



Source: Rachel Shabi, 'Fallow year is year of plenty for Arab-Israelis', *Guardian Unlimited*, 20/09/07.
Tags: [Israel](#), [Palestine](#), [food](#), [religion](#)
Writer/s: [Nicholas Blincoe](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

Nida put her cards on the cafe table. All of them. She had an ATM card, a driving licence, an I-D issued by the Israeli army, a Blockbuster membership card, a permit to travel to Jerusalem and three passports: Palestinian, Jordanian and American.

'Come on, big shot,' she said. 'Show me what you've got.'

Ahmed opened up his wallet and began skimming his cards on to the table: a Westminster University library card, his own I-D card and driving licence, a credit card and a Palestinian passport.

'That's five to my eight,' Nida said. 'I win.'

'Hold on.'

Ahmed dipped back inside his wallet and plucked out another small laminated card: his membership to London Zoo.

'It's a little out-of-date,' he admitted. 'By about fifteen years.'

Nida shrugged. 'So is my Jordanian passport. And the Blockbuster card, for that matter.'

'And my library card,' Ahmed said. 'I only keep it because I like the photograph.'

'Snap.'

The photograph inside Nida's Jordanian passport was taken when she was twenty. Her eye shadow was purple, swooping in two great curves of graduated tones, while her hair was drawn tight to her head, until it exploded like a pineapple on her crown.

'Well, if we discount everything that's out of date, what are we left with?' Ahmed asked.

They began the recalculations. Nida had her American passport, her ATM card and her I-D. Everything else was out-of-date, even her Palestinian passport. She needed to renew it, but the clerks at the ministry were on strike. Ahmed had another ten months to run on his. He hoped the strike would be over by then, but he wasn't confident.

'So now it's four to three. I win,' he said. 'Did you know, when the Japanese win something, they have to buy their friends expensive gifts? I think we should adopt that rule. So, as the new winner, I should buy the next slice of cake.'

Nida protested. 'That's not fair. That takes the fun out of winning. I appreciate you trying to pay for everything, but I can't allow it.'

Ahmed stood up, grinning all over his face. She had seen through his strategy. 'Just tell me what you want? Coffee, fruit juice, cheesecake?'

This was the newest coffee shop in Bethlehem, and though it sold all the usual delicate and sticky Arabic pastries, it also sold Jewish cheesecake, the kind you found in New York delicatessens. It was delicious and, since the Jews now claimed falafel as their own, why shouldn't two Palestinians spend the afternoon eating Jewish cheesecake and playing a few hands of Arabic I-D card poker?

Later, as they were starting on their third round of

cheesecake, Nida said, 'You know, I've got a new rule. Next time, we ban all bullshit documents. So out with the Palestinian passport.'

It was true that the Palestinian passport wasn't really a passport. It was really just a repackaged version of the Israeli army-issued I-D. Which is to say, no one could get a Palestinian passport unless they first had an Israeli I-D. For the past eleven years, the army had refused to issue new cards, so tens of thousands of Palestinians were stuck. They couldn't go anywhere, not abroad...not even to the next village, because of the hundreds of army checkpoints scattered across the hills.

Ahmed shrugged. So, the Palestinian passport was bullshit. So was the old Jordanian Passport, when they had them. 'A passport is supposed to confirm nationality,' he said. 'But we were given Jordanian passports without Jordanian nationality. It's what lawyers call a legal fiction.'

'Isn't that just another name for bullshit? Legal fiction? You know, this is the Jewish New Year, and for the next twelve months, the Israelis are supposed to give up farming and let the fields rest?' Nida had been reading about this in the Israeli newspapers. 'Well, some Israelis are getting around it by growing hydroponic tomatoes, standing the plants on tables and using water instead of soil. How's that for bullshit?'

Ahmed knew of a better example. 'There's a pig farm in a kibbutz, somewhere in Israel, and the pigs have to stand on a raised wooden platform, so they don't touch Jewish soil and make it unclean.'

Nida laughed. 'I didn't know about that. Do you think the Israelis know there's a pig farm here in Bethlehem?'

Nida was a Christian, her father was a local teacher. Ahmed was a Muslim, from the local refugee camp. He knew about the pig farm, but he had never seen it.

'When I was a child,' he said, 'We used to dare each other to go and look at the pigs. We used to creep up close, but we would always run away, in case a pig saw us and gave us the evil eye. Then one day, my brother claimed that he had snuck right into the farm and seen a pig. He told us it was black as night, covered in spikes and breathed fire.' Ahmed laughed, picking up his membership card to London Zoo. 'I didn't see a pig with my own eyes until I went to London zoo, while I was studying in England.'

'You didn't see a pig until you were twenty?' Nida couldn't believe it.

'Not at all. Then, the first one I see is an African razorback warthog. It was black, it had spiky hair, and these huge red tusks that looked as though they had been bathed in fire. So, then I knew my brother had been telling me the truth.'

'The pigs in Bethlehem don't look like that. They're fat and pink.'

'Look, Nida. All of our cards and passports may be bullshit, but let's leave my brother out of it.'

'I'll leave him out of it, if I can buy the next cake,' she said.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Nicholas Blincoe.