



PLEASURE HUNTING

By Ronit Vered
Photos by Nir Kafri

ALL YOU CAN EAT

Stuffed falafel, friqeh soup and home-made kanafeh are just a few of the treats on hand at the Ramadan iftar feast in Jisr al-Zarqa

Around 6 P.M., about 10 stands selling falafel and homemade salads suddenly appear. The restaurants and cafes are still closed, but the improvised stands, which are open every day for two or three hours during the month of Ramadan, bring a colorful burst of life to the nondescript main street, which has no sidewalks. On folded plastic tables, plastic containers of small purple eggplants, pink turnips, vegetables pickled in yellow amba, red and green cabbage salads and hot pepper spreads accumulate in orderly rows. Hundreds of falafel balls are frying in pots filled with boiling oil, and dozens of men, women and children crowd the stands, awaiting their turn.

Chef Rabia's stand, located in front of the neighborhood cafe, is one of the most popular in Jisr al-Zarqa. Chef Rabia prepares falafel balls seasoned with coriander seeds and cumin; falafel shaped like a bagel, with a hole in the middle; big falafel patties seasoned with sesame seeds; falafel stuffed with onion or garlic; cigars stuffed with chicken and hot pepper; kubbeh (dumplings) stuffed with ground beef; and other stuffed baked goods that have been deep fried.

The various types of fried foods are wrapped in brown paper bags and taken home. There is no *iftar* – the meal that breaks the daily Ramadan fast – without falafel and pickled vegetables. But nobody eats at the stands or puts any food into his mouth.

One must be holy – or at least fortified with strong faith – not to be tempted by the smell and taste of the hot falafel balls. But everyone there obeys the laws of the Muslim fast, and the announcement of the end of the fast has not yet been made. Only young children, who cannot understand concepts like communal brotherhood or fasting to purify body and soul, are allowed to eat. They receive a delicate, forgiving slap on the hand, just to remind them of the Prophet's command.

At the same time, when a person needs all his willpower to avoid being tempted by Satan after 14 hours of fasting, some of the residents of Jisr al-Zarqa go down to the beach. Immersion in the waters of the Mediterranean keeps away thoughts of a hungry belly, lips that thirst for water, or the heat of the day. On ordinary days they go swimming at the official nearby beach, but during Ramadan many families prefer to splash in the small bay



A falafel stand on the main street of Jisr al-Zarqa.

of the "fishermen's village," alongside fishing boats that rock in the waves and buoys that rise from the water.

At Jurat Izzat – a breathtaking natural pool formed by stone steps that are alternately hidden and revealed beneath the foam – fathers teach their sons how to swim. Young children of five and six cross the stone steps where the water is shallow; the more advanced swim to distant spots and teenagers who want to display real courage swim up to Dove Island, at the northern edge of the Nahal Hataninim estuary. The last rays of the sun paint the world in a pink light, and from the beach, even the crowded village houses look like a romantic pastoral landscape.

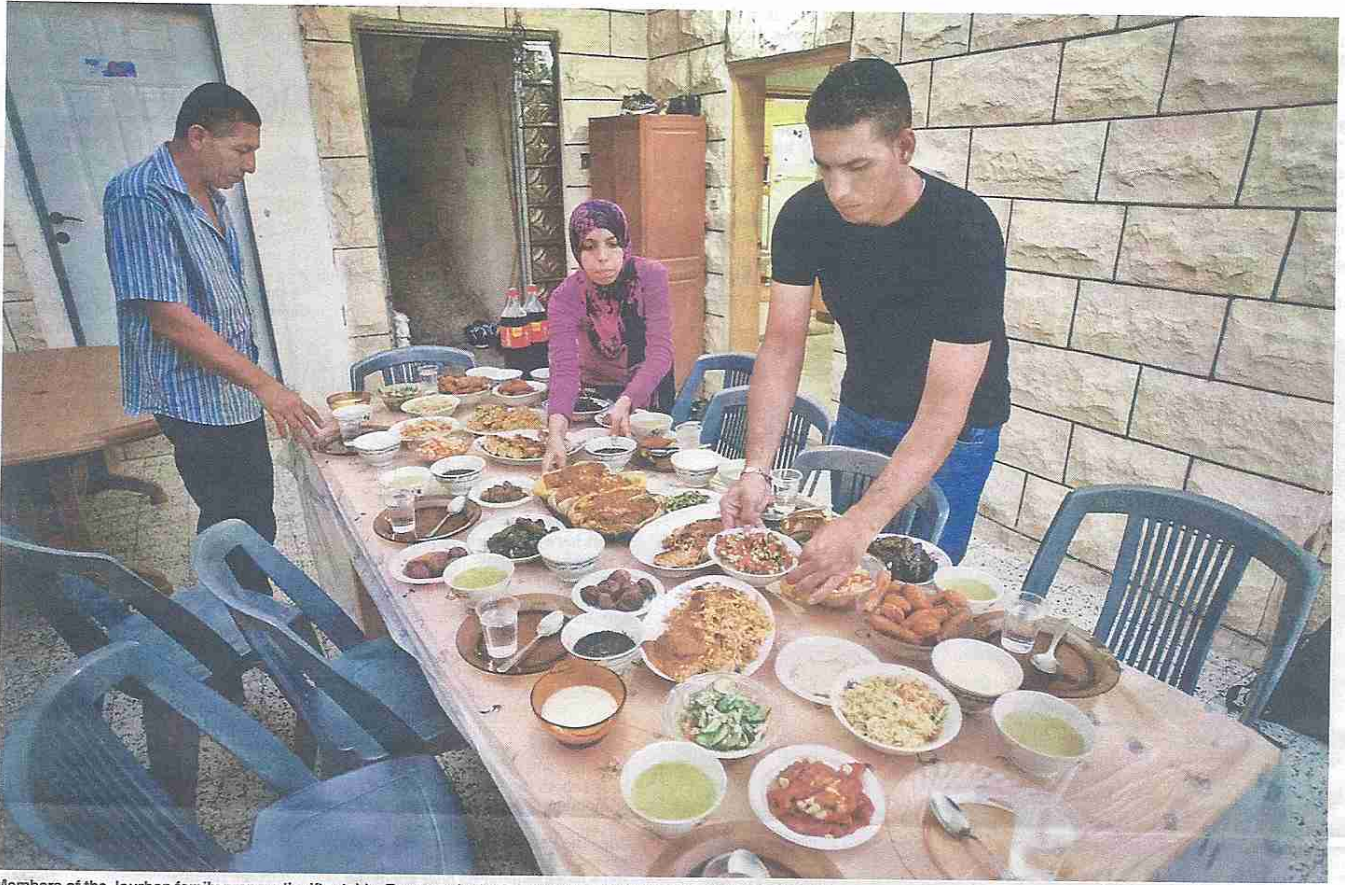
The appetite can't keep up

Toward evening the fishermen and their families sit in front of the huts and small stone houses on the beach. Musa the fisherman caught only three kilos of small fish in the nets he spread the night before – a tiny amount that is only enough to feed the family. Two hundred years ago, the members of the Amash and Jourban clans, two large families who to this day comprise most of the

population of the village, made a living from fishing and raising buffalo. In the early 20th century the buffalo herds were replaced by herds of sheep, which also disappeared over the years from a modern world crowded with highways and settlements. In the early 21st century, only 30 families in Jisr are still engaged in fishing. There are few fish in the Mediterranean, especially for those who go out in the fairly shallow water in small boats, equipped only with nets cast by hand and an ancestral tradition.

People return home from the evening prayer or from the sea and eagerly await the muezzin's call. In the Jourban home they set the iftar table in the back yard. Fatma and Dib have seven sons and daughters and during the day each of them sneaks in and whispers to their mother what they would prefer to eat at the end of the fast day. Fatma and Dib have their own preferences, and that's how the platters gradually pile up.

Here are just a few of the delicacies that are placed on the family table every evening: friqeh soup – a nourishing and reviving soup made of roasted green wheat; meluhiya soup – a hot and delicately flavored white soup made with chicken stock; a finely chopped vegetable salad with spearmint; kohlrabi and radish salad; cucumber salad seasoned



Members of the Jourban family prepare the iftar table. Everyone in the family whispers their own preferences in advance.



Fast food: stuffed chicken and chopped vegetable salad.



Swimming among the fishing boats in the Mediterranean.

with onion and chives; hummus and tahini salads; bitter suri olives; tiny pickled eggplants; several types of pickled vegetables; falafel balls, stuffed cigars; wheat kubbeh with a delicate coating and filling; kara squash stuffed with rice and meat and cooked yogurt; pullets stuffed with rice and pine nuts; turkey breasts stuffed with liver, organ meats and vegetables; stuffed grape leaves with nuts; turkey breast stuffed with cooked tomatoes and garlic; and trays of siniya (beef

in tahini.

At 7:30 P.M., when the muezzin announces the end of the fast, a heavy silence falls over the village. Nobody opens his mouth for any purpose except filling it with food. Anyone who has fasted from 4 A.M. dreams all day about the moment when eating will be permitted again, and about the dozens of delicious foods that will appear on his table. The desire is great, but the appetite can't keep up. After many hours of fasting, one can eat

only sparingly.

They console themselves with homemade kanafeh (a pastry made with shredded phyllo dough) – everyone knows that the Creator made sure to create additional room in the human stomach for sweets – and go to the only bakery in the village to buy atayef, a kind of pancake filled with walnuts and dipped in sweet sugar syrup. It's an energy-filled dish that will guarantee at least a few hours of peace during the fast the next day. At 8:30 ▶



◀ P.M. life returns to the main street, the cafes are bustling and almost all the residents of the village go out to spend time together.

The stuff of legend

The tours conducted in Jisr al-Zarqa during Ramadan, in cooperation with Sikkuy – the Association for the Advancement of Civic Equality in Israel – are led by Awad Jourban and Muhammed Amash, two intelligent young men with a great deal of historical and geographical knowledge. They were born in the vil-

area around 1500, decided to settle in the heart of a swamp, nobody knows. In the absence of a written tradition, legends and wild rumors were born. The descendants of the tribe, up until two decades ago, were forced to marry among themselves, since even residents of nearby Fureidis refused them. They know that only someone pushed to the margins of society chooses to settle in an area full of disasters, illnesses and curses.

From there we walk to the old village center, together with members of the tribe that received the lands of the village in the early 20th century in exchange for helping with the Zionist project of drying



Kara squash, nourishing friqeh soup and salads adorn the iftar table.

lage, where the rate of illiteracy and the number of school dropouts are among the highest in the country. The fascinating tour, which tells the story of Jisr al-Zarqa (meaning bridge over the blue stream in Arabic) and its inhabitants, begins at the entrance to the village, atop the gravel ridge that contains the vestiges of Roman quarries and dams. This is an outlook point with a view of the Carmel Mountain range and a broad area that was once the Kabara swamp.

Why the members of the Arab al-Ghawarina tribe, who arrived in the

out the Kabara swamp. We continue to ancient Tel Taninim and the coast of the fishermen's village, to see the vestiges of a world that is gradually disappearing, and to top it off we have a wonderful traditional Ramadan meal at the home of the Jourban.

Ramadan tours in Jisr al-Zarqa are conducted on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays in August, beginning at 5:30 P.M. The cost for an adult is NIS 90, for a child NIS 50. For details and registration call Mohammed: 052-3750705 or Awad: 050-7656294.

The Peris and the Jowamises

BEIT ZARZIR

■ **The cast:** Amir (57), Betty (56), Ya'ar (31), Osnat (30), Avner (4), Tamar (3), Khaled (61), Fatma (60) and little Khaled (13). Not in the photo: Yuli (16), a foster daughter, who has essentially been adopted by Betty and Amir; and Tal (28), a student, who lives in Haifa.

■ **Who's who:** Amir and Betty Peri are Ya'ar's parents; Osnat and Ya'ar are the parents of Avner and Tamar; Khaled and Fatma Jowamis are the hosts; and little Khaled, their grandson, is here by chance for a visit.

■ **Story in a nutshell:** Amir and Betty sold their home in Givat Elah (a neighboring community) and decided to build a new home in Shadmot Dvora (near Kfar Tavor). In the course of the construction they changed their mind and decided to stay in Givat Elah until Yuli finishes high school (in two years). As a result they had to find a place to rent immediately. A place was found but won't be available until September. Khaled and Fatma heard about the Peris' problem and responded: "Please, come stay with us." The offer was accepted and in June the Peris from Givat Elah moved to Beit Zarzir for three months. How did Khaled and Fatma hear about the straits in which Amir and Betty found themselves? All will be revealed.

■ **Highway 7626:** After taking a left at the mosque, the narrow paved entrance to the Jowamis' compound passes between olive groves. We drive in and on the right, on a concrete terrace, stands the family's large house (two-story, light-orange stucco, decorative stones, and shaded parking area between the pillars); on the left is the house allotted to the Peri family.

■ **Allotted house:** The dwelling is flat and wide, with a light metal roof, ceramic-tile floor, aluminum-sided windows, orange walls ("a startling loft" Betty calls it: *zarzir* means "startling" in Hebrew). The space is divided into two parallel halls along which cloth curtains have been hung to compartmentalize the temporary living quarters. The right-hand hall contains the Peris' living-room furniture (white and blue sofas, Danish armchairs) and a heavy dining table. The young Peri family (Ya'ar, Osnat and the children) is ensconced

behind a curtain and has spread a communal sleeping mat on the floor, in addition to the beds arranged along the wall. Betty, Amir and Yuli are living in the second hall, on the left; Betty and Amir have their own room; and Yuli has an enclosed area with a bed, computer corner and a copy of "The Little Prince" (in English). Also here (in the second hall) is the kitchen, which has been moved from Givat Elah. We peek in: Stuffed vegetables (Fatma's handiwork) are simmering on the gas cookers. Later we will see another kitchen, in the rear, which plays an important role in the lives of the two families.

■ **Midday:** The fans do their best; there is no air conditioning. We sit outside in the parking area below the Jowamis' house, and are served fruit and coffee. A light breeze blows from the direction of the olive groves and we discover an interesting detail.

■ **Interesting detail:** Fatma and Khaled lived in the house they have placed (for free) at the Peri's disposal and moved to the big house, which actually belongs to their young (and single) son, Uzi. The question now arises: How did the two families become friends?

■ **Friends:** It's all thanks to Amna, Khaled and Fatma's 8-year-old granddaughter, who attends a school in the Arab village of Manshiat Zebda, in the Jezreel Valley, where Betty is a teacher. When Khaled heard about Betty and Amir's housing problem, he said without hesitation, "Ahlani wasahlan (welcome)."

■ **In the meantime:** Ya'ar and Osnat and their children left Kibbutz Neot Smadar (north of Eilat) and joined their parents for the village idyll in Beit Zarzir.

■ **Village idyll:** Every morning at around 7, Betty and Fatma meet over a cup of coffee (granulated instant) in the shade of the olive trees next to the rear kitchen, in order to plan the evening's joint meal. The options include combinations of *maluhiya* (a green salad), *maklubeh* (a chicken dish), stuffed vegetables and schnitzel dipped in whole-wheat bread crumbs (a recipe from Osnat, even though she is a vegetarian). At the same time, Amir and Khaled have their morning



Home 1. Jowamis.



Home 2. Peri.