

The Village of Al Syleh



THE COFFEE HUB

Just 10 kilometers northwest of Jenin city lies the village of Al Syleh Al Hartheyeh. Even though people still call Al Syleh a village, that is not the feeling one gets when arriving in its robust town center. With a population of over 14000 people and an active city council, this town is hardly a village, but driving less than one mile outside of its interior and seeing the endless olive and oak trees that are spread across its rocky hills one comes to understand how despite all the urban development that occurred in their town people in Al Syleh are still trying to hang on to an old village heritage of growing what they eat.

As well, Al Syleh has one of the largest cooperatives in the Palestine Fair Trade Association with 36

farmers and an estimated annual olive oil production of more than 16 tons, cultivating 1603 dunoms out of the towns' total land mass of over 8900 dunoms. Entering the boisterous center of Al Syleh one must make a stop at the unofficial yet commonly frequented destination of Abu El Abed's roasting house. A coffee roaster spins all day mixing the smells of coffee beans with a wide array of other spices being prepared in the same shop. From *Halqoum* or *Raha* sweets to fresh pistachios, one should be prepared to take in large amounts of candy and caffeine as coffee pots and clanging cups make their rounds for every one stopping by. Around the corner from the roasting house is the main and oldest mosque in Al Syleh. Sheikh Hasan mosque was built in 1890 and was dedicated not only to worship and prayer but also as a place where conflicts were



resolved. Along side the prayer area is an old room that was designated as what was called 'the court room'.



Coffee Roaster in Syleh

This heritage site is a monument of pride for the people in the village as they see it as a significant achievement of their grandfathers who were perceived as honest judges. But the mosque is not the only thing people in Al Syleh are pleased to talk about. "We are proud of our heritage but we are even more proud of the achievements of our people today." Grabbing a folder from his drawer, Mustafa explains how he has received an award from the American Journal of Mathematics for his research on a new mathematical theory. While Mustafa does not like to brag about himself, all the men in the village love to talk about how "a humble man who could easily be dismissed as a poor son of a farmer has made a contribution to the world of math and he is one of us."

Education, like in most villages, is highly valued in Al Syleh with an exceptionally high number of people who speak basic English and have completed at least high school level education. However, formal education has not lead people in this town-like village to dismiss embodied knowledge that is learned and passed down through generations. Old sayings provide guidance to farmers as to when the agricultural cycle begins. With a great dependency on rain water farmers refer to the month of September as the month where people need to start preparing for the weather to cool down and the rain to start falling. It is also the same month when people wait for the first rain as an introduction to the olive harvest season.



Mustafa explaining his Mathematical Theory published in the American Journal of Mathematics

SUHEIL- THE BRIGHTEST STAR

Another fascinating sign farmers say they look for is the appearance of the star of Suheil in September skies. Suheil is the second brightest star in the night sky and is referred to in astronomy as Canopus and the proverb that goes with it says, "itha thahar Suheil, dob el kheil" which literally means: when the star of Suheil appears, it is time to bring in the horses; signifying the cooling of the weather and the need to provide animals with warm shelter. Also a common



given name, 78 year old Abu Suheil says that understanding our connectedness to the universe allows us to have productive cycles as well as stability in our daily lives. “The farmer does not rest, when one season ends another one begins and we have clear habits of what we need to do. Everyone knows what to expect in each month. What to eat, what kind of work we will be doing and so on... this gives us emotional stability that we know what’s going to happen at least in the land.” Without a doubt, agriculture seems to be one of the few things offering people predictability and security that is so much needed in a politically unstable reality. This is one of the reasons the 36 farmers who are members of the Palestine Fair Trade Association in Al Syleh say they support the work of Canaan Fair Trade and are committed to their relationship with the company. “When we look at the future and we search for hope, the only hope I see for the future generation is in achieving self sufficiency. Canaan Fair Trade is helping us achieve this for our children” says Abu Samir.

appreciate foreign people who eat our olive oil and invest in the good earth. We are not people who beg for money. We are hard working farmers who want others to enjoy the healthful fruit of our land as well as the beauty of our cross cultural friendship.”

Perhaps beauty is the first word that comes to mind when dealing with the generous people of Al Syleh. In their own style of humor, men and women like to tease each other as a sign of admiration. Climbing up to the rooftop of one of the tallest buildings in the village, Abu El Abed is excited to share what he jokingly calls “the French hilltop”. With a clear overlook of Marj Bin Amer (the Plains) and a stunning view of the village’s old homes and mosques one can easily fall in love with the unorthodox beauty of concrete buildings and colorful plains. Standing at the top floor of the building, one can still watch people coming in and out of the roast house making jokes, teasing each other, and creating a warm atmosphere that only those who look it at with introspection can understand - the novel spirit of Al Syleh!



Abu Samir and Abu Suheil- members of the PFTA farmer co-op

According to most farmers in the Syleh cooperative Canaan Fair Trade has created a sense of motivation among the young and the old because “it proved to us that people around the world appreciate our products if they can access it and try it.” Sitting in the entry way of Abu Sobhi and Um Sobhi’s front yard with the aroma of fenugreek filling the air, Abu Sobhi explains the importance of crop diversification for achieving independence and self sufficiency and how that combined with an open world where producers are connected to consumers can save farmers around the globe from losing their livelihoods. And he wants people to learn about his home village of Al Syleh but he also wants them to know that, “we



*Um and Abu Sobhi in their front yard (above)
Abu El Abed in his shop (below)*

