

## Saving Palestine, One Plate at a Time

By Najla Abdellatif Vallander

Plastic is a big problem in Palestine. It tends to end up in the few available landfills that are limited in capacity, where some of it is dumped randomly (and possibly burned, polluting our air). Only very little is reused in the few recycling stations that exist in, for example, Nablus, Hebron, and Jenin, or in factories that produce plastic furniture, such as in Baqa Sharqiyye.

Some plastic and tin or aluminum cans are collected by *shabab* (youth) who search open garbage containers and sell their finds to Israel for a few shekels.

Worldwide, plastic is polluting our oceans. Not only does plastic take more than 500 years to degrade, its production process releases toxins into the environment and uses huge amounts of crude oil that release greenhouse gases. On top of that, plastic poses health hazards because it is toxic and BPA-laden — which is especially significant because in Palestine it is frequently stored in the sun where it heats up and leaches toxins into the contents of water, soft drinks, and juice bottles, for example.

Celebrations are an essential part of Arab culture, but unfortunately, plastic and receptions seem to have become inseparable in Palestine. Whenever I am invited to an occasion, I'm overwhelmed by the number of disposables that are used for serving food and drinks. This "convenient" habit has become a matter of course at most receptions and produces a large amount of unnecessary waste that ranges from single-use plastic plates and cups to plastic food wrapping and soft drink bottles.

**Palestine has an abundance of beautiful nature with stunning highlands and a widely diverse ecosystem of plants and animals. Sadly, you rarely find trash-free nature that is not overshadowed by mountains of litter and plastic waste.**

If you're ready to opt for trash-free receptions, here's a simple list of suggestions for solid improvements:

- Go for reusable plates, cups, and cutlery. If you do not have enough, you can try to make use of other dishes you already have at home, such as empty mason jars for drinking; thrift shops and markets are a great way to find extra sets of tableware (that can be stored in special places for special occasions), and borrowing from neighbors or friends is also an option.
- Alternatively, you can find plates made from natural materials, such as bamboo, in gift shops.<sup>i</sup> These dishes can be composted and pose less of a threat to the environment when compared to plastic.
- Choose washable cloth napkins and tablecloths instead of paper or plastic ones. You can make your own from unused fabric or old curtains that you might have at home.
- Skip the plastic straws! They are not only a major problem when they land in oceans, they are not necessary and made of toxic materials.
- Don't buy plastic-bottled drinks. Serve filtered water in glass jugs instead and try to buy drinks that come in glass bottles — or, even better, serve homemade lemonades, juices, or iced tea with mint or slices of apricot/apple/pear.
- As receptions frequently produce large amounts of food leftovers, store these and possibly freeze them for later use. To avoid disposable plastic food wrap and aluminum foil for storing, try plate-stacking instead!
- Use glass containers. Some foods, such as meat, can even be stored in the freezer in washable cotton fabric.
- For larger amounts of leftovers, there are charity organizations throughout Palestine, such as orphanages, that accept food donations. Examples are Jeel al-Amal in Al-Eizariya and In'ash al-Usra Society in Al-Bireh.<sup>ii</sup>
- Holding a waste-free reception does not have to be as challenging as you might think. On the contrary, it's super fun and relatively easy. Washing the dishes can be a great time for some of the younger guests to share time and conversation. Serving your delicacies in reusable utensils is a viable option because these last much longer (and save you money in the long run), and you can be sure that you are making a positive contribution to our beloved Palestine!



<sup>i</sup> For example, Rantissi Store on Rukab Street, Ramallah: around 7 NIS for a dozen plates, and 20 NIS for 50 spoons.

<sup>ii</sup> For example, at Jeel al-Amal in Bethany, 02-627-2753; at In'ash al-Usra Society, Sameeha Khalil Street in Al-Bireh, 02-240-1123; at Four Homes of Mercy in Bethany, 02-627-4871; or ask for local organizations in your town.