



## The Bag of Earth

*Palestine*

A highly respected rabbi once saw a Muslim woman with her son passing by on the streets of Nazareth, leading by the reins a donkey with an empty sack on its back. The woman was crying and the rabbi, being a compassionate man, approached her to ask what was wrong.

‘Oh, rabbi! My husband passed away a few months ago and, shortly before he died, he asked me never to sell our land because, being poor, our son might need it to grow his own food in the future.

‘But a few days after his death,’ the woman continued, brushing away her tears, ‘the governor sent me an emissary to tell me that he wanted to buy our land to make a new colony there for the Jews. I told him that I couldn't do it because I had promised it to my husband, as well as for the sake of my son, but the governor then sent me a missive telling me that if I refused to sell my land, I would lose the right to any compensation, because they were going to take it either way. But I did not accept it anyway.’

‘So what happened then?’ asked the rabbi with a horrified look on his face.

‘That some settlers came and drove my son and me out of our house and our land...,’ the woman replied, bursting into sobs again, ‘and they told us not to come back there or we would regret it. They only let us take the donkey...’

The rabbi bit his lips and his eyes misted over.

‘Don’t despair,’ he said when he pulled himself together and was able to speak. ‘I know the governor. I will see what I can do.’

Sheltering the woman and her child in his own house, the rabbi set out for the governor's building and asked for an audience with him. The governor, who held the rabbi in high esteem, received him immediately, and the rabbi went on to explain the reason that had brought him there, asking him to overturn his decision and to have the settlers leave the widow's land. The governor refused to comply and tried to explain to him the needs of the new Jewish inhabitants...

‘Injustices thrive in the seedbeds of injustice,’ said the rabbi, looking sternly at him. ‘You can’t do that to anyone, and don’t make the excuse that she is a gentile.’

But the governor would not budge, so the rabbi summoned him to come to the widow's house and land that same day in the afternoon. He then returned home and invited the Muslim woman and her son to accompany him with the donkey and bag back to their land.

The governor, confused by what had happened, would rather have put the matter behind him and forgotten all about it after his disagreement with the rabbi. But the rabbi was a highly respected man in his community because of his wisdom and kindness, so he finally decided to meet him at the house of the woman he had evicted.

When he arrived, he found them all there, including the settlers to whom he had given the woman’s land.

‘If you are going to stick to your decision,’ said the rabbi to the governor, ‘at least give this woman a gift. At least give her this bag filled with the land that was hers.’

And the rabbi held out to the governor the bag that the donkey had carried on his back until that moment.

‘I don’t understand what this is all about,’ replied the governor, pretending to be offended. ‘Why don’t you tell her to fill her bag with earth herself?’

‘When you would not do it yourself, the gift would lose its value,’ replied the rabbi, staring at him.

The governor, looking annoyed at the rabbi, took the bag from his hands and grabbing a shovel from the settlers, began to pour earth into it.

When the bag was full, he tried to lift it to take it to the widow, but he did not have enough strength to lift it off the ground.

‘The earth... it’s too heavy,’ he complained.

And the rabbi said to him:

‘If a single bag of earth that you are willing to return to its rightful owners is so heavy for you, how will your soul bear the burden of all the land that you have violently taken from them?’

Shocked, the governor dropped the bag and, straightening up, lowered his eyes, mute with stupefaction. After a few seconds, he went to the woman and her son and begged their forgiveness, finally ordering the settlers to leave the land. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2024).

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## Comments

This story is adapted from a Palestinian tale from the Arab Educational Institute in Bethlehem entitled ‘The Bag of Sand’. The original story is set in Baghdad during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansur between 754 and 775 CE, and features the widow and child being helped by Abdullah al-Mustakim, a wise and just judge who made the Caliph himself retract the expropriation of the woman's land.

However, in our adaptation we have drawn on the idea of another Palestinian story from the same institution, entitled ‘The Rabbi and the Moslem,’ in which a Palestinian shopkeeper goes to a Jewish rabbi to ask for help when a gold ring is stolen from his shop by another Jew. In this story, the rabbi summons the Jewish thief and forces him to return the stolen item to the Palestinian shopkeeper.

Working between these two stories, we have composed the adaptation above by making the Baghdadi judge a rabbi and the Caliph a Jewish governor in Palestine. We have also set it far from Baghdad, namely in Nazareth, a mere 25 kilometres from the Palestinian border in the West Bank, where Jewish settlers continue to take territory from Palestinians with the blessing of the Israeli authorities.

And we wanted to include this story in this volume of The Earth Stories Collection as a form of protest against what has happened in recent times in this part of the planet. In this regard, we would like to express – from our deepest and most sincere respect and appreciation of the Hebrew and Arab, Jewish and Muslim cultures, and of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples –

1. That the killings of more than 1,200 people - along with the taking of more than 250 hostages - by Hamas on 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023 were and remain to this day (8<sup>th</sup> December 2024) an unjustifiable atrocity.
2. That the killings of more than 44,000 people in Gaza - along with the 11,000 missing Palestinians - perpetrated by the Israeli army since 7 October 2023 were and remain an unjustifiable atrocity. Arguably, a long systematically extended atrocity.

In the Jewish Talmud, specifically in the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4, 5, it says:

Only one man, Adam, was originally created in order to teach us that if one destroys a single life, it's as if he destroyed an entire world, while if one saves a single life, it's as if he saved an entire world. (Grian, 2003, p. 109)

On the other hand, in the Muslim Qur'an, specifically in Qur'an 5. 32, it says:

Because of that, We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely. (ibid.)

In the sacred texts of both religions, we find the same precept.

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.

## Sources

Arab Educational Institute (1999). *Moral Stories from Palestine*.  
Bethlehem: Culture Palestine Series. <http://www.palestine-family.net/index.php?nav=5-12> (Accessed on 27 Sep 2013)

Grian (2003). *La rosa de la paz*. Barcelona: Ediciones Obelisco.

## *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Principle 3a: Ensure that communities at all levels guarantee human rights and fundamental freedoms and provide everyone an opportunity to realize his or her full potential.

## *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble – The Global Situation: Communities are being undermined. The benefits of development are not shared equitably and the gap between rich and poor is widening. Injustice, poverty, ignorance, and violent conflict are widespread and the cause of great suffering. An unprecedented rise in human population has overburdened ecological and social systems. The foundations of global security are threatened. These trends are perilous—but not inevitable.

Principle 3b: Promote social and economic justice, enabling all to achieve a secure and meaningful livelihood that is ecologically responsible.

Principle 9c: Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations.

Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.



Principle 13: Strengthen democratic institutions at all levels, and provide transparency and accountability in governance, inclusive participation in decision making, and access to justice.

Principle 13d: Institute effective and efficient access to administrative and independent judicial procedures, including remedies and redress for environmental harm and the threat of such harm.

Principle 13e: Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.

