

SECOND MONDAY (morning)

CHAPTER 19: VISIONS OF THE HAJ

"And complete the *Haj* or *Umra* in the Service of Allah...." (*THE KORAN*, II:196)

The mounting heat sapped our appetites. We ate little for breakfast, scraps left from the night before. Shai produced half a glass of Pesiah's milk for tea. She would give no more. Although Chalah occasionally tried to nurse, she was almost weaned and Pesiah's udder was becoming dry.

We had evolved a morning ritual of taking several glasses of tea before we saddled and packed the camels. When we came across an unusually aromatic plant, Shai would collect enough of its twigs or leaves to serve us for one or two days. More often, he would brew our tea from what our campsite might offer. A quiet before the rigors of our journey aside, the tea hydrated our bodies after a night without water.

Today, Samech seemed to be taking his own quiet, as if anticipating an especially arduous trek. As he had three days before, he lay sprawled on his side, his fettered front legs akimbo in the air and his neck arched flat against the ground. The early morning sun shadowed the fissures of his calluses, giving them the appearance of ludicrous pompons. For a creature considered so noble by the *Bedu*, he appeared utterly ridiculous.

At my approach, he opened his eyes, quietly bellowed, and rolled upright into the kneeling position, compliantly waiting to receive the saddle that I carried. As I positioned it on his back, he moved his shoulders, as if directing me to place it farther forward, where he could most readily bear the weight.

As we packed the saddlebags, Shai paused, reached into his ammunition box, and extracted a small package. Carefully unwrapping it, he pulled out a dried root, which I now knew would provide a richly aromatic delight. He unsheathed his knife and sliced off a sliver.

"Take this," he handed it to me, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Place it under your tongue. You will be surprised at what happens."

As the sliver touched my saliva, the pungent taste of ginger swirled through my mouth, its exotic tingle permeating every cranny.

Shai grinned, "Good, yes? As long as you keep it in your mouth, you will feel refreshed. But be careful that you don't forget to drink."

The essence spread to the roof of my mouth and through my nostrils. I inhaled the sensation, sucking it into my lungs. The tingle carried into my throat.

"This is better than what they offer in an expensive American restaurant," I bantered.

Shai's eyes twinkled. "Life may be hard in the desert, but we have time to think about it and to enjoy the pleasures that we find."

I recognized the reality of Shai's words. Beyond the desert, I live in a world of incomparably greater physical comfort. Yet, seldom do I think of its pleasures. Here, amid deprivation, I relish the few that we have—our freshly prepared meals taken at leisure in the still of the night and, afterward, reclining against the bundled tent or saddle, slowly sipping water.

We were lashing the flaps of the saddle bags when in midmotion, Shai froze. He slowly raised his arm, pointing toward the *wadi* wall behind me. Pesiah and Chalah stood transfixed, staring in the same direction. Keeping my feet in place, I slowly pivoted my hips to follow Shai's outstretched arm.

Less than 70 feet away, atop the wall, a magnificent ibex gazed down on us. His horns arched gracefully over his back, in a pose incomparably more dramatic than that of the gazelle we had watched two days before. Motionless, he scrutinized our band, focusing on Pesiah and Chalah. Every 30 to 60 seconds, he sounded one or two high-pitched chirps. After two minutes, he moved down the face of the wall, picking his way for several feet parallel to the top. Then, for no apparent reason, he slowly re-ascended and disappeared.

"Others in his family are nearby," Shai commented. "The chirps were a warning to them. Sometimes the ibex are wary; sometimes they are not. Perhaps there are little ones with his family. That was why he was cautious."

It is 120 miles from Be'er Sheva, the "Gateway of the Negev," to Eilat, on the Gulf of Aqaba. A caravan would have covered the distance in 10 days. If it followed a laborious route, descending and climbing through the *wadis*, it may have taken longer. If it traveled over the monotony of the Negev Plateau, it may have taken less.

In Be'er Sheva, rainfall averages less than 8 inches a year. In Eilat, it averages little more than an inch. For each day of travel south from Be'er Sheva, but 12 miles distance, the average rainfall decreases by one half to three quarters of an inch.

We had passed the Red Canyon the day before, where its multihued sandstones signified that we had entered the Eilat Hills, less than two days from the Gulf of Aqaba. Even my inexperienced eyes recognized the scarcity of vegetation compared to when we had begun our journey. The *wadi* below Har Neshef that we were now abandoning supported few plants. And those few were parched dry.

"How can even the ibex survive here?" I pondered half to myself and half out loud to Shai.

Shai raised his head, as if weighing the relevance of my question. "They eat a little bit of everything and travel long distances every day. That way, even in the dry season, they won't eat one area bare. And they don't have to drink water. They can get enough from the plants."

"And if it doesn't rain and nothing grows?" I asked.

"Then, they don't reproduce. If the females don't have babies, they don't need as much water. The herds become smaller. That way they adjust to there being fewer plants to eat."

I mulled over Shai's reply. "So when God promised the Children of Israel 'a land flowing with milk and honey,' it was more than poetry. For there to be milk and honey, there must be rain for plants to flower and animals to breed."

"Of course," Shai nodded. "The Sacred Books have beautiful poetry, but that poetry deals with the reality of the Land. Today, we reach Har Uziyyahu. From there we will see more of that reality, into Egypt and as far as the Gulf of Aqaba."

He turned to Louis, aspirated, and tapped the animal's lower neck. The great beast lurched upright. With a low, complaining roar, Samech followed.

We continued southward. Despite the early hour and low humidity, the air hung heavy and oppressive. Even with head and face swaddled by my *kafiah* and heavily tinted goggles beneath, I walked with my head bent, shading my eyes from the incessant glare of the sun.

I fell into the dull rhythm of the trail, mechanically placing one foot before the other, only vaguely aware of the tension in Samech's guide rope as he obediently followed. I focused on Louis' rhythmic gait, a majestic plodding with a slight prancing motion. His pads spread with each footfall, cushioning his feet against the rubble. As my eyes followed the pads, I realized that while I had often watched the gamboling of the goats, I had never noticed how they walked. They ambled in their usual position behind Louis, protected by his bulk, but never too distant from Shai. I shifted my gaze toward them.

I had assumed that their cloven hooves would not move. Not so. The cleavage allowed a flexibility, remarkably suited to the rocky terrain. On flat ground or large rocks, the two halves spread out as they strike the surface, absorbing the shock and giving balance. On small stones, the halves separate and curve downward, grasping the sides as would a pair of tented hands converging to hold an object between their palms. Whether the goats' hooves were formed on the Fifth Day by the Hand of the Almighty or by eons of evolutionary process, their adaptation to this environment, like that of the camels, was extraordinary.

We climbed steadily throughout the morning. Though the sun would take yet an hour to reach its peak, the air felt more stifling than any we had so far endured.

As the rain dwindles between Be'er Sheva and Eilat, the temperature rises. On a given August day, the high in Be'er Sheva averages 93 degrees Fahrenheit. That in Eilat averages 104 degrees. It can exceed 120 degrees.

In Eilat, walking in such heat is bearable. The streets are flat. There are no rocks to bruise one's feet. Except for midday, buildings shadow sidewalks from the sun. Cafes shade their customers with awnings or palm fronds laid across aluminum frames. Often, cords, with water trickling down, are placed around the outdoor seats. As the water trickles, it evaporates, reducing the temperature within the seating area by 20 degrees Fahrenheit or more.

But this was not Eilat. We twisted through barren hills, over broken rocks devoid of shade, under a relentlessly unforgiving sun. Again, my heart pounded and a choking tightness pressed my chest.

It was not yet noon when we reached the height of Har Uziyyahu. Shai raised his arm to motion a halt and pointed toward the west. The Egyptian border stood 2 miles away. Beyond the border lay the near end of a wide crescent-shaped depression. It extended into the haze for 3 additional miles and then arced to the north to disappear behind the ridgelines of the surrounding

hills. Toward its southern side, closest to us, rose a circular hill, 1,200 feet across at its base and 500 feet or more high. I imagined what a dramatic landmark it must have been, signaling to travelers that they were but a day's journey from Aqaba.

"That is the Moon Valley. It was the intersection of the routes of the trading caravans and those of the *Haj*, as well. They came from Gaza, the Northern Sinai, and Egypt. The trail they followed was called the *Darb el-Haj*, 'the Way of the Holy Pilgrimage.' They would meet in Aqaba before continuing south to Arabia and the Holy cities."

I contemplated the *Haj*, the mandated journey to Mecca, site of the *Kaba*, the holiest shrine of Islam—and by tradition, albeit not required, to Medina, the site of Mohammed's tomb. Together with prayer, charity, fasting, and the profession of faith, the *Haj* completes the five pillars of Islam.

The *Koran* obligates every Muslim who can afford it to make the journey at least once in his or her lifetime. In this regard, master and slave, black and white, rich and poor stand equal. Since the time of Mohammed, it has bound Muslims of all sects, countries, and social backgrounds in a shared ritual of profound impact.

The pilgrims approach the *Haram al-Sharif*, the sacred precincts of Mecca, clothed in white—the women swaddled in scarves and caftans, the men in *thobe al-Ihramo*, ankle-length terry cloth robes.

Regardless of origin, all dress alike. Differences of class, rank, and culture are subsumed within a single Muslim identity. Whether lettered aristocrat or illiterate peasant, descendent of the Prophet or Western convert, Arab or Malay, the sea of flowing white accentuates the sense of shared community.

The *Haj* is not a pilgrimage as conceived by the Western mind. It is not about reaching a destination. Rather, it is a voyage of the soul, a culminating moment of spiritual unity, a gathering of believers, all sharing a common purpose.

The emotion of that moment lies beyond description—elation in fulfilling the quest of a lifetime, uncontrollable tears of exhilaration, submersion in a feeling of total belonging.

Thus, regardless of the age of participants, the *Haj* serves as a *rite de passage*, strengthening the bonds that Muslims everywhere feel toward each other. Despite ceaseless internal conflicts, the journey, for more than 13 centuries, has instilled in Islam a unity of outlook and sense of community unknown in Christian domains.

Stemming from this sense of community, Muslims worldwide—notwithstanding their often autocratic governments, and to the utter bewilderment of Westerners—consider themselves among the most democratic of peoples.

The impact of the *Haj* on Islamic history and worldview has been extraordinary. The continual movement of the Faithful from throughout the Islamic realm enabled merchants to expand their commercial ventures and scholars to exchange ideas. The ensuing dissemination of mathematical, scientific, and mechanical knowledge built the foundation upon which Islamic civilization eclipsed that of Christian Europe for 500 years.

During the 19th century, Charles Doughty and Sir Richard Burton became so fluent in Arabic and conversant with Islamic customs that they successfully joined the *Haj* caravans.

Burton disguised himself as "Sheikh Abdullah" from Afghanistan. He sailed from Suez, the southern terminal of the Suez Canal, to Yenbo, a squalid port on the Arabian Peninsula, and from there traveled overland to Mecca. He penetrated into the *el hudud*, the sacred bounds of Mecca within which unbelievers are forbidden. Had he been discovered, he would have been killed, even if so doing would have contravened Islamic law.

Doughty traveled with the Syrian or Damascus *Haj*, which at that time was the largest such caravan in the world. It assembled in Muzeyrib, 40 miles south of Damascus and proceeded to Mount Hermon, which, at 8,000 feet, dominates what today is the border of Israel and Syria. From there, it continued south, staying to the east of the mountains of Moab and Edom—on the side opposite from the Dead Sea and the Arava—and then into the Arabian Peninsula. The journey took 50 days. Unlike Burton, Doughty never hid that he was a *Nasrany*, a Christian, and although allowed to travel with the *Haj* caravan, he was forbidden from entering the Holy City.

The *Koran* prescribes the time of the *Haj*, between the eighth and 13th days of *Dhu al Hijjah*, the last month of the Islamic calendar. This enabled the Faithful from as distant as the khanates of Central Asia to gather at Muzeyrib at the appointed time. By the day this massed assemblage began its journey, it numbered as many as 6,000 souls, half of whom may have been servants. It included as many as 10,000 animals. Camels, mules, and asses served as beasts of burden; goats and sheep were for slaughter or trade along the way.

The women and wealthy traveled in *mahmals*, tentlike cubicles covered with blue or red canvas and carried on the backs of camels. Cloth curtains on the sides could be closed to protect

the occupants from sun and dust. A handful of the wealthiest pilgrims rode in ornately decorated wooden litters. Such litters were affixed over a pair of poles, which in turn were hitched to two camels in tandem. Some were fitted with small glass windows, hinged from the top.

Burton traveled this way both to maintain his disguise and to protect an infected foot. Other pilgrims rode mounted. The poorest, as well as the most pious, struggled on foot. And, if in summer, they suffered the same scorching heat and exhaustion as did Shai and I.

They may or may not have traveled in summer. The *hijra*, the Muslim calendar, is based on a lunar year of 354 days. Thus, the time of the *Haj* cycles through the seasons, occurring 11 days earlier in each subsequent solar year.

When Islam burst from the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century, the *bedu* of the Sinai were among the first to embrace it. They would have joined the *Haj* from multiple points as the pilgrims from Cairo journeyed east and those from Gaza journeyed south to converge here at the Moon Valley.

As I gazed into the distant valley, I envisioned the *Haj* passing through the crescent—occupying almost its entire length and spreading out hundreds of yards wide. Thousands of sandals, bare feet, hooves, and pads would have pounded the loess, raising a cloud of dust, obscuring the humans and animals within it. The cloud would have rolled slowly toward us as the caravan beneath crawled forward.

As I formed this mental picture, I pondered the belief of the Faithful—that the physical journey of the body seeking the Holy City of Mecca served as a metaphor for the spiritual journey of the soul seeking knowledge of God and His service.

Each day of the physical journey was a separate stage. Death lurked constantly, be it from disease, a wild beast, or a human hand. So common was death that the pilgrims carried their burial shrouds with them.

But although death might come, so might the comforts of life. The end of each day also brought respite from the harshness of the journey—the settling of the dust; if summer, the relative cool of the night; a hot meal and coffee before the fire; the narcotic redolence of a communal *hookah*; water or sand with which to cleanse one's skin; and a mat, prayer rug, or perhaps cushions, on which to sleep.

So it is with each day of the spiritual journey of a person's soul and the acts that accompany it. At any time, man or woman may be tempted from the path of righteousness and,

thereby, condemned to *Jehennem*, hell. But for those who persevere and resist the temptation of evil, at the close of each day there is the reward of a life well lived, and at the close of life, the reward of eternal salvation.

I turned my gaze to the southeast. Less than 10 miles away lay the Gulf of Aqaba. The gulf meets the Arava to form 3 miles of almost straight shoreline jutting from the ridges on either side. The modern town of Eilat lies on the westernmost side of the shore, in Israel. The ancient settlement of Aqaba sits on the easternmost side, in Jordan.

The *Darb el-Haj* passed through the Moon Valley, entered the Negev Hills, and then curved down to reach the Arava at the head of the gulf. It was then an easy trek of a little more than an hour along the shoreline to Aqaba—with its water and rest—before the final journey south to the Holy Cities.