

SECOND MONDAY (noon)

CHAPTER 20: *I STRIKE SAMECH*

"One who kills a beast shall make restitution for it...."
(LEVITICUS 24:21)

We struck south from Har Uziyyahu, passing through excruciating heat and toiling over senseless rubble, which, if such could be imagined, was even more foreboding than the ground we had traversed the days before. My right hip began to ache. I adjusted my pace, with indifferent results. The ache turned to dull pain. It grew more intense. I struggled on.

What until now had remained a vague background awareness ascended into my consciousness. I realized that for much of my journey, pain—burning lungs, cramping muscles, throbbing joints—had been my companion. I had accepted it, inured myself to it, and perhaps even sought it. As I struggled beneath the blistering sun, I asked myself, why?

I thought of the medieval flagellants. Their self-inflicted pain enabled them to come closer to God, to reach a sense of the divine.

Although I had not intended it, the pain of my self-imposed trial was not dissimilar. It sharpened my sensitivity. Through it, I encountered the Negev in its most stark desolation and infinite emptiness. The intensity of that encounter embraced a dimension beyond any that I felt when observing the desert from afar—from the comfort of the bus when I arrived or, as I would recognize later, from that of a car when I departed.

It wasn't the pain that drew me, but what the pain engendered. It enabled me to transcend the rational mind of the West, and thus, to encounter an understanding of the Middle East. It opened a door through which I could pass between those two separate, and for most persons irreconcilable, realities.

On a different dimension, pain measured how close I drove myself to my physical and mental limits. It intensified as I approached them. With that, I recognized my absolute weakness and dependence on a greater force—my need for God.

Beyond the desert, one might view the issue of God versus rationality as a pervasive and

irreconcilable intellectual struggle. I understand that dichotomy; for once, I grappled with it. When in the West, I treated God as a convenient, perhaps necessary, mental construct—a pragmatic defense against the angst of a faithless nihilism. The travails of life are more bearable with God than without. And, thus, I chose to accept Him.

But within the desert's infinite emptiness, God—like Death—takes on a familiar and personal character that I have rarely, if ever, experienced outside. Here, He is near and omnipresent—a succoring force beyond rationality. Those who pass through this domain become cloaked in His intimacy. The intellectual struggles of faith, which tear the soul of the Western world, ebb into irrelevance.

The sun stood high above us as we descended into a featureless and utterly uninviting *wadi*. Scraggly acacias provided but half-hearted shade from the searing heat.

"We could stop here," Shai observed. He paused, "But there is natural shade 45 minutes away in Wadi Shachoret. We can go on if you want."

By "natural shade" Shai meant the shelter of a rock overhang or a shallow cave. From my first days in the desert, two years before, I had learned the *Bedu* saying, "The shade of a rock is better than the shade of a tree." Quickly I had absorbed its truth. Sunlight penetrates the meager canopy of even a large acacia, which, with the exception of a rare palm, is the only plant substantial enough to provide meaningful protection.

It was uncharacteristic of Shai to suggest that we go on. Up to now, he had always announced when and where we would take our noon rest. The desert had become his possession in spirit, if not in law. He knew where we could find reprieve from the harshness through which we passed. I considered that decision his full prerogative, just as photographs and, as had evolved, the brushing of the camels, were mine. In his gentle way, Shai was asking me if I had the endurance and will to continue.

As a child, I hated canned peas. But, I was compelled to eat them. In the admonitions of my mother, "The children in England are starving."

Throughout the years of the Second World War, I pondered the question of how my peas, if ever uneaten, could reach the children in England. Early on, I had concluded that they couldn't. German U-boats prowled the Atlantic coastline, sinking our ships. Peas would have been among the first casualties.

We had taken our first wartime vacation in Atlantic City. Great globs of oil from torpedoed tankers had covered the beach. It was black and tarlike and stuck to my feet. It brought home the reality of the war at sea. We didn't have enough destroyers and depth charges to stop the German U-boats.

Peas couldn't be as important as ammunition. The pea ships couldn't be as well protected as those carrying ammunition. Without question, the U-boats would get them.

I pondered over peas throughout the Battle of the Atlantic, our landing in North Africa, our advance into Italy, the Battle of Stalingrad, the D-Day Invasion, and until the fall of Berlin. Yet, I never solved how my peas, whether eaten or not, could help feed the starving children in England.

That wasn't the case for fat. Dutifully, my mother, with all other mothers, saved the renderings drained from cooked meat. Mothers and children returned it in cans to the butcher along with the red and blue ration tokens we needed to buy more meat or chicken. The war posters told us that the fat made the ammunition that our soldiers needed to beat the Axis. Never did they mention peas. And, never did I see anyone returning jars or cans of uneaten peas or, for that matter, any vegetables.

This had to mean that everyone was eating his or her peas. So like them or not, I, Sara my sister, and all the other suffering children of America endured canned peas throughout those years.

As early as I can remember, I concluded that the best way through my ordeal would be to eat the peas first. Once through them, I could enjoy my mashed potatoes, and after my mashed potatoes, relish the morsel of meat or piece of chicken that might be on our plates.

That pattern has stuck with me throughout my life. I still save most of my meat until last. And, more generally, forgo something partially satisfying if, with more effort, I can gain something fully satisfying. So it was now. I would bear the heat and my throbbing hip for the natural shade 45 minutes away. I nodded to Shai in assent.

Shai, traveling by himself, could have reached the shade within 45 minutes. Together, we could not. I slowed to what seemed no faster than a crawl. It was more the heat than my hip that kept me from a quicker pace. Even in the now-desiccated air, sweat poured from my body, drenching my shirt. My eyes burned from it. Again, my chest tightened and I gasped to breathe. Climbing each shallow ridge became an inordinate struggle.

Shai was at ease with my struggle. I was not. He understood and long ago had accepted the limits on human efforts that the desert imposes. I grasped those limits intellectually. I had yet to accept them in my heart. It was as if accepting them would acknowledge my personal failure rather than the realities of this environment.

I toiled on, as a nomadic King Canute, stubbornly trying to hold a relentless sun at bay. As we climbed toward what seemed yet another distant ridge, Shai pointed. Perhaps 100 yards in front of us ran a barely discernable break in an otherwise unbroken field of rubble.

"Do you see that line?" he asked. As I nodded, he continued, "It is a remarkable formation. You will see as we get closer."

What in the distance had seemed to be an inconsequential uplift became, as we reached it, a tectonic gash that tore through the limestone like a terrible wound. It extended in a jagged line more than 100 feet long and never more than 5 feet wide. The sun stood almost over us. Yet, the sides of the gash vanished into a chasm of utter blackness.

Falling to my knees, I grasped a piece of rubble. I crept to the edge of the chasm, reached over, and released it. For an indescribably long three seconds, more than 100 feet of accelerated descent, we heard nothing. Then, through the blackness, the sound of the rock ricocheting from the sides of the chasm reverberated back to us.

At some places along the gash, a few inches of the surface rubble had fallen into the

chasm. Perhaps it had been washed in by a winter torrent. Perhaps it had toppled during the cataclysmic event that had opened the gash. In most places, no rubble had been displaced. Plausibly, the chasm was but a few thousand years old, and perhaps less. I did not need Shai's explanation to recognize that it had been torn open by the same earth-rending forces that had formed, and continue to form, the Arava.

"Do you recall anything when you look at this?" Shai's words broke my thoughts.

After our passage through the crevice two days before, it took little effort to imagine Korah's revolt against Moses.

"Korah," I responded, still staring into the blackness.

"It would have been more like this, than the crevice near the water hole," Shai replied. "But as I told you then, Moses and Korah would not have been here. They would have been four days north of Shacharut, near Har Karkom, by the Wilderness of Paran."

The Wilderness of Paran, the focal point of the Exodus—the place from which the scouts had set out to spy the land of Canaan, the place to which they had returned, and the place at which Israel had encamped before Moses ascended the Mountain to receive the Word of God. Indeed, one day we would journey there.

We continued across the rubble, climbing toward the ridge. Dizziness engulfed me. I began to stumble. I had no thoughts other than of the effort required to lift each leg and to lurch each step forward. My head hung down, no longer to protect my eyes from the sun, but in the primordial sign of submission, like a prisoner being led to captivity. All I saw was the rubble over which we passed and my legs moving with each agonizing step.

We crossed over the ridge and began to descend its opposite side. In the furnace-like heat, I was immeasurably grateful for the change. Yet, the tightness of my chest and rawness of my lungs barely eased. The trail edged to the rim of the *wadi*. The *wadi* floor lay 300 feet below us, an almost vertical drop. I stood upright, trying to force away my dizziness. Between that act of will and the reduced exertion of moving downhill, my imbalance eased.

Suddenly, Chalah's frantic bleating pierced the air from behind the ridge we had just crossed. I pivoted and rasped out her name. Shai, ahead of me, swiveled. Pesiah turned transfixed. Chalah's bleating came closer to the ridgeline, its pitch rising in greater terror. In a moment, she burst over the ridge lunging faster than I had ever seen her move. As she rushed toward us, her bleating grew yet more intense. Only when she reached Pesiah's side did she

cease her cries. And then, with the exception of her heaving sides, she acted as if nothing at all had taken place.

As had happened at Wadi Jethro, she had tarried at some distraction. Looking up from the diversion, she had seen that she was alone. Her bleating voiced her panic at losing her herd.

I thought back to the leopard trap we had seen in Wadi Issaron five days before. Then I had focused on the cruelty of using a newborn kid as bait. Now I fully comprehended the effectiveness of that bait. To the ears of the predator, its cry of unabated terror meant the easy kill of an unprotected newborn.

Chalah kept closer to Shai than usual as we reached a ledge and started our descent along the wall of the *wadi*.

Several flies buzzed across my mouth and began to circle my head, lured by my sweat. For days, body salts and uric acid had accumulated and oxidized on my skin and in the fabric of my clothes, providing feeding for the hoards of skin bacteria. Even I noticed my stench. It had carried for hundreds of yards downwind to the recesses of the *wadi* where the flies had sheltered.

The versatility of the *kafiah* again proved itself. Wrapped around my face, it protected me from sun, windblown sand, and, now, flies.

Flies had accompanied us through most of our journey. However, the past two days had been too hot even for them. They had disappeared by late morning, like virtually all other animal life seeking shelter from the sun.

Normally, I despise flies. Now I welcomed them. They seek the cool darkness where mammals den. Their presence signaled respite from our ordeal. We were approaching the shade in which we could finally rest.

Seldom have I felt so utterly depleted as when we descended into the upper reaches of Wadi Shachoret. Aches consumed my every muscle. Pain pulsed from my hip. Even though we were descending, my lungs seared as I continued to gasp for each breath. I had pushed myself to the absolute limits of my endurance.

Wadi Shachoret—from the Hebrew *shachor* or black—takes its name from the black formations that dominate where it empties into the Arava. We would travel two or three hours more to reach that point. In the tract we were now crossing, the heights of the Eilat Hills adjacent to the Paran Plateau, the predominant rocks are a brownish-yellow Nubian sandstone.

As we descended the ledge, the wall down which we moved rose vertically, reaching

almost to the height of the ridge we had passed, and at which Chalah, for those few terrifying moments, had become separated from us. Below to our right ran the *wadi* floor. It was covered with small gravel, compacted by the force of the water that had deposited it.

To the left, straddling the *wadi* floor, lay two massive sandstone formations, each over 20 feet high. Fewer than 100 yards from us, they propped against each other, like two sides of a lean-to. Debris-laden water had sliced through their lower parts, carving away the strata to form a tent-shaped opening 5 feet high at its peak and 7 feet wide at its base. A long, deep shadow darkened its inner parts. We had reached the natural shade.

I fixated on the shade like a drug addict desperate for a fix. At last I could surrender to my weariness. The camels seemed to pick up their pace, as if recognizing that they too would now rest.

The main channel of the *wadi* cut along the vertical wall we were descending, providing an unencumbered track. Halfway to the formations, it had undercut the wall, sculpting a bulging overhang.

Camels are animals of the open desert and are timorous of enclosed spaces. As we began to pass beneath the overhang, Samech, in apprehension, pulled back. His lead rope slipped from my hand.

"Bastard!" The expletive tore from my lips. I bolted around, grabbing up the fallen lead, and slashing it across his face. The smack of the rope against his muzzle shattered the *wadi* quiet. Uttering a confused bellow, the poor beast pulled back.

Startled by my own rage, I made no further move to strike him. Hesitantly, he emitted a low, plaintive call. I turned toward the shadow, jerking his lead. Lowering his head, he emitted a second plaintive call and followed me under the overhang toward the shadow and rest.