

SECOND WEDNESDAY

CHAPTER 24: THE TEMPLE TO HATHOR

"... I will go through the land of Egypt and strike down every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast, and I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord." (EXODUS 12:12)

We had slept near the south wall of the small *wadi*, shadowed from the early sun. With our simple meal of the night before, we had little to pack. We quickly broke camp and saddled the camels. Pesiah and Chalah browsed 50 to 60 feet away, seemingly unaffected by their experience of the previous evening.

Today, we would reach Timna—the site of copper deposits that men had worked for six millennia. Given the distance we had covered during the night, it would be an easy trek—6 miles north across the flatness of the Arava.

We would find our noon shelter at "Timna Lake," a frivolous construction funded by a wealthy American. The clear spring-fed water invites swimming. Its overflow nourishes a *wadi* thick with vegetation—albeit the luxuriance muted by months of accumulated dust. A small cafe offers light meals, ice cream, and beer to the few tourists who stumble upon it. Frond-shaded picnic tables invite customers to sit out-of-doors.

Customers, however, are so infrequent that the cafe serves more as a gathering place for the few members of Kibbutz Elifaz who run it and the fewer yet volunteers who work on the kibbutz. The goats and camels could drink their fill and provide a diversion for the cafe staff. Vered, also, would meet us there and the three of us would continue together.

We trekked north, the sun at our backs, the near-constant winds in our faces. The Eilat Hills rose close by our left. The expanse of the Arava extended to our right, and beyond, indistinct in haze, stood the Mountains of Edom. Here in the depth of the Arava, the temperature ranged 6 to 8 degrees Fahrenheit higher than 1,500 to 2,000 feet above on the Negev Plateau. By noon, it would reach 104 degrees or more. The heat, combined with occasional gullies and loose soil, taxed our pace more than when traversing the flat parts of the Negev. I sipped from my

canteen often. Shai no longer felt compelled to admonish me to do so.

The acacia trees and brush-filled gullies contrasted with the barrenness of the Negev Plateau. There, except for a few spots in the *wadis*, the soil, if existent, was seldom deep enough to support more than a bit of scrub and, typically, nothing at all.

Here in the Arava, notwithstanding the severity of the environment, I felt a part of the landscape. It conveyed life, however difficult. The barrenness of the Negev is palpably harsher. There, I felt like an alien, intruding into a foreign emptiness.

Within two hours, we reached a graded road. Like the one we had traveled the day before, it was part of a grid built in 1957 for the Timna Copper Works. Open pits had operated for two decades in a futile attempt to exploit the historical deposits. The roads had been built to support the ore trucks, which groaned from the pits, and the boring rigs used to prospect for deposits beneath the loess. All now lay forsaken, serving as unmarked monuments to the failed dreams and economic folly of the then-new state.

We hiked over the road, moving easily on its smooth surface. If one failed to notice the accumulations of dust along the edges, the road appeared to have been cut but a few weeks before. But the reality of the environment soon broke that impression. At a slight dip, the road disappeared. Four decades before, its builders had filled a shallow gully. The erosion of 20 winters had now obliterated their encroachment.

As we climbed into the gully and out, I scanned our path for tracks. I saw nothing. No tire marks, footprints, or the impressions of camel pads. We were the first persons to pass since the winter rains.

Ahead, 100 feet to our right, mounds of dross rose more than 30 feet high. The dross—loess and alluvial deposits—had been scraped away to expose the ore of what had become a bowl-shaped open pit. An offshoot of the road descended around the pit's wall to its bottom.

Almost at the top, where the road entered the bowl, traces of green—the telltale color of copper—splashed across the pit's wall. I signaled my intent to explore it to Shai and left Samech by a handful of scrub. Remembering the separation anxiety he had displayed the week before, I had no concern that he would wander. He would either browse at the scrub or catch up to Louis.

I followed the offshoot road to the edge of the pit. Its steep sides fell to a floor 150 feet below. Except for a layer of loess left by the wind, the floor looked much as it had 20 years before when the last of the ore-laden trucks had lumbered from it. If a man slipped from the

wall, he would plummet down the side, with no chance of stopping his fall. Curiously I felt no fear. Only near-vertical walls engendered my terror.

Cautiously I picked my way down the wall. The giant shovel that had once cleared the pit had fractured the rock, providing rough hand and toe holds. As I descended, bits of stone gave way, rattling down the side. They gave me pause, lest I become careless. Twelve feet below the rim, I reached the narrow veins of green-stained rock. It was mostly a black, crystalline mineral, possibly manganese oxide, embedded with malachite—the green streaks I had spied from above. The malachite varied in shade from green-white to green-black. In a few places, it hinted at blue, a poor imitation of quality turquoise.

In ancient times malachite was polished for jewelry. Today, shops in Eilat cut and polish it as well. Called Eilat Stone, it is sold loose or set in silver. To close a sale, clerks confide to potential buyers that only a small supply remains. When that is exhausted, they say, the stones will be no more.

I could readily pull pieces from the fractures. I culled through several handfuls, choosing those with the most green, and placed them into a collection bag. Excitement surged through me as I thought of having them cut and polished. With what more inspiring a souvenir could I return from my journey than stones I had recovered from the ancient lode?

Having filled my bag, I picked my way upward, beaming at my find and imagining how they would look when finished.

Just short of the rim, the outcrop beneath my right foot gave way. The cascading shards shattered the silence. My stomach heaved. I lunged forward, frantically grabbing at the rock face and kicking my boot into it. For a terrifying instant, the boot slipped before it caught. I hugged the rock, shuddering as I listened to the fragments of the outcrop glancing off the sides of the pit. An endless three to four seconds passed. At last, they struck the bottom. Silence returned. Except for my heaving chest, I remained motionless. I shuddered again, paused, and then painstakingly inched up and over the rim.

Samech, indeed, had joined Louis. The two were browsing near where Shai waited. I displayed my finds to Shai's admiring nods and refilled my canteens. I made no mention of the outcrop giving way. I felt chagrined, knowing that I should have been more careful.

We continued for another half hour, moving from the road onto the loess. The sun reached toward its peak. Again, sweat poured from me and my breathing grew labored. Beads

of sweat formed on Samech's head. I began to think about the cold beer that we might buy in the cafe—a seductive but dangerous dream. After two weeks in the heat we had to take care. The alcohol of even two beers could cause an imbalance in body chemistry and precipitate rapid dehydration. One beer would be our limit.

A small hillock emerged in front of us. It was shaped like an upright egg, half buried in the sand. A miniature playa that supported several acacias spread before it.

"We are here," Shai announced. "Just beyond that hill is Lake Timna and the restaurant."

"If it's open," I responded, "I'll treat you to a beer."

Shai face wrinkled in appreciation.

We rounded the hillock, and the cafe, as if a mirage, appeared before us. Its modernistic design simulated a series of rising hills, melding into the desert. The attention to architectural aesthetics, the outcome of American largesse, contrasted to what otherwise would have been a cheap Israeli plan—a squat rectangular structure of concrete blocks. At the side of the cafe stood a deserted parking lot. The small lake, more a pond, was immediately behind. The shaded picnic tables huddled at its edge. With the parking lot, they likewise sat deserted.

The camels quickened their pace. They had not had water since Be'er Milhan, seven days before. They would drink as much as 20 gallons each—or close to 15 percent of their body weight. We threw the lead ropes over their saddles and let them and the goats make for the lake.

Shai stayed with the camels. He would loosen their cinch straps after they had taken their water. I headed for the cafe, pushing my goggles to my forehead. As I entered the door, I mopped the sweat of my face with my *kafiah*. A sole woman arose from behind the counter. At the sight of me, her pupils opened wide. Her jaw dropped. She stepped back, arching her back and audibly sucking in her breath.

Startled, I blurted, "*Ha chol besadar*—Everything's O.K."

She stood riveted in place, pupils still wide and jaw hanging.

"*Chaver shelee v ane nasim im kfar Shacharut*—My friend and I travel from the village of Shacharut."

She stood rigid for another moment and then exhaled, her shoulders dropping. The handful of people who lived in the Southern Negev all knew of Shacharut.

"I thought you were an Arab." She answered in English, responding to my American accent.

"Two volunteers from our kibbutz—a man and a woman—were hitchhiking near Ramon Crater yesterday evening. A terrorist attacked. The man was killed. The road has been closed all night. They haven't found who did it."

I looked at her incredulously. Ramon Crater lies in the heart of the Negev, miles from Gaza or the Egyptian border. Virtually all of the Arabs who live nearby are politically indifferent *Bedu*, not Palestinians. Before, terrorist attacks had taken place in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, or in the occupied territories, but not in the Negev. Answering my unasked question, she shrugged. "We all thought the Negev was safe."

Shai and two other kibbutzniks joined us. The beers cost six shekels each, roughly \$1.50. Whatever tension may have remained over our appearance ruptured in laughter when, in my ignorance, I tried to pay for both beers with a 20 agorot coin—roughly five cents—rather than the 20 shekels that I thought the coin represented. Being from Shacharut, we were granted credit.

While Shai and I sipped our beers, the five of us talked quietly of the attack, volunteers on the kibbutz, and my journey through the Negev.

In a few minutes, the bleating of the goats beckoned Shai and me to return outside. In a strange place, they grew anxious without Shai's companionship.

Shai stayed with the goats while I walked to the shower house. He would join me shortly. Located adjacent to the cafe, it was typical of any such facility—toilets, washbasins, and a tiled room with six open shower stalls. Across from the showers, a bench ran the length of the room. Small hinged windows near the ceiling provided light and ventilation.

Months of accumulated dust blanketed floor, bench, and fixtures. Except for my tracks, the dust lay undisturbed—a testimony to the dearth of tourists. The room invited its accumulation. The wind slowed as it passed through the windows, thus dropping the particles that it carried.

When I turned the faucet, hot water gushed. Yet, there was no heater. The ambient temperature was more than sufficient. I used my *kafiah* to wipe part of the bench—repeatedly soaking, wiping, and rinsing until it was clean. I mused at how quickly dust might accumulate—an inch in 10 years, a foot in 100? Over the millennia, it would collect in the sheltered areas where people might gather, covering all evidence of them.

After showering and washing our underwear, Shai and I walked toward the picnic tables, the goats tagging at our heels. The camels had taken their fill of water and were in the overflow *wadi* browsing. Shai and I each claimed a shaded table and stretched out. My thoughts turned to the two volunteers shot on the road to Ramon Crater.

There was yet another encounter with Death. This time, He chose not to play, but to make His claim. In four more nights I would be in one of the few cars traveling the same road. A little difference in timing or opportunity and the shots that had felled the volunteers could have targeted the car in which I would be riding.

I thought of Shai shrugging off the attack by the dogs. "*Ensha'Allah*. It is the way of the desert. If we search what has happened, there is something for us to learn."

What was I learning—the physical limits of my endurance? What little of my life I could control? How fragile even that control could be? I could move, but not in the heat of day. I could follow my quixotic pursuits, but only with care. Yet, even so, Death had become a constant companion—not the hypothetical of a broken water bag but the reality of my fever at Be'er Milhan, the face of the cliff, wild dogs, the crumbling outcrop, and, now, by proxy, a terrorist's shot.

In recognizing my fragile control, I could understand how mankind would evolve the concept of the Almighty. *Ensha'Allah*, all of these events would be God's will—a universal and comforting explanation for the unknown, the unexpected, and the uncontrollable.

At 4:00 p.m., a grime-laden Land Cruiser pulled into the parking lot. Shai sat up and grinned. It was a neighbor from Shacharut. Vered had arrived. Like a visiting aunt, determined to spoil her nephews and nieces, she brought with her—I thought of the Yiddish word,

"*schlep*"—two large shopping bags. The Hebrew word "*Supersol*"—the "Super Basket," Israel's premier grocery chain—splashed across them. They brimmed with fresh fruits and vegetables. Peeking from the tops were a freshly baked *challah* and a bottle of wine for *Shabbat*, both special treats to welcome Jane, her family, and their friends.

"A *michiah*—a pleasure," I exclaimed.

Vered beamed.

Shai brought the camels from their browsing. Excitedly, we repacked Vered's bounty into the saddlebags.

With Vered mounted on Louis, we struck out to the west, toward the Temple of Hathor at Timna, a mile distant. We would stop there and then continue on to our intended camping site, the "Roman Cave."

Represented by the features of a cow, Hathor was the Egyptian goddess of Turquoise. During the 18th Dynasty, ca. 1500 BCE, the Egyptians erected a magnificent temple complex to her at the mines of Serabit el-Khadem. Located in the mountains of southwestern Sinai opposite the Gulf of Suez, they lay 100 miles west of the Negev. The name translates as "Heights of the Slave," a reference to Semitic captives who worked the mines. The mines were a major source of Egypt's turquoise and copper. The association of the two led to Hathor later becoming the goddess of copper, as well.

The Pharaohs sent precious gifts to the temple and to "Mother Hathor, Mistress of Turquoise." However, the adoration of Hathor long preceded the temple. Five hundred years earlier, a mine superintendent left a hieroglyphic tablet admonishing that "If your faces fail, the goddess Hathor will give you her arms to aid you in the work."

We quickly reached the Timna Temple. It is dominated by a series of dramatically eroded red sandstone formations that rise more than 100 feet from the *wadi* floor. They are popularly called "King Solomon's Pillars," albeit, as I would discover, with no historical basis. The scant ruins of the temple lie beneath the southwesternmost formation, protected from the north winds. Over time, windborne dust settled, entombing the site as it was abandoned more than 3,000 years ago. To the right of the site, stairs cut into the pillar. They climb halfway up its side to a faint carving. It depicts Ramses II, Pharaoh from 1290 to 1224 BCE, presenting an offering to Hathor, represented in human form.

The temple is more modest and not as old as the temple at Serabit el-Khadem. Indeed,

“temple” is too generous a word. “Cult site” is more appropriate. The main feature is a small altar, which abuts the pillar. It consists of a single course of dressed rectangular stones laid out as a platform several feet square. Dressed stones violate the biblical proscription against using iron to construct an altar and confirm the site as non-Israelite. Behind the altar, three votive niches are hewn into the sandstone.

Cartouches—royal insignia of the pharaohs—document that the temple was used from the 14th to 12th centuries BCE. This defines the period during which Egypt ruled the area and exploited the copper deposits. Besides the altar, the excavators uncovered small statues of Hathor, the tools and—most intriguing—an exquisitely cast copper snake, its head gilded with gold. The snake was a ritual symbol of ancient Midian.

Below the snake, the excavators found masses of decayed red and yellow cloth, crafted of well-woven wool and flax, with beads braided into it. Two stone-lined holes pierced the floor of the original temple. They had secured the poles that had supported the cloth—a canopy that had covered the entire shrine. The Egyptians abandoned the site in the middle of the 12th century BCE, it had become a Midianite place of worship.

The parallels of Midianite beliefs, symbols, and practices with those of Israel of the Exodus are striking.

Jethro, the Priest of Midian, and Moses, the Prophet of Israel, shared ties of faith as well as marriage. The Biblical narrative suggests the common God of the two peoples:

"And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought a burnt offering and sacrifices for God; and Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to partake of the meal..." (Exodus 18:12)

When the people spoke against God, the Lord sent *seraph*—fiery snakes—against them. To protect his followers who repented,

"Moses made a copper serpent and mounted it on a standard; and when anyone was bitten ... he would look at the copper serpent and recover." (Numbers 21:9)

Throughout the Exodus the People of Israel marched with the *mishkan*—the tented tabernacle—and the *ohel*—the tent of meeting. Here at Timna were the remnants of a tented Midianite shrine, a parallel to the *mishkan* of the tabernacle.

Whatever the source of the Exodus narrative, this site stood witness to the historical veracity woven into it.

Shai's voice broke my contemplations.

"We must leave now. We have less than an hour of sun and it will take us longer than that to reach the cave."

We continued west toward the wall of the Arava, moving through an area of diminutive irregular hills cut by occasional *wadis* and abandoned mining roads. The sun lay close to the horizon. It transformed the landscape into rich earth tones, tinged in red. We twisted through the hills, into the long shadows, and then out. As we passed through them, we experienced the magical play of the evening light. Our caravan glowed in colors, luminous against the muted rubble. We moved over a slight ridge. The silhouettes of the camels played upon the yellow-brown rock and dust of the shallow *wadi* below—as in a pointillist painting, an exquisite melding of light, texture, and image. Then the sun dipped below the wall, erasing the magical moment and abandoning us to the darkening shadows.

I grew uneasy. The hills reminded me of the dry channels through which we had passed the night before. It was now becoming difficult to see. Shai was convinced that we were at the Roman Cave, but he could not find it. We wandered in the deepening darkness for three-quarters of an hour, searching without success. Giving up, we settled into a shallow *wadi*. That night, I again slept with my knife at the ready.