

FIRST FRIDAY (evening)

CHAPTER 5: RECONNECTING

"[And Abraham said to the three angels,] let a little water be brought: bathe your feet and recline under the tree. And let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourself." (GENESIS 18:5–6)

Virtually all rocks and soils contain soluble minerals, which are dissolved by groundwater. Sodium chloride—table salt—is among the most common. In areas heavy with limestone, such as the Negev, calcium carbonate may predominate. In temperate regions with moderate-to-heavy rainfall, the large quantities of groundwater dilute the dissolved minerals. Water is almost always fresh. In the Negev with its scant rainfall, the meager groundwater cannot dilute the minerals. Water is almost always brackish.

Shacharut receives water by pipe from deep wells in the Ovdah Valley. When it reaches the settlement, most is processed through a reverse-osmosis membrane. This traps the mineral ions, letting only the fresh water through. To save costs, some of the water is taken from the pipe without processing. This includes the shower water outside the khan.

Its high salt content was obvious from the amount of soap it took to lather. Out of curiosity, I drank from the showerhead. The taste brought back forgotten memories of my childhood—my father driving my sister and me to his parents' home, my grandmother's smile, her welcoming arms, and a simmering pot of chicken soup. I always thought the soup too salty and could never understand why my grandfather always added more. But despite so much salt, my grandmother's smile and embracing hug made her soup the best to be had.

Perhaps in a temperate climate, continuously drinking water so laden with minerals would cause health problems. In Shacharut, in the heat of summer, it would not. If anything, the water promoted well-being by replenishing the minerals that the body sweated out. I drank more.

I returned to the khan as the shadows of late afternoon took form. Tomer sat cross-legged by a reel now set as a table. Next to him, wearing *Bedu* garb and sandals, sat Shai, my guide of the previous two years, and Vered, then his companion and later his wife. As is common among men in the Middle East, Shai and I embraced. Vered welcomed me with a vivacious smile.

Shai's father, a survivor of the Holocaust, had reached Israel in 1947, packed with 4,500 other refugees aboard the fabled ship *Exodus*. She had been christened the *President Warfield*, after the head of the Baltimore Steam Packet Company, who 20 years before had ordered her built. She was among the last of the Chesapeake Bay packets. Launched in 1928, she had steamed the 185 miles between Baltimore and Norfolk for more than a decade, providing dinner, festivities, and sleep for up to 400 passengers. In 1942, she was requisitioned to Britain for wartime service. Later she was returned to American colors in preparation for the Normandy invasion.

The wear of war had left her a desolate hulk, no longer fit for commercial service. In July 1947, she was sold for scrap. Two days following that sale, she was bought by the Jewish Agency, the self-governing body of the Jewish community in then-British-ruled Palestine. Desperate for anything that would float, the Jewish Agency pressed the *Warfield* and a dozen others like her into a makeshift merchant marine. Their mission was to smuggle the shattered remnants of European Jewry from the Displaced Person camps of the Continent to what would become their new homeland.

Shai was raised in Tel Aviv, Israel's largest city and commercial center. He first experienced the desert during his military service when he and another soldier were assigned to guard a new settlement in the Negev. The other soldier found the isolation unbearable and required reassignment. Shai felt a serene quietude. He became a desert scout and survival guide for the army. He later lived among the *Bedu* to learn their ways.

At the center of the table rested a large brass serving platter piled with roasted chicken, rice, olives, garden salad, roasted eggplant, and hummus—the ubiquitous Middle Eastern dish made of ground chick peas, lemon, garlic, sesame, and olive oil. A small brass teapot stood to

one side. Two hand-baked *challot*, the twisted bread of the Jewish Sabbath, lay at the other. Next to them were two unlit candles and a bottle of Golan wine, which most consider the best that Israel has to offer. Apart from the four of us, the khan was empty, and except for the sound of the hot wind, silent. Vered lit and blessed the candles. I was given the honor of blessing the wine and bread.

There were no knives, forks, or spoons. We ate, as is the custom of the desert, sitting on the floor, sharing from a communal plate, and using bread in lieu of utensils. Throughout, we sipped herbal tea poured from the seemingly bottomless pot.

We chatted easily as happens among old friends who come together after a long separation. We discussed Tomer's hopes with the young boys in the kibbutz school near Jerusalem. We talked of the desert and God, of Patriarchs and Prophets, and of the *Bedu*, caravans, and camels. I recalled Shai's comments from the first time that I had sat in the khan, two summers before: "You will learn to love the camels. They carry your water. Your life depends on them." His words had proven true.

As we talked, the Mountains of Edom darkened from red to crimson to purple and faded into silhouettes, black against the starlit night sky. Still, the wind blew hot.

Our meal finished, we continued to sip tea. An ancient kerosene lantern hanging on a pole cast its dim light over us. The raised lettering on its base read *Deutsche Reichbahn*—"Railroad of the German Realm." This was the name of the rail system under the Kaisers, the German monarchs from the late 19th century until 1918. Now, the system is called the *Deutsche Bundesbahn*—"Railroad of the German Federation."

During the time of the Kaisers, what are today Israel and Palestine formed an inconsequential province of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey's dying claim to the Middle East from Egypt to the borders of Persia, present-day Iran. In October 1914, Turkey entered the First World War on the side of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, thus forming the Central Powers.

With Turkey as an ally, it became feasible for Germany to attack the Suez Canal, with the aim of impeding the flow of Colonial troops and supplies to Allied Forces in Europe. To mount such an attack, Turkish troops, and their German overlords, had to cross the Sinai Peninsula. To back that advance, German engineers constructed a meticulous system of roads, railroads, and water pipelines. In 1915, the German-designed railroad reached Be'er Sheva. From there, it

passed through the Negev, then known as the desert of Southern Syria, and into the Sinai toward the canal.

While the British repulsed the German-inspired Turkish assaults, the infrastructure to support them, and their accompanying accoutrements, remained. I imagined that the railroad lantern that now hung in the khan was a relic of that period.

It fascinated me. More than 80 years after construction of the railroad and almost 50 years after its abandonment, the lantern was still being used. Sometime in the future, it would be discarded to a rubbish dump. I fantasized that years later archaeologists would sift through the dump, find the lantern, restore it, and deposit it in a museum, perhaps in Be'er Sheva, which by then would be a major metropolis. They would certainly relegate the lantern to the Ottoman Period and tie it to the railroad of 1915. Yet, they would know little of its "secondary use" for perhaps as long as a century afterwards.

I felt mischievous glee with my fantasy—knowing the lantern's present use and how little archaeologists in a distant future could imagine its full history.