

FIRST TUESDAY (afternoon and evening)

CHAPTER 11: WADI TZEELAH

"He [Lot] prepared a feast for them [the angels] and baked unleavened bread, and they ate." (GENESIS 19:3)

We continued south, descending into a series of *wadis* and out again. Under the searing sun, each ascent was more arduous than the one before. I craved the shelter of our midday rest. I doubted that I could have continued without it.

As dusk fell, we entered up a *wadi* wider and more shallow than most. Its walls sloped at less than 45 degrees. They were marked by crevasses and small caves. Shai raised his hand, silently signaling me to stop. Motioning me forward, he pointed toward a slight ridge on the left of the *wadi* the length of two football fields ahead.

"A wolf. You will see it move."

Following his arm, I spotted the gray-brown form gliding with effortless grace near the top of the ridge, seemingly indifferent to our presence. It crossed over slowly and dropped out of sight. I thought back to the tracks by the water hole. Given our size, and that of the camels, the wolf, even if ravenous, would not have attacked.

We proceeded up the *wadi*, climbing to the next plateau. As dusk deepened, the goats fell silent and edged closer to us. Stars began to appear in a moonless sky. I picked my way along the fading trail. We continued, descending into the opaque shadows of the next *wadi*. Focusing on the now barely discernible trail, I fell behind. When I looked up, the visages of Shai, Louis, and the goats had disappeared into the night.

I shouted. After a pause, Shai's voice responded from the darkness, perhaps 100 yards ahead. As I moved toward his voice, he called out, "Which of the goats do you see?"

I peered into the darkness, trying to discern Pesiah's white among the silhouettes of rocks and boulders vaguely visible in the starlight. To no avail. To my surprise, I first discerned Chalah, deep black against a seemingly black background.

As I approached, Shai queried again, "Which of the goats did you first see?"

"Chalah," I replied in puzzlement.

"Yes," Shai responded. "In the desert, black is the easiest color to see both at night and day. That is why *Bedu* women always dress in it."

I mused over the seeming paradox: White reflects most light. Why then was black more visible? Again, I tried to discern the vague forms around me. In what was now near total night, I sensed no more than vague impressionist images, each seemingly a different depth of darkness. Slowly, I comprehended the visibility of black. In daylight, the desert rocks ranged in shade from yellow to dark brown. At night, each reflected a minute amount of starlight, making them vaguely discernible even in the faintness. Black would stand out most. It, alone, reflected no light.

We camped in Wadi Tzeelah, unburdening the camels, tying and brushing them, and then laying and kindling our evening fire.

As the flames caught, Shai set a small pot of water to boil and placed an eggplant on the burning wood to bake in its own skin. He kneaded flour, water, and salt for bread. I sliced carrots, onions, peppers, squash, and tomatoes. I placed these, with salt and olive oil, in a larger pot, which served as our fry pan, and set it on the fire. In a few minutes, I savored the pungent aroma of the oil and charring vegetables. As the contents of the pot smoked, Shai added lentils and the kazuach that he had picked that morning. He stirred a few moments and then poured in part of the boiling water. A cloud of steam billowed out, enveloping us in the fragrance of the pot's contents.

As the lentil stew bubbled, Shai combined lemon juice, salt, tehinah, and garlic into a sauce for the eggplant. As we had done at Wadi Jethro, we broke the dough into small pieces and pitched them from arm to arm, working them into thin sheets. Shai was infinitely more proficient than I. Of all his skills this was the only one about which I felt envy—perhaps because this was the one that I could possibly master. I laughed inwardly at my petit foible.

Shai had inverted the wok over the stew to gain maximum use of the fire. As we formed each sheet of dough, we placed it on the wok. As the sheet browned, we turned it with two sticks, and after browning the second side, flipped it off onto the moist towel. The eggplant was now baked. Shai split it open, releasing the steam in readiness for our repast.

We recited the blessing over bread and then feasted. We scooped the steaming eggplant from its skin, using the freshly baked bread dipped into the tehinah and garlic sauce. Following,

we served ourselves the lentil stew, eating it from cups. True to Shai's words, the flavoring of the kazuach was delicious.

We ate in silence. I felt no need to force a conversation. Shai and I had already journeyed together for two summers. During those weeks, I had grown comfortable with silence. We spoke only when we had something to say. Our intimacy of shared deprivations forged as strong a bond as could an intimacy of shared thoughts. During this, our third summer, we could be at ease without talking.

Our meal completed, we lay back, sipping tea brewed from the lemongrass of the morning. A cathedral of stars enveloped us. The camels knelt silently in the darkness. The goats reclined side-by-side at the edge of the fire's light. Each faced opposite the other, flank against flank, ever watchful for predators. As the fire fell into embers, the quiet was absolute.

I compared the ease of this moment with the harshness of our travel. Beyond the desert, I seldom if ever contemplated the toil of day and the rest of night. Here the difference was palpable. It nurtured an appreciation for the simple pleasures of rest, food, and drink. Although this night we ate and drank our fill, it was easy to imagine the experience of the Arabists who wrote of days with little water and no food—and the yet-harsher experience of the *Bedu* who left no written record. For them, a meal such as we had just taken would be truly a moment of appreciation.

Such contrast between the day and night provided an impetus for thanksgiving. The vast emptiness compelled contemplation of an omniscient Being. I grasped more of how in this wilderness Man came to accept a single all-powerful God.