. Mike apologized that they had been unable to shed their escorts, and everyone sat down on the balcony. Anita saw how tired I was and began to take orders for drinks. This allowed me to excuse myself and creep away.

The implications of my withdrawal from this social event in my house became clear next morning when many of those who had visited me the previous day totally ignored me. At first, I thought they were just tired and continued to behave as I usually did. By lunchtime I realised we had a problem. Two of the girls explained that by absenting myself from the final gathering with Mike and Anita, I had broken the laws of hospitality and the relationship with some of the boys was fractured.

On asking what I could do to repair the damage, I was told that someone else would have to act as a go-between to make peace between us.

The next week allowed no time to work out who could do this as the students had practical exams. It was with a sinking heart that I realized that I had drawn the short straw of examining Iyad, a boy from Gaza, who had been most affected by my behaviour. He refused to look at me or answer any of my questions, so I left my Palestinian colleague to lead the discussion. Some of his close friends behaved similarly and I became more and more frustrated.

Discussing the situation with my Palestinian colleagues, they suggested a person they considered suitable to make sulha. He was an American teacher of English who spoke fluent Arabic, had lived in Palestinian society for many years and had a close relationship with the boys from Gaza.

He explained to me that I had said to the students who were living away from home that my house was their house, using the Arabic phrase "ahlan wa sahan." I had then reneged on this agreement by absenting myself from the gathering with Mike and Anita.

"Words are to be taken seriously. You have offended their laws of hospitality."

Ed spent many weeks engaging in shuttle diplomacy, between the two of us before we could meet face to face. I had to apologise to Iyad for my breach in hospitality, even though I didn't believe I had behaved badly. I would need to be more careful about saying "My house is your house." They were very serious words.