

FIRST THURSDAY (afternoon)

CHAPTER 14: *FEVER AT BE'ER MILHAN*

"But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments ... I will wreak misery upon you—consumption and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish...." (LEVITICUS 26:14,16)

Be'er Milhan—the Well of Milhan—lies in a formless *wadi* encircled by shapeless sun-scorched hills. Their slopes offer no trace of shadow. Below the slopes, no acacias grow tall enough to provide even miserly shade.

In common with most wells of the Negev, Be'er Milhan sits in a wider part of the *wadi*, just above the primary flood channel. The well, like the remnants of that at Wadi Jethro, is circular and 10 to 12 feet in diameter. That diameter enabled enough water to collect to meet the needs of several families and their herds and flocks. The original well was lined with retaining stones. The stones extended 2 feet above the *wadi* bed. Deep within the well, the lowest stones may have been placed 10,000 years ago or more.

Unique to the Negev, Be'er Milhan is lined with concrete, which holds its ancient retaining stones in place. In the late 1920s or early 1930s, the Royal Engineers, then and today responsible for water supply for the British Army, came to the deserts of the Middle East. They reinforced the retaining walls of key wells to secure them against the winter runoff and constructed concrete caps to minimize evaporation. By guaranteeing the water of the *Bedu*, the Engineers ensured their loyalty to the Crown. As long as Britain maintained a military presence East of Suez, the Royal Engineers continued these efforts, lastly in the States of the Persian Gulf during the 1960s. Be'er Milhan was one of their more successful such projects.

The records of the expedition to Be'er Milhan are lost. However, by examining the construction of the well, one can surmise what the engineers did.

They likely reached Be'er Milhan from Aqaba, two or possibly three days away by caravan. At that time, Eilat was yet to be settled. They brought boards 4 feet long and 6 inches wide, cement, and steel reinforcing rods. Using the boards, they constructed a form inside of the

well. It was fashioned like barrel staves placed several inches from the original retaining stones. They next poured concrete between the stones and the form, thus sealing the stones in place. They set four layers of concrete, one atop the other. Each lower layer was an inch thicker than the one above. This extra thickness provided the added strength needed to support the weight of the higher layers. The marks of the boards and the boundaries of the four layers were impressed into the wet concrete. They remain clearly visible today.

After lining the well, the engineers capped it. In the center of the cap, they left a rectangular opening perhaps 18 inches wide and 8 feet long. To strengthen the opening, they affixed a steel frame, securing it by a raised concrete lip atop the cap. They braced the frame with seven reinforcing bars, giving it the appearance of a ladder carefully laid over the opening. Except at midday in the peak of summer, the cap shields the water from the sun, thus limiting evaporation.

When the engineers poured the cap, they extended the concrete over the exposed outside course of stones to protect them from the runoff. During the 70 years since the engineers left, recurrent floods have undercut that outer concrete. Its edges are now collapsing and some of the exposed stones are beginning to wash away.

We reached Be'er Milhan in the heat of day. My energy at dawn had proven a mirage. I felt completely drained. We pitched our tent to the east of the well, sufficiently far to discourage the flies that swarmed about it from bothering us.

We walked to the well, Shai carrying the stew pot to draw water. The sun, beginning to fall from its zenith, shone through the opening in the cap. It cut the darkness within, lighting a sliver of concrete wall and a small half moon of water. In the sun's rays, the concrete took on a golden cast, as if it had absorbed the color of the desert. Slender shadows delineated what had been the separations between the boards that had once held the poured concrete while it cured.

The water pooled 12 to 14 feet below the cap. A discarded water bottle floated between the darkness and the crescent of light. An emaciated yellow viper coiled around it, trapped

within the well by the smooth concrete. It had fallen through the opening weeks or, possibly, months before. Soon, it would weaken from starvation and slip from the bottle. I felt disquiet in being helpless to save it. I saw in its hopeless position a metaphor of the insignificance and frailty of human efforts in the vastness of the desert.

Shai knotted a rope around the handle of the pot and dropped it, face down, into the well. It struck the surface, shattering the silence. The viper flung itself from the bottle, thrashing into the shadow. The futility of its efforts accentuated my disquiet.

As we pulled the pot from the darkness of the well, its contents glistened in the light. Sheltered from the sun for all but a brief period of the day, the water of Be'er Milhan remained cool and clear.

We watered the goats and then the camels, repeatedly dropping the pot into the well to let the animals drink their fill. After three days without water, each camel drank two pots—20 quarts. If they had been more thirsty, they could have taken four times as much.

With the animals watered, Shai and I stripped. Sharing the pot, we again drew water and poured it luxuriantly over our bodies. If not for my enervation, I would have reveled in the luxury. Shai broke several small sprigs from a bush next to the well. Its dark green leaves, the size of the upper half of a man's thumb, were thick and shiny, the latter from the wax, which minimized water loss.

"This is called *yafruk*. In Hebrew, it means jointed, like the stem. It makes soap for washing. We can crush the leaves with a rock and then rub them over our bodies."

He passed half of the sprigs to me, laid his half on the cap, picked up a small rock, and began to pound. Listlessly, I followed suit. The leaves shredded between the rock and the cap, releasing a foamy essence. I rubbed it over my hands. Indeed, it was soap.

We lathered and rinsed and lathered again. With water in abundance, we washed our garments—*kafiah*s, T-shirts, and outer coverings—dipping them into the pot, wringing, and dipping again. The effluent flowed brown. Fine particles of sand, embedded by the wind, sank to the bottom.

I washed but felt little refreshed. Lethargically, I donned my wet T-shirt and *kafiah*. A breeze blew through the *wadi*, hastening evaporation of the water from the cloth. Yet, it failed to cool me. I rubbed my hand over my face. My cheeks and forehead felt fiery to my touch. Shai confirmed my fear. My body was hot with fever.

"We will rest. Maybe it's only sun allergy. You sucked out the bad blood at the pool. I think it will pass in a few hours."

Shai's unsolicited reference to my puncture of two days before jolted me. I studied his face. His furrowed brow again belied his reassuring words.

I thought back to the turbid water at Wadi Issaron and the thorn impaled in my palm. Four years before during a business trip, I had suffered the agony of an abscessed tooth. Since then, I had carried amoxicillin and codeine. If my condition worsened, I could take the amoxicillin. But, I had no certainty that an antibiotic intended for a dental abscess would be effective for sepsis. Now, with the reality of blood poisoning close upon me, I felt the chill of fear.

If my fever worsened, Shai could summon help on his cellular phone. He could climb a hill and find a signal within 15 minutes, or 30 minutes at most. The *wadi* was flat. Assuming no flat tire, a Land Cruiser could reach us within perhaps two hours. It could reach the hospital in Eilat within two hours after that. That would be four and a half hours in all. However, if I were seriously ill, such a delay in treatment could prove a dangerously long time. If I worsened after nightfall, it would be more difficult for the Land Cruiser to reach us, delaying treatment yet more. Sepsis could consume with savage speed.

The memory of a telephone call two years before flashed through my mind. It was from Matthew, the younger son of my friend, Allen. A week earlier in the morning, Allen had felt sick and remained at home. His roommate had returned that evening to find him comatose, ravaged with fever. Emergency services got him to a hospital in minutes. He was suffering acute sepsis. Notwithstanding antibiotics dripping into his veins, for two days the physicians were unsure of whether he would live. He remained in the hospital for almost a month.

I lay under the tent, eased against our sleeping bags, scrawling these musings into my journal. I sipped from my canteen. Possibly, I was only dehydrated. Maybe another liter of water and I would be fine. But if not, there was nothing Shai or I could reasonably do to seek help until we were sure that my condition was serious.

But that was a lie. In reality, Shai could have climbed a hill. He could have called Shacharut. The Land Cruiser could have taken me to Eilat. I could have gotten a hospital check-up and a regimen of antibiotics. And in a day or two, if not immediately, I could have returned to the desert and continued our journey. But, in truth, I didn't want to. I was ashamed of

quitting—as if leaving the uncertainty of the desert for the certainty of the outside world would mark me as a failure in Shai's eyes and irredeemably corrupt the experience that I was seeking.

Ensha'Allah, I mouthed the words silently. Again, they comforted me. Again, I felt as if in this vast emptiness, our presence could draw the attention of the Almighty. And, as promised in Scripture, He would ensure us our full three score and ten years.

Shai now rested with me beneath the tent. The goats nibbled nearby at the sparse brush. The camels browsed farther away. Every half hour, I removed my *kafiah* and T-shirt, poured water over them, and slipped the water-soaked clothes back over my body. The breeze hastened evaporation. It didn't help. My face, arms, and torso remained flushed with fever.

Shai stirred and called to Pesiah. She came into the tent. They fell asleep together, cushioning each other. Shadows began to form against the hills. Crows cawed from the distance. Smaller birds twittered in the brush nearby, flying into the opening of the well for water. I wondered whether they recognized the viper and, if so, what distance they kept. And, after it slipped from the bottle for the last time, whether they would alight on that now-vacated perch.

I contemplated the intensity of my journey and the indelible experience it was etching into my memory. I thought of how the trail allowed so little opportunity for reflections. In the furnace of the day, I summoned all of my strength to drive myself onward—to overcome the enervation and pain of traversing this terrain. Only in the stillness of the evening, when my breath and heart had slowed from the excruciating pace of the day, could I collect my thoughts. Thus, even though I lay with fever, the shelter of the tent enabled me to appreciate my physical and emotional experience.

As the shadows lengthened, I again washed my face, arms, and torso, soaked my T-shirt and *kafiah*, and slipped them around my body. As the wet cotton clung to my body, I felt my fever break. I breathed deeply and spoke to myself the Hebrew words, "*Baruch H'Shem*"—"Blessed be the Name of God."

At that moment, Shai stirred.

"I think that I'm ready to go on," I greeted him.

He beamed.

We broke camp an hour before sunset. We would camp at Har Barek—the Mountain of Barek—2 and a half miles to the south. I was determined to reach it, to surmount my physical weakness.

As the sun slipped below the hills, we came upon a great acacia. In the deepening shadows, what appeared to be a mass of debris 4 feet across lodged just above the lowest fork. Above that lodged a yet wider mass.

"Nests?" I turned quizzically to Shai.

"Yes. They are nests of the Lappet-faced Vulture. It is very unusual to see two together. In fact, it is very unusual to see any at all." He paused. "They are extinct. When the *Bedu* left there was still at least one pair. Then there was only one. Perhaps three or four years ago that one died."

I stared at the massive nests. The bird had been immense, with a wingspan of 9 feet or more. Like the California Condor, it had recoiled from the presence of modern man, retreating to ever more remote areas. Unlike the Condor, it had not survived.

The idea of the extinction of a species so close in time unsettled me. It took on a different reality from the disappearance of the dinosaurs 60 million years past or even of the Woolly Mammoth and Cave Bears, 10 or 20 thousand years ago.

As with the viper, I saw in the nests a metaphor of the desert, in this case, the continuity of its emptiness. Amid the remains of countless transient civilizations, that emptiness remained constant. I contemplated it as we trudged on in the falling darkness. My thoughts shifted from the logic of the West to my sense of the moment. With that, I began to accept how in its vastness, this empty wilderness could contain all.

As darkness enveloped us, Shai signaled a halt. The indistinct outline of high hills against the stars showed that we had entered a small side *wadi*. Silhouetted against a moonless sky, the hills seemed to rise for a thousand feet.

"We are near Har Barek. We will camp here for the night. This is called Wadi Meteq, the *wadi* of sweet water. With a night's sleep, you will be able to travel a full day tomorrow."