

# Vendor of Smiles



By Jamil Dababat\*

For our years have passed and every morning I see that same young man standing in the same place with the same posture. Every morning as I go to work at the Palestinian News Agency WAFA in Nablus, in the northern West Bank, I see the same face of Ahmad.

In the morning, at the beginning of every new long workday, Ahmad stands there wearing his thick eyeglasses and summer cap. In winter he wears his black and white *kuffiyeh* that he winds around his neck. He stands alone and speechless, but his face radiates with smiles.

For the past four years Ahmad has been smiling at me. We have not exchanged a single word, not even a greeting. He simply smiles at me as he sees me pass by. I smile back at him. For all those years we didn't even know each other's name.

On May 16, 2016, I asked him his name and age.

Ahmad sells coffee in the city center near Shuhada Square. His full name is Ahmad Ali Bushkar, and he is 29 years old. He sells coffee with sugar and without sugar, in silence. Passers-by have become familiar with his smile. In fact, he is the vendor of joy in the city.

Ahmad began to sell coffee six years ago, and he took the city center as his permanent location. He leaves home at dawn holding metal cups in one hand. He raps the two cups one against the other producing a sonorous sound to attract people's attention. This is the coffee-selling signal in the Levant.

Ahmad starts his day with a smile. I asked him the reason he keeps smiling. "What better thing can I offer than a smile and a cup of hot coffee?" he replies. He stands in his place and greets people with a smile. Sometimes Ahmad, who has spent four years in Israeli jails,

greets people who are in a bad mood. He says, "This will change their mood," and he raps his metal cups.

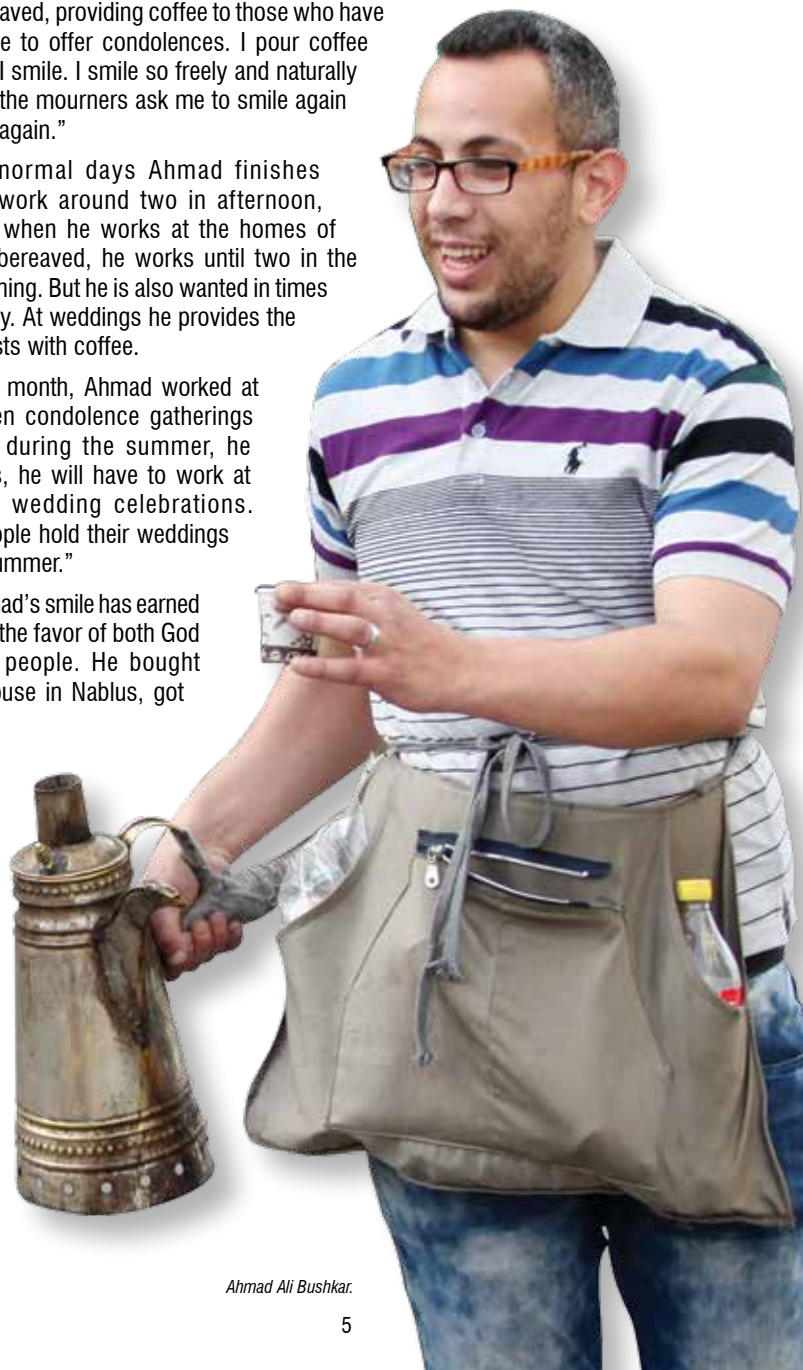
The rapping of the metal cups and Ahmad's smile enliven the torpid morning of the city. Ahmad has inherited the coffee-selling profession from his father, who has sold coffee for forty years.

Ahmad's endearing smile is known throughout the city and has become a beacon during times of mourning. He explains, "Sometimes I work for many days in a row in the homes of the bereaved, providing coffee to those who have come to offer condolences. I pour coffee and I smile. I smile so freely and naturally that the mourners ask me to smile again and again."

On normal days Ahmad finishes his work around two in afternoon, and when he works at the homes of the bereaved, he works until two in the morning. But he is also wanted in times of joy. At weddings he provides the guests with coffee.

Last month, Ahmad worked at seven condolence gatherings and during the summer, he says, he will have to work at four wedding celebrations. "People hold their weddings in summer."

Ahmad's smile has earned him the favor of both God and people. He bought a house in Nablus, got



Ahmad Ali Bushkar.

married, and now he has a son called Yasser.

His smile brings him many customers. Every morning he sells around 100 cups of coffee to people heading to work. Some of his customers are women who work as schoolteachers or employees. He smiles at women as well. He smiles at everybody, and this is the peak of courtesy. People are living in tension and under pressure, and Ahmad's smile is a consolation to them. How beautiful life can become if associated with Ahmad's smile!

This morning I saw Ahmad and he smiled at me as usual.

"Do you know me?" I asked.

"No, I don't," he replied.

"Then why are you smiling?" I continued.

"Why wouldn't I be smiling?"

The morning signaled the beginning of a new day in Nablus, and Ahmad's face gleamed with a jubilant smile.

*\*Translated from Arabic by Sammy Kirreh.*



*Ahmad selling coffee on the streets of Nablus.*

I asked Ahmad, "Do you still smile at people even if they do not buy coffee?"

"I smile at anyone and in every place," he replied. "Even in times of war, I smile. Sometimes when I go to work in the morning I see Israeli tanks. I become fearful, and I change my route and continue on my way. But when I face people I smile."

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