

## Sample Translations

Hoda Zahalka

Stories by Rawya Burbara

Target Language

“What good is a murdered husband’s paradise to a wife, when she is left to endure the worldly torment of hell.”

### **No Consolation for Men**

“What will happen to all the widows and orphans added to this year’s count?”

“They will make do with what they have. Life goes on.”

“I’m at a loss for words. How can we comfort her?” She looked at her friend, who was always present at funerals. Each of her friends had a role: one for advice, another for company, one for handling tough situations, one for small talk, and another for gossip. Among her friends was a woman of prestige, elegance, and strength. She was chosen to attend events of joy, celebration, and sorrow because she herself disliked the usual, spoken or unspoken words at such gatherings.

“Say what you always say at funerals.”

Could she repeat her usual words? She was familiar with the deceased. Years of sharing a workspace had unveiled his secrets. She had overheard the distressing and embarrassing phone

conversations with the bank. She was witness to his interactions with his children, their requests and demands, and his tireless efforts to meet them. She recalled his silent nods in response to his wife, attempting to absorb her anger. Much like the tenth day of each month absorbed his entire salary, leaving nothing for the days that followed.

She knew him well. He would only confide his troubles to God, to avoid any disgrace. He wouldn't turn to the black market, afraid of a darker fate. But what if he borrowed money to whitewash his life, to present a facade of brightness? No, she would have noticed it. He would have had a fortune, paid off his debts, granted his daughters every request, covered his sons' club fees, paid dues to the local council, electricity, water, internet, and phone bills. He would have provided for his partner and covered the costs of social events, weddings, births, holidays, and birthdays. He would have covered the medical bills for relatives and ensured monthly support for the widows in his family, themselves victims of an endless cycle of vengeance, a cycle that knows no beginning nor end, and no rhyme or reason.

What could she possibly say to his wife? How would she console her now that she has joined the ranks of the defeated and lost? She could start with, "Your husband was supportive of his friends, loved by everyone, dedicated to his work, and he truly loved you and your children." But should she disclose what the wife doesn't know? Should she reveal her suspicions? Should she tell her about her husband's feelings towards her and their children? And who is she to reveal this? A colleague who eavesdropped on his conversation, only to fantasize herself as his secret lover.

No, she refused to list his virtues; she would not be like Al Khansa, mourning her brother. No... She would offer the customary words of comfort: "He who leaves children behind never truly

dies. Through the offspring, his spirit lives on” But in reality, he didn’t just die; he was killed, supposedly by mistake.

She could say, “May Allah grant him a place in heaven,” But what good is a murdered husband’s paradise to a wife, when she is left to endure the worldly torment of hell, raising their family alone, weeping alone, devoid of joy and companionship? Now it is her responsibility to heal the wounds of orphans who now understand that there is no safety in this world. The father, the expected protector, could not even save himself from the relentless, random violence that has taken the lives of the men in their family throughout the years.

She might offer comfort with “May God watch over those who are still alive,” though she knows that human life is preordained, and God’s protection lasts until a person’s destined time.

“What’s wrong? You’ve fallen silent, we’re nearly there.”

As they approached the house, her heart pounded at the sight of the black cloth hung as a canopy cover in the yard, the women wailing and weeping, and his young daughter quietly playing with her toys in a corner of the house.

As she moved toward the group of women, her heart heavy with condolences, she noticed the woman she had comforted just two weeks prior, sitting next to the wife of the deceased. Could it be true? Impossible! Was last month’s victim also an unintentional death? If that was the case, what became of the intended targets? Where had they disappeared to? Why must the innocent suffer for others’ sins? Why do we categorize murder as either deliberate or accidental, and seek excuses for the latter? Why do we blame past and present governments? Why do we expect politicians to fix our social problems? Are our problems social, political, or societal? Or maybe

they are fundamentally ethical dilemmas? Could it be the tribal bigotry that still runs in our genes, the same bigotry that once led us to bury our daughters alive, driven by our outdated ideological and societal constraints? Instead of allowing murder in the name of family honor, we should have worked to prevent it. The very family honor we sought to protect has been the cause of the destruction of our dreams, both present and future, and the loss of our loved ones.

After offering her condolences to the wife, she felt an urge to declare to everyone present, “Had we put an end to our ignorance, we might have prevented this number of widows and orphans. This is a society that makes orphans of its children for the sake of money, love, honor, and abhorrence. It’s a society that abandons its daughters to widowhood in the name of masculinity,” She was ready to voice those words aloud for truth knows no shame, but it does fall on deaf ears. Was Rachel still weeping for her children? Or had Hagar assumed that role?

She approached the deceased’s wife, and all the possible scenarios of solace rushed through her mind. Embracing her, as tears flowed down the wife's cheeks, the wife found comfort in saying, “You were like a sister to him, and in his absence, you will be a sister to me.”

She lifted her head from the wife’s shoulder and said, “The wife of my brother becomes my sister,” As she looked into her eyes, she saw a reflection of the world’s deepest sincerity. Behind those eyes, there was a glimpse of the world’s suffering and a disdain for its hypocrisy. In the whiteness of her eyes, there was an unexpected blackness, a profound darkness. Frightened by this revelation, she stepped back, taking with her all the words of consolation.

“If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future.  
If you are at peace, you are living in the present.”

— Lao Tzu

### **Accountability**

He pushed open the bank door and stepped into a crowded room. Right by the entrance, a machine for dispensing numbers caught his eye. He walked over, scanning left and right, only to be confronted with Hebrew text on the screen. Hesitating, he glanced around, seeking someone to assist him. His eyes settled on a young girl, around the age of his grandchild. With one of his granddaughters by his side, he wouldn't be at the mercy of strangers. But alas, none of his grandchildren had time to spare for him. His eldest granddaughter was studying dentistry at the university, and the other was busy with college, pursuing a field with bright career prospects, though he never quite grasped the specifics. His youngest granddaughter was still in school, *Oh dear, if only going to school was something we all had to do when I was a boy*, he thought to himself.

After finishing eighth grade, he had no choice but to leave. Continuing school would have meant traveling to distant schools in Rameh or Kafr Yasif. His late father's words still echoed in his mind: “If all of you go off to school, who will stay to tend the cattle and work the land? I brought you into this world to help with farming. The schools? They're just a waste of time.” *Oh, waste*

*of time you say, father. If I had learned a thing or two, I wouldn't need help reading the words on this silent machine. May God forgive you, Father, and my children too. May God forgive you and your children. You were taught at school. You can read this silly machine, but you're busy with your own affairs.*

He barely got to see his family once a week because they were constantly chasing after their livelihoods, or perhaps it was their livelihood that was chasing them. Purchasing a golf cart had turned out to be his smartest move. He could easily charge it overnight, and no driver's license was needed. It gave him the freedom to go anywhere – the market, the clinic, the local shop or to take his wife to the physiotherapist, all without relying on anyone else. However, now he was at the bank to get money for the little vehicle's repairs. Two days ago, he had gotten distracted and collided with a parked car. And a week earlier, he noticed that his headlights were dim, probably from scraping the neighbor's fence. Be that as it may, he would withdraw money and repair it. The machine before him was a perplexing contrast to the marvelous invention of the golf cart.

He didn't know what to do. He could certainly speak Hebrew; he had picked it up from working in constructions at "Shavei Zion." Communicating with people was easy for him. But he never had the chance to learn to read and write in Hebrew. "When Israel came", he would say, "I had just finished eighth grade." Back then, they didn't teach Hebrew in schools. They were taught poems, which he still recites on special occasions. His daughters and daughters-in-law might be teachers, but his sharp memory had helped him read and understand more books than they had. He expanded his knowledge by listening to literary programs on the radio and television. This silly machine wasn't going to get the better of him. He was determined to get his money.

Early that morning, he took his medicine, and, as usual, had a spoonful of honey on an empty stomach. Years back, researchers from Carmel Hospital had visited him to study the country's longevity rate and had chosen him among the elderly who had never been sick nor hospitalized. They sought his secret. He revealed it to them - olive oil, honey, and organic food. But, alas, the organic food that once marked the seasons is scarce now. There were times for cucumbers, okra—oh, the okra he used to grow! —and, of course, watermelon season. They would stockpile watermelons, the fruit that you treat yourself with and nibble on, and even the donkey gets a bite.

*"I still remember the sweet taste of watermelon. My mother, God rest her soul, used to cut it into crescent moon shapes, we'd grab the slices from her hands and mark our teeth on them. The red juice would trickle down our hands, all the way to our elbows. Mother would gather the seeds, clean, and dry them, then roast them with salt for a delightful snack. The rind was always for the donkey, our faithful companion on our daily travels."*

Alas, the watermelon has lost its flavor, and the golf cart doesn't eat rinds. Instead, it devours insurance money and feasts on retirement pension, but it is still worth it. Without it, he would need daily assistance, much like his need for a translator.

"Where did that little girl heading towards the machine, go?" he wondered. Turning around, he found her, "Grandpa, did you get a number to know when your turn is?" she asked.

Oh, the embarrassment he felt. Should he tell her he couldn't read Hebrew? Indeed, she was as young as his granddaughters, this generation lacked the knowledge he had grown up with. With so many influences, they seemed to have lost track of what they truly wanted.

The young girl waited for him, busy with her phone buzzing with notifications. He glanced at her screen with his right eye, noticing pictures and smiles. He couldn't see with his left eye; doctors said he waited too long for treatment. He wished he had learned Hebrew before his sight got worse. But at least his situation was not as bad as his brother Simeon's. Simeon struggled even with Arabic letters. If he stood by this machine and tried to read in Arabic, he'd be completely lost. And a talking machine? That would be even worse. He would be in serious trouble. For years, his hearing problems had sparked countless arguments with his wife and children for refusing to wear hearing aids, scared of being called deaf. But anyone speaking with Simeon could easily tell he was hard of hearing. Alhamdulillah, he thought to himself, better to have partial blindness than be completely deaf.

The girl waited, lost in her own world, not noticing the line behind her getting longer. In that line behind her, he saw a young man who looked a lot like his eldest grandson, the one named after him. That boy was sharp, just like his grandfather. He would have jumped in to help if he were there. But he'd just graduated from university and was working hard to build his own home. Life's harder now, maybe even more so than trying to deal with this silent machine. When he built his house back in the day, it was done bit by bit, one room at a time. He never understood why folks go for those massive houses with too many rooms. They take loans from the bank to build fancy houses, and sometimes, they meet their end before settling the debt, just like what happened to his neighbors. They passed on debts and houses to their kids, leaving behind a complicated mess of inheritance. When he worked in construction, he noticed that Jewish folks were not interested in big houses; they were happy with small ones, about a hundred square meters or so. They didn't have big families, like us Arabs; we always prided ourselves on having lots of children. Pride? What pride? He couldn't even find somebody to read what was on the



screen for him. There was a time when people found strength in farming, in family ties, and even in occasional disagreements. But nowadays, even in elections, family ties don't seem to carry the same influence. During the last council election, his wife was upset with the mayor. He hadn't assigned their daughter a job at the council, and she decided against voting as if her vote could make a difference! Yet, the mayor did return without success. A once large influential family now stands divided. They speak of Democracy today, Oh Dear Democracy...

“Are you done, uncle?” A tall young man asked impatiently from behind. “Hurry up, we need to get back to work,” his tone lacking courtesy.

what should he say to this young rebel? admit that he couldn't read Hebrew?

“Wait, son, I can't find my glasses,” he said, pretending to search for them. The truth was, he never carried them around. What was the point of them? When his vision was good, he used to narrate tales, recite lines of poetry, and share old sayings with his family.

“Please help him,” He heard voices behind him. She moved towards the machine, pressing many buttons, and then asked him for his identification number.

“Identification number? Why? Are you a bank employee?” He asked.

“The machine is requesting the identification number, uncle,” She explained

“I don't share my Identification number with anyone. Ever since we lost our cards, I've forgotten the number... what is this new generation,”

“Uncle, it's the machine that's asking, not me,”

“To hell with the machine.”

He recognized a voice in the bank, similar to the one he hears at the medical clinic, announcing a number in Hebrew — the queue number. But he didn't have a number, and all the teller windows were empty. Where were the customers? What happened to the bank today? He looked behind him. Everyone was waiting for him. They were all gathered around that silly machine, waiting in line. He realized that thanks to him, this was the only line in the bank.

“My number? My queue number? My ID number? I'll tell it to the teller now,” he said, heading towards one of the bank employees.

“Please, sir, what's your account number” she asked.

“My account number?”

“Yes, please. Where is the queue slip that you took?” she inquired.

“I didn't get one,” he replied.

“Can I have your account number?”

He began rummaging through his pockets, searching for that old slip of paper where he meticulously wrote down the numbers. Among the papers, large and small, he uncovered countless memories... so many memories... he longed for them to return.