

FIRST WEDNESDAY

CHAPTER 12: THE UPPER REACHES OF WADI OVDAH

"See, I have given thee ... dung ... and thou shalt prepare thy bread thereon." (EZEKIEL 4:15)

We had camped on the west side of the *wadi*. Bereft of the shade of the eastern wall, the first rays of morning sun awakened us. The petroglyphs of animals and remnants of stone foundations revealed that others had once settled here.

The *wadi* stretched several hundred yards wide. Nearby, the winter runoff had gouged a channel several feet below us. Within the channel, the skeletal branches of desiccated plants testified, again, that no rain had fallen for more than a year.

Notwithstanding the dearth of green, dead brush was relatively plentiful. We picked several handfuls that had caught on the upstream sides of the few still-rooted plants. These would provide the fire for our breakfast. We then gathered the dung that the camels had dropped during the night. It would dry by evening and provide the fuel for our fire.

These tasks completed, Shai washed his feet, massaging his toes as he did so.

"You should do this," he invited. "It feels very good and you'll feel better."

"I have no need to," I replied. "My boots and socks protect my feet from the stones and dust. You travel with only sandals."

Shai looked up, smiling in acknowledgment.

Shai laid the brush for our morning fire as I folded our sleeping bags and poured the unburned kerosene from our lanterns back into its storage can.

Even though the sun was not yet hot and we had yet to travel, I felt vaguely enervated. I stared at my hand, focusing on the barely discernible mark of the puncture. I thought back to the previous day by the stagnant pool and the acacia thorn impaled in my palm. Admittedly, I was excited by the challenge and danger of our journey. But, I had no adventurous attachment to blood poisoning. I began to comprehend more fully the potential peril from that wound—and felt fear.

I leaned against our sleeping bags, scrawling these thoughts into my journal and sipping from my canteen. Likely, I was only dehydrated. It was not unusual for me to need water in the morning. A liter and hopefully I should be fine. "*Ensha'Allah*." Silently, I mouthed the words. I took comfort. It was as if I could draw the personal attention of the Almighty, who would ensure our safety as we journeyed through this vast and terrible emptiness.

While I mused and wrote, Shai lit the fire and kneaded dough. This morning, we would eat *leba*—*Bedu* bread, shaped like a large, pregnant pancake, and made from our staple of flour, salt, and water. The fire subsided and Shai placed the dough into the center of the ashes.

"It is better to use ashes—not coals. With coals, the *leba* may burn," Shai pointed out.

I appreciated Shai's instruction, just as he appreciated my eagerness to learn. He scooped a handful of sand from the *wadi* floor and poured it over the dough.

"This protects the top of the *leba* from burning. If there is no sand, we use flour. But, flour will burn."

I grunted in reply.

Squatting by the fire, Shai reached for a stick and covered the dough with ashes. We sat in silence, watching the ashes flake into powder as the fire consumed them. As in the night before, I felt no awkwardness in our silence. It had become as natural and familiar as the silence of the desert, itself.

Several minutes passed and Shai scraped the ashes away, revealing the baked bread. On our past journeys, I had learned not to ask how long preparation would take. Like the grandmothers of my generation, Shai always cooked food until it was ready. Poking his stick around the edge of the loaf, he knocked away a few charred pieces. He then tossed the loaf onto a flat metal plate and rising upright, flipped it into the air.

"That is part of the show," he grinned, "but it also takes away the sand."

Shai had placed only the jar of soft goat cheese, *la'baneh* in Hebrew, on the mat. It was the same cheese that we had packed in a glass jar before we had set out for the dunes—a journey that now seemed a world away in time. It had the consistency of heavy sour cream or yogurt and was covered with a thick layer of olive oil. Used to dairy products laced with antibacterial additives and constantly refrigerated, I questioned Shai on how long it could last in this heat.

"The *Bedu* have been preparing cheese from goat milk for thousands of years. They have learned how to make it so it doesn't spoil even without a refrigerator. The olive oil keeps the air

out. Even in this heat, the *la'baneh* will last for a week. But," he paused, his eyes crinkling mischievously, "if we carried a refrigerator with us, it would last for a month, maybe even two." I joined in Shai's grin.

As had become our custom, I recited the blessing. Breaking small pieces of *leba*, we scooped them into the mixture of *la'baneh* and, dripping with olive oil, brought them to our mouths. This and tea was our breakfast.

As we loaded the camels, enervation drained me. It took all the effort I could muster to finish packing the saddlebags and to lash them shut.

As we began to travel, I felt the urge to quit—simply to stop and to lie down in the shadow of Samech. I fought it. In reality, I could have ridden. Yet, to do so would have acknowledged that I hadn't the will to persevere. I forced myself forward, step by step. I sucked from my canteen, as if it were a women's breast, offering me succor.

I thought of Thesiger's and Lawrence's adulation of the physical and moral stamina of the *Bedu*. At that moment, I comprehended their meaning. For a band to survive in this harsh environment, every man had to drive himself to his limit. The group lived too close to the presence of Death to support the infirm for long or, worse yet, the slacker.

I fell into the rhythm of the march and with that felt more able to continue. We passed through a series of *wadis*, each more empty than the next. Despite their utter barrenness, ancient grazing paths cut into their sides. As were the paths in the bowl above Wadi Issaron, those closer to the base were more pronounced and those higher less so. I marveled at how, with rain, plants would grow in this now-desolate waste. Yet, as we passed through, it seemed void of life, except for a few dried branches in the *wadi* floor.

We climbed toward a ridge and the trail dropped into a slight depression. There lay what appeared to be a dead branch, perhaps an inch in diameter. Shai stopped and pointed to it.

"This is a *zugan*. It has found water here. It can grow for 200 or 300 years. Maybe in that time, it will get 2 or 3 inches in diameter. Each branch has its own root. It is a very dense wood and holds water well. When a drought comes, the leaves and branches slowly die. But with rain, even a small number of surviving cells will quickly regenerate. They will grow again until the next drought."

The *zugan*, I thought, seemed a metaphor for life to survive in the desert—ever dependent upon water.

We continued on, the sun blazing down relentlessly. My shoulders felt as though they were burning, even though they were covered by my T-shirt and jacket.

In late afternoon, we reached the Wadi Ovdah. Here, between two chains of hills, the *wadi* opened into a flat valley 50 to 100 yards wide. This was the uppermost reach of Biq'at Ovdah, the broad Valley of Ovdah, where we had seen the leopard shrine four days before.

The meandering course of the runoff was heavy with brown brush. Plants were more numerous and more tinged with green than at the leopard cult site. Here, at the narrowest part, the runoff was heaviest, thus penetrating the soil more deeply than in the wider valley further below.

That night, we camped in Wadi Ovdah just above the water line. With darkness and rest, my enervation of the day seemed to pass.