

FIRST MONDAY

**CHAPTER 9: TO WADI JETHRO**

"When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh. He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well." (EXODUS 2:15)

I awakened as the sunlight danced from the crest of the dune, painting it in golden-red. We had camped against the eastern side of the *wadi*. Here, we could remain in the early morning shade for another hour until the sun climbed high enough for its rays to reach us.

The night before, we had tethered the camels—commanding them to kneel and binding together the cannons and forearms of their front legs. Without such restraints, they would have deserted us and returned to the camel yard. Yet even so fettered, they had crawled through part of the night to browse the *wadi* scrub. Protected by the thick calluses on their knees and chests, this seemed not to bother them, even when they dragged their bulks across bare rock.

I pulled myself into a sitting position. My movement aroused them and both turned to ponder me. As they stared at me, I wondered what they would do if they were not bound. Would they, like the two goats, wander over to greet their human companions or browse indifferently until saddled with their loads? Horses who live intimately with humans might do so. These camels lived mostly with their herd and likely would not—although TheSiger wrote of having seen a *Bedu* camel nuzzle his master and, in subsequent years, I would observe the same.

Shai had kindled a diminutive fire, bringing less than a quart of water to a boil. The goats were finishing half of the small sack of fodder he had poured for them. Pesiah's small udder swung as she munched. "Would you like milk with your tea?" Shai grinned. I nodded affirmatively.

With that, he kneeled at Pesiah's side, glass in hand, and firmly caressed her teats. Her milk foamed into the glass like beer tapped from a near-empty keg. Within a few tens of seconds, our two glasses were full.

I sipped the warm, rich liquid—stronger and more savory than cow's milk. Shai

followed suit. We finished the milk and drank our tea black.

I turned to preparing our morning bread: mixing flour, salt, and water, kneading it into dough, breaking the dough into pieces the size of a small fist, pounding the pieces to flatten them, and then tossing the flattened pieces from arm to arm until they form a thin sheet like a raw pizza crust. As I formed each sheet, I placed it on a wok inverted over the fire, let it bake for a minute or two until blisters formed, turned it over for another minute or two, and then removed it from the wok, ready to eat.

As I kneaded, I thought back to two years before when, for the first time, I had watched Shai prepare this simple fare. As he lifted the first baked piece from the fire, I realized that it was the same as *matzah*—the unleavened bread eaten with the Passover meal—which the rabbis of the fervent Jewish sects still hand bake today. More than three millennia after the Exodus, this *matzah*, the central symbol of the Passover, remained a reality of the desert.

A chill swept through my body as I again grasped the continuity. At that moment, I felt more bound than ever to the Epiphany at Sinai—to God's giving of the Ten Commandments.

That was the formative event of the Jewish People and the sole reason for their being. Prior to Sinai, they were the Hebrews—contentious tribes of desert wanderers. At Sinai, those tribes accepted the Ten Commandments. They committed themselves to obeying God faithfully, to keeping His Covenant, and by example serving as a moral beacon to the world. In the words of Scripture, they were to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6). And, thus, they became the Jewish People.

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Within the hour we had eaten, packed the camels, and were again passing through the dunes into the morning sun toward the Arava.

In the popular mind, desert sands convey the notion of a lifeless place. This is not so. Notwithstanding as little as an inch or two of rain a year, animals as well as plants have adapted to the Negev's harshness. The shadows of the early morning revealed an array of subtle tracks left by small creatures that move only at night. As I leaned down to study them, Shai stooped at

my side.

"During the day they stay in holes or burrow into the sand. At night, they come out to eat. That way they save their water. There is even one beetle that lives at the very top of the dunes just below the surface. When the sun heats the sand in the morning, it crawls to the shady side; when the sun heats that side in the afternoon, it crawls back."

A thin line between miniature footprints marked the dragging trail left by a mouse. A few yards away, a thicker line between slightly larger tracks marked the passing of a lizard. Parallel imprints of fine lines angled against each other showed the creeping of a beetle. By afternoon, the windblown dust would cover them all.

Within half an hour, we passed through the dunes, returning to the rubble-covered limestone. The trail, now visible, traced upward between two small hills. We reached the top. Wadi Jethro spread below us. This was the third year Shai and I had journeyed here. Each time, I stood transfixed at this spot.

Exodus narrates the story: Jethro ruled as High Priest of Midian. It was to Midian that Moses fled after he slew the Egyptian. It was by the well in Midian that he rested after his journey. It was at the well, that he defended Jethro's seven daughters from the shepherds who would drive them from the water. Here he married Zipporah, one of the seven, and from here for 40 years he tended Jethro's flocks.

At that time, 3,300 years past by popular reckoning, but perhaps as much as 700 years earlier, Midian marked the far-eastern border of the Egyptian Empire. It was because of Midian's distance from the House of Pharaoh that Moses came here. Two days' journey to the south lay Timna, the site of "King Solomon's Mines." While peoples had exploited Timna's riches since before the Patriarchs, the ruin of a temple to Hathor, Egyptian goddess of turquoise and mining, attests to the long Egyptian dominance in the region.

Before us, three dry tributaries flowed from the surrounding hills and converged into a nearly flat valley almost a half-mile across. Toward the far side of the valley, below the point at which the tributaries converged, lines of thick brush grew lengthwise across the dry watercourse. These marked the remains of irrigation dams, which even with the paucity of rain had for millennia retained sufficient runoff to support fields and flocks. To our left, along the top of the hill, elongated mounds of rubble entombed what were once dwellings. The hill may have offered modest defense against a small band of marauders. It would have been useless against

trained soldiers.

We crossed the *wadi* into the thick brush. By Negev standards, the growth was luxuriant, with plants abutting each other and some tamarisks 10 feet or more tall. Large rocks formed the foundations of the still-functional dams. The sediment on their upstream sides lay higher than that immediately downstream. This provided both rooting and moisture for the plants. A line radiating to a side *wadi* marked the course of an aqueduct that had once carried floodwaters to a cistern. The aqueduct had been fitted with filters—stone barriers that slowed the runoff enough to ensure that most of the silt settled, before the waters trickled into the sunken storage basins.

In an open area between the main channels of the *wadi*, stones formed a rough circle perhaps 12 feet in diameter. They were the remnants of the uppermost course that had once lined a well. Wells were always dug in the middle of *wadis*, where the ground is level and the runoff slows. There the sediment is deepest, allowing for the maximum accumulation of water before, through use and evaporation, the well would go dry. Fifteen years before, the *Bedu* had abandoned Wadi Jethro. Once they had left, the silt-laden winter rains had filled the cavity. As I stared at the remnants, I understood why the Book of Genesis tells of the servants of Abraham, and later those of Isaac, digging wells. Each year the winter rains would carry sediments that filled the wells. Each year, those who had lived here would dig out the sediment to regain access to the water.

Shai pointed to a cleared flat area on the opposite side of the valley well above the flood line. "That was a threshing floor. They are always above the water line and flat. They are places where the wind blows. They don't have to be level, although that would be better."

I gazed at the cleared area and imagined women throwing basketfuls of newly threshed grain into the air, letting the wind carry away the chaff.

Leaving the camels to browse, we crossed the valley and climbed to the site. Shai leaned down and groped among the rocks. After a moment, he stood up holding an elongated white object. His eyes squinted in a roguish grin.

"You will enjoy looking at this," he intoned, thrusting the object toward me.

It was a carefully crafted limestone cylinder, just under 6 inches long, slightly tapered toward a gracefully rounded upper end. The base was 2 1/2 inches in diameter and flattened. Just over halfway from the base to the upper end was carved an indented thumb grip.

Shai's grin broadened. "Perhaps it looks like it comes from a temple to the goddess

Aphrodite?"

"By a threshing floor?" I laughed.

Shai joined my laughter. "Well, maybe here it was used to grind grain."

The sophistication of the pestle was remarkable. The base end would have fit neatly into a user's palm. The thumb grip enabled the user either to pound or grind. The rounded tip concentrated the force of the user's motion to crush the grain.

I wondered at how long a woman would have labored to grind sufficient flour to provide her family its daily bread—and when the last women had used the pestle, or one like it. Perhaps it was within my lifetime. With the possible exceptions of Be'er Sheva and Aqaba, ready access to stores and packaged flour had only come to the Negev during the past 50 years.

We descended to the valley and walked along the watercourse, looking for evidence of earlier inhabitants. Two years before, I had found several shards of hardened red clay, the fragments of a crudely shaped *jahrah*, which had predated the potter's wheel. They had been here the next year as well, indicating that no rain had fallen during the interim to bury them or carry them away.

A dark object half buried in the sediment caught my eye. Scraping away the dirt, I pulled out the perfectly turned bottom and partial side of a black clay container.

"Do you recognize it?" Shai asked, rhetorically. "You can tell from the clay and the shape that it was a *jahrah*. The black color means it was turned in Gaza a hundred years ago—or maybe less or maybe more. It was used here by the *Bedu*."

As I turned the black shard over, I marveled that in this place I have found and held in my hands the remnants of human habitation from the time of Moses to the time of living memory. Throughout as much as four millennia, the material way of life had changed little. What had changed was a shift in mindset, from worshipping a pantheon of gods, if not the idols that represented them, to accepting a single Almighty, without physical form.

I thought of the shards I had found two summers before. In concept, they could have come from Jethro's household. If this were, indeed, where Jethro had lived, Zipporah, herself, could have used them. I could not comprehend that notion. Indeed, the idea that in entering Wadi Jethro, I might literally be walking in the footsteps of Moses was too profound for me to entertain.

The sun was halfway to its zenith as we continued eastward out of the *wadi*. We were

moving toward the Arava, yet the trail climbed upward.

The Negev Plateau differs from a plateau cut by a river valley. Rather than falling toward the Arava as it erodes over time, it lifts and falls away. This stems from the tectonic forces that formed the Arava and continue to do so. As the terrain on each side of the Arava tears apart, that of the Negev is forced upward. This tilts the Negev toward the Sinai, draining its scant rains away from the Arava. The runoff courses toward the Sinai, meanders through the Ovdah Valley and similar basins, and eventually returns to the Arava through a few major *wadis*.

As we climbed toward the crest of a rise, the sediment of loess—the windblown deposits that filled the *wadi*—thinned to a film of dust blanketing the rocks. The vegetation that had covered the lower floor of the *wadi* disappeared, replaced by rubble. We passed over the rise. The trail dropped slightly and then climbed toward a second rise.

The panicked bleating of Pesiah and Chalah crying from behind shattered my thoughts. I bolted around as they rushed over the rise we had just passed. Neither their speed nor bleating diminished until they reached our sides.

They had lingered to browse on a last bit of vegetation. Though we were less than the length of a football field ahead of them, we had passed from their view. Looking around and seeing no one, they had raced in terror to catch us. The meaning of their primordial cries was clear: "Don't abandon us. You are our protectors. We are all safer when we stay together."

True. In the desert, the goats depend upon us for water and, as I would later understand, for protection from predators. During our journey, I would sometimes fall back to examine a relic or to take a photograph. At such times, one of the goats would turn to bleat. Now I comprehended the meaning of their cries.

I contemplated the Biblical images of humans shepherding their flocks and the metaphor of the Almighty shepherding His human assembly. Both are protectors. For the flocks, the protection of the shepherds is physical. For the humans, the protection of the Almighty is as much spiritual. Philosophers will argue which may be more important into the indefinite future.

We trudged upward, following the ancient route, at last reaching the crest of the Arava. At the lip, stood a large *rujum*—another of the stone piles left by millennia of travelers to mark the way through the wilderness. The slope of the Arava descended below, broken by boulder-strewn gorges alternating with jagged ridges. A maze of tracks crisscrossed the chaotic terrain. These were grazing paths, abraded into the surface by the hooves of long-extinct wild goats and

sheep—foraging through the ages. Only the trail descending from the foot of the *rujum* would lead to the floor of the Arava.

Enveloped in haze, the Arava spread almost 2,000 feet beneath us. As at Shacharut, the gigantic gouge extended north and south as far as the eye could see. On the far side stood the mountains of Edom, their outline softened by the heavy air. The Jordanian road ran below them, lost in the haze. The parallel Israeli road ran closer to us. It too was lost in the haze. On the floor of the Arava, acacia trees appeared as ragged dots of olive green, their color muted by coatings of windblown loess. Their relatively large numbers—perhaps as many as one to the acre—evidenced the life-giving runoff that flowed into the Arava during the winter rains. The only signs of human habitation were two dusty green rectangles to the south—the irrigated date palms of a kibbutz plantation.

We turned into the sun, toward Eilat. The trail, worn into the dark limestone by centuries of caravans, followed the rubble-strewn crest. We trekked for almost two hours. Even though we were crossing level terrain, sweat was running from me. The sun passed overhead, its heat growing more intense.

"We must stop now," Shai announced. "We will eat and rest."

Except for the green rectangles far below, our stopping point and everything surrounding it was utterly desolate. Behind us, to the west, the scorched terrain rose and disappeared, leaving only an empty sky. There were no bits of desiccated vegetation, no tracks in pockets of loess, no clouds—only the unending void.

We commanded the camels to kneel 25 feet apart and tied them in place. They seemed indifferent to the fetters, giving no resistance to our slipping the ropes beneath their forelegs and binding them. So positioned, and without vegetation on which to browse, they would remain virtually motionless for hours.

Shai and I gathered the heaviest pieces of rubble and built two small cairns to anchor two tent ropes. We tied two other tent ropes to a horn of each camel's saddle. We then raised the tent, supported by a single center pole. Once within its shade, I followed the habit of the camels and used my body to sculpt a depression in the rubble. With that, I could, as did the camels, disperse my weight and, despite the stones beneath me, lie prone in relative comfort.

We washed our hands with a few drops of water and lunched on what would be a typical noon meal, salad and bread from the morning dipped in olive oil. By wrapping the bread in a

moist towel, Shai had kept it fresh and pliable. Without the towel, it would have hardened within two hours. In *Bedu* fashion, we ate using the bread to scoop the salad. Shai flavored the latter with *za'atar*, an indescribable spice mixture ubiquitous to the Middle East. Its major ingredient is *hyssop*, a mintlike herb. It was used in the purification rituals for the Ark of the Covenant during the time of the Exodus and for those of the Ancient Temple 300 years later.

Our surroundings, totally void of stimulation, prompted me to focus on our simple meal. I savored the food as I would a gourmet repast, inhaling the aroma of the spice and bread, feeling the salt and oil on my lips, sensing the textures on my tongue. We finished. I reclined into the depression I had formed and sipped from my canteen, relishing the taste of the water and its sensation as it passed through my lips, across the roof of my mouth, and into my throat.

Shai took a package from the saddlebag and carefully unwrapped it. It was his Bible. He read from Genesis and shortly fell asleep. I felt drained, unable either to read or write. In the discomfort of my dried sweat and aching muscles I could not sleep. I felt suspended in an in-between world, neither asleep nor awake; neither bored nor stimulated.

I contemplated my feelings. Paradoxically, the void surrounding us aroused in me a greater awareness—and with that a greater introspection. I felt disquiet—an unarticulated unrest, an indistinct apprehension. The disquiet, as much as my physical exhaustion, kept me awake—and would return to do so throughout our journey. It was as if my soul were grappling with an undefined demon of whom my conscious self was only vaguely aware.

I lay back and closed my eyes. I drifted into the halfway world between wakefulness and sleep and then to wakefulness and back again to the halfway world. As I lay there, I focused on my feeling of disquiet, trying to explore its dimensions, to articulate its nuances. In vain.

We remained beneath the tent for almost three hours. As shadows began to form, and the heat to ease, we renewed our trek along the crest of the Arava. We reached Shacharut at dusk. We would bathe, rest for the night, and in the morning continue south toward the Gulf of Aqaba.