

FIRST THURSDAY (morning)

**CHAPTER 13:      *ALONE IN THE DESERT***

"The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night...." (EXODUS 13:21)

Arising with the sun, I felt my energy restored. I kneaded the dough and baked our morning bread.

During the three summers that Shai and I had journeyed through the Negev, I had never traveled by myself. This year, I was determined to do so. I proposed that I strike out alone to Be'er Milhan—the well of Milhan. It was but one half day from where we were camped. Usually, it was two days travel from Shacharut. We too would have reached it in that time had we not detoured to the water hole of Wadi Issaron. Occasionally, guides from Shacharut followed the route on four-day trips—the longest offered to tourists and one that they seldom chose.

Shai resisted my proposal. His job, he pointed out, was to ensure that I got back unharmed. Traveling alone in heat of 100 degrees Fahrenheit or more was not safe. Yes, the guides sometimes went by themselves, but usually in the morning or evening. I was proposing to travel through the heat of day. I was far older than any of the guides. I needed more water than did they. I might miscalculate and drink too little. And even if I could read a map, the desert can be disorienting. It is easy to confuse the grazing paths for the trail. Even though I would be following a sometimes-traveled route, I could become lost. Besides, Samech could not be trusted. He was not used to going alone. He could sense that I was not experienced. Perhaps he would bolt.

Every objection Shai raised was true. But I persisted. In typical Israeli fashion, we negotiated. Finally, Shai acceded to my demand. I would travel ahead. He would follow. Sometimes I would be in his sight, but more often not.

We carried maps—both in Hebrew and English—prepared by The Israel Survey and

published by The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel. At a scale of 1:50,000 they are detailed enough for experienced readers, albeit not to the degree of North American maps, which are typically to a scale of 1:24,000. In contrast to much of the area we had already traversed, I would be following a recognized route. It would be marked with blazes painted onto rocks. Under such circumstances, Shai's concern seemed to me overstated. Or perhaps not. As we oriented the map, my eyes fell to the paragraph below the listing of "Geographic Terms and Place-Names":

"This map should not be construed as an invitation by its publishers to engage in any hiking or related activity ... travelers [should] carry valid insurance covering personal hiking accidents including evacuation charges to hospital."

In a country not known for its liability lawyers, these words were a jolting reminder of how unforgiving the desert can be.

Shai and I separated with a slapping of backs, the modest bravado of men who part when one is about to pursue an uncertain venture with an uncertain outcome. Samech readily followed my commands, perhaps stepping a bit faster, perceiving that for once, he, not Louis, was granted the lead.

Samech and I moved beyond the campsite, over a ridge and into the emptiness of the Negev. I scanned the landscape, turning full circle to grasp the solitude. With Shai, Louis, and the goats now gone from view, the desert seemed even more vast—the void more complete. A strange exhilaration gripped me as I inhaled the panorama of infinity and recognized my insignificance within it. Around me lay the vast emptiness, which held nothing, yet contained all.

Three weeks before, Tomer had led a small group over this route. Occasional camel droppings marked their path. Odorless and dull black, they were evidence of Tomer's passing.

Droppings reveal much about those who passed before, when, and under what circumstances. Fresh droppings glisten and smell. Within a day they dry and turn dull black. They become duller over time. After several months, they begin to bleach. Within a year, they

bleach completely. In two years, they disintegrate into fibrous half shells. Beyond two years, perhaps more if there is no rain, they disappear. Typically, camel droppings are rounded and the size of children's marbles. However, when camels have taken water, the first droppings are larger, looser, and clumped together—looking akin to the droppings of a calf. This reveals that the camels were moving away from a nearby water source. Tied to the direction of the camel's tracks, they point the way to the water.

Several yards beyond the camel droppings lay a slight depression, dusted by a shallow layer of loess. The tracks of Tomer's group were imprinted in the dust, undisturbed, as if the group had passed but a few hours before. Only the slightest crumbling at the edges, and a barely discernable layer of dust, revealed that weeks had passed since the tracks were made. One set of tracks stood out—the soles of boots with straight crisscrossed treads that intersected at 90 degrees. They formed a pattern of perfect squares, as if they had been molded by a waffle iron.

Almost all of the trail passed over rubble. Nonetheless, I would see the camel droppings and spy the tracks left in sporadic vestiges of loess. These confirmed that I was following in the footsteps of Tomer's group. The waffle-iron treads became a sign for me. I began to anticipate them in depressions where a trace of loess or sediment might collect. They were among the largest of the boot marks, and the most distinct. The man who made them became my ghostly companion—without form and unknown.

As the heat intensified, I wondered at my growing attachment to the tracks and the unknown person who had left them. They provided a continuity in the emptiness and with that a comfort. I thought that perhaps, in a like way, the signs of the Almighty, which had guided the wanderers of the Exodus—the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night—had provided those souls with a similar comfort.

My thoughts were broken as Samech bellowed a plaintive moan and jerked back against his lead, almost pulling it from my hand. I turned. Samech had stopped. His neck was arched to the rear, vainly searching for Louis and Shai. Again, he moaned and tried to go back. I yanked at his lead, jerking his head forward.

Camels, like goats and sheep, are herd animals. Despite their massive size, unless trained to solitude while young, they stay near other camels and fear being separated from them. Unlike goats, camels may wander far from each other, but seldom out of sight. Even though Louis dominated Samech and sometimes bit him, Samech's separation anxiety far exceeded any

suffering he may have felt over his subordinate place in the camel yard. As we moved on, Samech became increasingly distressed, more frequently looking back and trying to return. Shai's concern was well founded. Samech was ready to bolt.

With each arduous step, I pulled harder to keep Samech on track. I laughed inwardly at the irony—gasping to drag a 1,200-pound camel across the desert in searing heat. I had no option but to continue. If I allowed Samech his way, he would be uncontrollable for the rest of our journey.

Again he tried to pull away. With a shout of *yallah*, I slapped the lead rope across his face. Uttering a half-roar of surprise, he pulled back. Then with a bellowing moan, he acquiesced to my command, plodding onward, but still, with every few steps, looking back for Louis.

I disliked striking Samech. Yet, the harshness of the desert corroded my patience. I would only reflect on what I had done later, when, under different circumstances, I struck Samech a second time. Now, struggling with Samech in the overpowering heat, I had no reserve of energy. I focused all of my willpower to take each step and pull Samech forward.

My grueling effort brought me to the point of complete exhaustion. The sun was reaching its zenith as we struggled over a small ridge. I stopped to wait for Shai.

I could detect no outward response from Samech when Shai and Louis appeared. Only when our caravan continued onward, did Samech seem to respond to his separation. Without complaint, he waited for Louis to take the lead.