

SECOND SATURDAY (afternoon)

**CHAPTER 17:      *THE WATER HOLE OF WADI ETEQ***

"... the ground under them burst asunder, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up with their households, all Korah's people and all their possessions. They went down alive into Sheol...." (NUMBERS 16:31-33)

It was just afternoon when Shai turned from reading the *Chumash*.

"Come. We shall go to the water hole. It is the best in the Negev—always in the shadows. So the water is cool and it is deep enough that we can swim." Pausing, he added, "It holds water for a year. It only becomes dry when the winter rain doesn't come."

After rationing myself to a cup of water each night for washing, I felt palpably excited at the thought of such luxury.

"The camels cannot travel there. So we will leave them here and carry our own drinking water."

I nodded in acknowledgment and sucked the last drops from the canteen I had nursed throughout the morning. I mused at the irony of taking drinking water to the water hole. However, it had been at least four months since the last rain and maybe six. For a person not used to it, drinking such water could invite dysentery or worse. I refilled my canteens from one of our large water bags. Shai slung a mostly full 5-liter water bag over his shoulder.

"You don't have to take another bag, this will be enough."

I grimaced. That gave the two of us perhaps 6 liters. It was enough for an afternoon but left little allowance beyond that. "Typical Israeli," I thought. "Except for the army at war, they're blasé about everything."

Had Shai been an American, we would have taken two full water bags as well as my canteens—as much as we would have needed and again as much as a safety precaution. But then I brooded, Americans are notorious for overkill. I recalled the scene I had witnessed more than once in international airports, a pair of middle-aged or elderly American tourists dragging eight pieces of matching luggage through what would be a seven- to 10-day circuit of luxury hotels. I

held my tongue.

We began to trek down the *wadi*. The goats, who had been nibbling unobtrusively nearby, instantly romped to our heels. The camels looked up from their browsing. They stared after us, with a seemingly mixed look of curiosity and apprehension. In common with horses, they bond with their human masters. Also similar to horses, they would be unlikely to follow us as long as they had themselves for companionship.

Within a few tens of yards, Shai began to cut left toward a side gorge. "Be careful," he warned. "You shouldn't go any further down the *wadi* to try to take pictures."

I looked at him. He paused, his cheeks wrinkling mischievously.

"You're at the edge of a dry waterfall. How do you call it in America—Niagara?"

I looked to where I had supposed the course of the main *wadi* continued—and shuddered. I was standing on a bare limestone shelf swept clean of debris by the on-rush of water. Less than 8 feet away, the course of the *wadi* disappeared. Hidden from view by the shelf, it did not reappear for several hundred yards. At that point, it was more than 200 feet below us.

I felt chagrined at failing to recognize the precipice before me. Yet, even when filtered by goggles, the light glaring against the limestone camouflaged what in other environments would be obvious. I was thankful for Shai's watchfulness.

As we entered the gorge, I swallowed on seeing the track we would follow. A rock-strewn slope arose to our left. As the gorge continued, the slope grew steeper and rose higher. The rocks gave way to boulders. In 150 yards the slope transformed into a sheer vertical wall, now cloaked in afternoon shadow.

A few yards to our right, the slope plunged into a chasm—a continuation of the face of the dry waterfall. The trail paralleled the chasm, edging ever closer as it twisted upward toward a ledge. At the ledge, an outcrop overhung the gorge. The trail passed beneath it and faded into the shadow, seemingly merging into the vertical wall.

The goats ended their romping and moved onto the trail, walking in single file ahead of us, leaving Shai and me to follow. Slowly, we approached the shadowed wall. I lagged behind, increasingly apprehensive at the ledge, the narrowing trail, and my growing awareness of the depth of the gorge below us. I forced my eyes to focus to the left of the trail and 2 feet ahead, diverting them from the gorge and the crippling panic that would surely ensue if I allowed myself even to glance into those depths. Shai's white *gabiyah*—*Bedu* trousers—became a

ghostly presence at the periphery of my vision.

We reached the vertical outcrop. I clutched at its face. It was as if by so doing I could deny the chasm, which now plunged downward inches from my feet. Passing the outcrop, we reached the deep shadow of the sheer wall. There, the ledge disintegrated into a series of fragmentary protrusions, none wider than the breadth of my foot. Beyond a 20-foot gap, the ledge reappeared. Five stories below, shattered boulders littered the bed of the gorge.

The goats paused and then picked their way over the remnants of the ledge. Shai followed. He turned toward the wall to take advantage of a few handholds. I watched as his sandals felt for the protrusions. Their thin leather soles curved over the bulges with a flexibility that my heavy boots could never match. Carefully moving across, Shai reached the opposite side. There, he turned and beckoned me to follow.

Only those who have known the terror of an inescapable phobia can comprehend the power of will required to face it. I looked at the protrusions, the handholds, the open space, and the shattered boulders below. My throat constricted. Nausea twisted my gut. I stood trembling before the void, paralyzed at the height. I felt an utter vulnerability to the abyss.

My mind told me that I was free to turn back. Shai was in my employ. He would receive the same pay no matter where we went or what we did. There were only the two of us. No one else was involved. No one else would know. Yet, given the deprivations that he and I had experienced together, I felt compelled to continue. It was as if my failure to do so would dishonor the bond that we now shared.

Mimicking Shai's movements, I turned to the wall. In a primordial reaction, I pushed my body into it, as would a frightened child seeking safety in its mother's embrace. I clutched at each handhold, my palms slippery with sweat. Groping for each niche, I inched from protrusion to protrusion across the void. In what seemed an eternity, my right foot touched the opposite ledge. Shai reached out, locking his hand tightly around my wrist and pulling me toward him.

He smiled his quiet smile. "When it is your decision, it is possible to overcome your fear. At times, we all struggle with our fears."

I nodded in acknowledgment. I thought back to Tomer, who had found acceptance among those who lived here. With it, he had begun to heal his wounded soul. In the same way, as I comprehended that Shai accepted my fears, I became more able to overcome them.

The trail widened. It entered a sharply rising crevice that cleaved through the limestone

strata. Broken ledge after broken ledge formed a crude passage upward. Like the floor of the gorge, the crevice was choked with boulders. In places, they blocked even the goats from passing. There, Shai and I would cradle them in our arms and lift them to the next-higher ledge. They submitted without complaint. Shai and I crawled after, bracing ourselves against the sides of the crevice and pulling ourselves upward.

We climbed upward for half an hour, drawing ourselves from ledge to ledge. Then, abruptly, the crevice ended. A sheer wall blocked us from going further. We had reached to within 12 feet of the top of the gorge. To our left a twisted fissure cracked through the rock and disappeared into blackness.

Shai pointed toward it. "It isn't very wide, especially at the top. It curves and you have to bend over to get through. Be careful that you don't catch your chest or your feet."

With those words, he moved into the opening of the fissure, pulled his knees to his chest, and eased sideways into the forbidding twisted void. Pesiah and Chalah hesitated and then followed. I was left alone—abandoned.

I had never before considered which of my two phobias aroused greater terror—my fear of heights or my fear of entrapment in a confined space. As a practical matter, my claustrophobia is worse. Packed elevators, mobbed subway trains, and tourist class in fully booked flights are part of my normal experience. Standing at the brink of a cliff is not.

Whenever possible, I minimize the impact of my claustrophobia—by using stairs rather than elevators and by sitting or standing at exit doors when riding conveyances. As long as the conveyance is moving and I maintain an illusion of escape, I manage. Standing before the fissure, I confronted my worst claustrophobic fear—stationary constriction. My throat tightened. My body quivered. Again, my hands broke into sweat.

I tried to escape my terror, without success. Once more, I focused on the bond that Shai and I had forged. To no avail. I stared into the blackness of the fissure. Seeing nothing, I forced myself to stoop, lowering my head toward the wider part of the opening. Two arm lengths away, Shai's figure formed, silhouetted in semi-light like a ghostly apparition.

I lifted my cameras from around my neck and passed them toward him, stretching my arm as far as I could to keep my torso from the enclosed space. I unbuckled my canteen belt and passed it and the canteens through, as well. Our hands just managed to exchange the objects. With these acts, I had done all I could to free myself of impediments to my passage.

Trembling, I lowered myself into a semi-crouch. Closing my eyes, I began to repeat the *Shema*—the affirmation of the Oneness of God, the article of faith of the Jewish People. I pushed into the fissure. Sweat streamed from my body. The words of the prayer rushed from my lips, as if they could quell my fear. I focused on each word. My chest and shoulders scraped against the jagged confines of the fissure wall—and then wedged. Nausea wrenched my gut. I convulsed at the terror of choking on my own vomit.

I focused more intently on the prayer, forming a surrealistic split within my psyche. My emotional and physical responses were real. But in spite of those realities, repetition of the words seemed to serve as a narcotic. It did not abate my terror. Rather, it enabled me to overcome terror's paralyzing effects. Uttering the words yet faster, I lowered my torso until my buttocks almost touched my heels. My chest and shoulders dropped clear of the confine that had pinned them. Holding my crouch and pushing against the rock, I crawled crablike through the fissure.

Shai and I stood in semi-light at the bottom of a second crevice 12- to 14-feet deep and little more than the breadth of our shoulders wide. Except for giant slabs of strata fallen in the middle, its floor and walls had cleaved cleanly apart during the tectonic event that had formed it. In defiance of its narrow confines, it conveyed an aura of vast space, like that of a cathedral.

"Do you remember when Korah and the Levites revolted against Moses?" Shai asked.

"Yes," I nodded.

The story of that revolt is one of the most vivid in the Book of Numbers. Korah, with 250 chieftains, rose up against Moses and Aaron, claiming that the two leaders had usurped their power. God, in fury, wrought retribution. The ground beneath Korah and the chieftains burst asunder, swallowing them and their households into Hell.

Looking around the crevice, Shai commented, "This might be how the earth swallowed them." He paused. "But this could not have been the place. Moses and the Priests would not have gathered here. It would have been at another place. It is called Har Karkom. It is four days north of Shacharut. It may be the true Mt. Sinai. Perhaps one day we will go there."

I stood in silent awe—both at the realization of how this place embodied the reality of the Biblical legends and at the total comfort with which Shai commented on the story. At that moment, Moses, Korah, the Chieftains, and the Priests were not legends, but the historical reality of the Negev.

We lifted the goats to the tops of the slabs and from the slabs to the brink of the crevice. The crevice walls had split sufficiently to provide hand- and footholds for us to follow the goats out.

We stood atop a nondescript rolling hill, covered with fractured limestone. I looked down upon the trail we had just ascended. In an hour's time, we had struggled little more than a quarter of a mile. I could easily see the bare limestone ledge that marked the lip of the dry fall and for the first time the face of the fall. It plunged into shadows, its base blocked from view by the snaking course of the gorge along which we had traveled.

We moved down the hill away from the gorge. I reflected on my passage through the fissure and my repetition of the *Shema*. I recalled 17 years before, my wife and I separating and the tearing asunder of my family. I was devastated. Depression engulfed me. Each hour, I struggled to survive. I sought solace in the daily *minyon*, the communal prayers of the synagogue. The unchanging ritual provided an anchor in my otherwise shattered world. Each morning I sought it out as the single certainty of my life. My daily repetition of the words did not alleviate my pain, but made bearable that which I thought I could not bear. Similarly, my repetition of the words this day made bearable my terror of passing through the fissure.

At the base of the hill, we entered a second *wadi*. Towering vertical walls shaded its depths from the sun. The winter runoff had swept its floor clean. The surfaces of the rocks, scoured by the rushing water, glistened like milk porcelain. Whirlpools laden with stones had hewn giant basins into its floor. The lower walls were sculpted into sensuous curves. Higher up, rounded cavities conveyed a vaguely erotic awareness. As we penetrated farther, the shadows deepened to the soft hues of twilight. Shai's pace quickened in anticipation, as if he were approaching a rendezvous with a lover.

The pool lay 20 feet beneath a ledge. A gap in the ledge channeled the water directly downward. Over the millennia, the cascading flows had carved a hollow that even four or five months after the last rain held enough water to cover a standing man. With the exception of an hour at high noon, the walls of the *wadi* shielded the pool from direct sunlight. The green tinge of the water evidenced microscopic life. Yet, the pool appeared infinitely clearer than the stagnant water at Wadi Issaron.

We stripped naked and entered the pool—something that would have been unthinkable had the *Bedu* still roamed here and used the water to drink and cook. We edged toward the

deepest part, beneath the cleft. There, we quietly treaded water. I exhaled to sink to the bottom. The water closed quietly over my head. My feet reached the sand. I stood motionlessly, holding my breath, feeling the water caress my body and sensing its delicate chill. The quiet beneath the water matched the silence of the air. It seemed yet another dimension of the emptiness that contained all.