

SECOND MONDAY (afternoon)

CHAPTER 21: THE LAW OF THE DESERT

"If, then, you obey the commandments ... loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land.... You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil ... [and there will be] ... grass ... for your cattle and thus you shall eat your fill.

"[But] take care not ... to serve other gods ... For the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and ... you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you. (DEUTERONOMY 11:13–17)

It took but a few minutes to tie down the camels, extract the mat from the saddlebag, place it in the shadow, and set our meal upon it. As the heat had sapped our energy, it had sapped our appetites. A small melon, a piece of bread, and a few bits of dried fruit sufficed for our nourishment. We ate in silence, and after eating, rested in silence. I nursed from my canteen, consuming its contents. My nausea subsided. My heart slowed. My physical and mental balance returned.

I looked at Shai, breaking the quiet, "I hit Samech."

"I saw."

"It was cruel."

"You were hot and very tired. You needed to rest."

"But that didn't give me the right to be cruel."

He shrugged.

I hesitated and then asked, "Would a *Bedu* have done that?"

Shai pondered, searching for his words. Carefully, he answered, "Probably not. But, they are used to the heat and to driving themselves. They know nothing else. You are not. You know a different life. It is harder for you than for them."

I stared into the shadow, reflecting on the comforts of that different life, which now seemed so alien.

At its peak, the Washington summer, drenched in humidity, is more oppressive than the bone-dry heat of the Negev. Yet, I experience little of its burden. My life centers on an air-conditioned apartment, a cool shower at dawn, an air-conditioned office, and, in the evening, when I return from work, a swimming pool mostly to myself. After supper, a glass of warmed cognac, perhaps calls to friends or relatives, an evening of reading and writing, another shower, and then the luxury of clean sheets upon an oversized bed.

My professional life provides a parallel psychological comfort. True, I devote long hours. However, my business partner and I enjoy a global clientele, which has continuously supported us.

Given such comforts, it is easy to be gracious. I refer professional inquiries that we choose not to handle to other firms; I mentor the one or two students who may call each year; I lecture before university classes, which provide but symbolic remuneration.

But what if I did not enjoy the comforts of modern surroundings and such professional security? Would I find it so easy to be as generous, patient, and even-tempered—to practice those refined attributes for which I pride myself? As I had experienced with Samech, perhaps not.

Engineers have devoted more than a century and a half to transforming modern life to suit human wants—water, gas, and electricity, and from them, heating, air conditioning, and refrigeration. Living in such managed conditions requires little accommodation. In the desert, the opposite holds. To survive, men must accommodate to unrelenting harshness.

The limits of our physical endurance demand that we carry water and seek shelter from the noon sun. The weakness of our spirits casts doubt over whether we can maintain the will to endure.

I turned to Shai, "The English Arabists wrote of the moral and physical strength of the *Bedu*. What did they mean?"

Shai's brows furrowed as he contemplated my question. He seemed to turn it over in his mind, as if seeking an answer that would convey understanding of what otherwise could not be understood. His words came slowly.

"The *Bedu* cannot be broken. It starts when they are born. *Bedu* mothers carry their babies on their backs, always next to them. Whenever their babies cry, the mothers tend to them, maybe to nurse them, maybe to caress them. This makes the *Bedu* calm throughout their lives."

"So unlike America," I reflected. "There mothers may leave babies in day care from just a few months."

Shai's face darkened, as if a mother abandoning her baby to the care of such strangers repulsed him. He made no direct response, but continued his train of thought.

"The *Bedu* never force their children. When the father does something, he shows his son. He never tells his son that he must do it. Only when the son is ready does he follow his father. It is always the son's decision."

The words struck a raw nerve. Painfully, I remembered how differently I had raised my own son and daughter; how I had imposed myself on them—opinions, worldviews, ritual practices.

Those were not their ways. They rebelled. And, I lost them.

"It's always by example, never by insistence?" I queried.

Shai fixed his eyes on mine, sensing my disquiet. Softly he replied, "Yes. It continues throughout a *Bedu's* life. Everything a *Bedu* does comes from his decision, not someone else's."

"But, everyone makes his own decisions," I protested. "A person may discuss his decision. A person may go along with a group. But in the end, the person decides."

"Yes," Shai conceded. "But others may feel forced to decide. A boss may tell you to do something and you may not agree. You will tell him that he's wrong. But, if he insists, you do it. Then, it's not really your decision. Your heart is not in it. The *Bedu* are different. Their heart is always in what they decide."

"Always?" My voice rose with incredulity.

Shai nodded. "Everything is a group decision. That is why they sit for hours, talking about the smallest thing. When it is within the family or tribe, everyone must agree. Only between families and tribes can there be differences. Once the *Bedu* decide, their belief is absolute. They are right. Others are wrong. There is no middle. This makes them certain of what they do. An outsider cannot change them. If they are to change, the entire family or tribe must change. Even if later it becomes clear that they are wrong, they do not accept blame or guilt, for originally everyone agreed that it was right."

I wrestled with the implication of Shai's words. My thoughts shifted to the cauldron of power struggles that define relationships in this part of the world. "That means that the political 'solutions' that Western governments propose for the Middle East must all fail. We see them as

suggesting a reasonable middle ground. But because they are a middle ground, none of the participants can accept them."

Shai's voice quickened. "You are beginning to understand. Here, we don't know how to compromise—to agree to something that we don't believe in. If we don't agree, we become enemies. Israeli or Arab, it doesn't matter. We are both alike. Israelis may dress as in the West. We may speak better English. But beneath the surface, we have become as Middle Eastern as the *Bedu*."

I shook my head in denial, "It's completely different from us. In America, we assume that others seek common ground—that they are willing to give to reach an agreement. We say, 'better a bad agreement than no agreement.' Even with disagreement, we think that we can remain friendly, or at least civil. You're saying that it doesn't work here, that no one believes in compromise."

Shai shrugged. "Perhaps a few. But, here, power is everything. It's better to fight, and maybe to die, than to have a bad agreement. Compromise means that you are weak, that you can be pushed to give more. If two men argue, neither will give in to the other. In the end, the stronger gets his way. Maybe he will give the weaker a crumb to show his generosity—but only if he's certain that the weaker one fears him."

"But generosity is a sign of friendship—or compassion." My voice rose in protest.

Shai's face tightened. "Do you think that Saddam Hussein became ruler of Iraq by offering friendship and compassion?"

Shai's question caught me off guard. I made no reply.

"No," his voice slowed. "He became ruler by being the most brutal. Whoever stood in his way, he murdered. Of course, he gives gifts—magnificent gifts—but not for friendship. He gives them for fear—so people never forget his power to kill them. It is better to receive nothing than such generosity."

Shai paused. His eyes locked on mine. "We do not think like Westerners. Whether Israeli or Arab, we're the same. Westerners do not understand that."

"You do not recognize it, but you asked your question in Western words. You separated moral from physical strength. In the desert, they are one. When you are sure of what you are doing, you will accomplish it, even if it's difficult and you are exhausted." His face relaxed. "You see that in yourself. You were determined to go on. So you pushed yourself until we got

here."

I nodded in acknowledgment, feeling the pride in having willed myself to persist.

"Other Westerners would not have done that. They would have stopped at the acacia trees, or if they had continued, they would have given up along the way. Even if they were not paying me, I could not leave them. So they can stop whenever they wish and wherever we are. I will raise the tent. A *Bedu* does not have someone else to raise the tent. He must go on."

Through Shai's words, I was comprehending the impact of the Negev on my soul. What for me had been almost insurmountable psychological and physical barriers were for the *Bedu* everyday life. Through this journey, that life was becoming my life, as well. By enduring, I was separating from my former worldview and entering a new mental realm—passing from the equivocal to the absolute.

"What we experience as the limit of our endurance is for them normal," I muttered. "For them, everything becomes life or death. We can't comprehend that."

"Few Westerners can," Shai concurred. "As you are experiencing, the desert is unforgiving. Always, it demands going close to your limits. You must follow the rules. Make a mistake and you die."

I intoned what had become the inviolate rules of our daily journey, "Keep the water in separate bags; tie the camels so they can't escape; load them so they aren't injured; take shelter from the midday sun."

Shai's face brightened. "Yes. And those rules are absolute. It is the same with everything. Just as the desert is severe, its law is severe. To survive, you must have strict laws. You do not steal. You do not lie. You give hospitality to the stranger. The *Bedu* are sure of them. They have no inner conflicts, as Westerners experience them."

"Hospitality as law? Not as manners or courtesy?"

"As law," Shai repeated. "Manners or courtesy mean that what you do is expected, not required. In the West you do not think of hospitality as required. Here it is. We share food and water even with the stranger. Within the memory of old men, there has been too little water and too little food for a person, or even a family, to survive by itself. By sharing, everyone has more chance to live—even in times of drought."

"That explains the feasts that the Arab leaders make for Western diplomats," I mused.

"Exactly," Shai's words quickened. "The law of hospitality demands that we show guests

great courtesy, make great feasts for them, and treat them with great consideration. We make no difference between those who live here and those who do not. Arab leaders despise the West—Europeans and Americans alike—for what they see as its moral weakness. They loathe it for its Godlessness. They hate it for its power. But they are always courteous and gracious and make great feasts."

I shook my head. "We totally misunderstand that. We think that such courtesy means that they respect us, that they want to honor us, that we share something in common. But it's the opposite. It's only to show their own people that they stay faithful to their law—even with the Infidels."

"Yes," Shai acknowledged. "Westerners do not see that."

"The custom hasn't changed in 4,000 years," I reflected. "When Abraham sat by his tent at the terebinths of Mamre and the three angels appeared, he ran to greet them, to wash their feet, and to make a feast for them."

Shai grinned. "You recognize how well the Bible still explains the Middle East."

I frowned. "It may explain what people still do, but it doesn't explain why they are so determined. At some point in the West, if we couldn't succeed, we would stop trying. Think of Vietnam. After 10 years of serious fighting, we quit. Here it goes on for generations. No one seems to give up."

"Of course not," Shai agreed. "There is another side to survival, the need to belong. You can't survive alone. You must be part of a family and a tribe. Within them, people are soft. Between them, they are not. The *Bedu* fear being cut off. A thief might risk being caught and having his hand amputated. He will not risk being caught and being banished from his people. This is why within the family and the tribe everyone obeys the rules. Where there is doubt, the family and tribe decide. If they decide to fight, everyone fights. Later, individuals may grow tired. But, they won't stop unless everyone agrees to it."

I contemplated the implication of Shai's words. "That explains why a father can kill his own son. If the tribe rules that the son must die, it can also rule that his father must kill him. If the father refuses, he would be outcast. His choices would be to lose his son, family, and tribe—or only his son."

"Yes," Shai nodded. "If the tribe—or family—decides that the son must die, they would also demand that the father kill him. That way, no one else would have blood on his hands."

"Such harshness," I pondered. "What does that mean for the God of the desert?"

Shai reflected before replying, as if he recognized that I was struggling with an issue of ultimate meaning. "Both the Torah and the Koran tell us of God's compassion, His loving kindness, and His forgiveness of sinners, who return to Him in repentance."

Shai paused. "But God is also severe, just as the desert is severe. He is absolute, just as the desert is absolute. And for those who do not repent, He is unforgiving, just as the desert is unforgiving."

Then Shai shrugged. "But still, we pray to Him. He is the only God we know."

The words of Deuteronomy, inscribed in the Prayer Book, formed in my mind.

"If ... you ... lov[e] the Lord your God and serv[e] Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land.... [But if you] serv[e] other gods ... there will be no rain ... and you will ... perish."

As a child, I had repeated the words by rote, without comprehension. Only as an adult did I grasp that they epitomized the Covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people. At this moment, I began to comprehend how the God of the desert still lives in those words and how the law of the *Bedu* remains as absolute today as was the injunction of Deuteronomy more than 3,000 years ago.

More than a thousand years after Sinai, the Great Sanhedrin emerged as the supreme judicial body of Judea. Its 71 (or at times 70) elders sat for 200 years until the destruction of the Second Temple in year 70 of the Common Era. The Roman rulers of Judea granted it absolute autonomy in matters of Jewish Law, including capital offenses.

The rulings of the Great Sanhedrin were infinitely more compassionate and forgiving than the literal words of Deuteronomy. The Talmud, the Jewish Oral Law codified after the fall

of the Second Temple, records that if a Sanhedrin condemned one man to death in 70 years, it was considered severe. Between Sinai and the Sanhedrin, the rules had mutated from black and white to shades of gray.

By then, the people of Israel had left the desert. Be'er Sheva lay beyond the southern border of Judea. What had been Canaan was now the Promised Land of milk and honey. Blessed with water, it was a more forgiving land. With that, the understanding of the Law became more forgiving, and the courts as well.

The sun hung red and shimmering as we departed our shelter and began our descent into the Arava. It lay more than a thousand feet below us, concealed from view by rows of abraded hills. Elongating shadows covered the *wadi* bed, shielding us from the direct sun. We moved easily through the still-oppressive heat.

Around us, erosion had carved a seemingly impassable terrain of tangled scarps, boulder-choked ravines, and broken ridges. Masses of talus spread chaotically beneath the formations. They lay in testimony to the relentless erosive power of the changing temperatures and the rare rains. Tilted layers of multicolored sandstones—beiges, reds, yellows, and browns—alternated with each other. The falling sun accentuated their colors, enriching the nuances, revealing the separations between the strata. The *wadi* bed snaked through this chaos, providing an incongruous passage.

For more than two hours, we followed that passage through the near-surrealistic landscape. As the daylight faded, our path entered a shallow cirque, filled with the sediments deposited from eons of the *wadi*'s flow. Before us, a last jagged ridge blocked our view of the Arava. Beyond the ridge, muted in the haze, rose the peaks of Edom, glowing crimson in the final rays of the setting sun. Around us, the multicolored sandstones had disappeared, replaced by dark brown and black formations. We had entered the mouth of Wadi Shachoret.

As we emptied the bottoms of the saddlebags, I spied a series of tracks in the hardened sediment and crouched to examine them. They followed a straight line, spaced evenly apart but with right and left sides offset from each other. The upper half of each track consisted of four oblong pads radiating outward, with the center two connected at the base. At the end of each pad a small triangular indentation had been imprinted into the sediment by the tip of a claw. The lower half of each track consisted of a single rounded triangular pad. The full print was just over two inches long. They marked the passing of a lone wolf. I pointed them out to Shai.

"Yes," he commented. "The flow from the *wadi* slows here and the water seeps into the ground. There are more plants. Ibex and maybe gazelles come to eat. That is why the wolf was here."

That night the goats slept unusually close to us.