

FIRST SUNDAY (later morning)

CHAPTER 8: TO THE DUNES OF THE NEGEV

"And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them, you have profaned them." (EXODUS 20:22)

With a clicking and tap to the neck, Shai bid Louis to rise. Obediently, the great beast lurched upward—first onto his front knees, then raising his hindquarters, and last pushing his front legs fully upright. Without command, Samech followed, bellowing in complaint.

Thus, our small band—camels, goats, and humans—began its journey. We moved down Wadi Shacharut, parallel to the narrow tarmac road on which Tomer had brought me to the khan and on which Shai and I had descended to the Ovdah Valley. We proceeded on foot, for although we could ride the camels, they served primarily as pack animals. Shai led with Louis. I came after, leading Samech. Pesiah and Chalah darted from side to side, searching for bits of vegetation.

We followed a trail no wider than a footpath, etched in the sunburned limestone by the millennia of caravans that had once traversed it. If traveling in our direction, they would have scaled the Shacharut Ascent from the Arava, descended through Wadi Shacharut as we were now doing, and then turned north through the Negev to Gaza on the Mediterranean Coast or continued west through the Sinai to Egypt. Several crude petroglyphs were scratched into stones at the trail's edge. In times forgotten, these may have marked tribal boundaries or served as signs to the gods.

As I paused to study the petroglyphs, a feeling of apprehension came over me. For the first time I fathomed the audacity of what I was attempting—to understand why God had chosen to reveal himself in this place—and more audacious yet, to understand His essence, itself. For several moments, my apprehension lingered, as if I were in danger of Divine retribution for transgressing a sacred boundary. I was awed by that idea—a feeling that would have been inconceivable to me in the secular world.

Within a quarter of an hour, the trail branched. The more-traveled route continued down the *wadi*; the less-traveled route arced to the right. We followed the latter as it passed between two knolls and then opened into a second *wadi*. A line of small hills rose a half mile or more distant. Halfway to the hills, a broad scar, almost pure white, shimmered in the sun.

In contrast to the dark rubble and shallow pockets of dust scattered about us, the scar appeared utterly flat, void of pattern or indentation. It covered the lowest part of the *wadi*—a depression where the annual runoff pooled and then evaporated. Except for some brush in a break by the near edge, there was no sign of vegetation.

I recalled a similar formation from hikes as a boy through the forested hills of Maryland and Virginia. My father, a trained botanist and avid naturalist, had pointed out clay silt deposited by small creeks where they entered the stillness of a marsh. The silt formed an impervious seal, suffocating life beneath it. Here, it was salt-laden sediment, concentrated by years of evaporation. In verdant woodlands, such a deposit was a curiosity. In the desert, it was strangely more so—sterility imposed upon barrenness—a void upon a void.

We traversed the scar into the line of hills, where the runoff flowed, precluding a salt build-up. Instead, brown silt collected in level patches on the *wadi* floor—a mixture of eroded limestone and windblown dust washed from the surrounding hills.

The trail crossed the *wadi* and ascended the opposite side. At the top lay a conical heap of stones, no more than a foot high. This and others like it, sometimes smaller and sometimes larger, were *rujum*, trail-markers set by ancient travelers. They were always placed at the beginning of descents and at points during the descent where a traveler could take a wrong turn. As we continued our journey, the *rujum* would become signs of reassurance as we left the better-known trails and traversed increasingly unfamiliar and difficult terrain.

Before us spread the Negev Plateau, an endless expanse of barely discernible and formless hills, in the words of T.E. Lawrence—Lawrence of Arabia—lacking utterly in romance. All were littered with fragments of eroded rubble, seemingly scorched brown-black by eons of brutal sun. A Martian landscape looked no less inviting.

The sun beat down relentlessly. My jacket absorbed the heat. My skin felt on fire. Days later, I discovered that my arms had tanned. At first, I thought the sun had penetrated the jacket. Later I realized that the tanning had come from indirect light during our midday stops. Then we might rest within a shallow cave, below a rock overhang, under an acacia tree, or, if natural

shelter were completely absent, beneath the tent. I would strip off my jacket leaving my arms bare, in the vain hope of relief from the all-encompassing heat.

We followed an endless dark-beige path, a hue lighter than the burnt brown-black rock over which it passed. Millennia of trudging feet, hooves, and camel pads had kicked away the bits of rubble that had once littered it and abraded the patina formed by 100,000 years or more of exposure. Except for our own footsteps, the landscape was totally silent. Not even the sound of wind broke the solitude.

As the heat intensified, a mélange of feelings swirled through my mind—exhilaration at the audacity of my undertaking, apprehension over the deprivation and more so at the potential danger, and fear that I would not have the strength to complete the journey. I felt the fear most intensely. For if I failed, it would be immutable proof of my waning physical and mental powers, and an undeniable confrontation with my mortality.

Within an hour of our beginning, I fell into what would become the routine of my passage—heavy breathing, profuse sweating, and consuming exhaustion. As I toiled forward, I focused on each step. My mind drained, void of thoughts of personal glory or failure—or of Patriarchs, Prophets, and the Almighty.

Shai raised his hand and pointed. Before us, just off the trail, stood 11 natural rock slabs. They had been carefully placed upright to form a slight arc along the ground. The largest was a little over 2 feet high, the smallest a little less. They had stood here unmoved for thousands of years.

"Do you know what these are?" Shai queried.

I nodded affirmatively, already too drained to expend energy on unneeded words.

"Yes," Shai continued, as if reading my thoughts, "These are *metzivot*. You can see they are nothing like the columns we saw in Wadi Shacharut. Always they are on hills near the remains of a settlement. There may be many. There may be few. There may be only one. Perhaps they were symbols of the spirits of the dead. The people would come here to be with the

spirits."

Innocent enough, I thought. But there must have been more than that. Why else would the Torah have viewed these simple stones as such threats? During the ensuing weeks, I turned the question over in my mind. How far is the mental journey from pillar as symbol to pillar as idol? Staring at the slabs, I imaged how short that journey could be—from communing with Spirits, to worshipping those Spirits, to engraving their images—two or three generations might be all it would require.

The Torah commanded the People of Israel to build their altars only of unhewn stones. Moses knew well the images of the myriad gods that adorned the temples of Egypt. As the story of the Golden Calf testified, the allure of those images could be irresistible. And, by analogy, so could the danger posed by the crude representations before us, erected by those who lived here before the People of Israel.

We moved over the stark landscape and descended a small slope into a flat *wadi*. Across from us, limestone strata protruded from a vertical face. Below the face, dried brush marked the course of the scant runoff. Sparse silt retained enough moisture for a few plants to survive. Even these seemed miraculous.

Yet, I could see how they clung to life. Several small hills drained into the area. For millennia, each rare rain had washed the dust of the hills into the slight catchments of the *wadi*, depositing the thin layer of soil. Now, with each rain, enough water seeped into the soil to sustain the brush for the one or two years that might pass before the next rain fell.

Closer to us lay five circles of stone. The largest was 30 feet in diameter. Two circles a little more than 12 feet in diameter abutted each end of the larger one. Off to a side lay the remnants of two smaller circles.

I recognized the circles as similar to those of the now semipermanent *Bedu* villages south of Be'er Sheva. The large circle had once served as a corral for domestic livestock—goats, donkeys, and perhaps sheep. Those at each end marked living quarters. The circles to the side had been storage or cooking areas. I thought the separate living areas curious. Then I realized that persons sleeping on two sides of the corral would better protect the animals from predators. My mind flashed back to the leopard shrine.

Shai reached down and picked up a smooth, rounded stone the size of a tennis ball. "They used this to shape their flints. They would chip off small pieces. That way they would

shape the blade and then form the sharp edge."

The Canaanites had used iron before the time of King David. That marked the beginning obsolescence of stone tools. Thousands of years may have passed since this site had been settled and that rounded stone last used to shape flints. Yet, the physical structure of the *Bedu* household had not changed.

Shai lifted a water bag from the camel and moved toward the runoff. "We must drink now. The goats must drink, also. They did not have enough before we left." He knelt down and scooped a small trench in the dust. Pesiah and Chalah nudged past his arms, waiting for him to pour from the bag.

"The soil will hold the water long enough for the goats to drink. Once the water seeps in, the soil keeps it from evaporating. It blows from the Sinai—small fossil animals in the dust. In some places the water can stay for two years without rain. That is how the people could grow food and live."

Shai was referring to diatomaceous earth—the fossilized remains of the siliceous skeletons of plankton. Unlike river sand, polished round by the rubbing of grain against grain, diatomaceous earth is irregularly shaped and abounds with microscopic cavities. It retains copious amounts of water through capillary attraction.

As the goats drank from their earthen trough, I refilled my now-empty canteens from the water bag.

We trudged out of the *wadi*, again ascending to the plateau. The sun stood nearly overhead. The dark rock absorbed its heat, radiating it back with a vengeance. When we first moved down Wadi Shacharut, my sweat had evaporated almost unfelt. Now, even in the bone-dry air, it soaked through my T-shirt and into my jacket. Swaddled by pants, jacket, and *kafiah*—the traditional Arab head covering—I could withstand the sun. I could not withstand both the sun and its reflection. My body struggled to maintain its temperature. My lungs seared as I gasped for breath. My heart pounded, driving my blood ever faster, attempting to expel excess body heat. I sucked at a canteen almost continuously.

As the sun passed its zenith, Shai guided us into the upper reaches of a small side *wadi*. Fifteen feet above the ground, a shallow cave opened, accessible over fallen boulders in front. This would provide our midday shelter.

The camels sank to their knees, Louis in silence and Samech with minimal protest.

Within a few minutes, we tied them down and carried the provisions for our rest into the cave—two of the smaller water bags, a straw mat, a few utensils, and a food box. We unrolled the mat, washed with what seemed an infinitesimal amount of water, and prepared our lunch—a salad of chopped vegetables flavored with olive oil, garlic, and slivers of hard goat cheese. We finished with dried dates, other dried fruit, and nuts.

"Drink while we rest," Shai admonished. "You have lost more water than you think."

Sitting on the dust-covered floor, I leaned against the cave's wall, shifting my back to avoid the sharpest of the protruding rocks. I sipped steadily from my canteen, staring at the kneeling camels below us, listening to my now-quieted breathing and sensing my slowing pulse. I relished the hint of cooling wrought by my drying sweat. Contrasted to struggling forward beneath the sun, I was experiencing the height of indolent luxury. My mind wandered to the pleasures I had enjoyed in major cities of the world—the Grand Hotel in Stockholm, the Ritz in London, the Peninsula in Hong Kong. I smiled to myself at how readily I had shifted my concept of comfort.

The shadows reached halfway across the *wadi* as we departed the cave, retraced our steps, and returned to the plateau. We continued our journey through the silence across the desolate stone and rubble. In the distance, a series of rounded hills appeared, lighter and more yellowish than the ground we were crossing.

"Those are the dunes of the Negev," Shai nodded. "It is the same as the dust that blows and falls everywhere. It comes from the Sinai. But this is the only place in the southern Negev where it forms dunes. We will reach them by sunset."

Over the next two hours, I watched the dunes take shape, forming into sensuous mounds as we came closer. As we reached them, the fractured limestone of the desert floor gave way to rippled patches of sand. The camel's pads sunk in, leaving prints, their forms accentuated by the shadows of the setting sun. The sides of the prints did not collapse, as would have happened had the sand been of coarser quartz and without the diatomaceous content.

Then the dunes rose abruptly, 100 to 200 feet above us, without hint of the smaller mounds before them. In a few moments, we were climbing. With each step, my boots sunk until the sand almost covered the bottom-most lacing. Had the sand been slightly finer and all quartz, it would have sucked me in like quicksand. But it compacted under my feet as much as displaced around them. The compaction provided an underpinning for each step upward, making the climb bearable.

We labored through the dunes step-by-step, their crests hanging over us like giant sea swells threatening a dwarfed vessel as it slipped into a trough. Shai navigated by the shadows extending from the crests, always keeping them to our left, always weaving toward the northwest. The sun set. Twilight encompassed us. We labored on, now guided by the red afterglow in the western sky. As darkness fell, the dunes ended as abruptly as they had begun, and we descended to a *wadi* floor. We unloaded the camels, tied them for the night, and then, in what would become an evening ritual, I brushed each.

We prepared supper over a fire of eucalyptus logs, which we had packed in the saddlebags. The Jewish pioneers of then-Turkish Palestine introduced the eucalyptus from Australia at the turn of the 20th century. At that time, it was considered a wet site species. At first, it was planted to absorb water when the pioneers drained the malarial swamps of the Galilee to transform them into farmland. Later, the pioneers discovered that eucalyptus could survive on as little as 8 inches of rain per year. Soon, it was planted throughout the semiarid regions of Jewish-settled Palestine to provide windbreaks for cultivated fields and to stabilize the dunes of the Mediterranean shore.

We gathered brush from the *wadi* to serve as tinder. Three small logs sufficed to cook our meal. As Shai ignited the fire, he explained, "We cook as do the *Bedu*. Here in the desert, everything is scarce. You need little fire for a good meal, only enough to boil a stew or to roast meat or vegetables in the coals. You can tell the campsites of *Bedu* from those of Israelis. The Israelis have big fires. The *Bedu* do not."

I recalled a similar story from my early youth, perhaps from summer camp or a two-week Boy Scout trek through the mountains of New Mexico. Then, the comparison was made between the small fires of the American Indians and the large ones of the white settlers. Then, I felt no tie to the Indians. Now, I felt as if our small fire was transporting me back 4,000 years into history.