

# Beit Al Karmeh

## A Community Center and Guesthouse in Kafr 'Aqab, Jerusalem



By Samar Awaad

**K**afr 'Aqab is a small village located on top of a hill in the beautiful northern suburbs of Jerusalem. It used to be populated primarily by a farming community that cultivated the land and lived a very simple Palestinian life. In the early 2000s, Kafr 'Aqab, along with Qalandiya Refugee Camp, got riveted behind the apartheid wall that was built to restrict access to Jerusalem. Almost overnight, a quick drive from Kafr 'Aqab to Jerusalem was transformed into a dehumanizing, sometimes hours-long journey through the Qalandiya checkpoint. Today, Kafr 'Aqab is a congested and overcrowded area, home to thousands of Palestinians who live in urban chaos and lack the bare minimum with respect to health, educational, environmental, and urban planning standards and services. Most of Kafr 'Aqab is technically under the Jerusalem Municipality. But as it is located on the West Bank side of the apartheid wall, the municipality basically ignores the population's needs and provides no services.

Dalia Association was established in 2007 with an aim to realize our rights as Palestinians to control our resources and sustain our own development for generations to come. In 2020, Dalia responded to calls for support by Kafr 'Aqab community members who face the impact of economic and political disenfranchisement. The association established Beit Al Karmeh, a community center and guesthouse, in the middle of a cluster of Ottoman-era buildings in the historical center of Kafr 'Aqab. The building was restored in cooperation with local community members and upon their request. The center was established with three goals: to preserve architectural traditions and protect the site from rapid urbanization and reconstruction; to create a space for community activities, learning, and empowerment in a neighborhood that is systematically neglected and disenfranchised; and to create a space for the practice and preservation of Palestinian cultural traditions and heritage. Beit Al Karmeh is an excellent place for Palestinians and foreign tourists alike to

experience how our communities are preserving their culture and traditions amidst the ever-expanding occupation and Israeli colonial project.

The center was renovated and rehabilitated by Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation and funded by the UNDP, the British Council, the German Agency for International Cooperation, and Kafr 'Aqab Municipality. Beit Al Karmeh was established in 2021 through the generous support of DROSOS Foundation and, most recently, A.M. Qattan Foundation.

To achieve an impact in the area, Dalia partnered with other cultural and community organizations that share the association's goals and aspirations. They include the National Storytelling Center that is run jointly by Siraj Libraries, the Visual Arts Forum, the Palestine Association for Visually Impaired Persons, and Kafr 'Aqab Municipality. For Dalia, this partnership alongside community support resembled *al-ouneh* (voluntary support), one of the association's main values and a Palestinian indigenous system of solidarity, whereby community members help other individuals or their entire community. Traditionally, most Palestinians were part of an agrarian society,



Kafr 'Aqab women's bazaar.

and *al-ouneh* manifested itself especially during the harvest season, as villagers helped their neighbors harvest their crops once they finished harvesting their own. But *al-ouneh* was apparent also in other aspects of daily life, when people helped each other build homes, schools, and other projects. Dalia Association reemphasizes the importance of this concept and applies it to our modern-day context to eventually build trust with and within the communities it works with.





Kafr 'Aqab food bazaar.

Kafr 'Aqab is an overwhelming example of loss of public space due to urban expansion and the ongoing implementation of colonial policies. Along with its partners in Kafr 'Aqab, Dalia hopes to counteract such effects by providing a safe and comfortable public space for this community. This is achieved by enabling locals to gather and hold meetings, training courses, and workshops on topics that concern the community. In other words, the aim is to provide them with a public space for the dissemination of knowledge and ideas, the exchange of resources, and the empowerment of civil society. In turn, this strengthens bonds and links among community members and groups that begin to consolidate their common issues and reconcile their differences.

Dalia strives to achieve its goal in Kafr 'Aqab by turning this community space into a celebration of Palestinian cultural heritage and identity by preserving the indigenous

Palestinian cuisine. In Beit Al Karmeh's community kitchen, for example, our ancestors' and grandmothers' recipes are revived and documented and therefore protected from being appropriated or erased. They are prepared using seasonal and local ingredients, made and cultivated by Palestinians on their land. Monthly, sometimes even weekly, pop-up kitchens and food events are held with chefs and women's organizations to meet this goal. Since 2021, Dalia's events have included the First Kafr 'Aqab Food Bazaar, the celebration of Saint Barbara Day in cooperation with Aboud Women's Association, and *Hajjar's Zalabia* with myself and storyteller Fida' Attaya, baking traditional *manaqish* (traditional pastries filled with spinach, *za'atar* or cheese) on an open fire, or preparing the traditional dishes *maqluba*, *maftoul*, and *musakhan*. Many other food events are planned for the remainder of this calendar year.

As Dalia Association aims not only to encourage cultural exchange among the members of the local community but also to ensure that Beit Al Karmeh is able to host people who are traveling to Kafr 'Aqab from other Palestinian towns or visiting from abroad, two guest rooms were created within the building during the reconstruction phase. The building's traditional architecture and beautiful atmosphere have attracted local photographers who have done several photo shoots in the courtyard. The meeting rooms and courtyard are used to share our

Dalia Association is hopeful that the partners and people who share our vision and dreams of preserving Palestinian cultural traditions and contributing to the empowerment of the Kafr 'Aqab community will visit Beit Al Karmeh— no matter where they come from. You too can participate with us and the community in exploring how our grandmothers and grandfathers lived and cooked in historical homes such as Beit Al Karmeh. These traditions can be – and remain – the anchor for our ongoing resistance and survival as Palestinians on this land.



Khubaizeh pop-up kitchen with Chef Samar Awaad.

views and political commitments with the community through lectures on topics such as food sovereignty, including a discussion with the expert in ecological farming Saad Dagher, who gave a very informative and interactive presentation about the challenges facing Palestinian farmers and the restrictions imposed on our food sovereignty by the occupation. Furthermore, Beit Al Karmeh has hosted screenings of movies such as *The Wanted 18*, *The C Word*, *The Untold Revolution: Land Sovereignty in Palestine*, *The Kingdom of Women: Ein El Hilweh*, and more.

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