



Beit Alhekma (House of Wisdom)

"The value of every person lies in what he is best at"

In collaboration with:

The Arab Education Forum

&

Al-Qattan Cultural Center_Gaza

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Beit Alhekma - Gaza:

Mujaawarah brings together people who believe that the “value of every person lies in what he is best at”, as opposed to evaluation-based degrees that he/she has earned. It creates space to narrate stories about us, explore the depths of our own beings and get in touch with our innate souls.

This act aims at getting rid of toxins, illusions and cognitive occupation, caused by modern civilization, laws and regulations that have been formulated to take away the very value of the human being, especially Palestinians, who are targeted to change their beliefs and knowledge and steal their identity, such as the connection of a man to his/her land.

In autumn, trees shed their exhausted leaves, and people shed their hair too. Nobody can change this connection between man and the land. While trees shed their exhausted leaves, we, too, try to get rid of illusions that have been growing within to brace for a winter that heals our souls, preparing us for a new life in the spring. This idea was inspired by conversations on the meaning of the human being and extracting wisdom from within between Munir Fasheh, Issam Hajjaj and Mohamed Ghuneim, and finally saw the light.



The story of my *Mujaawarah* with Issam and Gaza's young people over several months

My relationship with Gaza began 50 years ago in the early seventies, after the 1967 war. Before that time, it had been impossible to visit Gaza, although it only took one hour to reach it.

This relationship started with conversations about education in general and mathematics in particular (which I used to teach at Birzeit University). I had a deeper connection with the strip later when I founded Tamer Foundation for Community Education (early 1989), namely through the “Reading and Self-expression” campaign, which was the first to bring together Palestinians (following Nakba in 1948) all the way from Acre in the North to Rafah in the South.



The Reading Passport was one of the tools connecting children and young people to different regions of Palestine. Without sufficient budget at the time, we had to sell the passports to cover printing and other expenses. Launched on February 1, 1992, the project sold 80 thousand passports across Palestine in the first year. In addition to the passport, Yacoub Abu Arafeh, who played the character of “Nakhla Al-Shiber”, greatly inspired children (I wrote a detailed article about the campaign, which was published with photos in Harvard Educational Review in 1995).

Most of what we accomplished in the campaign was led by volunteers. As usual, Gaza was the most active region in the project. Nihaya Abu Nahleh was a key figure in the strip, and Dr. Muna

Farra also contributed to the project. Thanks to “*Educational issues*” and “*Nakhla Al-Shiber*” pages in Al-Quds newspaper as well as “*Yara’at*” in Al-Ayyam newspaper (inspired by Serene Huleileh), strong ties began to emerge between everyone involved in the project. I visited Gaza for the last time on September 28, 2000, when the second *Intifada* broke out.

I wrote the aforementioned information as an introduction to *Mujaawarah* with Issam and a group of young people from Gaza to highlight the importance of creating ties, based on exposition, intellect and human conscience. About a year and a half ago, director of Arab Education Forum in Ramallah, Hiyam Abu Arqoub, told me that Issam Hani Hajjaj from Gaza wanted to get in touch with me. We talked for the first time via Skype on October 12, 2020, and continued to talk every week with a group of young men and women from Gaza Strip from different age groups, who were meeting at the Children’s Center at Qattan Foundation.

In our meetings, what we essentially did was inspired by the title that Al-Jahiz chose for his most famous book: exposition and demonstration. It was people’s weapon to fight against the barbaric hegemony of modern civilization, which essentially led every person to express the meanings and understanding of things that lied within. Those meanings were formed after meditating and thoroughly reflecting on what we experience in addition to the connection between our experiences and the external world, primarily formed by soils that we feed and feed on, especially societal, cultural, civilizational, and spiritual soils.

It is worth noting here that these words (as well as others such as wisdom, faith, hope and hospitality) are completely absent from our educational institutions, because we have accepted to become puppets of a civilization that we thought was superior, when we were impressed with its technological advances. However, we failed to see its detrimental impact on the roots of life, and accepted, for example, what we received from the Euro-American tribe as universal facts. The most important component to heal from such beliefs lies in deeply understanding what we experience and telling our life stories with meanings and understanding, based on “wisdom” as a value that we seek not to negate in our acts.

In the early beginnings, young people found it difficult to talk about meanings and knowledge they have formed without repeating institutional terminology that is mostly metaphysical and has no connection to life. It’s not easy to heal from repeating what we hear and read from shameless experts, convincing us that the past is no longer valid and trying to turn us into slaves of their own knowledge. In our meetings at the Children’s Center, I used to listen intently to stories that are heartfelt expressions of their interaction with life. We did this in *Mujawara*, which I consider to be the best medium for learning and basic building bloc of any community. A healed family is the best example of *Mujawara*, based on a deep conviction that every human being can be a source of meaning, understanding and exposition. This is the key responsibility of each human being (which explains why this has been absent from modern schools and universities that have been trying to control and shape our minds ever since their establishment in Europe 400 years ago). Every expression added something and formed rich knowledge that knows no hierarchy or vertical evaluation. Towards the end of May 2021, I began to form yet another beautiful relationship with Mahmoud Al-Sha’er (magazine 28) in Rafah, and I shall write my story with him in a different outlet later.

I wrote many thoughts about the civilizational potential of Gaza in a blog post titled “thoughts inspired by the healing nature” (from pages 196-200). My relationship with Issam, Mahmoud and other young men and women from Gaza reminded me of the time I had a continuous connection with the Strip. It made me feel a great desire to visit Gaza and talk to its young people. Creating ties between us is our best tool to protect ourselves from the modern barbarism that is growing due to distractions on so many levels. I shall continue to create these ties with groups led by Issam and Mahmoud and other groups around the world, who have chosen to break free from the grip of institutions and experts serving mindless consumption. The Arab Education Forum, which I founded in 1997, has made these ties with individuals and groups around the world possible. Such ties are based on living with hope and with whatever we have at our disposal.

Munir Jamil Fasheh

My story with Munir Fasheh

Every night, I let my soul travel out of my body and reflect on what I did on that day. I always find truth that takes me further away from illusions. I believe that I am good at poetry and meditation helps me do that.

I feel that my relationship with meditation fixes all the destruction that lies within as a result of European values, modern civilization and distractions. It rearranges everything within and all that revolves around me and my relationships with people. It helps me get rid of intellectual toxins, and I feel way more comfortable. This has made me better understand my own value and create my own meaning, making myself the only reference.

In October 2020, I started having one-to-one talks with Munir, and found out about *Mujaawarah* as a medium for learning. Through continuous meetings over the span of a year and a half, Munir told me about the research paper that he had sent to universities in Palestine, asking them to encourage ten students to embark on the path of wisdom, to no avail. I told Munir that we didn't need any university to start this initiative. We only needed the space to bring together people who wanted to join us.

Munir got very excited, and connected me with the director of Qattan Cultural Center, Nihaya Abu Nahleh, who initially agreed to host us for three months as the center couldn't host us permanently. During this time, I told my friend, Mohamed Ghuneim, about the idea and he told me "Great, count me in".

Mohamed writes and plays oud, and I have known him for years. We didn't realize at the time that we had been engaging in a form of *Mujaawarah* together for years without even knowing. We had always shared stories and reflected on all that had been happening around us. We had only missed Munir's presence with us.

I later invited a number of people who wanted to take part in this, and we formed a group of ten people as a pilot experience to test the success of the idea. The center then invited five adolescents from the writing club to live this experience with us. Our meetings lasted for three months, as the center could only host us for that period. We stopped this activity for two months, because we didn't have the space to meet. During this period, we took part in meetings organized by *Hakaya* project in Jordan via Zoom. The project is run by The Arab Education Forum, and connects organizations and different individuals and groups who believe in the centrality of storytelling in the healthy growth of individuals and societies. We also took part in Radical Fridays, a series of online symposiums tackling radical education in Palestine.

We are currently working with Munir to find a venue, where we could independently meet for a day every week and further strengthen relations between groups in Palestine, Jordan and Mexico. We hope to turn this into a global group, and add new stories from different cultures and countries around the world. This is an invitation to everyone to share stories with us and help us conduct this meeting either online or through visiting Gaza in person.

Issam Hani Hajjaj

Stories from friends of “House of Wisdom”

These are stories from friends of “House of Wisdom”, as they try to introduce themselves in one word. Every person has his/her own form of self-expression, including writing, drawing, signing, playing music, or even expressing one’s story through oral narration. One friend preferred not to mention neither her name nor her story, because she didn’t want the world to know a single thing about her. I have decided to talk about this so we can all know how flexible *Mujaawarah* can be as a medium for learning, where each person seeks to create a meaning that is exclusively his/her own.

Munir Jamil Fasheh: meditation

Issam Hani Hajjaj: inspiration

Mohamed Atef Ghuneim: meaning

Roa Haidar Hassouneh: animals

Amani Bassam Issa: Dance

Malak Hani Al-Sweirki: emotion

Dalia Abdul Hakim Lafi: passion

Rawan Mohamed Quwaider: transparent

Dana Naser Fleifel: nature

Abdul Rahman Rashid Al-Erqa: awakened

Mohamed Atef Al-Saksak: awareness

Shahd Atef Al-Sha’er: gratitude

Aya Jamal Inaya: neutral

Abdullah Khaled Al-Erqa: volleyball

“Successful indeed are the believers: those who humble themselves in prayer; those who avoid idle talk”

I want to talk about this verse in particular. What did God mean with this verse of Quran?

Idle talk could mean here polytheism, or maybe the sins that we don't pay attention to or the useless things that consume our energy. *Mujaawarahis* based on knowledge and wisdom stemming from people's different experiences and perspectives. All of our acts and talk need to have value. For example, in our first meeting, we talked about the saying “the value of every person lies in what he is best at”. Everyone talked about things they were good at. In our conversations, we all noticed that there were acts we did but didn't realize that they were good acts towards ourselves and others. The point here is that we learn from the value of the words we speak now and will speak later.

Abdul Rahman Al-Erqan (22)

Scholarships, Harvard, Stanford, a genius teenager, and the prison of Gaza.

These are the issues I thought and continue to think of.

At the end of the second meeting of *Mujaawarah* and while we were talking with our teacher, Munir, I received a letter regarding the scholarship that I had invested all that I had to get. The letter informed me that there was an update on the scholarship application and that I had to check my email.

I was nervous, but I tried to hold myself together. I told Issam “I have to go”. I couldn’t wait, and somehow, I knew I wasn’t accepted. I literally broke down. Even now, I still have fears regarding my academic and professional future. Being an ambitious woman only made this fear worse. It wasn’t just about fear. It was my struggle and misery, but also gave me solace in this world. That’s because I only see my own worth through my academic achievement. However, after grieving the fact that I wasn’t accepted in the scholarship program, I was surprised to realize that I got over this failure quite fast. I recalled the words of our teacher, Munir, when he said, “the value of every person lies in what he is best at” and that “one’s own value should not be measured by academic accomplishments”.

These words have deeply touched me and made me get over my misery and frustration quite fast. Honestly, I consider *Mujaawarah* in general and the House of Wisdom in particular to be a prosperous space of knowledge, one that is very open and comfortable.

At long last, I realized that my value lies entirely within myself, my own ability to pursue self-development every day and being able to break free from frustration and reclaim wisdom.

I am healed.

Thank you, my friend Issam! Thank you, my teacher Munir!

Malak Hani Al-Sweirki (16)

People have this urge to seek truth and understand the origins of everything. I realized later in life that I really didn't know who I was at an early age, as you can't really know something without experiencing its opposite.

I can now talk about how I got to know myself better when I went to school one day and took a shortcut. A cat approached me, and quickly got into my clothes, probably mistaking them for her home. I don't know exactly what happened to make me feel that the world of animals speaks to me. Animals have a world of their own, just like humans have one of their own, and too many ways of communicating and understanding meanings.

I discovered later that I could introduce myself through my relationship with animals. When I gently touch a cat, it comes closer and starts making sounds that I try to understand. When it comes to *Mujawara*, many people don't really know themselves and don't really feel what's happening around them because of the chaotic public and academic spheres. I started delving deeper into this relationship, and this phrase crossed my mind: whatever you do in good faith will be returned many times greater than your original act.

This is how our relationships should be as human beings. It is important to reconsider everything happening with us and reflect on things to capture their meanings.

Roa Haidar Hassouneh (21)

I was thinking of this thoroughly. Why didn't we start *Mujaawarah* a long time ago? I reflected and searched for the meaning. I believe that we will undoubtedly be of great benefit and also greatly benefit from it. For the first time ever, I feel I am able to express what's happening within. This might be a simple thing, but it's an accomplishment that I can't turn a blind eye to. The beginning was tough, and I feared that it could be impossible to deal with *Mujawara*. However, as soon as we started it, I shared all that I had within, and felt a huge burden lifted off my chest.

We talked about the saying "the value of every person lies in what he is best at", and I hadn't imagined before that I could express what I was good at. *Mujaawarah* gave us this comfortable space that made me speak up with utmost honesty and without any fear. I love dancing in my bedroom. When I dance, I feel that the world has stopped and that I have conquered the world around me.

Amani Bassam Issa (21)

"You can't give what you never had". I have always been looking for answers. I have searched behind curtains and doors and under the sheets. I have always tried to open closed boxes. Being a stubborn person who overthinks everything, I don't accept "facts" without questioning them. I have to always find the reasons. I started from the first question that children ask: does God really exist? Where is He? Who is He?" and reached philosophical meanings that human beings have discovered throughout human civilization such as love, altruism, and vices.

I believe that my peers are trapped in vicious and endless circles, where they have lost the meaning of things. There is a lot of ambiguity that has made their vision bleak.

"You have a duty towards yourself". I have around one thousand books at home, covering sciences from different countries. One day, I was trying to find a book to keep myself entertained and I came across an old book by Naguib Mahfouz, titled "*Sukarriyah*", with a worn-out cover. I paused for a second astonished that we had this book, even though my father, mother and grandmother didn't read such books. They all didn't believe in the value of literature, viewing it as "nonsense" that wasn't necessary at all. I opened the first page and knew that it was a gift from a dear person, and that's why it was there. I think it was the first edition of the book as it looked really old.

I spent two days reading this book non-stop, delving deeper into every word, and thought. I felt like leaving everything aside and getting lost in the book, so that I wouldn't think of any other thing that could distract me!

I believe this is cowardice, as we try to run away from thoughts, feelings, and existential ideologies. However, it is easier and more comfortable than searching for your own self and trying to understand and confront yourself. Many people do realize that they should do that, but do they have the energy and courage to do it?

When I embarked on this journey, I knew why so many people preferred the first option. It's not easy to reflect on the past, as it might be suffocating. Today, I take this path, while many people choose to live as "machines". It's not my responsibility to change what they carry within. The only thing that matters and that I should do is to create this bond with myself, as I am not in charge of the world. Every person should start with him/herself. This is our duty, and I can clearly see that *Mujaawarah* will help us revive and untangle our soul, and have a closer look at our inner selves.

Aya Jamal Inaya

One day, I was hanging out at the beach in Gaza with my friends. We were discussing the idea of accepting one another without judgement based on color or religion. Strangely, one of them told me “Your ideas are strange”.

I was surprised, and wondered what made my ideas strange if I wanted to accept and treat everyone with kindness based on their acts. That was the last time I discussed anything with anyone. Maybe my choice of friends wasn't right, but I had remained silent for a long time and refrained from conversing with anyone until my friend Issam told me about *Mujawara*. This is the first time I share my thoughts with people after that incident, and it turned out to be a great experience.

The concept itself makes us broaden our vision, and even our way of thinking and judging things. I believe the days ahead will be much better, as we will be able to really introduce ourselves and understand who we are.

Mohamed Al-Saksak

I am an ambitious and positive person. I love working on developing myself. I love working hard to achieve my goals. Not long ago, I started looking at things from a different perspective. I always try to go back to the roots of anything I do in life. I love nature and always choose to sit by the window. On the road leading to Khan Younis, there is a long pier, full of trees and the attractive greenery. I love children and myself when I am nice to them. I like to always be independent. I have recently discovered my value and what I am good at. I have realized that my value lies in the things I am good at and love. I play volleyball, and constantly try to improve in it.

I have a goal I want to achieve: I wish to see a positive change for myself and everyone. Unfortunately, I can't change everyone. The only person I seek to and can change is myself. I love all people, irrespective of their actions or beliefs. I am different and we can't be alike in everything. I accept diversity. My sense of commitment is what I love the most about myself, especially my commitment to my goals, which I see as far-fetched and nearly impossible. I won't give up, because I have realized that my value lies in what I am good at, and these meetings with our teacher, Munir, have helped me embark on this journey.

Abdullah Khaled Al-Erqan

I would like to tell you my story with nature and *Mujawara*. Nature always makes me feel comfortable and entertained. It takes me on a beautiful journey that brings peace to my soul, positive energy and a lot of hope. Nature is amazing when every element in it is renewed in peace. My relationship with *Mujaawarah* is based on renewal.

This is the first time I take part in it, and I am trying to form a meaning of my own. *Mujaawarah* is based on getting to know each other and learn from other people's stories and different perspectives. It gives us plenty of space to gain knowledge, and learn how to get to know our own selves. In every meeting and with every new saying, I could feel that something inside me was being renewed, and that my way of thinking and judging things was changing.

As Issam said, "our goal is to dismantle and re-arrange things". This process is similar to the way nature renews its elements. It is safe to assume that the words and language we used to describe things have made us settle and reach new meanings within us.

Dana Naser Fleifel

I think I am a person who is passionate about the things I love and believe in, such as discussing timely topics that are of public interest. I always seek to gain new knowledge to take part in the discussion.

Mujaawarah has helped me enjoy this passion, as I have listened to people from different age groups, with different stories and goals, but we all have one thing in common: we all belong to the same things. *Mujaawarah* has changed my perspective and concept of things. I used to think that people should work in the field they love so they could love their work. However, after listening to people who had this experience, I changed my mind. I understood that if we worked in the field we are passionate about, we would no longer love it, as we would be forced to do the work. We would no longer feel excited, and might lose our love and passion. This is the meaning that I have formed in *Mujawara*.

Dalia Abdul Hakim Lafi (16)

I am like a Samurai. I wish I could be transparent. My heart is like a book that has been long forgotten on a shelf of a public library. I want to cry like Darwish, and stay alone on the road like his horse.

My experience with *Mujaawarah* has made me want to reconsider my priorities, based on what I want and don't want. Opinions of people were turned into meaningless dust. During one of the meetings, one thought crossed my mind: what could happen if I became transparent and sat in the corner as a listener with a mask that hid my face? Honestly, I liked the idea. Today, I appear and disappear as I wish using my own hiding costume. *Mujaawarah* has helped me become a good listener and look within to better understand myself.

Rawan Quwaider

“Maybe you are searching among the branches for what only appears in the roots”

With this quote by Jalal Al-Din Rumi, the session on Skype was started. Born in Jerusalem, the speaker, Munir Fasheh (80), was forcibly displaced when he was seven years old, and currently lives in Ramallah.

That was two days ago, when I was invited to *Mujaawarah* at Qattan Center for Children. It was an enlightening experience and a turning point for me, as I got the chance to learn about the exceptional experience of this change-maker, influential figure, and great observer.

The discussion focused on realities of education in the world, and attempts to refute myths about curricula, teaching methods and the concept of unfair evaluation of diverse human capacities as well as its tragic consequences. This process actually leads to the elimination of our senses, questions, innate intelligence or dynamic intellect and ends our desire to gain knowledge and discover things. It results in hiding realities rather than revealing them.

What happens is that we activate the ability among humans to memorize without deeply understanding an issue. It makes people commit to strict systems that underestimate capacities of learners, and impose curricula that don't really feed their mind. They are almost lifeless and deadly, and can, at worst, completely destroy a human being's mental capacities. Of course, there are always exceptions of creative people, who have survived in a way or another without letting this destructive force deeply affect them!

I can't report on everything that was discussed in depth with serious concerns about the human mind in this brief note. I will, however, try to share the highlights and invite you to rethink our acceptance of this system, which controls people's minds. I know that you have had personal reservations about each stage of your education, but we never had the courage to criticize what we thought was "sacred". We didn't know the alternative, and maybe even now, we don't have a clear solution, ready to be implemented. However, I believe that our living minds and hearts, equipped with awareness and the willingness to change, won't run out of ways to improve, and change mechanisms.

I encourage you to look up this ex-teacher, who lost faith in the predominant form of education. My friends, I am sure you can guess why I was invited to this meeting, which marked a turning point for me and made me feel I wasn't alone in criticizing the curricula a few days earlier. There are people who spoke up, and spent years working on critiquing and revealing the ugliness of curricula through hard work, writing, and fighting for this cause. They are people who managed to talk remotely with small groups, ready to listen and discuss the problems of education, curricula, and applied teaching mechanisms.

Finally, I encourage you all to ask yourselves this question: why don't we take a moment to reflect on this issue? Why don't we mitigate its negative impact on our lives and ways of thinking and dealing with ourselves, others and our children?

Let's stop accepting what we find on the surface, and start thinking of what our minds missed when we were denied the right to free thought and made to mindlessly receive and consume. Our minds are still being distracted, so we could continue to enjoy and implement modernized curricula to distract us with modern tools, further limiting our abilities and senses. This is not really very different from the policy that has controlled us for so long and prepared us for all that we experience today. Each one of us has his/her own way of dealing with this.

As I write this lengthy speech to you, I am not sure how many of you will read it till the very end. However, I am happy to know that few of you will continue to read this, hoping that I can create some impact. This is what I hope to achieve, as a person who has so much love and is deeply concerned about the prevalence of triviality, controlling and invading our minds. Without due resistance, this triviality continues to fill our minds, visit our homes, and eats away at what remains of our souls and minds.

Writer Hend Joudeh (she was hosted during one of the meetings)