

SECOND FRIDAY

CHAPTER 15: TO WADI ETEQ

"For the shadow of death is to all of them as the morning; for they know the terrors of the shadow of death." (JOB 24:17)

I awoke as the sun's rays flooded the *wadi*. Daylight revealed the surrounding hills rising no more than 300 feet, but one third the height that I had imagined them in the darkness of the night before. I wiped my hand over my forehead. It was cool to my touch.

"You look better this morning," Shai smiled. "But be sure to drink. If you aren't careful, you may again fall sick."

I needed no reminder and grunted affirmatively.

"I will climb the hill to call Shacharut," Shai nodded toward the slope opposite us. "We have to change our meeting point for the resupply."

While I had lain with fever at Be'er Milhan, we had fallen behind our schedule. Shai would have to alert Shacharut to a different point where the Land Cruiser could meet us.

On my first journey in 1995, our emergency communications had consisted of an ancient Motorola two-way radio, seemingly scavenged from a junkyard. It was powered by a derelict car battery, which appeared equally as old. Both radio and battery laid buried deep in a saddlebag. Their awkward location and the need to hard-wire the battery to the radio, precluded their use except under the most dire of circumstances.

Later that summer, the radio—or perhaps the battery—failed. With that, Shai shifted to a cellular telephone. Since then, Shai has used the cell phone to coordinate logistics. So far, he had not needed it for an emergency.

Except for service over short sections of the central and Arava roads, the Negev stretched far beyond the posted coverage areas of any of Israel's cellular systems. Despite this, its bare hills, sharp ridges, and deep *wadis* induced reflection and ducting of the cellular transmissions. These and related phenomena carried erratic cellular signals far beyond their predicted coverage areas. As earlier guides had learned the location of water in this parched environment, Shai had

learned the location of radio signals—most often available along the tops of ridges and hills. In the southern Negev, such ridges were seldom more than a half hour climb from a *wadi* floor.

Shai had kindled the fire and nestled the kettle over it. The pungent aroma of freshly brewing coffee tantalized my senses. Coffee was a rare morning treat. Usually, we began our day with sweetened herb tea—caffeine free. Strong *Bedu* coffee is a powerful diuretic, something to take sparingly when toiling beneath the sun.

I sat, drinking from my canteen, watching the flames lick at the bottom of the kettle. Within a few minutes, I had consumed the canteen's full contents, satiating my thirst. I now looked forward to the strong black liquid that Shai and I would savor when he descended from the hill.

We had tied down the camels the night before. Samech sprawled where we had left him, stretched akimbo on his side. His head and neck lay flat on the ground, arching lazily away from his body.

This exposed his underside, revealing the giant callus that sheathed the middle of his belly. Its fissured surface was patterned like the cracks of hardened mud that might form at the edge of a drying water hole. Camels are born with that callus, as well as ones on their knees and elbows. As the animals grow, the calluses enlarge and thicken, protecting their bodies and legs from the blistering rubble of the desert floor.

I shifted my gaze to the velvetlike coverings that jacketed the soles of Samech's feet. Unlike the rigid hooves of horses or asses, the coverings form flexible pads that spread with each step. The spreading enables camels to cross soft sand without sinking and, more commonly, to traverse the sharp rubble without mutilating their feet. The pads distribute weight so effectively that the animals will voluntarily stand on the upright edges of rocks, seemingly without discomfort. I mused at how remarkably camels have adapted over the eons to survive in this wilderness.

So, too, have the practices of man in the tens of thousands of years in which he has lived here. But as I was experiencing, man's evolution has been more spiritual than corporeal. It has evolved around recognition of man's physical limits and the constant presence of Death, ready to make His claim at a moments notice. As I write these words, I think of Death as more personal than even God. In the desert, Death, more than God, remains a constant companion, ready to appear when one's time has come.

Beyond the *wadis*, the Negev embraces endless miles of empty plateaus and formless hills. This barren repetition offered little stimuli for the early inhabitants to develop a pantheon of gods, such as those of the Norse, Greeks, or Romans. True, the sun and moon loomed large with their notions of the divine. Yet, this emptiness, devoid of form, surely encouraged the concept of One Being.

I do not believe in geographical determinism—that the emptiness of the Negev "caused" the concept of One God to form. There are other deserts as bleak as the Negev, whose inhabitants still hold to animist beliefs.

Rather, I see the Negev's bleakness as a condition that nurtured and sustained a monotheistic ethos. Something else brought that ethos to the fore. Whether the word of God—or the envisioned word of God—it was articulated and conveyed first by Moses and later Mohammed.

I thought back to less than 24 hours before, lying beneath the tent by Be'er Milhan consumed with fever. Given another constitution, my body's reaction could have been far different. I again recalled my friend, Allen, who came so close to dying and with different luck would have done so. The experience of such arbitrary consequence must easily have moved early mankind into placing its faith in that One Being.

I mulled over the desert's unforgiving harshness. How could that not have led to the evolution of a severe and demanding God? Such a God reflected the environment in which His adherents lived—a God of absolutes, the stern Judge of the *Torah* and the *Koran*. Yet, severe, demanding, and stern defined but one face of this God. The other was that of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Like the desert, the God of the desert was one of extremes.

Shai's return broke my musing. Together, we savored our coffee. That, with a melon, was our breakfast.

An hour after breaking camp, we reached the dirt road on which we would rendezvous with the Land Cruiser. In spite of the relatively early hour, the sun was beating through my shirt, seeming to burn my arms. Already the camels were slowing their pace in response to the heat.

As we trudged onward, I thought back to my youth and summer hikes through the countryside of Maryland and Virginia. There, the August sun was equally as strong. With far higher humidity, the discomfort was greater. However, most of that hiking was through the shade of woodlands or of the hedgerows that often marked the boundaries of the fields. The trees absorbed the sun, cooling the temperature of the woods to below that of the open fields. One could rest against a tree, pausing in its deep shade or lie on the cool humus and ground cover that carpeted the woodland floor. Here, there was neither shade nor softness. The sun beat down without respite. This was the curse of the desert.

Shai signaled a stop. The camels readily obeyed our commands to kneel. Shai and I settled beneath an acacia. Within a few minutes, the sound of a distant engine rose above the murmur of the wind. Soon afterward, the Land Cruiser emerged in a cloud of dust.

In addition to water and food, it brought fodder for the goats. Although the goats could survive in the wilderness, our journey over the barren trails tried them as it tried their human masters. Beyond the *wadis*, there was little even for them to eat.

With our water and food replenished and the news of Shacharut reported, we bid farewell to the Land Cruiser and continued southeast toward the Arava. We passed a small side *wadi*. A few yards below a diminutive dry waterfall, the slope of the side *wadi* leveled and widened into an almost flat area. There, a stunted palm struggled to survive, incongruously green in the midst of the parched brush. It marked a *thamile*, the location of shallow groundwater in a *wadi* bed that can be readily reached by digging.

The trail we followed was rarely traveled. Tracks in hardened mud showed that two camels and perhaps five persons had passed over it shortly after the last rain. This would have fallen in March, at the end of winter, or at the latest in April, four or five months before. The white edges of the occasional camel droppings revealed that there had been no other travelers since that time.

Each half hour, we paused to drink. Each time, I took a half-liter or more of water. With even such brief rest, my breathing and heart slowed. The wind blowing through my shirt evaporated my sweat, bringing a welcome, albeit momentary, chill to my skin.

We snaked out of the *wadi* and again moved across the plateau. I felt weakened from my fever. The sun felt more cruel than usual. After what seemed like hours of toiling, we reached the heights overlooking the Arava. I looked up. The sun was only at its zenith. We pitched our tent at the edge of the plateau, securing it to the kneeling camels and rock cairns.

Two thousand feet below spread a warren of meandering *wadis*, ancient trails, and a modern dirt track. They sliced a backdrop of black hills and the eroded remnants of an earlier valley floor. Heat waves shimmered and gusts of dust whirled across the expanse. Behind the warren lay two ragged hills several hundred feet high. A wide *wadi* curved behind them. At its far side, a dark mass of jagged rock rose to almost 1,500 feet, its serrated ridge cutting the sky. The rectangular ruins of an ancient fortress brooded from its highest peak. Beyond the ridge spread the Arava. At its far side, the Mountains of Edom faded into the haze.

"That is Har Timna, the mountain of Timna," Shai motioned toward the mass. "Look below it, on this side of the two small hills, and tell me what you see."

I studied the terrain below. Barely visible on the remnants of the valley floor were what appeared to be white pustules, blotching the ground like the residue of a plague.

"There seem to be white spots in the flat areas—maybe dozens of them."

"Very good," Shai grinned. "There are more than 5,000, maybe as many as 8,000. No one knows for sure. They are shafts. Some may be 6,000 years old. They go down to the tunnels where miners collected the ore. Some are as many as 100 feet deep. The white comes from the blowing dust. Over the last 2,000 years it has completely filled the shafts. You will see in five days, when we reach them. The place is called Timna, after the mountain. Some call it King Solomon's Mines."

Goose bumps erupted over my body. Since I was a child, I had heard stories of King Solomon's Mines and the incredible riches they had produced. It felt unreal to think that within a week I should actually explore them.

We retreated to the shelter of the tent. The goats joined us, preferring the certainty of the shade to the scant chance of finding a morsel of forage on the barren plateau. Only after the

shadows lengthened did they stir. With that, we broke camp and continued to Wadi Eteq. We reached it at dusk, at a place with walls rising high on both sides.

The wind had died, leaving the desert in utter quiet. We had hiked 12 miles under the sun. The effort had drained me. I welcomed the falling darkness as a covering in which I could wrap myself for sleep. Yet, despite my exhaustion, I brushed the camels and following that joined Shai in preparing our evening camp. As we shared the grandeur and deprivation of our journey, I was determined to share its labor as well.

Pesiah and Chalah browsed nearby as Shai and I unloaded the camels. As we lifted the saddles, a scream pierced the silence. The goats bolted through the semi-darkness, dashing to place themselves between us and the source of the scream. Once behind us, both stood facing the source, knees locked and neck hairs upright. Shai ran several steps toward where the goats had been, uttering a guttural shout. As if by instinct, I picked up a rock and followed, mimicking his cry. In the darkness, we could see nothing. Even in the quiet, we could hear nothing. After a pause, the goats returned to browsing. Whatever predator had startled them had slinked away.

Twice more during that evening, the goats bolted, startled by something prowling at the periphery of the camp. Each time, Shai and I moved toward the area from which they ran. Whatever may have been stalking retreated into the darkness unseen and unheard.

Tonight would be *Erev Shabbat*, the evening of the Sabbath. Tomorrow, the Sabbath day, we would not travel. In celebration, Shai braided two loaves of unleavened dough into the traditional shape of a challah, the festive bread of the Friday evening meal. He directed my slicing of squash, peppers, carrots, and onions. We stirred these into a pot of already boiling rice, set next to the teakettle. First carrots, followed by peppers, squash, and onions. A few minutes later, Shai reached into the battered ammunition box and brought out several small packets of spices. As he mixed their contents into the stew, an indescribably delicious aroma ascended from the pot. Truly, this would be a meal for celebrating the sweetness of the Sabbath.

Several times, I asked "how long" our feast would take to cook. Shai always replied, "until it is ready." I was amused at how difficult I found it to adjust to this element of Middle Eastern time. In contrast, I had little trouble with the "early morning" departures from our campsites, which we seldom managed before 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. On this dimension, I had accepted the rhythm of the desert.

Shai diced a salad of cabbage and tomatoes while I crushed cloves of garlic in a hand press. The crushed garlic, mixed with a few tablespoons of virgin olive oil, would serve as our dressing.

Our preparations almost completed, Shai probed into the depths of his saddlebag and, as if by magic, produced a bottle of cabernet sauvignon. It had been produced and bottled by the Golan Heights Winery.

The Golan Heights rise more than 3,000 feet above the Sea of Galilee and the Hula Valley of Northern Israel. Israeli forces captured them from Syria in bitter battle during the Six Days War of 1967. Afterward, vineyards were set by Israeli settlers. Notwithstanding the youth of the vineyards, knowledgeable Israelis judge that the volcanic soil and higher altitude of the Golan produce better wines than those from the older and better-known vineyards of Mt. Carmel.

I had brought Sabbath candles in my pack. I removed two and placed them in a shelter of stones near the fire. Reading from a small paper prayer book, we blessed the candles, wine, and bread and shared our meal in the quiet of the night.

As I sipped the last of our tea, I realized the depth of my fatigue. My muscles ached to the point of pain. With effort, I arose, stepped to the water bag, and poured a cup of water. I folded my *kafiah* and dipped it into the cup and washed my body and limbs. I rinsed my *kafiah* and washed again. The one cup of water cleansed and cooled my body. As I waited for sleep, I thought of the coming Sabbath day and the respite it would bring from the rigors of our travel.