

THIRD SATURDAY

CHAPTER 28: *ASCENT TO SHACHARUT*

“... but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—... your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle....” (DEUTERONOMY 5:14)

Vered elected to stay at the kibbutz where, by late afternoon, she could arrange a ride to Shacharut. Shai and I would make the tortuous climb from the Arava, following a long-forsaken caravan trail.

I felt uneasy over traveling on Shabbat, a feeling that is foreign to my life beyond the desert. I had no concern over Divine retribution. Long before, in studying with Chabad mystics, I had learned that God places more importance on men struggling with questions of behavior toward each other than in blind adherence to ritual.

Yet, I felt a desire to take pause—to rest the camels, the goats, and myself. Deeper within me, I felt that we were crossing the land of the Almighty—a land so empty that He looked over each of the few men who traversed it and here, especially, expected each to keep His injunction.

I held these thoughts to myself. Had I voiced them, Shai would have offered to defer our leaving. But, my feeling was not strong enough for me to want that. Our return to Shacharut meant the luxuries of a shower, clean clothes, and cushions on which to sleep. As importantly, my time in the desert was drawing to a close, requiring that I leave for Jerusalem the following day. I had no desire to depart the Negev without a night of rest to ease the disquiet of that transition.

Usually, I live at ease with the tension between Eastern and Western thought. Part of me, the dominant part, views God as a construct of the human mind, as postulated by the philosophers of the French Enlightenment. Not so in the desert. Here, it is more comfortable—and seemingly more appropriate—to view God as the unquestioned creator and master of this universe.

We departed the kibbutz pursued by hoards of flies. They swarmed around us, like piranha seeking to devour any bit of bare flesh. The camels blinked to keep them from their eyes. I was thankful for the protection of my goggles, the *kafiah* swaddled about my head, and the long sleeves of my jacket and long pants. I thought back to our encounter with flies as we took shelter in the upper reaches of Wadi Shachoret and how I had welcomed them as a harbinger of rest. Now, I amused myself with the thought that these considered us and our sweat-impregnated clothing more appealing than the rotting wastes of the kibbutz kitchen.

We continued north through the Arava, following the faded thread of the ancient trail. The heat was more intense than in the days before. The rubble was coarser and more profuse than that further south. Several times, I stumbled. The steel shanks of my boots shielded my feet, but the soft tops offered only partial protection from sprains. I slipped twice, each time feeling my ankle pull. I began to tread more cautiously. Our pace became grueling. I could not have maintained it had we just begun our journey.

Virtually no rain falls in the Arava. Yet, fed by the runoff from the Negev and the mountains of Edom, the Arava receives more water and supports more plant life than anywhere else south of Be'er Sheva. Twice during the morning, a herd of gazelles broke from a scrub-filled dry watercourse a quarter of a mile or more in front of us. Even at that distance, I was thrilled to see them bolt. Judging from the dust, each herd numbered at least 15, an unsustainable size on the far drier Negev Plateau.

As the sun moved overhead, we reached the hills that marked the western edge of the Arava and the beginning of our ascent to Shacharut. Even though we had traveled for more than two hours, the flies remained with us, undiminished in number. More than ever, I was thankful

for the protection of my goggles and *kafiah*. Shai paused.

"We have been in the desert for more than two weeks. Do you think you have the strength to make the climb?"

Shai's inquiry surprised me. Until this moment, our taking shelter during the heat of day had been inviolate. Shai was not only suggesting that we forgo it, but that we do so on what would be the most strenuous leg of our journey, the more than three-hour ascent to the scarp of Shacharut. His desire to reach home was clear.

The year before, we had taken a different and shorter journey, but had returned to Shacharut by the same route. We had climbed in the late afternoon. I had pushed myself to the limits of my endurance, yet, I could not continue. Defeated, I had crouched in the shadow of my camel, gasping in shame. Only by riding had I been able to reach the summit.

Despite that previous ordeal, I nodded my affirmation—determined this time to make the top on my own.

The climb was terrible. The sun blazed without mercy, its intensity magnified by reflection from the precipice above. Yet, foot-by-foot, I continued.

We came to a wash that had obliterated the thread of trail, strewing our path with rocks and small boulders. I paused to pick my way through them. Not uncommon for camels, Samech continued, by chance stepping hard on the upper heel of my right boot.

The platform tore from the leather. As I felt the force of his foot, I exploded with an expletive. He lurched his head back. This time, I held myself from striking him.

Muttering to myself, I crouched to examine the boot. The separation stemmed from a design flaw. A strip affixed from the back of the upper leather to the heel would have stopped anything from catching the platform and pulling it away. Less than a third of the platform had separated. With luck, the remainder would hold until we gained the peak.

The climb was trying for the camels as well as their masters. As we struggled upward, I could feel the increasing tension in Samech's rope. I cursed the greater effort that leading him

required. I counted steps to incremental goals—the next boulder, a subsequent curve, the following vertical wall. I focused on my sensations—the pounding of my heart, the taste of sweat at the corners of my mouth, the stench of my body.

I pondered over what compelled me to endure such self-inflicted discomfort. Again, I thought of the Victorians and the sense of inadequacy that drove them and, likewise, myself. But, I could not sustain such mental pursuits. I was too drained. My concentration returned to my next step and the one after that.

For more than an hour, I struggled upward, exhausting one canteen and depleting the other. The sun was relentless. I felt giddy and unbalanced. I yanked Samech to a halt and loosened a water bag to refill my canteens. My giddiness increased. I rubbed my hand over my forehead, pressing on my *kafiah* to mop my sweat. Even through the cloth, my skin burned. The urge to vomit churned my stomach. Leaning against Samech's flank, I acknowledged to myself that I could go no further.

Hoarsely, I called, "Shai, I must rest."

He came quickly.

"Perhaps it would be better if you ride?"

"No," I rasped, "I can't. I need shade, rest!"

It was a near absurdity to expect shade at this time and place. Yet, 50 yards ahead, the trail cut next to a slight rock outcropping. A scant shadow formed at its base. I pointed. Shai held my arm and we moved toward it.

"You have been in the desert long enough to know that you cannot push yourself beyond what God allows," he chided. "All of us here are limited by His will. It is His will that you have reached exhaustion, just as it is His will that the shadow is here for you to recover."

Even in my overwhelming fatigue, I was awed at Shai's conviction. As I had observed before, in an Israeli context he was "not religious." Yet, his desert experience had forged a belief in the Almighty that seemed absolute.

"*Ensha'Allah.*" I could say no more.

Runoff had eroded the base of the outcrop, forming a near-vertical cut and slight overhang that reached nearly 3 feet above the trail. The shadow below was no more than 2 feet wide and 6 long. The ground was blanketed with coarse gravel. I eased myself into a half sitting–half reclining position to place my body fully within the scant shadow. Shai sat next to

me, half in shadow and half out. Had he contorted his body, he too could have come fully within the shade. But, he felt no need.

The gravel cut into my buttocks and lower back. Reaching back, I pulled away the largest pieces and, as did the camels, moved my pelvis to contour the remaining gravel to my body. Sheltered from the sun, I felt an almost euphoric sense of relief. Bits of gravel stuck into my back. Yet, the depression that I had formed felt positively comfortable. I was bemused at recognizing how relative my concept of comfort had become.

I sipped from my canteen. My body began to cool. My dizziness and nausea passed. My gasping eased into heavy breathing and then to normal inhalations. In half an hour, I was ready to go on.

As we continued upward, we passed the mouth of a small cave. Strewn in front lay several ibex bones, the signs of a hyena den. I wondered for a moment whether humans had ever occupied it. I concluded likely not. The slope we were climbing precluded any chance of catching water for agriculture or storing sufficient amounts for drinking.

The sun still blazed when we reached the summit. The Arava stretched below like a meticulously crafted diorama. The Mountains of Edom, faint in the haze, framed the horizon. I felt numbed by exhaustion and, yet, exhilarated. I had scaled this final height. Our journey was over.

We were but a few hundred yards from the camel yard. Here, as in most of the Negev, the surface sloped down, away from the crest of the ridge. Yet, I felt that I could barely move onward. I hardly protested at Shai's insistence that he unpack and brush the camels. With halting steps, the broken boot sole of my boot flopping in the dust, I dragged myself toward the derelict shipping container from where we had begun our journey and from there up the road to the khan and shower.

In the dark stall, I luxuriated in the flow of warm water. The massaging stream eased the ache of my muscles. As the water washed over me, my body cooled. I soaped and rinsed three

times, as if afraid that my soured sweat would adhere to me forever. As I scoured myself with soap, I began to feel the full soreness of my muscles and the rawness of my skin.

Stepping from the shower, I looked at myself in a mirror that hung by the sink in the center of the room. I reeled at the apparition that returned my stare. In spite of having been continuously covered by my *kafiah*, my cheeks and nose had turned red and swollen by the sun. Staring down, I saw the backs of my hands seared red-brown, blisters from sunburn erupting over them. Rope burns cut between my thumbs and forefingers. Bruises discolored my arms and legs—some from falls, others from the pressure of rocks on which I had slept. Five years later, the deepest would still scar my body. My ribs pushed against my chest. My belly pulled taut, sucked in under my rib cage. Two days later in Jerusalem, I would discover that I had lost 15 pounds.

The shower refreshed me. Yet I remained exhausted. Mindlessly, I stuffed my jacket, pants, socks, and underwear—the outer clothes stiff with as more than two weeks of sweat and grime—into a plastic trash bag and twisted the sealing wire tight. I changed into the fresh clothing that I had put aside for my return. Before slipping on the T-shirt, I passed it under the open faucet to gain the half-hour of coolness that would come from the evaporating water. As I buckled my belt, I heard the Land Cruiser climb up the hill and pull to a stop at the side of the shower room. Shai came in, looked at me and grinned.

"You deserve to look tired. We made quite a climb. Come, we will go to my house. You can sleep better there and Vered will have for us a good meal."

The dwellings of Shacharut clustered around a lone main road that ended in a lazy cul-de-sac. As we bumped over it, children and dogs romped in the setting sun, some on the road and some in a play area encircled by the road. A slide, monkey bars, and tree-swings fabricated from discarded tractor tires offered the pretense of a playground.

Like most of the families of Shacharut, Shai and Vered lived in a caravan—a trailer—which nestled on a permanent stone foundation. It sat at the edge of the settlement, at the top of a slight rise. The entrance faced away from the road, onto a patio equal in size to the caravan. The patio was shaded by a wooden frame covered with dried palm fronds. Welcoming cushions lay piled around a low table. A garden extended into the desert, ending abruptly at the length of a water hose.

As Shai and I came to the door, Vered looked at me and burst into a smile.

"Shai has brought you home, so you can sleep."

The caravan was wonderfully fresh—cooled by a fan that blew air over a wire mesh impregnated with trickling water. I recalled my undergraduate roommate, Danny Soussa.

In 586 BCE Nebuchadnezzar's armies conquered Judea, destroyed the Temple of Solomon—the First Temple—and exiled the Judean elite to Babylonia. Soon after, Babylonia weakened. In 539 BCE, it fell to the rising might of Cyrus of Persia. In the second year following his conquest, Cyrus decreed, "Whosoever there is among you of [the Jewish People] ... let him go up [to build to God a house in Jerusalem]" (Second Chronicles, 36–23). Thus, did Cyrus release the Jews from Exile.

Yet, the Exiles had by then settled and flourished. Many, among them Danny's forebears, chose to remain in Babylonia. There, they became one of the most prosperous of ancient Jewish communities—a bulwark of Judaism and home to the Talmud, the record of oral law compiled by the rabbis following the destruction of the Second Temple.

As long as Danny's family could remember, they had been advisors and healers to the rulers of Baghdad. His grandfather had brought the first electric generator to the city, disassembled on the backs of camels. His uncle had been dentist to the Caliph.

More important from my then-worldview as a student, his mother had sent "CARE" packages of candied dates packed in flour. That was in 1956, when travel and mail were still by ship, and packages took three or four months to arrive.

Danny told me of the *Bedu* bringing the branches of a desert bush into the bazaars of the city. In the heat of summer, his family's servants would buy the branches, place them in dishes of water, and set the dishes in the windows. The water would permeate the branches. As the breeze blew through the windows, the water evaporated and cooled the air. So it was with the fan now blowing through the wire mesh.

I nestled onto the assortment of cushions that adorned the floor. For the first time in more than two weeks, I lay down to sleep feeling cool and clean and with full support in my

lower back and legs.

It was half past eleven when Shai awakened me. I had slept for more than five hours. Numbly, I followed him onto the patio. Two candles in glass holders cast their glow over the table set with linen. The desert breeze caressed us. A mosaic of stars formed the backdrop. With few words, we shared our meal. Finished, I returned to the cushions again to sleep.