

ON HOSPITALITY

Back in 1974, I went for the first time to visit my maternal family in Nazareth. As I approached the old family home, I could smell the sumptuous aromas of fried garlic, chopped herbs, spiced lamb and savoury cracked wheat balls. When I entered, I saw eight stuffed lambs, and dozens of cousins once, twice, and thrice removed, all waiting to greet our exiled branch of the family.

Then came the invitations to eat: "I swear by God the Almighty, may I be denied the pleasure of seeing you again, if you do not try this lamb" or "By the grave of our beloved aunt, you must take this chicken breast from my hand".

That said, I kept on declining these invitations, even when I fancied that tasty cheese-stuffed filo pastry. This was how I was brought up. It is *'aib*, or rude, to show your hosts that you would like some more.

What I didn't realise was that these rules are turned on their head at an English table. The shock came when I visited my English friend's house as a girl. When asked if I wanted some more pizza, I said: "No, thanks", and the hosts' answer was: "OK". Oh no!! I was hungry, but I was waiting for my hosts to renew their invitation. Whilst it may be rude, in some cultures, to push your guests to eat, in mine, it is rude NOT to. One's guests should be offered food to their hearts' and stomachs' content.

Let me end by quoting an old Palestinian song from Nazareth which extols the virtues of generosity and hospitality: "To whom does this large welcoming house belong? Look, it has a huge stewing pot, from which flows a stream of cooking fat"!

Well, it belongs to every nation, each in its own way. But to my Anglo-Saxon friends and relatives, I beg you to make your stewing pot bigger and your invitations to eat more fulsome.