

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

Teta Nabiha's

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Abstract

“Teta Nabiha’s” is an account of return to Palestine written in creative prose. The essay offers a personalized, non-fictional narrative of the Said family home in Talbiyya, Jerusalem, which my mother’s grandparents, Nabiha and Boulos, built with their cousin Wadie in the 1930s, and to which they never returned following their flight from Palestine in late 1947. On the one hand, “Teta Nabiha’s” is a story of the family home itself, and what has become of it since its confiscation by the Israeli state in 1948. On the other, it is a literary account of our return – my mother, brother, stepfather, and me – in late 2011 to Talbiyya and to what remains of Teta Nabiha’s. Using a combination of secondary source research, family photographs, satellite imagery, descriptive prose, dialogue, and a mix of literary styles, “Teta Nabiha’s” seeks to reimagine Palestinian narratives of return in a way that goes beyond loss and sorrow to imaginatively explore an altogether new tone of Palestinian literature infused with humor, love, sentimentality, creativity, and hope.

Keywords

Palestine; Palestinians; Jerusalem; return; Israeli occupation; Nakba; Talbiyya; Ramallah.

Editor’s Note

This version was developed out of a notable contribution to the Ibrahim Dakkak Award for Outstanding Essay on Jerusalem, 2020 Round.

This letter is about Nabiha Said, my great-grandmother, and her home in Jerusalem, the one taken from her and to which she never returned. It is a story about her granddaughter Dina, my

mother, whose return to Teta Nabiha's I orchestrated in December 2011. This is a narrative of our ongoing displacement and exile from the house Teta Nabiha built as a family home with her brother Wadie in the early 1930s. It is a narrative of our return, my mother, brother, and me, to Talbiyya and to what became of Teta Nabiha's, now locatable on electronic maps at "10 Brenner Street." With this written record, I affirm the permanence of Teta Nabiha and her descendants in the limestone walls and halls of so-called "10 Brenner Street."



Figure 1. Teta Nabiha and her youngest children twins, Robert (left) and Albert (right), my grandfather. Jerusalem, 1930s. Said family collection.

Teta Nabiha's was confiscated by the Israeli state in 1948, though neither Teta Nabiha, her brother Wadie, nor any of their children were there to witness it. They had already left Jerusalem for Cairo in anticipation of the war, and like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians still in exile, they have not been able to return to their home which remains where they built it, in Talbiyya. Today, and like most of historic Palestine, Talbiyya is thoroughly Judaized, its Palestinian origins meticulously effaced. But like us, our limestone walls, marble floors, and terracotta roofs remain standing, remain Palestinian.

In the early 1980s, Menachem Begin gave the house to the International Christian Embassy, a right-wing evangelical organization established in 1980 to support the Zionist state, and when the organization relocated in the 1990s, Amidar Public Housing was granted the property. In the early 2000s, Talbeia Properties, a real estate company, purchased the property from Amidar, and shortly thereafter in 2005, American financiers and brothers, Arthur and Michael Fried, bought it from Talbeia Properties.¹ Wasting no time, the Fried brothers hired an architect to add two more floors to the edifice, transforming Teta Nabiha's into a five-story condominium apartment building to be managed as short-term family vacation rentals.² I shudder to think how Teta Nabiha would have felt to learn of the irony that the family home she built with her brother was bought and redesigned by brothers who rented it to vacationing families.



Figure 2. Left to right: Teta Sylvia, my grandmother; Teta Nabiha, my great-grandmother; and Dido Albert, my grandfather. Manhasset, NY, 1960s. Author's personal collection.

The Fried brothers also purchased 90 percent of the properties of Talbiyya from Talbeia Properties, but the house at “10 Brenner Street” is the one that caused them the most trouble. In December 2011, two other brothers, Eyal and Oded Baruch, sued the Frieds, their neighbors on Brenner Street, over alleged construction violations.³ Evidently, when the Frieds began redeveloping Teta Nabiha’s, the Baruchs took the opportunity to complain to the Jerusalem municipality about a wall separating the two properties that they claimed trespassed on their land. In a legal battle that dragged on for months, Talbeia Properties, intervening on behalf of the Frieds, submitted that the wall in question had “been there for 80 years” and that the building was marked for preservation.⁴ Indeed, eighty years ago, Nabiha’s children, Yousef, Evelyn, George, Albert, and Robert, and their cousins Edward, Rosemary, Jean, Joyce, and Grace were playing around the house’s limestone *sur* and on the stairs that led to the breezy porch.

While the Baruchs were preparing to take the Frieds to court in the late autumn of 2011, I was preparing to take my second fieldwork trip to Jerusalem for my dissertation. My advisor at New York University drew a makeshift map for me on a lined piece of paper on how to find Teta Nabiha’s. “Of course, I know the Said house!” he exclaimed. I had never been. I also had a plan to take my mother with me. She had not been to Jerusalem in over a decade, and she had never seen her family home. “It’s too painful, mama. I can’t,” she would say each time I egged her on about the importance of using our new American passports to return to Palestine. “It’s poetic justice, mama,” I would insist. And once I had the makeshift map to our home in hand, she simply could not get herself to refuse. She, too, was desperate to meet her family home.

That winter was cold, but not at the Allenby crossing in the Jordan Valley. The occupation authorities processed my mother, brother, stepfather, and me within an hour. Undoubtedly, traveling as a family with our stepfather, a white American, and with finite reservations at the luxurious American Colony hotel, eased their suspicions about the purpose or length of our stay, and so we were spared the usual hours of interrogation. Certainly, we did not show them our map that would reunite us with our family home, the one Dina retained glimpses of in her photographic memory. About Teta Nabiha’s, she recalled a photograph her father kept from the late 1930s of Robert, his fraternal twin, posing on the running board of a car with the newly completed home in the background. On the road, the house stood alone, with still barren plots of land adjacent to it. Talbiyya was being born.

Our arrival in Jerusalem was magnificent. Chariot-like, our triumphal taxi ascended the aged hills of the Jordan Valley to reveal the Dome of the Rock, struck brilliantly by a ray of light ripping through thick late December clouds, and thus made visible miles away across the wide valley to our left. Here we were, entering our city despite the occupying state’s best efforts to keep us out. Surely, we had already won. Yes, we arrived in Jerusalem on American passports we acquired through our American stepfather, we were staying at the American Colony hotel, and I had in my pocket a makeshift map to our family home drawn by my American doctoral advisor. How tenuous, how fraught, was our homecoming. Nonetheless, we were here.



Figure 3. Robert, my grandfather's fraternal twin, posing for a photograph outside the Said family home. Talbiyya, Jerusalem, 1940s. Said family collection.

Wednesday, 28 December 2011, was overcast in Jerusalem, so that morning, I felt dismayed that we would not experience Teta Nabiha's in its sunlit glory. Dina had often talked about the house's limestone exterior, that emblem of Jerusalem's beauty. If only those clouds would part. After breakfast, we sluggishly walked up Nablus Road from the American Colony toward King David Street in West Jerusalem where we would rent our own chariot to visit the Mount of Olives, Talbiyya, and Ramallah that day. My brother Sami and I sighed as Nablus Road steadily inclined towards the YMCA in East Jerusalem. We are not morning people, and we certainly do not appreciate cold mornings. But Dina was exuberant. She, too, cannot bear the cold, but that morning, she was frenetic, concealing a mixture of excitement, anxiety, and heartache with overpreparedness. For the cold, she put on her nylon leggings and a pair of wool socks underneath her trousers and brown leather boots, and layered her torso thickly with a long-sleeved thermal turtleneck, fleece sweater, and wool coat. She was ready.

Once the entrance to the YMCA was visible to our right, Dina stopped and asked if we had time for a quick detour. She had been speaking rather incessantly that morning, in her characteristic stream of consciousness, and we had been anticipating her endearing quirks to exceed expectations throughout this trip. But today was about

Dina. She could do whatever she wanted. “Of course, *habibti!* Take us wherever you want!” Her husband Kelly, unfailingly supportive, answered on our behalf. She walked us a few steps back and, to the right, pointed at a church through an arched opening in the wall. “This is St. George’s, guys. Mama and Papa married here.” Sami and I, waking up now, froze under the opulent archway and, with our lips inadvertently parting, scanned the peaceful courtyard within and the ominous medieval tower in the background. “Mama! ‘*Anjad?!*’” “Of course! Come, let’s go inside.”

As we entered the church, Dina at once transformed into a carefree child, taking Kelly’s hand and pulling him gleefully toward the back pews. Facing the altar, she locked her arm in his, and proceeded down the aisle as a bride would with her father. Her smile grew bigger with each step, and we could hear her giggle from the back of the church. “*Yee*, I’ve always wanted to walk down the aisle where my parents did!” At the altar, she stopped, turned around, and, for the first time in my life, asked me to take her photograph. She hates being photographed. Her grin swallowed her face as I snapped the photograph of her, standing properly as a schoolgirl would, at the altar where her late parents had wed. Sami and I were transfixed. We had never seen our mother like this, and we never thought we would be standing where Teta Sylvia and Dido Albert married.

We took a family photo at the Mount of Olives that is now framed in each of our homes. All around us huddled tens of impressionable tourists and their abrasive tour guides. Sami and I took some more photos, attempting panoramas, and Dina sat quietly, pensively, on a limestone bench to smoke her late-morning cigarette. Kelly examined the oblong map of the city corresponding to our view at the edge of the cliff above the cemetery. He always appreciated a captioned illustration. But this was not the moment we came to Jerusalem to experience. Countless families, many of whom were also returning exiled Palestinians on tourist visas like us, had been here and had taken these photos, had examined this map, and had smoked cigarettes admiring the majestic view of the holy city, mourning what was once ours. Teta Nabiha and her children were not here. Nonetheless, we were moved, and Dina asked to go back to the hotel for a rest before the remainder of our afternoon.

She had one more cigarette at the entrance to the American Colony before we left for Talbiyya. Kelly kept her company while Sami and I waited in the car, me in the driver’s seat, and Sami behind me. I pulled out the map from my pocket and examined it once more. Sokolov Square was our destination, depicted as an oval in the center of my advisor’s illustration. The square was the main feature in the map, and he had drawn a road representing King David Street that we were to follow from the north as we descended upon Sokolov. “It’s on the western side of the square, at the intersection of Sokolov Street and another. I can’t remember the name of the street, but you’ll see it as you drive around the square,” he assured me. I had marked the intersection with an emphatic star, and as Sami and I sat in the car waiting, I gazed at that star and felt I was offering my family the most meaningful gift. I, the aspiring scholar and historian of Palestine, was responsible for the map, for pushing for our trip to Palestine, for driving us to Talbiyya, and for finding Teta Nabiha’s. At once, I felt both

pride and trepidation. *What if we cannot find it? What if it is unrecognizable and this devastates mama? I will have made her come for nothing.*

My heart beat faster as I forced myself to reconcile my pride and fear; in a moment, I would need to drive. Behind me, Sami said nothing, drooping in his seat, perhaps unconsciously conserving energy for what was to come. Dina and Kelly walked towards the car and I gulped, mostly air. She got in next to Sami as Kelly sat beside me. “Ready boys?” She asked with pep in her voice. “*Akeed, habibti mama. Let’s take you home!*” I replied as I drove the car to the Colony’s gated exit. “So, we’ll drive south on King David Street past the YMCA in West Jerusalem until we reach the intersection at Jabotinsky Street,” I began as we approached highway 60, soon to cross to the west side. Articulating our plans verbally helped ease my anxiety. “We’ll then take a right into Talbiyya and Sokolov Square should be right there!” “All right!” Kelly said excitedly. I looked at Dina in the rearview mirror. “*Shoo mama, keefik?*” She was looking out her window with a soft smile, visible only by the lifted sides of her mouth. She took a quick breath and looked at me, as though awakening from a daze. Smiling wider, she offered, “*Mneeha, habibi, mneeha.*”

Sokolov Square was a park.⁵ Pine trees lined it, and along the outline of the park, we admired rows of limestone houses, built in the 1920s and 1930s as Talbiyya was becoming a tony neighborhood. “*Ya bayyeh, how beautiful,*” Dina said. “This was all for Palestinians, guys. We built this whole area. *Akh, they took it all.*” From inside the park, we heard the laughter of Israeli children, layered in down coats and warm boots, playing in sand pits, on swings, and down slides. Dina asked me to park the car. “But mama, we still need to drive around the square. I think it’s on the other side.” “No, stop here. I’d like to walk.” I obliged. Kelly and I were the first to leave the car. Dina and Sami were notoriously slower, and we knew not to wait. We began walking along circular Sokolov Street, me with my map in hand, and Kelly beside me with his hands as usual half-tucked in his front pockets. We looked in every direction. I knew I would not know the house, but I was hoping the perpendicular street would be clear and we would see only one house where it met Sokolov, and it would be that house.



Figure 4. From left to right: my stepfather Kelly, me, my brother Sami, and our mother Dina. Mount of Olives, Jerusalem, December 2011. Author’s personal collection.



Figure 5. Teta Nabiha's sons on the steps to their home in Talbiyya, early 1940s. Top row, left to right: George and Yousef. Bottom row, left to right: Robert and Albert. Not pictured is Evelyn, Nabiha's only daughter. Said family collection.

“Papa!” Dina screamed. Stunned, Kelly and I turned around to see Dina wailing in the street, bringing her hands from over her head to cover her face. “Papa, I’m here! Papa!” She fell to the street, landing on her right hip. Her right hand left her face and met the cold asphalt for balance, as her left expanded across her face, still covering both eyes, tears slowly puddling between her fingers. Sami dropped beside her and put his hands on her shoulders. He looked up where she had been looking before she collapsed. There was a structure under construction behind a limestone barrier a few meters ahead and around a bend. Kelly and I were approaching it when we heard her scream, but we could not see what it was behind the trees and construction material. Retreating now, we came to Dina’s side, lifted her up, and looked at the construction site behind the ancient wall. “Mama, is that the house?” Sami asked. Between gasps for air, Dina managed: “Yes, that’s our *sur*.” She recognized it from the photographs. Suddenly, I was not the gifter or the scholar. I was the exiled Palestinian returning home with his exiled mother. *Why had I not anticipated Dina’s pain? Why had I not anticipated what this would be like?* I was not prepared.

Dina’s cries escalated and deepened, like a mourner’s during a funeral. The few passers-by looked at us with confusion and alarm, but no one approached us. We lifted Dina and slowly walked her to the limestone wall that outlined the park, directly across from Teta Nabiha’s *sur*. Her legs gave out again, but Kelly held her up. We stood her against the wall, and some minutes later, she gradually began to recover her breath. Kelly and Sami stood on either side of her, and Sami reached for a cigarette from her purse. He lit one for her, then another for himself. As they stood there, fuming through their lips and nostrils, their faces were grey, expressionless. *How could today be anything but cloudy?* There was no place for the sun here.

Facing the façade that stood atop Teta Nabiha’s nest, my breath grew heavy. I looked up to the fourth and fifth floors of the new condominium flats, hollow still with stacks of tiles piled around the renovated window frames, and saw two men approach the edge to look at us. They were construction workers, Palestinians. One of them shook his head slowly, while the other stood beside him, arms folded, motionless. They had heard Dina’s cries for her Papa. They knew who we were, returners, and they recognized the spectacle below. I locked eyes with one of them, and he tilted his



Figure 6. Said family house remodeled. October 2019. Author’s personal collection.

head downwards. I felt helpless then. There was absolutely nothing any of us could do. We were stuck there, trapped. *This is return.*

After what felt like an eternity, Dina spoke. “*Khalas.* Take me to my mother’s house in Ramallah.” She dropped her shrunken cigarette on the sidewalk and squashed it with her boot. Kelly put his arm around her and began escorting her to the car. Sami, mostly frozen still against the park perimeter, began thawing and dragging his feet behind them. I stood in the middle of the sidewalk facing Teta Nabiha’s, cracking each of my knuckles robotically. My breathing became faster, and my throat locked. I looked up at the workers, behind me into the park at the children playing, and all around at the occupied homes of my family’s neighbors. I clasped my icy hands to stop myself from cracking my fingers and looked up the street, where Dina was walking, her head resting on Kelly’s left shoulder. She was stumbling a little, but Kelly had her. I looked back up at the two workers, but this time, my eyebrows scrunched up at my temple. I was certain they felt shame with their pity. *How dare you be part of this?* I turned around to face the park. I saw mothers chatting as their children swung and slid. Though they did not see me, I gave them the same stare. *How dare you play amidst our ruins?* And for all the ignorance in the world, I knew they knew where they were, and what they took. I marched to the car and drove my family away from this place.

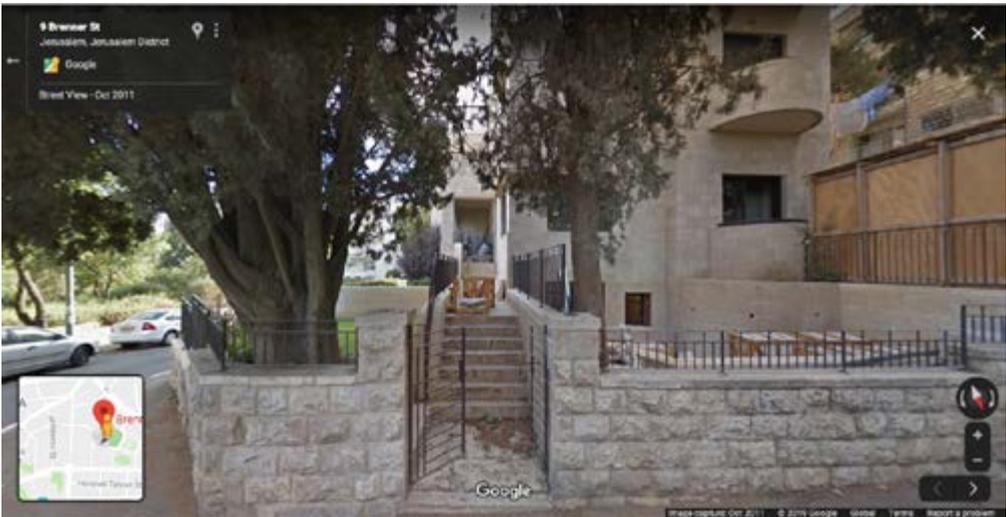


Figure 7. Screenshot of Google Street View for Said family house, now locatable at “10 Brenner Street,” seen here under construction, October 2011. Sokolov Square seen to the left, online at ([google.com](https://www.google.com/maps/@31.8611111,34.8011111,15z)) bit.ly/311PhLJ (accessed 20 September 2020).

The sun is bright on this Sunday afternoon, 13 October 2019. Twenty-six degrees outside, Ramallahs are anxiously awaiting the breezy autumn weather. I could be outside enjoying the heat wave, but thoughts of Teta Nabiha’s preoccupy me. Lying in bed with my laptop, I enter “10 Brenner St.” into Google Maps and find the “street view” option is available. As Google adjusts its satellites to transport me twenty

kilometers south, my breath quickens. The image that appears shows a park. *This is Sokolov Square*. There is a woman, frozen in time, pushing her baby cart up the sidewalk across the street from the park. It is a sunny day in Google. *We walked along that sidewalk*. I adjust the street view to face Teta Nabiha's at the corner of the intersecting streets and see a façade that looks familiar. I zoom in on the unique balconies which form a vertical line along the right side of the building. They are semi-circles encapsulating dark, tinted windows. *I know these balconies*. I grab my phone to search for a photograph my brother sent me months prior while on a visit to Amman. He had taken a photograph of the original photograph Dina recollected from her childhood, the one of her uncle Robert reclining on the running board of a car before their newly-completed home. Robert's widow had it in her apartment in Amman. I find the photograph in my phone and I see those balconies on the right side of the edifice. Breathless, my eyelids freeze open.

When I regain focus, my eyes travel to the bottom of the Google "street view" page in search of a date. October 2011. We had visited two months later in December, when the Baruchs were arranging to sue the Frieds, when an architect was renovating the façade. I take screen shots of these frozen images of Teta Nabiha's and send them to Dina, now retired in Florida. In our Skype call, I can see she is getting exasperated. "*Khalas habibi*, I mourned my grandmother and father on that day in December. I don't want to relive it." "I understand, *habibti* mama. Sorry to bring this up again." "*Ma'lesh habibi*, you don't have to move on. For me, Teta and Papa aren't there anymore. They're in me, and they're in you and Sami." I look down at my lap to have a moment with myself as I crack both my pinky knuckles simultaneously with my thumbs. Exhaling gently, I look up to see my mother's face. She's also looking down, breathing slowly. But she's not cracking her knuckles; she's picking at her cuticles, as she does when pensive. "*Tayyib, habibti* mama. I think I'll go for a walk. It's warm out today." "*Akh, ya niyyalak*, you get to walk those streets!" She begins, still working on her fingers. "I do love it here," I smile. She looks up at me, grinning now. "I know the feeling, *habibi*."

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Endnotes

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| <p>1 Nimrod Bousso, "American Owners of Luxury Jerusalem Property Benefit from Ties to Netanyahu Bureau," <i>Haaretz</i>, 14 November 2013, online at (haaretz.com) bit.ly/3nGy1FP (accessed 18 September 2020).</p> <p>2 Bousso, "American Owners."</p> | <p>3 Bousso, "American Owners."</p> <p>4 Bousso, "American Owners."</p> <p>5 The official name of the square is Chille Square. The street encircling it is Sokolov Street.</p> |
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