

FIRST SUNDAY (early morning)

## ***CHAPTER 7: PREPARATIONS***

"And Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Say to your brothers, Do as follows: load up your beasts and go at once to the land of Canaan.'  
(GENESIS 45:17)

We dawdled over breakfast in the shade of the khan, savoring a rare hint of semi-coolness lingering from the night. It would be another hour before the sun beat through the roof fronds, baking the interior to the heat of the outside.

I ate little—a slice of melon and a piece of soft, unleavened bread, followed by two glasses of sweetened tea. The sweetness assuaged the little hunger I felt. As I had learned from previous years, in the desert heat, my body tempered its appetite to conserve the water otherwise used for digestion. I had also learned how quickly exhaustion would engulf me.

As the sun beat down with ever-greater intensity, minor slopes, which I would barely notice at 70 or even 80 degrees Fahrenheit, would become growing obstacles. Each step would require more willpower than the one before it. It would be my body signaling—do not move, do not sweat, do not lose water.

I refilled my empty glass from the small *jahrah*, one of two placed on the table. The water had sat overnight. Part had evaporated into the dry air, cooling that which remained. The thick walls of the *jahrah* served as insulation, ensuring that the content kept its chill. I sipped one glass and then another, savoring the coolness.

"Come." Shai smiled as he rose from the cushions. "You have now taken four glasses. That is enough for the next hour. It is now time to saddle the camels."

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Pesiah and Chalah, her kid, gamboled near the camel yard. Pesiah was a *Bedu* goat,

smaller than the domestic milk goats of a kibbutz herd. Stubby white hair grew from her head like the unkempt mop of a pre-adolescent tomboy. A brownish red mane dangled from her shoulders to her hindquarters. A stunted right horn gave her an unbalanced appearance. It had broken when she was a kid and Shai had splinted it back in place, with only partial success. He had raised her on a bottle and, as I would observe, both she and Chalah were as attached to him as spoiled lapdogs to a doting mistress.

Chalah had been fathered by an errant domestic billy. Except for her white face, she bore little other resemblance to her mother. Her body was covered in short, jet-black hair. On occasion, she still nursed even though she had almost reached the size of her mother.

When Shai traveled to the Galilee or Jerusalem, Pesiah and Chalah were left to browse with a kibbutz herd in the Arava. But Shai was their unquestioned master. As we approached, both trotted over and nuzzled him, as might a dog welcoming back a family member absent for several hours. Pesiah rubbed against Shai, raising her head for him to stroke her throat, a sign of her complete trust.

"We will take them with us. Pesiah still has enough milk for our tea. It will be very fresh. As long as she carries it, it doesn't spoil." Shai's mouth broke into a grin.

I felt a surge of excitement at the prospect—a journey with a greater tie to the life of Patriarchs than any I had taken. Yet, my excitement was tempered by the knowledge that raw milk can transmit tuberculosis, a concern only partially lessened by the high reputation of Israel's agricultural services.

The camels milled restlessly around the corral, clamoring in a bedlam of obscene gurgles and disconcerting roars, the latter reminiscent of a lion house at feeding time. Half their din was in protest at being put under saddles. The other half, as I would later learn, was trepidation at being left behind.

Able to carry loads of up to 600 pounds and to travel for up to three weeks without water, camels were highly prized for their commercial value well into the 20th century. Although the great caravans have faded into history, *Bedu* men may still keep their camels as a sign of wealth and their families may still use them for milk, meat, and hair. Camels may roam untethered near encampments. All, however, are domesticated. The *Bedu* keep donkeys, as well, to carry domestic loads and support the work of the household. They are owned by women, who under *Shari'a*, Islamic Law, enjoy property rights equal to those of men.

We would travel with Louis and Samech. Both stood tethered outside the corral. Louis was the largest and strongest of the camels, yet stolid and gentle. Despite his size and strength, he was not the best leader. He was timorous and often hesitant to follow difficult trails, even if he had traversed them before. In such circumstances, Shai would patiently coax him forward, whispering encouragement and softly stroking his neck. I thought of a lover, who after a quarrel coaxes his beloved back to responsiveness. Despite his timidity, Louis was Shai's favorite.

Four scars slashed vertically across Louis' right cheek. These were the markings of the *Abu Rabia Bedu*, the tribe who had raised and trained him. They lived near Arad, in the north of the Negev, close to the Dead Sea. In the Negev, camels carry only the tribal marking. There is no need for individual markings. All members of a tribe know who owns each camel. If a camel is sold outside the tribe, that is known as well. For this reason, a camel, when sold, is not marked again.

I would lead Samech. He was smaller and wirier than Louis and a constant complainer. He roared when being saddled; he roared when being unsaddled; he roared when rising up; he roared when kneeling down. I thought of him as the camel equivalent of a shrewish woman or bastardly man for whom no gesture, however kind, would fully placate or satisfy. As I would quickly learn, even when I brushed him after our day's journey, he would try to bite. Despite his sullen temperament, he proved his worth on the more difficult trails, which he dutifully traversed without protest. Yet, I felt no affection for him, and much preferred Louis for his gentle nature.

Half a dozen saddles lay heaped in the yard, crowding one on the other. They differed from those still used by the *Bedu*, incorporating design refinements introduced by the guides of Shacharut. Most obvious were the bright yellow plastic pads attached to their undersides, giving them the appearance of double-sized life jackets lying incongruously in the desert dust. Incongruity aside, the pads protected the camels from chafing more effectively than did traditional blankets.

I disliked the pads intensely. They symbolized the encroachment of Western modernity on the *Bedu* and the inevitable dissolution of their tribal culture. The *Bedu* would gain materially from modernity. But, in exchange, they would lose the certainty and support of the closely knit groups in which they lived. I felt disquiet at this. It forced me to acknowledge the void spawned from the failed relationships of my own life—wife, children, and later lovers.

The saddles were made from wooden boards crafted in the shape of a child's pup tent.

Two heavy lateral boards, the sides of the tent, were affixed to two miniature "A" frames. To provide clearance over the camel's hump, the seat of the saddle was suspended between the peaks of each "A." It was little more than a slightly curved rectangular board covered with rough fabric, far different from the sculpted leather of an American or European horse's saddle. A wooden horn, akin to the pommel of a Western saddle, crowned the peak of each "A." The saddle boards were screwed together. This provided more secure attachment than the saddles of the *Bedu*, which are still jointed and lashed.

The saddle rests on the camel's upper rib cage, extending above the hump. The hump is tender and a load is never placed on it. Contrary to popular belief, the hump stores fat, not water. Camels can live off such fat for weeks. When food is scarce, especially during the winter mating season, the hump may almost disappear. Unlike humans, camels can recover water by metabolizing their fat. However, their primary water storage is within interstices of their bodies.

Camel saddles have no stirrups. To steady himself while mounted, the rider hooks one leg around the front horn and rests his second leg over his first one. Some *Bedu* may ride kneeling, a practice that is common in the southern reaches of the Arabian Peninsula. During steep descents, the rider may reverse his position and hook his leg around the rear horn. Doing so protects him from what might otherwise be a painful compression of his groin against the front horn as the camel lurches downward. More commonly, the rear horn is used to hold the lead rope of a following camel.

The saddlebags were made of dull green canvas, depressingly sterile compared to the colorful and tasseled wools woven by the *Bedu* women. Their pockets were more spacious than those of the *Bedu* bags, another innovation of Shacharut. This made them more suitable for carrying our light, but bulky, sleeping bags and mats. Two wide strips of canvas held a pair of saddlebags together, leaving a space in the middle for each bag to clear the saddle. The strips had center holes. This enabled us to slip them easily over the horns of the saddle and to secure them in place.

Our two knapsacks and my two cameras lay next to the saddles. My knapsack carried the barest essentials—an extra pair of chino pants and a shirtlike jacket, several changes of underwear, and a half-dozen pair of heavy socks. Except for two extra pair of socks, I took the clothing more as a symbol of civilization than as a necessity for our journey. Within half an hour of trekking under the sun, any comfort a fresh change may have offered would be dissipated in

sweat and dust. In practice, the extra clothing served more as attire for my leaving the desert and returning to the Western world. Of greater importance were an extra pair of glasses, additional sun goggles, and a survival kit. The latter fit into a small bag 6 inches long. It included matches, 6 feet of leather thong, a compass, a small Swiss army knife, and a small flashlight. I packed a pair of thick-soled rubber flip-flops at the top of the knapsack. If I stepped carefully, they would protect my feet from the puncture of an acacia thorn when moving around the camp at night and in the early morning. Up to 3 or more inches long and iron-hard, acacia thorns were known to puncture even the steel-belted tires of off-road vehicles.

I kept a toilet kit in one of the outer pockets of my jacket. Its key contents were a toothbrush, toothpaste, and dental floss. Brushing teeth is the only semblance of personal hygiene possible in the desert. Although the kit also included an emery board and nail clipper, they went unused. A stone picked from the desert floor was always at hand to smooth a torn nail. A second pocket held my "medicine kit"—heavy duty sun screen, cortisone cream, small bandages, analgesics, and prescription drugs. I did not take salt pills, although in future years I would learn to do so.

I carried two cameras, both 35-mm single-lens reflex Canon EOSes, a model favored by advanced amateurs. One was fitted with a 30–80 mm lens and the other with a 100–300 mm lens. During the previous year, I had learned the hazards of changing lens in the Negev. The exercise took no more than a few seconds, and I changed the lens only once or twice a day. But, by the end of the journey, the inside of the camera was coated with dust—to the amazement of the professional staff of the photography shop to which I brought it for cleaning and repair.

That journey and the one before also taught me the need for padded and reflective camera cases. The black bodies of the cameras absorbed the sunlight, becoming too hot to touch and baking the film within. A search of camera accessory catalogues proved fruitless. In the end, Voula, the resident seamstress of my neighborhood dry cleaner, fabricated cases for each camera using padded white canvas, which she diligently searched out for the project.

Both Voula and I were immeasurably pleased with her work. Only when she had completed it and I was slipping the covers over the cameras to ensure their fit did I acknowledge to myself that I had actually commissioned specialized equipment for an "expedition."

I felt excitement, pride, and apprehension. I was fulfilling a fantasy of which few men would dream and virtually none would carry out. And, notwithstanding Shai's skill as a guide

and our careful preparations, we would be traversing a hostile and barren environment. More so than in previous years, for days at a time our safety would depend entirely on our own resources. I felt a surge of adrenaline as I anticipated the physical and mental challenge.

Our remaining gear was piled nearby—two 20-liter water bags and four 5-liter ones, half a dozen 1-liter plastic water bottles, eucalyptus logs 2 to 4 inches in diameter, rudimentary cooking gear, two 25-liter plastic jerry cans cut open and partially filled with provisions, a first aid kit that included splints and tourniquet, a 10- by 15-foot reed mat, and a large roll of black meshed agricultural netting with a crudely fashioned collapsible pole. When no other shelter was available, we would use the netting to protect ourselves from the midday sun. It was far less expensive and far lighter than the goat hair tents still used by a handful of *Bedu*.

We carried no weapons. Hostile *Bedu* no longer roamed the southern Negev. The Egyptian border near which we would pass had been quiet for years. Large predators were few and shied from men. Yet, except for Shai, all other guides still went armed.

Shai caressed Louis on the neck for a few moments and then aspirated a guttural hiss from the roof of his mouth, the *Bedu* command to kneel. Louis obediently fell to his front knees, then settled on his rear haunches and, finally, lowered his front bulk to the ground. Shai turned toward Samech and aspirated again. Samech bellowed in protest. Shai repeated the sound. Only then did Samech follow Louis to the ground, bellowing yet more.

Camels, at least those of the *Abu Rabia*, respond more to voice commands than to the lead rope, the foot, or the riding stick. "Stand up" is a clicking from the roof of the mouth. "Go" is the same clicking sound or the cry "*yallah*." "Stop" is an aspirated guttural, "*whaqheef*."

Throughout our journey, Samech, notwithstanding his obdurate nature, would respond to my commands. I attributed this to Tamar Gamliel, my Hebrew teacher of almost 20 years before. She had playfully coaxed a dozen apprehensive adults into a greater familiarity with the language than many of us had felt possible and taught us an authenticity of pronunciation, which even native Israelis notice.

Exotically beautiful, Tamar was the daughter of observant Jewish Yemenites who had immigrated to Israel in 1938. By popular legend, the ancient Jewish community of Yemen traced its roots to a mythical union between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. By a more plausible legend, the community evolved from Jewish settlements, which followed the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE. Yemenite Jews became artisans, especially skilled

in silver and gold, crafts some still practice in Israel today.

Scholars consider the Yemenite dialect as the closest spoken approximation to the Hebrew of the Bible. It is more guttural and Arabic-sounding than modern Hebrew, particularly the Hebrew of the Eastern European synagogue. I surmised that through Tamar's efforts my pronunciation of the Arabic commands sounded especially familiar to Samech, leading him to respond.

We saddled Louis and Samech as they kneeled, being careful to place the yellow saddle pads over their rib cages so that the saddles cleared their humps. Unlike the saddle of a horse, that of a camel has two cinch straps. One is placed just behind the front legs and the other in front of the rear legs. The front legs of a camel are its strongest. The saddle and its load are placed slightly forward to take advantage of this. When the camel is kneeling to be saddled, it is trained to rise slightly so that the cinch straps can be slipped easily beneath its bulk.

Once we had secured the saddles, we lifted each saddlebag onto the saddle horns and loaded them with our supplies and provisions. With the single exception of raw sun-dried camel meat, our provisions included the basics that *Bedu* would have taken on a journey: brown rice, flour, dried dates, salt, tea, and coffee. Given the modern convenience of supermarkets in Eilat, we added substantially to these basics—halvah, the sweet sesame paste common throughout the Middle East; chopped dried papaya and pineapple; pistachios and other nuts; and a generous supply of fresh melons, oranges, apples, and vegetables. We completed our larder with a soft goat cheese, similar to feta, and a brick-hard goat cheese, heavily salted. The latter was almost inedible. It became my job to sliver small amounts of it to flavor stew, rice, or salad. I swore that the cheese did more to dull my blade than did the pervasive sand. In the blistering heat, the fresh fruits and vegetables could keep for no more than a few days. The dried provisions, including the hard goat cheese, could keep for months.

Finally, we hung a 20-liter water bag and two 5-liter water bags over the horns of each saddle. The 60 liters and the half dozen 1-liter bottles—our tie to life—would suffice Shai, myself, and the goats for what would be two days before we returned to Shacharut.

The large pockets of the saddlebags easily held our equipment, knapsacks, and food. Within ten minutes we had lashed them closed with nylon cords and were ready to begin our journey. "Drink again," Shai admonished. "Without water, you die in as few as four hours." With that, he drained half a water bottle. I took several gulps from the first of my two canteens.

Paradoxically, Shai's reiterations of how close we could be to Death eased my concerns over the dangers of our journey. As I had learned during our two previous expeditions, he fully appreciated the desert's unforgiving heat and took every prudent precaution to ensure our safety.