

CHAPTER 2: EARLY STIRRINGS

I no longer recall when the thought first came to me—to try to relive the experience of the Patriarchs. Whatever its origin, it grew over time. As it did, I began to envision the chance of comprehending, in some way, how the Patriarchs may have developed the concept of One God and come to know Him in their daily lives. As the idea expanded, I became absorbed with it.

I was raised in a relatively nonobservant Jewish household. My mother was the then-"modern" daughter of a rigidly observant junk dealer. My father was the son of a "nonbelieving" socialist house painter. The tensions between their opposing worldviews permeated our house. During the early years of my childhood, my family, at my mother's insistence, followed *kashrut*, the Jewish laws of dietary observance, maintained some ritual practices during the Sabbath and holidays, and sporadically attended synagogue. However, these actions stemmed more from a burden of obligation than from the love of her heritage.

My father ridiculed her practices. Silently I took umbrage, feeling, even as a small child, the importance of a sacred anchor. Although my mother kindled the Sabbath candles, the Sabbath was a day to shop and make household repairs—not a day of joy, study, and community.

Notwithstanding these roots, and my own seemingly secular ways, as long as I can remember, I felt estranged from a life devoid of the Almighty. As an adult, I experienced the shattering of my marriage and disintegration of my family. Afterward, I wondered if a greater grounding in observance might have held us together.

As my marriage crumbled, my father died. I sought—and found—solace in the daily ritual of the synagogue. In later years, I fell from that routine and chose a more solitary life. Even so, those years of daily synagogue attendance left me with a greater sense of spirituality than I had known before.

Modern life, glutted with its electronic and commercial distractions, enables us to evade human intimacy. Likewise, it enables us to avoid closeness with the Almighty and the focus on human purpose that His service commands. In this respect, while I may project a veneer of liberal social thought, I have long felt a sympathy with religious traditionalists—whether Jewish, Islamic, Christian, or other—who distance themselves from the secular world to pursue the service of God.

As the idea of reliving the experience of the Patriarchs formed, I focused on what such a venture would entail. The idea emerged of a journey, by camel, through the Wilderness of Judea, the Negev Desert, or the Sinai. If possible, I wanted to culminate with an ascent of Mt. Sinai, which by 4th century Christian tradition, was ascribed to *Jebel Musa*, Arabic for the Mountain of Moses, one of the highest peaks within the southwestern interior of the Sinai Peninsula.

The idea became increasingly compelling as I realized the demands such a venture posed. My professional commitments precluded travel in any month but August, when the desert would present the most arduous of physical challenges. By the same token, it would be far from the intrusions of tourists and the distraction they would bring. Both the physical challenge and potential solitude of the venture heightened my desire to proceed.

Also playing their parts were the reminders of my aging. I had begun to experience intermittent pain in my right hip, my knees, and especially my lower back. Although I was otherwise in good health, these discomforts marked the jarring reality that in future years I might not be capable of such a journey. In early 1995, I made a commitment to begin.

Only a small group of longtime friends championed my journey. While expressing concern over the physical dangers, all shared my enthusiasm for the adventure and spiritual quest.

Jane, my business partner, and Cheryl, our office administrator, were appalled. How could I live in such heat? Could I find a guide? Would the guide know how to survive? Where would we find water?

During a visit, Ehud, my Israeli friend of 25 years and a retired intelligence officer, voiced his concern: "The Negev is very difficult in August, Herschel. One can't make mistakes. How can you be sure a guide would know what he's doing? A young man may be able to survive. You may not. Perhaps you should wait until cooler weather—or better yet, not go at all."

Judy, my travel agent, was aghast. "You want to do what? By CAMEL!" Like others, she expressed her concern over the physical challenges. Only half in jest she voiced her financial worry: If she didn't find the camel, she might lose an account. If she found the camel, I might die and she would surely lose the account. After rebuffing her suggestions of a "special" Israel tour with lodging in five-star hotels or, possibly, a Galilee horse ranch, she turned to the task of finding a desert guide.

Within a week, she had faxed me a travel article from *The New York Times* lauding an Israeli desert program to build self-reliance in business executives. The program came complete with teams of survival specialists and psychotherapists. "Judy," I chided, "I don't want business executives and psychotherapists; I want a journey through the Negev." Reproached, she tried again. In another week, she had located Sefi Hanegbi—Joseph of the Negev. Immediately thereafter, he and I began to correspond by fax.

Sefi had founded "Camel Riders" in Shacharut, an isolated settlement of 21 families located on the edge of the Negev Plateau 30 miles north of Eilat. A single exchange of faxes assured me that none of his small staff practiced psychotherapy, and that he would arrange for his "very best" guide to lead me.

I had assumed that my first journey would take the form of a tour with, perhaps, six to eight people. This was not to be. Few people travel the Negev beyond the confines of an air-conditioned bus, fewer yet in summer, and virtually none for more than four days.

As it came to pass, that first journey proved more solitary and introspective than I had imagined. My captivation with the Negev transformed into an obsession. Over the years, I would return again and again.