

SECOND SATURDAY (morning)

CHAPTER 16: *SHABBOT*

"[Abraham] took curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared and set these before them; and he waited on them ... [Then] the men set out ... toward Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off." (GENESIS 18:8,16)

Shai's cry of "ayah!" joined by the thud of a stone against flesh, shattered the predawn silence. I jolted upright. Pesiah bolted from between our sleeping bags. My small prayer book lay sprawled in the moonlight, a corner chewed away. Pesiah sat down at the edge of the camp, just beyond the toss of another punitive stone.

Shai, propped on his elbow, yawned, "Goats have no shame. A dog will do something wrong, but when it's caught, it runs away with its tail between its legs. Not goats." With that, he returned his head to the kit bag that served as his pillow.

Smiling at Shai's commentary, I sluggishly rolled off my sleeping bag, gathered up the chewed prayer book, and tucked it into my knapsack. Stars had yet to disappear from the eastern sky. The sun would not rise for more than an hour.

As I lay back on my sleeping bag, the thought struck me that "shameless goats" could have explained the structure of the sites that we found in the wider *wadis*—the circular corrals with smaller circular dwelling areas attached on opposite sides. I had assumed that humans in the dwellings would have protected livestock in the corrals from predators. However, as Pesiah's misdeed suggested, the corrals could also have protected the contents of the households from the livestock. Amused with my mental prowess, I fell back asleep.

Flies crawling on my mouth startled me awake. I jerked my hand upward, pursing my

lips and wiping them against the sleeve of my T-shirt. A grating whir surrounded me. The sun was peeking above the horizon. I wrapped my *kafiah* and jacket about my head and arms. They would fend off both flies and newly rising sun. Shai snored, oblivious to such discomforts. Muted by my coverings, the whir of the flies lulled me back to sleep.

Sweat pooling in my eyes reawakened me. The shadows of the morning had disappeared. Even Shai arose, no longer inured to the mounting heat. We wiped the sweat from our faces and arms and, together, unfolded the tent and pitched it over our sleeping bags. We had eaten late the previous night. With a few words, we agreed to forgo breakfast and then resettled beneath the tent.

I realized that my arms and legs were itching. Looking down, I saw red blotches spread over them. A chill of apprehension crept over me as my mind swept back to my fever. I looked closer and recognized the eruptions of mild sun allergy, easily treated with the cortisone cream that I carried. With relief, I wondered at the eruptions breaking out, even though I kept fully covered during daylight. It served as another reminder of how fragile men are in this environment.

The folded tent—in actuality, the agricultural netting—was my favorite backrest. Except when we pitched it to provide our midday shelter, it was available for my more prosaic use. With it now spread overhead, I substituted a saddle in its stead.

I reclined against the saddle to reread and expand the notes of my journal and to record my thoughts of the previous evening and the present morning. I did most of my writing before we broke camp. Sometimes I added a few scribbled words along the trail. By the time of our midday rests, the heat was too oppressive to write, even in the shade. By evening, I was too exhausted.

When I wrote more than a page or two, Shai would break camp alone—cleaning pots in the sand, bringing in the camels, saddling them, and packing their saddle bags. I had mixed feelings about him shouldering those burdens. In part, I was grateful that his efforts allowed me the time to write. In part, I felt the guilt of a shirker.

We talked about it once. He felt no resentment that I spent my time writing, or that I would lag behind on the trail to take photographs. My purpose was to record the Negev. His was to ensure that I could do so as undisturbed and safely as conditions allowed.

As I adjusted the small of my back to the contours of the saddle, Shai took a few drops of

water to wash his hands, as a Muslim before prayer. He then rummaged into his knapsack and extracted a package neatly wrapped in a worn towel. He carefully unfolded the towel and removed a copy of the *Chumash*, the first Five Books of Moses.

I wondered at the complexity of his spirit. He was not particularly observant of the Sabbath. In common with most secular Israelis, he would not step foot in a synagogue, except under duress. If challenged, he might not acknowledge a belief in God. Yet, here in the desert, his words revealed a comfort with the Almighty that was as complete as that of the most fervently observant Chassid or most faithful *Bedu*.

Pesiah and Chalah had been nibbling at bits of brush. Suddenly, they stopped, standing upright. Their eyes focused on the upper reaches of the *wadi* wall. I held my breath, moving only my eyes to follow their stares. A lone Dorcas Gazelle stood at the rim of the wall, staring down. The three animals eyed each other motionlessly.

Surprisingly, the gazelle began to pick its way down the cliff toward us. Unlike ibex, gazelles tend to stay in open areas, away from the rocks and slopes of enclosed *wadis*. Much more so than ibex, they shy away from humans. It's unusual that one would remain so close, even when separated by a vertical wall of 60 feet. Then, perhaps sensing the presence of Shai and myself, the gazelle stopped and retraced its steps. Reaching the rim, it vanished from sight.

The sun climbed higher. Its reflected light glared from the *wadi* walls. No trace of wind reached us on the floor. The air hung still and stifling.

Shai looked up. "You are feeling how hot the *wadis* are. It's cooler in the open desert. There, we can feel the wind and the sun doesn't beat down from the rocks."

I nodded in understanding.

We prepared a simple lunch—challah left from our Sabbath meal, tahina sauce, and a melon.

We split and cleaned the melon, feeding the fibrous core and its seeds to the goats. We let the split halves sit, allowing the juice to evaporate and chill the flesh. Several flies alighted

on the exposed halves. Like the goats, they were part of our caravan, constantly with us. Sometimes, they were fewer, usually in the open desert. Sometimes, they were more, usually in the *wadis*, where they could take shelter in rock crevices during the heat of the day. It was pointless to whisk them away. They would either return or be replaced by others. In the desert, one's sense of hygiene quickly shifts. Today, in this abandoned wasteland, flies would not carry the infectious pathogens that could devastate an urban population. They were more an annoyance than a hazard, and were countered by drawing one's *kafiah* across one's face.

As the melon and its flies chilled, I prepared the tahina sauce. Tahina itself, is little more than crushed sesame seeds, which may vary in color from off-white to light beige. It is similar in consistency to natural, unhomogenized peanut butter, but totally different in taste. Middle Eastern cookbooks may describe the sauce as made by mixing tahina, water, lemon juice, olive oil, salt, garlic, parsley, dill, paprika, and cumin. Ours, however, included the indescribably exotic spices that Shai magically withdrew from his ammunition box—or on occasion picked from a shrub.

We ate in silence, tearing off small slices of bread to scoop the sauce, savoring the cool melon—now free of flies as our motions kept them at bay. I sipped from my canteen, Shai from a water bottle.

As we finished our meal, Shai broke the silence. "Look at the bush behind you."

I shifted to my right. Thirty feet away, a dark green shrub, caked in dust, grew to a height of four feet. With the exception of two scrawny acacias, it stood above the other flora in the *wadi*. Its thin and narrow leaves vaguely resembled the needles of a fir or juniper. In common with all plants of the desert, the leaves had evolved to minimize the loss of water.

I recognized it as a tamarisk, one of the few trees that can survive south of Be'er Sheva, where the precipitation diminishes to as little as an inch a year. It roots in the sandy soil typical of the *wadis*, and grows as either a tree or a bush. One of a handful of halophytic—salt loving—species, it can survive a salt content that would be deadly to most other plants.

Nabataen farmers, and perhaps those before them, planted tamarisk trees at the upstream faces of the irrigation dams across the *wadis*. Indeed, the remnants of the irrigation dams at Wadi Jethro supported several of them. As the tamarisks grew, their tangle of roots trapped silt carried by the winter floods, deepening the soil that accumulated behind the dams and enabling it to retain yet more water.

The tamarisk is intertwined with Biblical history. Burton Bernstein, in *Sinai: The Great and Terrible Wilderness*, talks of the manna from heaven, which nourished the Tribes of Israel during the Exodus. It may have come from mitelike insects that feed on the tamarisk. When the insects pierce the plant, it produces a resinous secretion, which as described in Exodus 16:31, is "like coriander seed, white, and [tasting] like ... honey." The *Bedu* of the northern Sinai call it *Mann es-Sammah*, "manna from heaven," and into the 20th century used it as a sweetener.

"You have read your books," Shai continued, "and you know that the tamarisk is suited to this part of the desert. But there are more important reasons for it than that. After the shepherds of Abraham and Abimelech fought over the well at Be'er Sheva, Abraham and Abimelech made a pact. When Abimelech departed, Abraham planted a tamarisk at the well in honor of God. You know the story. But do you know why Abraham planted a tamarisk and not another tree?"

"No," I acknowledged. "I had never thought of that, only *etz hayim*." I used the Hebrew, "tree of life," the symbolic binding of the Torah and the Jewish People.

Shai smiled. "In Hebrew the tamarisk is called *ashel*. Its letters are *aleph*, *shin*, and *lamed*. These letters carry a mystical message. For they are the first letters of the words *achilah*, *shtia*, and *leviah*. These words mean eating, drinking, and accompanying."

"This is how one must treat guests in the desert, not only by sharing food and water, but also by accompanying them as they leave your presence to continue their journey. If you just give them bread and water and let them leave your tent unaccompanied, it is as if you felt obligated to welcome them but cannot wait for them to go. However, if you accompany them when they leave, it means that you are sad at their departure and want to keep their presence as long as possible. This is what Abraham did for the three angels who visited him and promised that Sara would suckle a child in her old age. He walked with them to see them off as they continued their journey to Sodom."

The corners of my mouth creased upward in appreciation. Shai was but half my age. Yet, he had willingly taken the role of guiding me spiritually as well as physically.

Later I would learn that in modern Israel, *aleph*, *shin*, and *lamed*, indeed, convey a message. But they refer to the words *achilah*, *shtia*, and *lina*—not *leviah*. *Lina* means lodging. And the acronym for food-drink-lodging refers to an expense account. It is never used in the manner that Shai described.

Yet, in learning this, I was not disappointed. For that sense holds relevance only for the

modern world. Shai's meaning, whether passed down to him by others or his own construct, conveys the mystical substance of the Negev.