

# AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE AL-SAYYID VILLAGE

Told by Saleh Al-Sayyid



## I. The patriarch leaves Egypt and settles in the Negev.

This is about the village patriarch, the first man of the Al-Sayyid family. His name was Al-Sayyid.

The village elders speak of a certain man, a grown man with a few children and a small family who came with him from Egypt about two hundred years ago. According to the stories we've heard he had to leave his homeland of Egypt because of fights with his family. There was a matter of one of the brothers being killed and then he had to flee his land and the land of his brothers and go to a different land.

He left Egypt with his small family—a wife and a few kids—and moved to the land of Israel. Here he had to face a life, populations and people he was not familiar with. The story goes that he settled down at first in El-Arish. He decided to leave El-Arish, though some of his family stayed there, and he arrived to the area around Beer Sheva. Something worth mentioning about this first man of Al-Sayyid, who was called Al-Sayyid, is that apparently he was blind, or could not see well. He had the wisdom he had gained from his life in Egypt, and also had a bit of money with him. And that's it—back then, when there was a feud, whoever left their region had almost no chance of ever going back. He took all the money he had and planned to settle in some place and buy land in order to base his family in an area far away from the feud.

Story has it that he used to check the land each time to see whether it was good or not, because the source of livelihood was agriculture and agriculture is, above all else, land. Wherever he went, he dug up a small hole in the ground with his hands, took the dirt out of this small hole and then put it back. Because he was blind he felt the land with his hands and checked whether this little hole he made filled back up, or a bit more, or a bit less. Because this we know about land: if you dig up an area then it crumbles and its density changes. So we can put the earth back in its place and it will be a bit higher, or a bit more. That is the criterion he used to measure or evaluate the land, whether it was fertile or not. That is why he stayed in the Beer Sheva valley region. He conducted his test of the land and its fertility and it suited him. It suited him here.

## II. Settling in a new land

It was as if he had landed among villages, tribes, populations which were alien to him. He didn't know them. He began to forge links with them, like a refugee who arrives at a new place. Gradually he began raising his sons and marrying women from areas which were a bit further away. The local villages and tribes did not want their daughters to marry him because he was

considered a refugee, so he had to marry women from regions like Gaza, a bit far from our surroundings in Beer Sheva. He married a number of wives. The first one who came with him from Egypt—we don't really know her name or what happened to her part of the family. Those he married here around Beer Sheva, they are the ones with whom he had the children who are the parents or parents' parents of today's generations. From the wives he had a number of boys and he taught his boys to love the land, buy land and so on so that they could be able to live among the tribes.

He managed to buy land from the surrounding tribes again and again until he passed away, and his sons continued this process. He knew that you need to have a certain place, have land there, have wells, have buildings, wives, families, houses, all these things. That is the style he brought with him from Egypt, his sons adopted it here and the buildings they raised here bear witness to this fact. He himself did not build any buildings here. He might have built wells but there is almost no trace left of whatever basic structures he had raised here. But his sons, each of them built a few buildings, one or more, and also wells which are the most vital and crucial. Structures were also used for their livestock, housing their families and storing the wheat and barley which they purchased. Storage was from summer to winter, a long period.

He was a well-connected man and was regarded as wealthy among the people he used to trade with. He earned respect from the surrounding families and tribes, as well as from people and merchants from Gaza; Gaza-Beer Sheva was a common path, like one district—there was direct communication. The first sons in his dynasty were Saleh, Hassan, Muhammad, Thabet and Abd Al-Salam. They too had to marry outside of the local villages, outside their surroundings: women from Gaza or Rafah, which are on the closest connected route.

### **III. The first deaf people and the formation of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language**

Regarding the deaf, I think the first deaf baby in the village was born in 1930, give or take a year or two. Before that there weren't any deaf and the people didn't know or understand what deaf people were. There was a very small population then, not so big. And then, when the first deaf baby was born, its family, parents and brothers had to find a language in order to communicate with him. They wanted to communicate about things they talked about in their own language. Every product or word they wanted to mention to the deaf boy, they took it from the way the thing was done. If we're talking about a cat, for instance, so how do you differentiate a cat from a dog? They are not very different. They used the dog's barking. In sign language, using their hands, they made a gesture of barking to explain that it is a dog, as if the dog was opening its mouth to bark and bark. A cat laps milk – that is what differentiates it from a dog. So then they managed to explain to the deaf boy with their hands that it is a cat rather than a dog, and vice versa. In the same family, three more deaf children were born, and one of them was my father. Little by little, they managed to improve the language and with time more and more

concepts were added to the language, until it became a cohesive whole with a very rich and useful vocabulary. Whatever was needed—some matching sign was found for it.



DOG



CAT

There started to be more and more deaf people and together they turned these first signs into the sign language of the locals, of Al-Sayyid. This language was prevalent among the deaf and also among the non-deaf and all the signs were clear to them because they came from the world they knew. Maybe there was a problem conveying emotions or slightly abstract concepts. Even today that is difficult for us—maybe in Israeli Sign Language you can express these things—but in ABSL not every abstract concept has a word that is a 100 percent fit. In any case, this language developed from a collection of words, with each word taking a sign as its translation, and these signs came together and became a full language of the deaf. While it does not cover all of the concepts we want to say nowadays, it covered enough for the people who lived at the time. As generations passed, this language evolved, new words were added, some from need and some from society and some from life and some from the innovations they saw, experienced—and made up words for.

#### **IV. The early vocabulary of ABSL**

For familiar events they took the word from the behavior or act the person does. And what do I mean by that? For example, holidays, such as Ramadan and Al-Adha. How can you differentiate between these two holidays? Ramadan, for example, means fasting. Fasting is not to eat, not to drink. I mean, how do you explain to a deaf person not to drink, not to eat and all these things? There is a sign for fasting and then a handshake. A handshake is a custom in both religion and society: shaking hands with those very close to you, sons, daughters and family, shaking their hand on that day and greeting them, *kul 'aam wa-'aantum bi-khayr*, 'may you be well each year.' That was Ramadan.



Ramadan:

FASTING



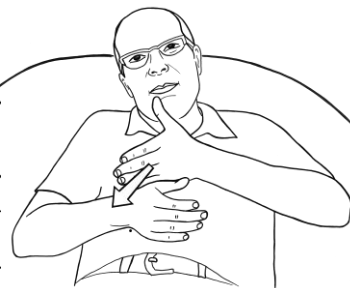
HANDSHAKE

The other holiday in the year is Al-Adha. Al-Adha is 'sacrifice', so that means slaughtering a lamb. How would they define it? Another handshake, and a sign for 'slaughtering'. Some added a sign for 'sheep', so the sign was "SHEEP+SLAUGHTER+HANDSHAKE".



Al-Adha:

SHEEP



SLAUGHTER



HANDSHAKE

Other typical things for them were days of the week and what they were associated with. Thursdays were especially hectic days in the markets. What would they sell in the markets? Whatever you had to sell but, also, whoever had sheep to sell or wanted to buy sheep came to the market. So how did they want to characterize Thursdays? It was called "MARKET+SHEEP".



Thursday:

MARKET



SHEEP

Mondays were called "MARKET+NOT-SO-BIG", because people and products were there but no sheep. Tuesday was "MARKET+NOT-SO-BIG+AFTER"; Wednesday, "MARKET+SHEEP+BEFORE". The sign for Friday was 'prayer'. Saturday was indicated by a gesture for 'closed'. Why is Saturday closed? Because there is nothing open, no public transportation, and all that.<sup>1</sup> This entered the language. I don't know how they would sign

<sup>1</sup> Friday is the Muslim Sabbath, the day of prayer for Muslims. Saturday is the Jewish Sabbath, and in Israel there is no public transportation or trade on that day.

Saturday before the founding of the State of Israel, surely not like that, but I got to know Saturday by this 'closed' gesture. So how did they sign Sunday? "CLOSED-DAY+NOT+AFTER", meaning 'not Saturday, but the day after'. And in this way they reached seven days!



Monday:

MARKET



NOT-SO-BIG

Signs for crops are represented by the action involved. The sign for 'wheat' shows how they used their hands to harvest the wheat.<sup>2</sup> 'Tomato' was signed with squeezing gesture because they did not have a knife to make salad with so they took a tomato from the field and prepared it with their hands, crushing the tomato like this.

Signs for the family, too, signs for father, mother, brother and sister – there was of course a substantial need to mention them and they talk with these signs a lot. Father was signed as 'moustache'; it is also used for to mean 'man'. Mother is like this, which is the sign that they used for women. I do not know if it had something to do with what women wore on their foreheads, and there are also some used a sign indicating a nose ring. The village sheikh is important and the sign shows that he is above everyone else.<sup>3</sup> The sign is "SHEIKH ('beard')+TRIBE+UP". So sometimes they had to give 3-4 signs to explain a single word and that was so that what they wanted to say would be understood best—would be clear.

Many hearing people here know sign language, but not all to the same extent. Those who understand more are those who lived with the deaf, their sons, their wives, their brothers who lived with them longer and closer. So they know the signs, you might say, in detail. The rest of the people, people who are a bit further away from the deaf, understand in general; given some story they can understand the gist of what the deaf mean to say but not the details.

In the 1980's or so, ISL started entering the life of the population and then some mixing arose between the local sign language and ISL. It's like speaking part Arabic and part Hebrew – neither side is clear on whether one is signing ISL and the other ABSL, and they will not understand each other 100 percent; they would understand but maybe less, 80 percent. Today there is a small handful of villagers who sign the original language, ABSL. For the most part they must be at least forty or fifty years old. These are the people who know the language.

---

<sup>2</sup> The sign for 'harvest' took on the meaning of 'year' in ABSL. See page 65.

<sup>3</sup> See page 35 for the sign for 'sheikh'.