

# Kaukab

REMARKABLE BEDOUIN WOMEN



Smadar Ben-Asher

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By

Smadar Ben-Elsher

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by Smadar Ben-Asher

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Dedicated to Yoel  
(1951-2004),  
who illuminated my life  
and entrusted us with the best of himself.

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By the star when it sets. Your companion has neither strayed nor is he deluded. Nor does he speak out of his desire. This is nothing but a revelation that is conveyed to him. (*Quran*)<sup>1</sup>

## PREFACE

### **The Meandering Path of Childhood**

A young girl wanders through the intricately laid paths of the kibbutz. With the arrival of Rosh Hashanah, everyone received new shoes, and before Passover, all were given sandals. Aside from this everyday footwear, each child possessed tall boots for hiking and waterproof boots for the rainy puddles. The girl's fair cheeks dotted with freckles are a testament to the harsh Negev sun. "Freckle-face" was the taunt her classmates used when they wished to tease her. Her short haircut, the unimpressive handiwork of the visiting barber who was compensated per head, did little to add glamour. Green lawns stretched between the kibbutz houses and walking on the pavements required nimble navigation to avoid the oscillating sprinklers. Eskimos recognize ninety shades of white, but we, the kibbutz children, discerned just as many shades of green, the color that framed our existence: the lawns we mustn't tread on, the bushes that bordered them, and the myriad of tree species planted up to the fence surrounding the kibbutz, beyond which the small hills began, with their wild grasses that immediately wilt at the onset of the first heatwave. The sun's rays, masterful painters of shifting hues, transformed the landscape's colors almost hourly from dawn till dusk, through the sweltering summer and into the

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<sup>1</sup> *Quran*, Surat An-Najm, (53): 1-4.



winter — which begins at Hanukkah, ends at Purim, and fades before we've had the chance to properly greet it. Grey concrete paths, with a uniform pattern imprinted upon them, meandered between the uniformly designed homes. Flower gardens with multi-colored trailing branches, white daisies, and orange marigolds adorned their entrances, declaring the residents' diligence that didn't cease alongside their long work hours.

Everything was meticulously organized on the Kibbutz. Every detail, no matter how small, had its designated place and time: the opening hours of the general store, the shoemaker, the electrician's workshop, and the secretariat offices were all prominently displayed on the doors (which were usually locked). The community's work scheduler maintained endless, numbered "recruitment" lists for various tasks — from tending the orchard to loading poultry or cotton. Beyond the fixed six-day workweek, members were occasionally required to give more of themselves, dedicating additional days to labor at the expense of their "Sabbaths" — surrendering those cherished days off that were gradually becoming increasingly scarce, for the betterment of the greater good. A duty roster was pinned to the notice board at the entrance to the communal dining hall, listing the names of those assigned to the tasks of "set up" and "break down" for holiday festivities or weddings. Assignments for guard duty at the gate and night watch at the children's houses are listed separately. In addition to these rosters, there's a carpool list for vehicles departing early the following morning from the kibbutz to Tel Aviv, a table of those going on vacation or taking leave, and a register of those eagerly anticipating a move into a larger apartment, or seeking to travel abroad. These requests were relayed through notes placed in the mailboxes of those in charge, while important matters were communicated in letters to the secretary-general of the kibbutz.

I became lost amidst this rigid routine. I knew that on Tuesdays, the dining room served meat patties, and on Fridays, hot dogs. My day was punctuated by other indications of a daily rhythm, like the sound of heavy tractors rolling out at 5:30 AM to the fields, the wake-up call of the on-duty caregiver at 6:45 AM, “Good morning, children, time to rise and shine,” and later on, lights out in the children’s house at 8:30 PM in the evening. It was of paramount importance to be assigned to a fitting placement slot and not cause any trouble. My existence was cradled within these boundaries, and everything I desired lay in the world beyond the regimen.

The internal kibbutz road emerged from Gagarin Square, so named because its construction was completed around the time of the first manned space flight by Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin. This dramatic event occurred at a time when the kibbutz still harbored the conviction that the Soviet Union was the beacon for nations, and just a few years after the kibbutz children’s Purim celebrations were canceled to mourn the death of Stalin. From this square, the road led to the large gate, which proudly displayed the kibbutz emblem, skillfully crafted by a local artisan. Come nightfall, the main gate was secured with chains and padlocks; in the morning, the entry was reopened for the procession of trucks. Some brought supplies to the kitchen ramp; others, loaded with feed for the chickens or fertilizer for the fields, turned left toward the chicken coops and barns. On the main road outside the kibbutz, the one linking the heart of the country to the Negev, cars passed by every few minutes. We, children, would sit and diligently record the names of these cars in meticulously organized charts, row by row, as training for future life conducted within the confines of the constant filling of empty slots in lists.

Beyond the road, which we dubbed “the main road,” Rahat began. Today Rahat is a city; previously it was a small town, but at that time, it

was a Bedouin settlement sprawling across the eastern hills. The precise order, structured organization, and neat demarcations set within the straight and curved lines never intersected. Rahat appeared as a collection of tents in various sizes and makeshift tin huts, whose construction was seemingly never complete. To the left, near the cemetery, stood the prominent house of Sheikh al-Huzayl, large, sturdy, and conspicuously prominent in the landscape. We were told that the Sheikh had thirty-two wives and approximately one hundred and twenty children. I couldn't grasp how one could count children "approximately." In my group on the kibbutz, the "Omerim," there were sixteen children, and when Reuven and Ayala joined, we numbered eighteen. We were never considered "approximately."

From within the tents, women occasionally emerged, with their infants clung closely to them. In the eyes of some women who gazed at us from the shelter of their tents, I thought I detected a glimmer of alarm. I couldn't link this trepidation to our group of children, donned in blue hats with oversized shoes, short clothes, and a canteen with its long strap diagonally crossing their small torsos. I wanted to believe they were merely shy. Yet, in contrast, the young girls met our eyes with smiles. Around us, a flurry of small children scampered about, darting in and out of the tents. The women shouted at the children in a language that was unintelligible to us, frequently exclaiming, "Ta'al hon!"<sup>2</sup> Gaunt dogs barked with fervor, likely attempting to chase away the strangers edging closer to their homes. Children our age rode donkeys to the school, housed in the distant huts east of the flour station, even though the school day had already begun an hour or two earlier. Only a few men were present there. One stepped outside, hurling stones at the barking dogs to drive them away, and then gestured broadly with his hand, inviting us to enter the expansive

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<sup>2</sup> "Come here" in Arabic.

domain of the “Shig,”<sup>3</sup> where several elderly men were usually seated. The scent of campfires lingered in the air, mingling with the sweet aroma of the hash-laden cigarettes they rolled. Our tall shoes were coated in a thick layer of dust, which we later brushed off with the aid of a special brush upon our return to the children’s house, just in time for lunch. Amid this disarray, I felt wholly consumed by curiosity, yet simultaneously, a part of me felt at ease. There in Rahat, among the haphazard jumble of tents and the scattered remnants of dismantled cars, there was nothing to damage. Any hint of the rigid confines of the kibbutz was left behind at its grand gate, and for a brief moment, I was free to absorb the varied colors, and sounds, along with the scents, and to relax in the presence of disorder that no one sought to alter.

Years passed before I returned to the vistas of my childhood. An aerial corridor now connects the community where I’ve built my home to the kibbutz where I began my life, with Rahat, the largest Bedouin city in Israel, nestled in the space between them. The home of Sheikh al-Huzayl now seems minuscule against the backdrop of the surrounding towering buildings, some rising two or three stories high. Where tents and shacks once stood, now garages, workshops, and small factories have sprouted everywhere. Storefronts line both sides of the road, with the narrow space between them and the bustling street crammed with crates of vegetables and fruits awaiting to be purchased by those who pass by. From afar, one can spot slender minarets of the mosques, their gleaming gilded domes shining, alongside expansive schools, the police station, and city hall. The local community center, seemingly plucked from a foreign architectural magazine, is adjacent to a substantial clinic serving as a front-line emergency facility. A road, notably uneven, cuts through the city, interspersed with roundabouts

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<sup>3</sup> Shig — The section of the tent where the men of the family sit for long hours, conversing and passing the misbaha beads through their fingers. Women do not have access to this area.

every few hundred meters, all graced by either withered plants or discarded heaps of garbage strewn upon them.

This time, I approach Rahat from the East, not the West. The unfamiliarity profoundly strikes me. It's not the strangeness or difference of its neighborhoods that I find unsettling. Language poses no barrier – everyone speaks Hebrew fluently, the words rolling off their tongues with ease. However, the Bedouins' sense of identity has shifted from Israeli to Palestinian. A mix of nationalistic and racist undercurrents permeates the air, and its stinging breeze is impossible to ignore. A complex web of government policies, security confrontations, short-term wars, and home demolitions, alongside political and institutional violence — rends the delicate societal fabric shared by the Jewish majority and the Bedouin Arab minority. I return to Rahat and expand my acquaintance circle to Lakiya, Hura, Segev Shalom (Shaqeeb as-Salaam), and the unrecognized Bedouin villages in the Negev. The sober understanding that what disappears by day stirs in the evening offers little solace. I sense the unrest in the eyes of the youth and the absence of tolerance, respect, faith, and hope. Gone are the days of roaming in shorts, tall shoes, a hat, and a canteen slung diagonally across my upper body: innocence has ceded its place to an understanding that a shared life must be built on mutual respect, informed understanding of the other, recognition of differences, and a willingness to see beyond what is immediately visible.

Twenty years ago, in a unique program designed for training Bedouin at Ben-Gurion University, one of the students wrote on her exam booklet: *“I've written the answer to the question as you requested, but if I do what you've suggested – they will kill me.”* This student's comment led to the initiation of research on the necessity to tailor the professional ethical code for educational advisors to align with the traditions of Bedouin society (Ben Asher, 2001). Gradually, I became attuned to the challenges Bedouin grandmothers faced in sharing

their emotional distress (Ben Asher & Marei, 2012); the Bedouin mothers striving to protect their children amid the security threat of rockets launched from the Gaza border; the messages conveyed to women by men that the warning sirens are merely Israeli propaganda to be ignored (Ben Asher, 2016; Ben-Asher, 2016); and the Bedouin children caught in the throes of war, unable to grasp the gravity of the reality surrounding them. The resilience program devised by the Ministry of Education, intended to provide psychological support to assist them, is not at all adapted to their specific needs (Ben Asher, 2018).

For over three decades, my professional journey at Kaye Academic College of Education, Ben-Gurion University, and the Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev has brought me into contact with Bedouin women. I learned to distinguish the Arab students from the North from the Bedouin students from the South. I witnessed their pallor, exhaustion, and near-collapse from fasting during Ramadan afternoons. My heart skipped a beat each time they frantically rushed in to report a student's indefinite absence due to a looming familial threat or a blood vendetta. To me, they were all students like any other, whom I expected to engage with scholarly articles and produce coherent academic papers. I came to recognize those who persevered until they achieved their goals and also to discern those attempting to sidestep difficulties, sometimes even offering payment for written assignments. As years turned into decades in the recurring cycle of academic terms, I transitioned from one semester and year to the next without stopping. Occasionally, a personal story would land on my desk, offering a window into a student's individual experiences. I reviewed these stories, provided feedback as needed, and returned the assignment. Nothing predicted the pause for introspection on the uniquely complex and multifaceted lives of the

Bedouin community members, a society not of harmonious contradictions, but of clashing and wounding fragments.

When exactly does a large ship pivot its bow to alter its course? The ship's captain, familiar with the sea's pathways, anticipates a change in azimuth, while the sleeping passengers awaken at dawn to new shores. I was not at the helm of my life's vessel, but rather a passenger, sailing through the daily routine on the predetermined course of someone training myself for the lengthy and intricate journey into academia, teaching, especially engaging in the field of educational psychology, with its array of diverse specializations and responsibilities. Yet, when I joined the staff at the Mandel Center for Leadership in the Negev, I elevated my sights to reexamine my core values and beliefs, delve into my professional identity, and specifically concentrate on the unique challenges of the Negev and its residents. With this perspective shift, I found myself facing a new horizon.

At first, the landscapes before me evoked the images etched into my memory from the kibbutz children's Tuesday outings, yet those scenes have been supplanted by a stinging reality that has evolved over time. As a child, I never heard the term "Nakba," intertwined with the independence of the State of Israel. We referred to the Bedouins simply as "our neighbors," while the designation "Palestinians" wasn't even part of their vocabulary. The protests against the military government concluded around the time I finished elementary school, and the demolition of unauthorized houses had not yet become widespread. I deeply yearned to revisit the comfort of a curiosity that requires no order, but it had slipped from my grasp.

Was it my role as a regional psychologist in the South, or perhaps my transition to the Mandel Center for Leadership Development in the Negev, that served as the catalyst for an

active change in my relationship with the Bedouins in the Negev? I can't pinpoint this transformation to a single event, but rather an expanding awareness that began to crystallize within me, embracing the shared lives of all Negev residents, including the Bedouin community. I embarked on a journey of discovery, to reacquaint myself with the emotionally rich social and cultural world hidden beneath the time-honored tradition of hospitality. The challenge of not knowing Arabic was an obvious barrier, but surmountable compared to other obstacles. Above all, I wanted to hear directly from the Bedouins themselves. While interviewing the men proved challenging due to their cautiousness and suspicion, engaging with the women opened up a torrent of vibrant, pulsating stories of their experiences. Interacting with them as students and peers in leadership groups allowed me to synthesize nuanced insights and gather profound testimonies of their lives. Gradually, their narratives formed a rich tapestry, like the intricate, colorful carpets Bedouin women weave for their tents. Beyond their modest attire and compliance with patriarchal family norms, I was privy to their full lives, characterized by a subtle, almost invisible struggle for independence, education, personal growth, and recognition of their capabilities.

Sometimes, I question whether we are living in the same Negev desert. To me, the road that separates the Bedouin city from the kibbutz community, with its blooming, lush green plazas filled with stunning seasonal flowers and its expanses of playgrounds, a swimming pool, and sports courts — feels like a vast ocean. Crossing this road takes only a few minutes, yet I perceive merely the surface froth, concealing its depths below. Nevertheless, in their homes and mine, the same sun rises and sets, the oppressive heat of the khamsin<sup>4</sup> is felt by all. The wind heralds a reprieve, drought

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<sup>4</sup> Khamsin — a dry, hot, sandy local wind affecting Egypt and the Levant.



returns, hands embrace a newborn, though the shadow of another war looms, love and hope flourish. Amid these complexities, there emerges a deeper understanding that womanhood is not just a gender category, but an essence of being. These shared experiences bridge the gaps between our disparate shells. They have attentively listened to my words at various stages; now it's my turn to listen to them.

*It's difficult for two seashells to truly converse,  
Each is attuned to its own ocean's verse.  
Only the pearl diver or the curator of the old  
Can affirm without doubt: it's the same sea they hold.*  
(T. Carmi, 1994, "Attentiveness," p. 41)

### **“Bricolage” (Interdisciplinary) Ethnography: Handiwork of an Artisan**

Each story shared by the Bedouin women is deeply personal and unique, as are my encounters with them, one-of-a-kind and beyond replication. The journey to Amal's home via a tumultuous dirt road, riddled with potholes and littered with boulders left by floods; our discussions in a diminutive room within a towering office building, behind a door guarded by Kawkab's husband to prevent any unfamiliar men from entering; Faiza's request to meet at my home; and the drives through uncharted villages and haphazardly developed town alleys – all these experiences compelled me to reconsider the conventional methods I had previously employed. Most Bedouin women refrain from answering calls from unknown numbers, and despite sending them my contact details via text, my calls often went unanswered. Arranging the first meeting with any of the interviewees was particularly challenging, demanding Bedouin-like patience, that necessitates an altogether different appreciation of

time. Often, establishing a connection required relentless follow-up, with repeated requests conveyed through an intermediary who relayed reassuring messages regarding my intentions.

On one typical workday, a few spare minutes suddenly became available. My fingers almost dialed her number instinctively, trained by countless previous attempts. To my surprise, she answered. Her voice sounded tentative and slightly wary, but she agreed to a meeting without setting a specific time. Gazing through large glass windows, I observed Be'er Sheva enveloped in a dense, yellow haze. A Negev storm, carrying grains of Sahara Desert sand to this southern city of opportunities, shrouded everything in a thick, suffocating fog. I sensed an urgency that if I didn't seize the moment, the opportunity to meet the woman on the other end of the line might never materialize. "I'll be near the community center in thirty minutes," I told her, suggesting she could direct me to her home from there. I hoped the silence on the other end was one of surprise, rather than withdrawal. Eventually, she asked hesitantly, almost as if concerned for me, "In this weather?" An hour later, we were seated in her living room. Her brother, a young disabled man reliant on the pension his sister received as a widow from the Ministry of Defense, sat at one end of the sofa, observing us silently. Eventually, her brother relented and left us alone. On the wall, a television screen of grand proportions displayed the perpetual circular movement of white-clad pilgrims circling the Kaaba in Mecca. The broadcaster's recitation of Quranic verses resonated throughout the room, providing a steady ambient echo, and serving as a kind of background music.

Our conversation took place in an almost intimate setting. Abruptly, she excused herself and returned with a sizable plastic bag containing photographs from her wedding and honeymoon with her husband, who was tragically killed in a military accident shortly

thereafter. For one hour, a shared reality emerged in that room between two women from distinct nationalities, ages, and educational backgrounds, united by a poignant separation from the man to whom their lives were intertwined. Na'ama Sabar Ben-Yehoshua (2016) refers to this phenomenon as a “double consciousness state” to describe the researcher’s acute awareness of being both the observer and the observed, a dual awareness that shapes and simultaneously contributes to the creation of their shared reality.

The tension between the desire to delve into the essence and the necessity to convey findings in generalized scientific language, places qualitative research in a realm of inquiry, filled with reflection and uncertainty regarding the very possibility that these two distinct realms exist simultaneously. Sabar Ben-Yehoshua characterizes such research as “dual-tracked,” it serves as scientific documentation, while concurrently offering the narrative of a once-in-a-lifetime, personal adventure. This type of research relies on data collected through methods anchored in theory but is based on a unique data-gathering journey that cannot be replicated. In the past, I was accustomed to filling in charts brimming with data, regressions, and asterisks marking significant differences, meant to exhilarate the researcher as though they had discovered precious treasures. Nowadays, I am not merely seeking the generalized dimensions; rather, I am in pursuit of the personal, individual, and singular experience, which ultimately constructs a person’s perception of the world. What, then, is the distinction between narrative research and the realms of art and literature? Amia Lieblich (2010) reiterates two principles: adherence to research ethics and profound reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the subject or subjects researched. In the seemingly vast space between the scientific and the literary realms, a rich

tapestry of “bricolage” (interdisciplinary) auto-ethnography is woven, blending the two into a vibrant patchwork quilt.

Ethnography is a research method that involves collecting data from the field within the context where the behavior occurs. The researcher observes the phenomenon under study from a holistic perspective, considering various variables as a participant-observer, even if not part of the culture itself (also see Bar-Shalom, 2011). Clifford Geertz (1983, 1984, 2008) pondered how to describe a cockfight on the island of Bali as a reflection of social orders. According to Geertz, a people’s culture comprises rituals that embody unique meanings for the locals, and the cockfight serves as a kind of simulation of social structures, embodying societal rivalries and strategies for dealing with them. Geertz contends that the cockfight is the locals’ unique way of “playing with fire without getting burned.” The anthropological paradigm Geertz developed, “symbolic anthropology,” explores how human societies construct meaning. Geertz believes that understanding a society’s culture is not a philosophical argument or a solitary mental exercise, it necessitates a flexible research approach that gathers a comprehensive array of data using diverse tools. This naturalistic research employs various methodological practices, such as observations, interviews, and text analysis, along with the researcher’s experience and impressions, thus poetically termed “patchwork method,” or in its French nomenclature – bricolage research.<sup>5</sup>

Bricolage research offers a critical approach that integrates multiple perspectives, theories, and methodologies. According to Sabar Ben-Yehoshua (2016), bricolage writing is described as a

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<sup>5</sup> The term “bricolage” is associated with the structuralist thought of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and denotes the action of a craftsman who integrates a multitude of materials. The result is a novel combination of elements taken from existing systems, creating an interdisciplinary tapestry of interwoven components whose collective significance transcends that of its individual parts.