

## CHAPTER 30:        *EPILOGUE*

I sat at a table on the shadowed veranda of the King David Hotel, staring at the walls of Jerusalem, glowing golden in the afternoon sun. The view was much the same as when the hotel had been built more than 60 years before, during the time of the British Mandate. Tennis courts stretched below the veranda and beyond them a swimming pool. Behind rose the parapets of the Old City.

I still felt disquieted by my separation from the Negev. Nominally, I had come to the veranda to review the notes of my journal. In truth, I had come in the empty hope of finding and binding to a remnant of the past—the time still within living memory when the *Bedu* had roamed a desert that stretched unbroken from Damascus and the Suez to the farthest reaches of the Arabian Peninsula.

Affixed to the hotel entrance, three equal-sized brass plates bespoke of that past—"King David Hotel"—each separately engraved in English, Hebrew, and Arabic. As befitted the then-reigning power, the plate in English was affixed to the keystone above the door. Those in Hebrew and Arabic were affixed below, one at either side.

The interior of the hotel had been restored to its imperial glory. From parquet floors to wall hangings, the billiard and reading rooms looked as they had when Britain still ruled. Yet, they were out of place, like ill-chosen museum settings, deserted and unconnected to the present by even the thinnest thread of history. Unlike the grand hotels of Europe, neither concierge, nor doormen, nor bellmen cherished the past these rooms had witnessed, nor seemingly were aware of it.

No one knew, nor cared, that sheiks had once sat here to receive the obeisance of Mandatory officials, that officers of the General Staff had followed the victories of Rommel against a succession of failed British generals as the *Afrika Korps* pursued Britain's Eighth Army across North Africa, that intelligence officers had weighed the seething nationalist resentment and uncertain loyalty of the Arabs, and that yet others had brooded over the looming threat of military disaster, as Rommel's panzers closed on Alexandria and Cairo during the summer and early fall of 1942.

I sat alone, ignored by two lounging waitresses, faces blank with boredom, who

personified the indifference of Israeli service. I would have welcomed a glass of water. Yet, I was thankful for their apathy. It enabled me to grapple uninterrupted with the torrent of impressions that overwhelmed my thoughts.

I paged through my journal, catching the phrases—"vast emptiness," "unrelenting heat," "on the edge," "*Ensha'Allah*"—recalling the images and sensations of the moments in which I had scrawled the words. I struggled to transform those memories into the logic of Western thought. It was seemingly a futile task, as if dissecting the intimate moments shared by lovers could capture the heart of their passion. The shadows lengthened. The walls changed to pale amber. Slowly and with difficulty, I coalesced the impressions into thoughts and then into a coherent, albeit imperfect, thesis. The amber deepened. I began to write.

I formed the question, which after my first journey had again drawn me to the Negev, and the answer to which had become my obsession: Why had that barren wilderness served as the crucible of monotheism?

This is not a theological question. To the rabbis, and I assume Christian and Muslim clergy, it holds little more than a passing secular interest. For them, the relevant moment centers on the revelation of God and His Law, not why in a particular place or at a particular time He chose to reveal Himself.

The rabbis with whom I originally raised this question knew of no treatise on the subject. Only when I was well into writing my third draft did Rabbi Joshua Haberman introduce me to the work of Joseph Ernest Renan, the 19th century French Orientalist, philosopher, and historian.

Born in 1823, Renan had trained for the priesthood. In 1845, he renounced the collar and turned to the secular study of religion and philosophy. In 1860, he traveled to Syria as part of an expedition commissioned by the French government. Fifteen years later, and by then a member of the *Academie des Inscriptions*, he was appointed professor of Hebrew at the *College de France*. His brilliant and heretical analyses of the Gospels of the New Testament brought him academic renown—and suspension from his teaching position. Afterward, he undertook an expedition to Egypt. Despite his suspension, he remained at the college, and became director in 1883. His five-volume treatise, *A History of the People of Israel*, was published in Paris between 1887 and 1893. Shortly thereafter, it was translated into English. In that work, Renan discussed the interplay of the desert experience of the Tribes of Israel and the evolution of their God.

I have not read Renan's work. The questions that I raised—and the answers formed—

came as I journeyed through the Negev, encountered its harsh emptiness, and later mused over those experiences. I surmise that Renan may have had similar experiences and that those experiences shaped the questions he asked and the answers he found.

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Why in that desert, during the 40 years of the Exodus, did the tribes of Israel evolve—and accept—the concept of one Almighty God? God first forged His Covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:2–14). But it was only in the desert, at Sinai, that Abraham's descendants accepted and confirmed that Covenant. Conversely, why did other peoples of that time—Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Indians, Chinese—who lived in watered and verdant environments and were materially more sophisticated—maintain their polytheism or worship God in human form?

Indeed, the evolution and acceptance of monotheism in the Middle Eastern deserts took place not once, but twice—first when the tribes of Israel, led by Moses, adopted Judaism and two millennia later when the tribes of Arabia, led by Mohammed, accepted Islam. Why was it that Judaism, and later Islam, flourished? What was it about the desert—and what remains about the desert—that compelled those tribes to find and accept a single, omnipresent, and omnipotent God?

From before Moses, caravans had carried the riches of Babylonia, Persia, and India to Egypt and vice versa. Coming and going, they traversed Arabia, the Negev, and the Sinai. With the caravans came ideas, as well as merchandise. On this account, it can be argued that the peoples of those deserts were exposed to foreign ideas and the opportunity to adopt them. Such ideas may have included that of a single God.

But the caravans also carried their merchandise and ideas to the urban bazaars of Egypt, Babylonia, Persia, India, and China, the hubs of trade. The merchants of these bazaars were as sophisticated as the desert tribes, if not more so. Why, if the ideas carried by the caravans included that of one God, did only the peoples of the desert adopt them? Why not the urban peoples of the river valleys as well?

Ramesses II, ruler of Egypt from 1279 to 1212 BCE, is conventionally identified as the

Pharaoh of the Exodus. In the earliest years of his reign, the oldest of his retainers would have been the youngest of those of Akhenaten, King of Egypt from 1358 to 1340 BCE. It was Akhenaten who embraced the concept of One God. After his death, the priesthood suppressed his idea, erasing his God from the lexicon of Egyptian deities. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western scholars discovered Akhenaten. They held that Moses, as a prince of Pharaoh's household, could have learned his beliefs, thus providing the spiritual foundation for leading the tribes of Israel to their rendezvous at Sinai.

However, knowledge of the One God does not explain why the tribes of Israel accepted Him. Nor does it explain why the Egyptians, whose Pharaoh had once embraced such a God, rejected Him.

Alternatively, as the rabbis wrote, the tribes of Israel held firm to the God of Abraham during their 400 years in Egypt. In concept, they may have been the source of Akhenaten's monotheism, not the other way around. But, if that were the case, why did the tribes of Israel reject the pantheon of Egyptian gods to maintain their One God while the Egyptians maintained their pantheon and rejected the One?

As with all revolutionary movements, the tribes of Israel needed an "Exodus Ideology"—a doctrine that supported their separation from the past that they were rejecting. For the Exodus itself, the Passover narrative, the *Seder*, tells that story—the physical and spiritual oppression by Pharaoh, the yearning for freedom by the people, the Ten Plagues wrought by God, the eventual release by Pharaoh, and the going forth from Egypt.

An Exodus Ideology would have enabled the tribes of Israel to shed allegiance to the Egyptian gods. However, the need for an Exodus Ideology does not explain why the tribes chose a Single Being. In forming their ideology, they could have adopted a pantheon of gods, albeit different from those of Egypt.

That adoption of One God centers more on the nature of the desert itself. Moving beneath the unrelenting desert sun differs from moving in a watered and shaded environment. Journeys must be planned from water source to water source. They must account for the limitations of how fast and how far man and beast can travel—and the reality that men must shelter when the intensity of the sun becomes too great to bear.

On a shaded trail in a temperate region, a man with a light pack can easily hike 20 to 25 miles a day. In the heat of the desert, a man and loaded camel can travel but half that distance.

A broken water bag can mean death within a few hours or, if perchance shade is found, 24 hours for even the strongest. In the desert, in contrast to watered regions, the need for water—and awareness of that need—stays constant.

Paradoxically, I have known thirst more in temperate forests than in the Negev. In the forests, water—be it a spring, stream, creek, or pond—is always present, at the foot of a hill, the end of a meadow, or the middle of a valley. Because of water's availability, one thinks of it little and is more indifferent to dehydration and its dangers. Not so in the wilderness. With rare exceptions—the water hole at Wadi Issaron, Be'er Milchan, and the pool near Wadi Eteq—once the winter rains have passed, the desert is void of water. Because of its scarcity, thoughts of water are constant.

The absence of water places man and beast always at the edge of death—the approach of which can be unambiguously measured in terms of liters and hours. Among those who travel the desert, the awareness of death is ever present. It compels men to recognize their frailty. And that recognition nurtures a predisposition to embrace a Greater Force, more so than would be the case in the more forgiving environment of a river valley.

The embrace comes quickly, almost without thought. By the campfire, in the solitude of the night, talk of God is as spontaneous and natural as talk of politics at an urban cocktail party. Death, and because of death, God, become constant companions.

The awareness of one's closeness to death may explain why the desert compels men to seek a god. But it does not explain why in the desert, men chose the One God.

In stark contrast to Eastern North America and Northern Europe, the Negev is an expanse of complete and overwhelming emptiness. When the wind dies, it is a place of overbearing silence. I have never experienced the combined effect of emptiness and silence within the temperate zones. There can be complete silence within a forest, frozen in the depths of winter. But a snow-bound forest conveys a sense of loneliness, not of void.

The combination of silence and emptiness, the defining elements of the Negev, surely nurtured the concept of a Single Being. That silence and emptiness allowed fewer bases than elsewhere for evolving and maintaining the polytheism common to ancient peoples. Unlike the desert tribes of Israel and Arabia, the peoples of the great river valleys, as well as the Greeks, Romans, and Norse, lived in far more varied landscapes. That variation spawned their concepts of multiple gods, just as the silent void of the desert enabled that of One God to take root.

But, why did only the tribes of Israel and Arabia evolve the concept of One God—and not others who lived in similarly severe and barren environments? Why didn't the peoples of other deserts—the Gobi, the Kalahari, or the Arctic—come to accept Him?

Perhaps they did. However, their beliefs in One Being would have had little chance of gaining currency. In some deserts, the Kalahari and the Arctic, the people were isolated from major trade routes. Without trade routes, there were no paths along which their ideas could diffuse to a broader world. Peoples of other deserts were often illiterate. The written Torah, and later the written Koran, enabled Jews and Muslims to compile a sacred record, to assure its continuity, and to diffuse it to other peoples. Without writing, dwellers in other deserts were less able to do so.

The God of the Bible and the Koran is compassionate, merciful, and forgiving—forever willing to welcome back into his fold those who have fallen from His ways. Yet, He is also severe, demanding, and harsh—ready to blot out those who transgress His Law. In both texts, the severe God dominates.

One should not expect otherwise. For the land in which mankind met that God is, itself, severe, demanding, and harsh. And to reflect that reality so must be the God who rules over it.

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In rereading these pages, I think that surely others, besides Renan, would have pieced together this puzzle. But then I ask myself, how could they have comprehended the desert crucible—the emptiness that contains all—unless they had journeyed through it? But, it doesn't matter.

I lay down my pen with a sense of completion. I have answered for myself the question that drove me to the Negev. Yet, that answer has not slackened my obsession. I look forward more than in previous years to my return and, with my first questions answered, the new experiences that may await me.