

FIRST TUESDAY (morning)

CHAPTER 10: THE WATER HOLE AT WADI ISSARON

"As a thorn that cometh into the hand of a drunkard, so is a parable in the mouth of fools." (PROVERBS 26:9)

Rain in the Negev is rare, localized, brief, and torrential. One *wadi* may receive a storm and the next one nothing. In some places, rain may not fall for three years. During the driest periods, the brush desiccates and diminishes until so little is left that even goats go hungry. At such times, the *Bedu* women, accompanied by their daughters and young sons, drive their few goats or sheep as far as 8 or 9 miles from their encampments to find forage.

In most of the area through which we would travel, rain had not fallen for two years. We packed fodder for the goats. The camels would make do. They could go for days with little or nothing to eat, living off of the fat in their humps.

The strap of Shai's sun goggles had broken in Wadi Jethro. To protect his eyes he now wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, peaked like a dunce cap. He had picked it up as a tourist trinket during his travels through Morocco. Perched over his *kafiah*, it looked ridiculously out of place.

We traveled south from the camel yard, moving away from the Arava. The terrain remained as desolate and forbidding as that we had traversed the day before, varying from scorched black to burnt brown. Only one or two shriveled twigs, extending from a fissure or depression in the limestone, suggested that the land might support life.

In late morning, we came upon what seemed to be several well-laid courses of rectangular stones, which appeared to buttress an uplifted segment of limestone strata. They seemed almost perfectly set, as if laid by human hands. In the Negev, such formations are not uncommon. However, as were all such seemingly man-made courses, they were the products of geological disintegration. In the summer, searing hot days expand the desert rock; cool nights contract it. In the winter, warm days and bitterly cold nights do the same. Repeated through eons, this process cleaves the limestone. In some places, as here, the cleavage appears as meticulously set stone walls. Millennia more, and the stones would disintegrate into the

pervasive rubble that lies strewn across the desert floor.

Usually, I felt comfort from the unchanging continuity of the desert. Sites of habitation could look little different whether they had been abandoned 2,000, 200, or only 20 years ago. I felt a tie to them. Their seeming timelessness gave me a false sense of immortality. If they could remain so unchanged for so long, I felt little reminder of the inevitability of my own death. But here, the cleaving of the stones jolted me. Their symmetry, contrasted against the disarray around them, conveyed the inevitability that they, as with all else, would degrade into formless debris. Perhaps accentuated by the physical weariness that already enveloped me, I recognized the briefness of my own stay on earth, and the unpleasant awareness that accompanied that recognition.

Two Nubian ibex emerged from a depression and climbed onto the ridge opposite us. The leader, an adult male, was adorned with magnificent horns that extended 3 feet from the top of his skull and then curved back 180 degrees. Those of the second, a young male, curved little more than 90 degrees.

The extreme curve rendered the horns dysfunctional in fending off predators, despite the fact that an upward flick could seemingly impale and eviscerate a leaping attacker. Indeed, their sole purpose is to challenge other males for a harem of females during the rutting season. At that time, dueling males will lunge at each other, butting heads to exhaustion. The victor will herd with the females. The vanquished will herd with other males who have yet to reach mating age or have also lost a contest for access to the females.

The trail edged down a slight slope that opened onto a bowl more than 100 feet deep and twice as wide. Worn grazing paths etched across the bowl's lower half. They bespoke of once-ample vegetation. Now, there were no signs of growth. Even the floor of the bowl appeared void of plants. Brown-black stones littered a brown-black landscape, as if a volcanic eruption had forever seared all that had once lived here.

The trail curved along the inside of the bowl just below its crest. We circled less than a

quarter way around and exited onto a plateau. Within a few feet, we stood in the upper reaches of Wadi Issaron. Here, in contrast to the bowl, a relative abundance of plants struggled for life. Shai reached down and picked a sprig adorned with budding yellow flowers, little larger than the tip of a kitchen match. Their diminutive size was common to the Negev. The smaller a plant's surface, the less water lost to evaporation.

"This is the Paroshet. It is excellent for tea and good for the stomach. It has a very good taste. Here, put it in your mouth. But don't chew."

I slipped the buds under my tongue. Almost instantly, a sharp taste of mint rushed through my senses. My saliva flowed in response. Shai grinned. "It's good in this heat." I nodded agreement.

Wadi Issaron nourished a veritable garden of herbs. Shai pointed lovingly to each and described its distinct medicinal or culinary use. Aromatic Star cured stomach ailments. Lemongrass furnished an aromatic tea. Achileah, fragrant, albeit bitter, cured colds, fevers, and difficult breathing. Kazuach smelled like celery and served as a flavoring for lentils, rice, or beans. I thought of my father. He would have been enthralled.

As Shai described each plant, I took a small sliver, inhaled its aroma, and savored its sensations on my lips and tongue. I reveled in its fresh pungency. The dried spices of an American supermarket paled by comparison. Passing the kazuach under my nostrils, I thought of Tomer and, again, the story of Esau selling his birthright to Jacob for bread and lentil stew.

I better appreciated why we would eat so well during our journey. Shai was more than a guide through the wilderness. He had become part of it, learning its nuances. He enabled us not only to survive but also to glean rare bits of pleasure amid its relentless harshness.

As if confirming my thoughts, he leaned down and broke a few sprigs from the kazuach. "We will take some kazuach for our supper tonight. It will be delicious. And lemongrass for tea." Walking a few steps further, he picked a small handful of the latter.

We reached a wider part of the *wadi*. There, Shai pointed to a stone arrangement seemingly laid by human hands, but with no obvious structural purpose. Unusual for a man-made structure, it lay just above the flood line. This meant that in the heaviest rains, it would be inundated by the runoff.

The arrangement stood by itself. It had no foundation. No water channels led to or from it. This precluded an agricultural purpose. It had been formed with the largest rocks available.

They had been placed in two parallel rows a little more than a foot apart. Heavy horizontal slabs, some still in place, were laid on top, forming a closed passage. The opening of the passage faced us. The opposite end was sealed with rocks. The passage, itself, was just over a foot high at the opening and perhaps 18 inches high at the sealed end. The entire arrangement was about 6 feet long. Close to the sealed end, a large vertical slab stood upright, held in position by two of the roof slabs. One roof slab still lay in its original place. The others had been shifted by the force of a heavy runoff.

"Can you think of what this is?" Shai queried.

I studied the heavy roof slabs, the enclosed passage, and the large vertical slab positioned at the far end. "A dead-fall trap?" I ventured.

"You are very observant," Shai grinned. "Yes, it is a leopard trap. This was once a leopard trail. That is why the trap is here just above the flood line. There are 10 or 12 in this part of the Negev. Just like the figures of the leopard temple, it shows that at one time there must have been many leopards here. They would prey on the flocks. They could also take a small child or a larger one—or, if the leopard jumped from above, perhaps an adult."

"That's not something that concerns us much today," I mused.

"No," Shai replied. "Today the predators—wolves, hyenas, leopards—no longer attack humans, at least I have never heard of it. In the past, life was less certain—a broken water bag, a fever, a slip from a cliff, a wild animal. All could take people very quickly. Not many lived the 70 or 80 years that the Bible gives us. Even when people tried to protect themselves and their flocks with these traps, it was not certain that they would succeed. If it had been easy, there would not have been the temple or so many traps."

Shai braced himself and lifted the vertical slab upwards a few inches and then let it fall. It dropped easily.

"The people who lived here would tie a newborn kid and put it in the trap behind the slab. They would place a stick to hold up the slab. Then they would tie a rope from the kid, guide it around the back of the trap, and loop it over the stick.

"You can imagine the kid just born, still smeared with its birth blood, crying pitifully for its mother. The leopard would hear the kid. It could tell from its cry that it was lost and alone. It would smell the fresh blood and be drawn into the trap. It would reach the kid, bite through its skull, and begin to drag the body forward. The rope would tighten and pull away the stick. The

slab would fall, pinning the leopard. The trap is narrow. The leopard could not move. The people would hear it roar and come to kill it with spears."

"It was very effective," I observed. "The slab would come down on the leopard's shoulders. If that didn't break its back, the leopard would try to back out. Perhaps, it could pull from under the slab as far as its neck. But at that point, the slab would pin the back of its skull."

"Yes," Shai agreed. "It worked very well."

I recalled the Biblical story of Joseph and his coat of many colors. Joseph's brothers, angered by his dreams of dominance, stripped him of his coat and sold him for 20 shekels to passing Ishmaelite traders. The brothers slaughtered a kid and dipped the coat into its blood. They took the coat to Jacob, their father, as proof that a wild beast had devoured his favorite son. On seeing the bloody garment, Jacob cried out in despair, accepting, without question, that Joseph had been so killed.

We continued down the *wadi*. Within a short distance, the floor of the *wadi* grew steeper.

"We are almost at the water hole," Shai spoke. "It's just beyond where the *wadi* drops. But be careful, the rocks may be loose, so it will be better to crawl to the edge."

Forty feet in front of us, the uppermost strata of limestone had washed away to form three shallow terraces. It appeared that just below the terraces, out of sight, more strata had eroded, forming a drop of what seemed a few more feet to the water hole. The third terrace was swept clean of rocks. In places, sections were being undermined by the rushing waters, confirming Shai's warning. Shai dropped to his knees, crept to the edge, and slowly looked over. I followed.

We lay on the overhanging lip of a dry waterfall, seemingly suspended in air. The terror of heights gripped me. It took all of my willpower to keep staring down. Eighty feet below, the force of the plunging waters had carved a basin. Within it lay a malachite-green pool—the water hole of Wadi Issaron. Variegated bands of sediments several times the pool's size spread around it, marking how far the pool had extended at the height of the flood. We crept back from the edge. My terror subsided.

I wanted to examine the tracks of the animals that came to drink. The vertical walls of the *wadi* blocked us from descending directly. To reach the pool, we followed a circuitous route—briefly retracing our steps, then climbing out of the *wadi*, trekking along its edge to beyond the lip of the waterfall, again climbing down to the *wadi* floor, and finally moving up the

wadi until we reached the basin. In the rough terrain and grueling heat, it took us more than half an hour.

As we approached the pool, I gazed at the bands of sediments that rimmed the basin. As the floodwaters had stilled, the lightest silt had formed a ring of mud at what had been the uppermost edge of the pool. Hardened by the sun, it chronicled the life of the water hole just after the last rain, a year and a half before. The ring abounded with ibex tracks and the marks left by smaller game. Intermixed were the prints of a lone wolf. I reflected on how the water hole sustained life. But, it also drew the predator, who lived through extinguishing life.

A band of sand lay below the hardened mud. Below that lay light gravel, then coarser gravel, and then rocks. The rocks and heaviest sediments had settled at the lowest part of the basin.

"This couldn't support many people," I observed.

"Not today," Shai replied. "Now the hole is mostly filled with rocks and sand washed in by the winter floods. The sun shines on it too, so the water lasts for no more than four or five months. When the *Bedu* lived here, they kept the hole clean. Each year, before the rains, they would empty the gravel and sand. With that, the hole was deep enough that the water would last throughout the year and perhaps longer. The *Bedu* always prefer water to moisture from plants. They use plants only in an emergency."

I thought back to the ruin of the well at Wadi Jethro. Now completely filled with sediment, it could be identified only by the remnants of the circular stone wall that surrounded it. Here, the water cascading over the falls still kept a small part of the water hole clear, even though the *Bedu* were no longer present to clean it.

We stood at the edge of the pool. What had appeared as malachite-green from 80 feet above proved a layer of stagnant slime. That didn't deter us from stripping to our waists. Any water in the desert is desirable and here water was in abundance.

Squatting at the edge of the slime, I soaked my T-shirt and *kafiah* and, using the latter, began to sponge the dried sweat and grime from my body. We had left Shacharut but a few hours earlier. Yet, dirty effluent from the dust already accumulated on my face and arms trickled from the *kafiah* each time I wrung it. As I sponged, I moved my left hand into the murk to balance myself as I crouched.

Pain stabbed through my palm. Mouthing an expletive, I jolted backwards, jerking my

hand upward. Two inches of an acacia thorn stuck out vertically. Mouthing another expletive, I grasped the thorn and yanked. Bright blood spurted as the thorn cleared my flesh. The puncture closed instantly. The blood slowed to a trickle. "Damn!" swept through my brain. "Deep enough to pierce an artery." I bit into my palm, sucking at the wound, tasting first the decay of the pool and then the salty sweetness of my blood. I spit out the mixture of slime, saliva, and blood. Again, I sucked and spit, sucked and spit, sucked and spit. Within a few seconds, I no longer tasted the sweetness. Glancing at my hand, I saw no trace of blood. The puncture had sealed. I bit down again trying to force out more blood. Barely a drop came.

"You sucked the poison out. I don't think we have to worry," Shai's voice came from behind me. I looked up to meet his gaze. His furrowed brow belied his words.

Taking an adhesive bandage from my breast pocket, I covered the wound. Given the depth of the puncture and the speed with which it had sealed, my action seemed more ritualistic than relevant. I thought of the instant spurt of blood and Shai's frown. I had no doubt that some of what was on the thorn was now spreading through my bloodstream. And what pathogens may it have carried? It was unlikely that human excrement had fouled the pool. But, given the condition of the water, that thought gave me scant comfort. I didn't relish the possibility of sepsis.

Had I been in an urban area, such a puncture would have warranted an anxious trip to an emergency room and almost certainly a regimen of prophylactic antibiotics. Here, beyond the bandage, there was little that we could do. I was in good health. Perhaps all would be well. The phrase, *Ensha'Allah*, came to mind. "May it be the Will of God." Now, I better appreciated the fatalism it conveyed.

We replaced our shirts and retraced our steps to above the dry falls. I luxuriated in the half hour of relative coolness as the water evaporated from my T-shirt and *kafiah*.